# A Home Away from Home: Protracted Displacement of Muslims Affected by Civil War in Sri Lanka

Submitted by

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A thesis submitted in total fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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March 2011

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**INTRODUCTION**

**CHAPTER ONE**
**PLACE, IDENTITY AND (DIS)PLACEMENT:**
**THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

**CHAPTER TWO**
**ETHNIC CONFLICT, DISPLACEMENT, AND MUSLIMS IN SRI**
**LANKA: SETTING THE BROAD SCENE OF THE RESEARCH**
**CONTEXT**

# ILLUSTRATIONSAND PHOTOGRAPHS

## List of Maps

## List of Tables

## List of Figures

# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| **ACMC** | All Ceylon Muslim Congress |
| **ADB** | Asian Development Bank |
| **EPRLF** | Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front |
| **EU** | European Union |
| **GA** | Government agent also know as district secretary |
| **GN** | Grama Niladhari (village officer) |
| **GND** | Grama Nilaldhari Division – lowest administrative unit |
| **GoSL** | Government of Sri Lanka |
| **HSZ** | High Security Zones |
| **ICRC** | International Crescent and Red Cross |
| **ICG** | International Crisis Group |
| **IDP** | Internally Displaced Persons |
| **IDMC** | Internal Displacement Monitoring Center |
| **IOM** | International Organization for Migration |
| **IPKF** | Indian Peace Keeping Force |
| **ISRC** | Islamic Relief Center |
| **INGO** | International non governmental organization |
| **ISGA** | Interim Self Governing Authority for the Tamil populated areas |
| **JVP** | Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front) |
| **PTOMS** | Post Tsunami Operational Mechanism |
| **LTTE** | Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam |
| **NEHRP** | North-East Housing Reconstruction Project |
| **SLFP** | Sri Lanka Freedom Party |
| **SLMC** | Sri Lanka Muslim Congress |
| **UNP** | United National Party |
| **USAID** | United States Agency for International Development |

# GLOSSARY

| | |
|---|---|
| **Aghadighal** | Refugees/displaced |
| **Ansari** | One who takes care of visitors/guests, or offers help to another |
| **Deyyo/Avuliakkal** | Saint |
| **Fajr** | Early morning Islamic prayers |
| **Grama sewaka/niladhari** | Village officer |
| **Idam peyarntha makkal** | People out of place, evicted/displaced people |
| **Isha** | Evening Islamic prayer |
| **Imam** | Islamic leader in charge of the mosque |
| **Jammath** | Muslim community, members of a particular mosque |
| **Jumma** | Friday Islamic prayer |
| **Kachcheri** | District secretariat office, main administrative body of a district |
| **Kandhoor**i | Feast at Muslim homes or mosques for religious events |
| **Kiramam** | Village in Tamil |
| **Killi** groups | Gangs of young men |
| **Kudi** | Kinship community of eastern Muslims |
| **Maavattam** | District in Tamil |
| **Madraza** | Arabic language classes usually held in local mosques |
| **Magrib** | Late afternoon Islamic prayer |
| **Marakkala** | Muslims are referred by this name by rural Sinhalese |
| **Mahinda Chinthanya** | President's manifesto |
| **Muhajirins** | Guest in need |
| **Mudalali** | Local businessman/vendor |
| **Moulana** | Islamic sufi |
| **Mukkadu** | Veil; part of the *saree* used to cover the head |
| **Musafir/Musafeer** | Refugee or a person who is in desperate need of help |
| **Oor** | Village, home community |
| **Podiya**r | Land owning village leader |
| **Rajakariya** | Duties of a royal/king |
| **Sambol** | A salad made of shrivelled coconut nuts and chilli powder |
| **Sinhalization** | Settlement of Sinhalese in areas populated by other ethnic groups |
| **Sonahar** | Tamil name for Muslims |
| **Thablig** | Faithful/devoted |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Thangal** | South Indian sufi |
| **Tamil Eelam** | Imagined homeland claimed by the Tamil rebels |
| **Thali** | Gold necklace offered to bridegroom during marriage ceremony |
| **Thambi mudalali** | Muslim trader |
| **Theppam** | Wooden boats (Tamil) |
| **Thinnai** | Half-built wall at front entry to house or porch (Tamil) |
| **Ullorr makkal** | Local people |
| **Ummah** | World Muslim community/Islamic brotherhood |
| **Vadapula muslimgal** | Northern Muslims |
| **Vadakku makakal** | Northern people |
| **Vadapula muslimgal** | Muslims of Northern Province |
| **Valai** | Fishing nets (Tamil) |
| **Valawu** | Community boundary (Tamil) |
| **Vadiya** | Tent-resting hut at the beachside |

**SUMMARY**

This thesis is about the conflict-induced protracted displacement of a group of people in Sri Lanka. A civil war, widely referred to as an 'ethnic conflict', began in the 1980s when Tamil youth from the northern and eastern regions began an armed struggle against the Sinhalese (Buddhist) dominated state over long neglected grievances concerning their community. The war raged for more than three decades, ending in May 2009 when the Tamil rebel fighters were defeated by government forces.

This dissertation examines how a minority group of northern Muslims, not directly engaged in the conflict, were affected and their struggle to find 'place' and 'identity' during and after the conflict. It is a case study of Muslims of Northern Province of Sri Lanka who were forcibly displaced from their homes in 1990. More than half of these forcibly displaced Muslims have been living in pockets of government supported or self-initiated settlements for nearly two decades in the north-western district of Puttalam.

Based primarily on ten months of ethnographic field work, the study outlines the lived experience of northern Muslims in three stages: pre-displacement, post-displacement and post-conflict. I first examine the reasons for the forced displacement of Muslims and why a large number of them found refuge in Puttalam. Second, I analyse the protracted nature of their displacement and their attempts to rebuild their lives and develop a sense of place and identity that links pre- and post-displacement experiences. Finally, I analyse the narratives of the displaced people about their aspirations to return to their homes in the north after the war.

Two key theoretical themes provide insights to this research: *place* and *identity*. These concepts are used to comprehend the lived experience of displacement and displaced people's post-war decisions to return. The dissertation concludes by suggesting that the end of conflict does not necessarily bring an end to displacement. In order to address the problems associated with forced displacement and relocation it is necessary to understand people's lived experiences, in particular, their experiences of place and identity while being people 'out of place' for a protracted period of time.

**STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP**

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the University Human Ethics Committee of La Trobe University (HEC Approval Number 676-06)

Date:22/03/2011

M. Razaak Mohamed Ghani

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

post-conflict situation in the country, which was useful for updating me on the post-conflict resettlement problems of displaced persons.

Finally, I offer my heartfelt gratitude and thanks to my wife and children for their patient and unstinting love while I was doing my doctoral studies at this late period in my life. My family migrated to USA while I was doing my doctoral studies in Australia. My wife Shamila was strong enough to take care of the children and all the responsibilities at home, thus giving me the freedom to complete the thesis. Without her support I might not have been able to write this thesis. I am proud of my children, Shameer, Ramila and Razmila for their tolerance and understanding during this difficult time of our life as a family. I love you all and look forward to beginning a new chapter in life in the near future.

# MAPS

**Map 1**: Sri Lanka



Source: www.mapsofworld.com/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-polit

**Map 2**: Sri Lanka Provinces
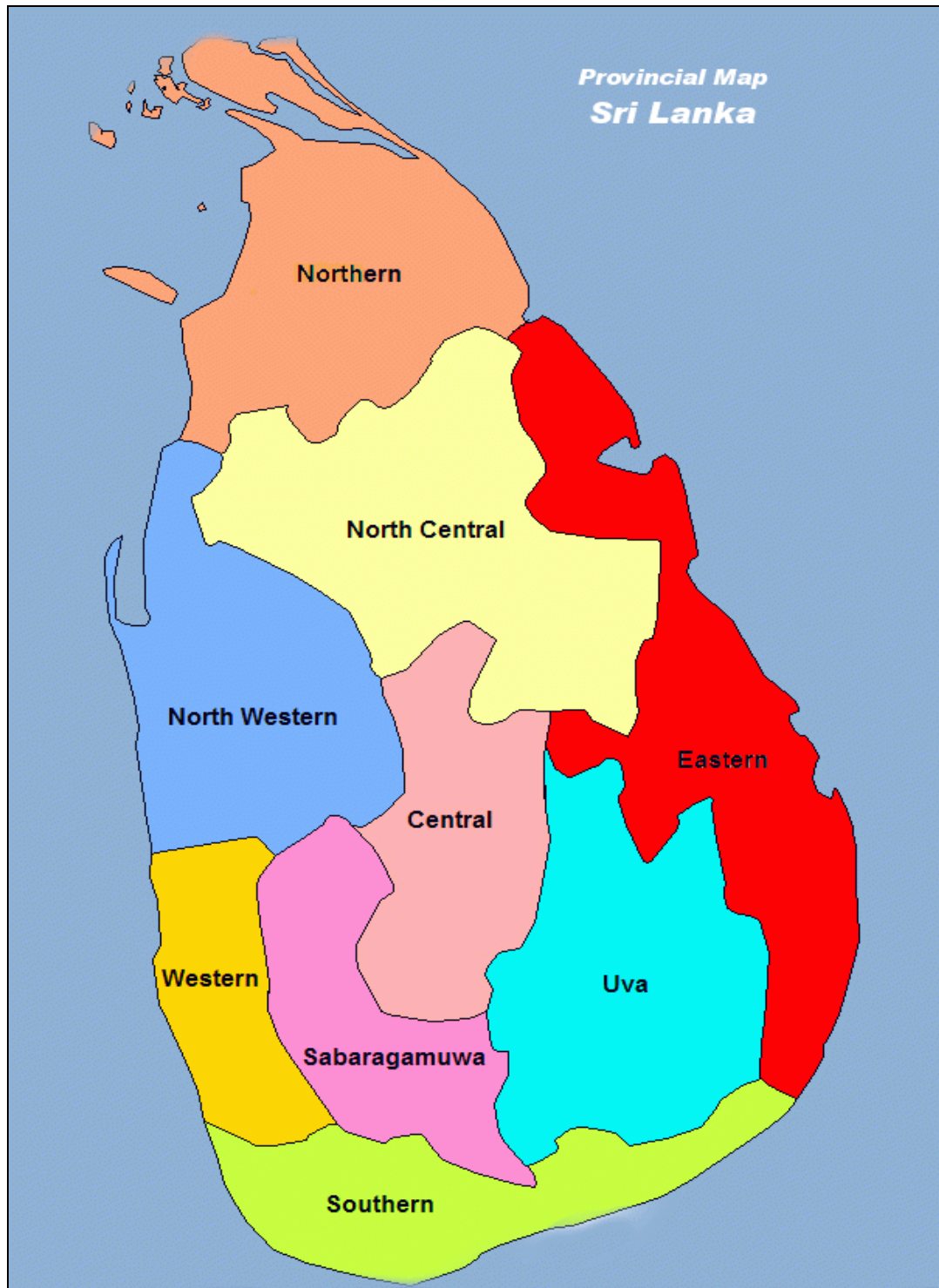


Source: www.mapsofworld.com/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-polit

**Map 3**: Districts of Sri Lanka



District Map
Sri Lanka

Jaffna
Killinochchi
Mullaitivu
Vavuniya
Mannar
Anuradhapura
Trincomalee
Puttalam
Polonnaruwa
Batticoloa
Kurunegala
Matale
Kandy
Ampara
Kegalla
Gampaha
Nuwara Eliya
Badulla
Colombo
Monaragala
Kalutara
Ratnapura
Galle
Hambantota
Matara
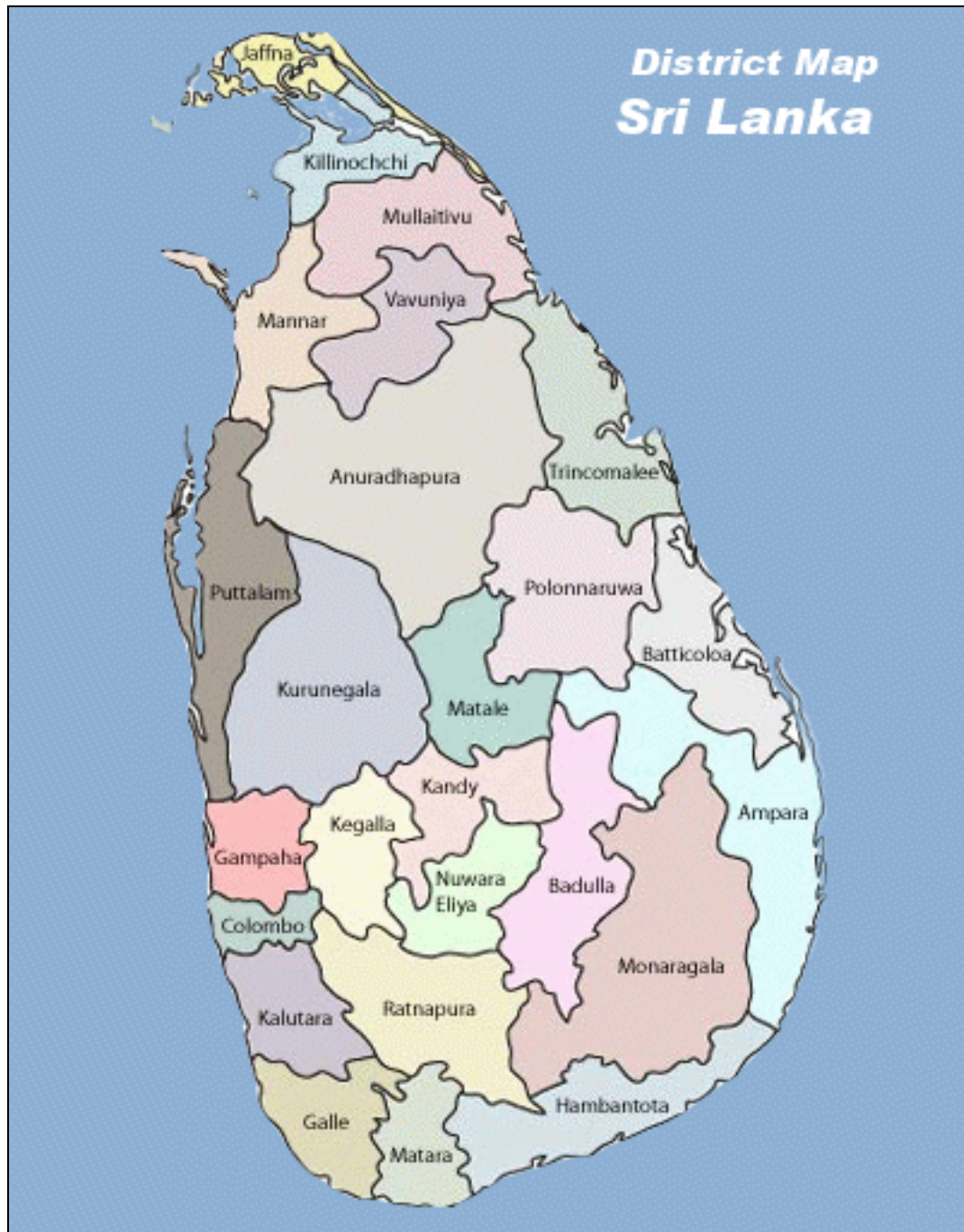
Source:www.topnews.in/93-arrested-lanka-links-ltte-2.

**Map 4**: Puttalam District Map



PUTTALAM DISTRICT

VANATHAVILLU

KALPITIYA

KARUWALASGAWEWA

PUTTALAM

NAWAGATHTHEGAMA

PUTTALAM
DISTRICT

ANAMADUWA

MUNDALA

MAHAKUMBUKKADAWALA

ARACHCHIKATTUWA

PALLAMA

CHILAW

MADAMPE

MAHAWEWA

NATTANDIYA

WENNAPPUWA   DANKOTUWA

6   0   6   12   18   Kilometers
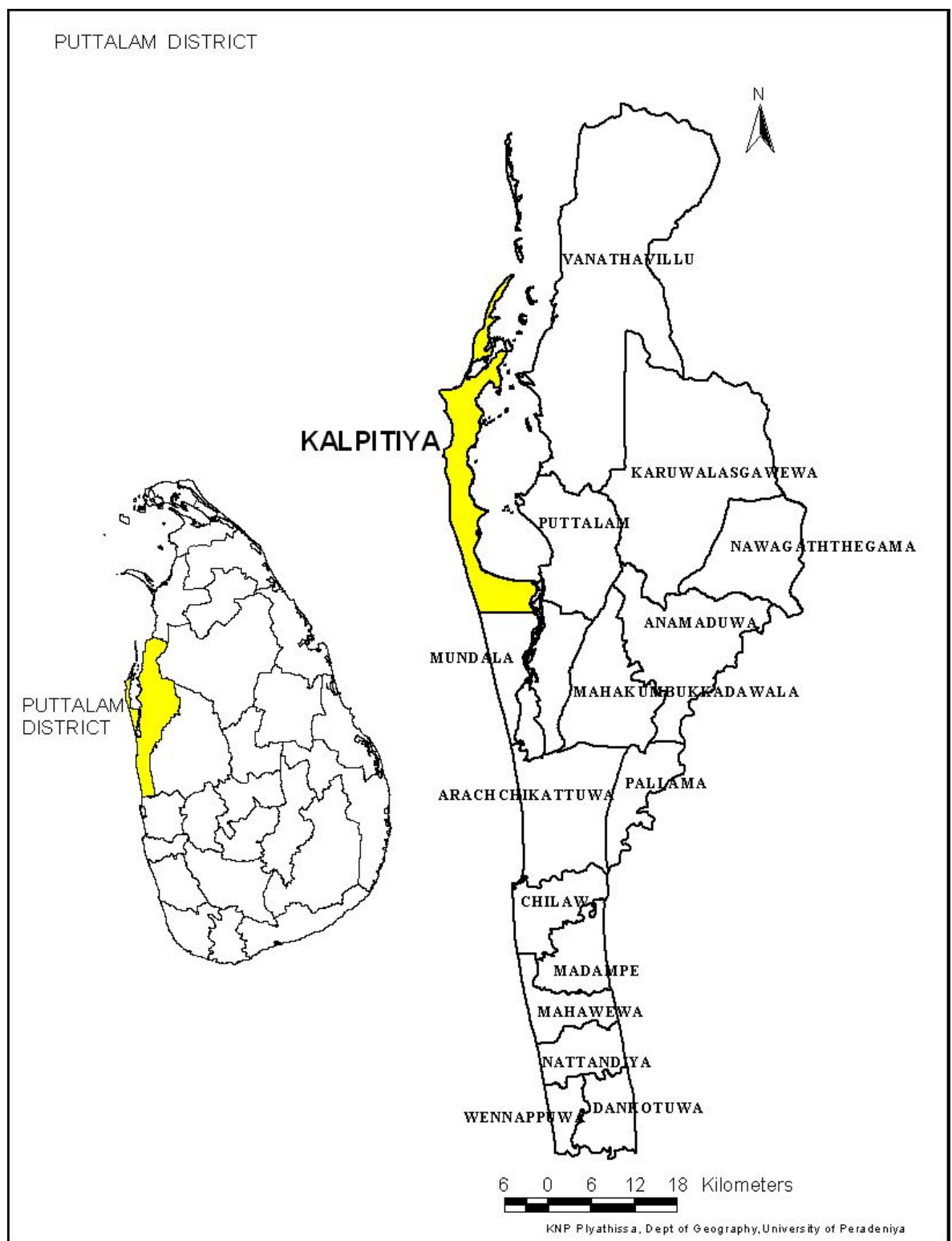
Source: Department of Geography, Peradeniya University, Sri Lanka

**Map 5**: Major townships and administrative divisions of Puttalam district



Source: http://dh-web.org/place.names/maps/kalpitiya.jpg
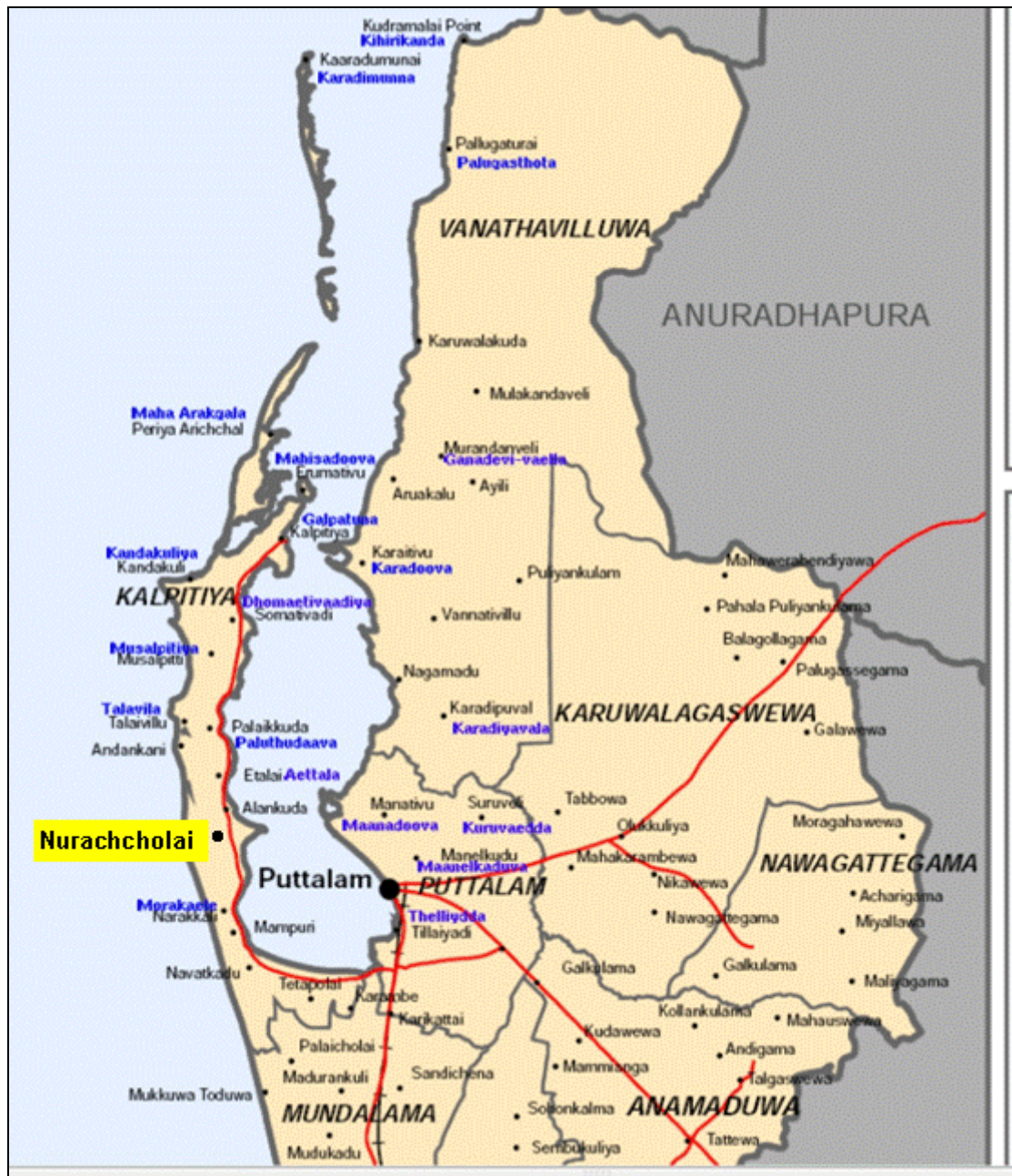
## INTRODUCTION

> This problem [ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese] is like a soccer match. One side is the Sri Lankan government, the other side are the Tigers [LTTE],[1] and the Muslims are the ball. Unfortunately we [northern Muslims] are the most battered ball among the Sri Lankan Muslims.
>
> Museen, 34 year old displaced person from Mannar (northern Sri Lanka) sixteen years ago.

In 2007, when I started ten months of field work with displaced Muslims in Puttalam, Museen was the first person I met, and the one who introduced me to other people and to various community groups. Puttalam is a dry zone district in North-Western Province of Sri Lanka. Museen was a displaced Muslim from Mannar (a district of Northern Province – see Map 3), who had arrived in October 1990 with his parents when he was fifteen years old. In 2000 he started a local NGO to support his fellow displaced people. By 2007, it had grown into a leading local community organization and Museen was able to build an office in a town called Nurachcholai, (situated on the main road from Puttalam to Kalpitiya – see Map 5) with a staff of two to work with him. On my first day of field work, Museen came to Puttalam in his own vehicle to pick me up and take me to his office. During this journey, which took more than an hour, he told me about his NGO and how he managed to get funds to support displaced Muslims.[2] Once we reached the office, he offered me tea and snacks, and then we began to talk about the purpose of my visit to Puttalam and the present situation of displaced people in the area.

Although this thesis focuses on displaced Muslims who were expelled from their homes in Northern Province in 1990 by Tamil rebels and are currently living in Puttalam, my original intention was to conduct research more broadly on Muslims and their place in the ethno-political conflict in the country. I was interested in revisiting the much debated identity issue of Sri Lankan Muslims, especially the question of whether they are Tamils converted to Islam or a distinct ethnic community (or Moors) of Arabic origin (Mohan: 1987). I also wanted to identify the factors underlining the present

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[1] [1] Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) is the main rebel group that fought for a separate Tamil homeland in the north and east of Sri Lanka

[2] He was one of my key informants in the research and 'cultural broker' to get access to institutions and communities in Puttalam

'political quagmire and ethnological conundrum' (Ali 2004: 01) of Muslims in the country.

I was interested in embarking on such a study for several reasons. First, the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict has been portrayed to the outside world solely as an issue between two communities – the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils – while ignoring other ethnic and religious groups that are affected and often forgotten by social science investigations and the international media (Ali 1997; Fazil 2005 McGilvray 1998). In this bipolar understanding of the conflict, the Muslim community was 'forgotten' or became 'nobody's people' (Farook 2009; Hasbullah 2001). Second, Muslims constitute roughly eight per cent of the total population of the country, and approximately one-third of the population in the conflict-affected northern and eastern regions, and they tend to be amalgamated with the category of Tamil-speaking people, undermining their aspirations to be recognized as the second largest ethnic minority. However, during the past two decades, they have become a politically mobilized community with a heightened consciousness of their group identity, especially in the context of the protracted conflict situation (Ameerdeen 2006; Nuhuman 2006:). Despite such visibility in the political and conflict processes, little sociological investigation has focused on the Muslims and their place in the context of the conflict (Ismail 1995; Samaraweera 1978) and post-conflict situation in the country.

Although I went to Sri Lanka in early 2007 and began initial field work into broad issues of Muslim identity, my attention continued to be drawn to the plight of displaced Muslims. It was pointed out by most key informants that the displaced Muslims were victims of the civil conflict.[3] However, their current circumstances have not received serious attention from social scientists. Some argued that there was a lack of initiative or interest among Muslim scholars on this issue because they were afraid that their findings might be provocative and be politically controversial. As a Sri Lankan, a Tamil-speaking Muslim and a social scientist, I decided to take on this challenge and embarked on my research into the plight of displaced Muslims. This research aims not only to contribute to knowledge in the field of forced migration and protracted displacement, but also to inform policies and programs relating to the post-conflict situation of displaced people. Thus the study provides in-depth insight to post-conflict

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[3] Some key informants believe that Muslims are unnecessarily dragged into the country's ethnic conflict by warring parties and that the Muslims of conflict-affected areas are often subjected to persecution by both government forces and Tamil rebels.

ethnic reconciliation and possible durable solutions to the problems of long-term displaced people in Sri Lanka. Before I discuss the specific research questions of my study, I provide a brief outline of conflict-induced displacement in Sri Lanka.

## Conflict-induced displacement in Sri Lanka: A brief overview

Displacement has been broadly defined in terms of the separation of people from their homes and cultures through physical dislocation (Bammer 1994; Harrell-Bond 1992;Mooney 2005). It can be categorized in three forms: a) conflict-induced displacement; b) development-induced displacement and c) environmentally-induced displacement due to natural and human-made disasters. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), agencies that report the trends and issues related to refugee and displaced persons globally, it is estimated that the number of 'people of concern' due to natural and human-made disasters was 43.3 million by the end of 2009.[4] Internally displaced persons constitute more than half of this total (UNHCR 2010: 1). Since internal civil conflicts have increased significantly during last two decades,[5] numbers of internally displaced people are rapidly increasing in the global arena (IDMC 2009).By the end of 2009, some 27.1 million people were internally displaced worldwide due to internal wars or civil conflicts, a record high since 1990 (IDMC 2010). Thus, some argue that the twentieth century is an 'era of displacement' or an 'age of migration' (Castles and Miller 2003; Chimini 2009;Said 1984).

Refugees and asylum seekers are forcibly displaced people who are seeking refuge outside their country of nationality. Internal displacement refers to population movement within the boundaries of a nation-state. The common definition states that internally displaced people are individuals who have been subjected to various types of forced migration or are uprooted due to natural or man-made disasters. According to the UN refugee and displacement portfolio,

> Internally displaced persons are 'persons or groups of persons who have been
> forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence,
> in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict,

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[4] Of these, 15.2 million were refugees and 27.1 million were internally displaced persons. The figure also includes 983,000 asylum seekers.
[5] Of the estimated 108 violent conflicts reported globally between 1980 to 2000, more than 80 per cent were violent intra-state conflicts (Colletta and Cullen 2003: 2).

situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border' (UNOCHA 1999: 6).

This UN definition of internally displaced persons captures largely the political aspects of the problem. It emphasises the involuntary nature and the fact that such movement takes place within national borders, but it does not adequately address the long-term or protracted displaced conditions. Some IDPs stay in temporary shelters for prolonged periods because of protracted conflict situations, which this study examines. Thus, social scientists and forced migration researchers continually search for appropriate definitions and analytical frameworks for studying the sociological dimensions of internal displacement worldwide. Many argue that IDPs are a social category and the same as refugees except they have not crossed a border of so-called nation-states (see Cohen 2004; Mooney 2005).

Conflict-induced displacement presents one of the greatest challenges to many nations and countries today (Muggah 2000:).The Sri Lankan conflict is a violent intra-state conflict that caused nearly 100,000 deaths and the internal displacement of approximately 650,000 people by end of 2007.[6] In 2006, battles between Sri Lankan government forces and Tamil rebels (the LTTE) increased the number of IDPs and about 300,000 people fled their homes in the Mullaithivu and Kilinochchi districts of northern Sri Lanka (UNHCR 2009). As a result of the conflict, nearly 3 million people, mainly Tamils, fled the country and now live outside Sri Lanka[7]. The Tamil diaspora accounts for between 23 and 30 per cent of the global Sri Lankan Tamil population of 2.7 million (Venugopal 2003: 20). After nearly three decades, the armed conflict ended in May 2009 with the elimination of the LTTE's military capacity and currently, government forces are in total control of the former rebel-controlled territories in the Tamil dominated north and east of Sri Lanka.

At the time of writing, the Sri Lankan government and international humanitarian agencies are assisting war-affected displaced people to resettle in their places of origin. Since the military victory against Tamil rebels in May 2009, the government has been

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[6] The official estimates of deaths by the conflict was 65, 000 by end of 2006.The official website of the defence ministry, as quoted by BBC, states that nearly 100,000 people had been killed during the civil war, from 1983 to the middle of 2009.
[7] By the end of 2000, there were around 110,000 Tamil refugees in India, 200,000 in Europe and 250,000 in America, Canada and Australia (Van Hear 2004: 8).

making efforts towards such resettlement. From the perspective of the government and the humanitarian agencies such as the UNHCR, there are three durable solutions to end the displacement: *integration* (local); *relocation* (other than the place of origin); and *return to place of origin* (UNOCHA 2004) with support and assistance to settle in the homes they lived in prior to the conflict. Although the government wanted a total return of displaced people to their original places in the north after the war, displaced people are facing a dilemma in choosing the best option in the post-conflict situation.

As discussed above, the Tamil-speaking Muslims of Northern Province[8] are one of the conflict-affected, internally displaced groups currently living in government supported or self-initiated settlements in the north-western district of Puttalam. They were forced to leave their homes in October 1990 by the LTTE and approximately 75,000 people were displaced within one week (Shanmugaratnam 2000: 8; Hasbullah 2001: 44). More than half of these found refuge in Puttalam. They have lived in settlement shelters for nearly twenty years and have become one of the 'longest' and 'largest' conflict-affected displaced communities in Sri Lanka.[9] The northern Muslims are largely a Tamil-speaking group who shared the language, culture and everyday life events of other Tamils for centuries, but who lost their homes, possessions, livelihoods and personal histories in the forced expulsion. The memories of homes, flight and experiences of the past are still alive for most of the first generation of displaced persons. Although the government has announced that they will be resettled in their places of origin, the displaced are largely undecided about whether to stay or return to their homes in the north. This thesis examines the lived experiences of conflict, forced migration, and finding solutions to end their displacement.

## Research aims

As I began this study on the protracted displacement of Muslims in Puttalam, I questioned what should be my key thematic concerns and research questions. I had an enthusiasm for understanding the political mobilization of Sri Lankan Muslims, an interest in issues related to their communal identity, and sympathy for those affected by the protracted conflict situation. As a doctoral candidate in the La Trobe School of

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[8] Northern Province consists of five districts: Jaffna, Mullaithivu, Kilinochchi, Vavuniya and Mannar.
[9] The other displaced persons living in camps and welfare centres for a protracted period are Tamils in Northern and Eastern Provinces who were evacuated by the Sri Lanka security forces so that they could establish High Security Zones in their fight against the Tamil rebels.

Social Sciences and Humanities, my research became increasingly aligned with the work of the La Trobe Refugee Research Centre (LaRRC) and its activities related to migrants, refugees and displaced persons. However, political developments and the intense fighting between Tamil rebels and Sri Lankan government forces placed constraints on the nature of my field work. These factors had a tremendous influence on me. I decided to select a research problem that would contribute to current academic knowledge in forced migration and displacement studies as well as having relevance to practical and policy matters in Sri Lanka's post conflict resettlement and development process.

After completion of my initial field visit to Sri Lanka in early 2007, I continued reading the literature and debates about people, place and identity in forced migration and refugee studies (Al-Rashid 1994; Castles 2003; Kibreab 1999; Malkki 1995; Shami 1996). I remembered the following remarks by a representative of displaced Muslims who spoke about their right to return, at a meeting held at the district secretariat office of Puttalam in February 2005.[10]

> We are not displaced people. We are people forcibly evicted by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam. We don't like to identify ourselves as displaced. You [the government] are labelling us as displaced people. It means that we, as people, have no permanent place to live and must occupy the lands of other people for safety. But we are not displaced people. In front of the government and foreign organizations we were chased out by an armed group [LTTE]. Now all government agencies and international organizations are trying to maintain that we are homeless and displaced. Please don't do this. We need our homeland and we are not here to grab anybody's land or property. By giving houses to our families, you are trying to bury our rights to return, and bury our rights to our homeland.

> A social activist (KI 5) of displaced Muslims in Puttalam.[11]

This meeting was my first encounter with displaced people in the area. It highlighted the centrality of issues of place and identity amongst displaced northern Muslims. This memory shaped the focus of my research. It prompted me to examine the ways in which

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[10] In 2005 I worked with a donor agency that provided funds for infrastructure and housing assistance to war-affected people during the period of ceasefire between the LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka.
[11] I interviewed him again during my field visit to Puttalam in 2007–08.

displaced northern Muslims now living in Puttalum have developed new identities and create, act upon and make connections to place. However, the problem of displacement is complex, and durable solutions require an in-depth understanding of people's experiences of place and identity. This study focuses on the following three research themes:

**1) What is the context in which northern Muslims became displaced?**

This primary research question aims to identify the factors that led Muslims in Northern Province, a Tamil-speaking community, to abandon their places of origin. Despite their cordial relationships with the Tamils for centuries, they were forcibly evicted from their homes in 1990. Although there are media reports and statistical information, there is a lack of in-depth study of the reasons for their displacement from the perspectives of those who were expelled from their homes. This research aims to present the perspectives of displaced Muslims living in Puttalam.

**2) To what extent does conflict-induced displacement affect attachment to place and identity?**

Displaced Muslims are currently living in refugee camps, welfare centres and resettlement villages where their situation has been described as a 'permanent impermanency' (Brun 2003: 22). Prior to their displacement, they lived in a predominantly Tamil region of the north, where they shared resources, customs and languages with Tamils. This research theme seeks to examine the memories and experiences of displaced Muslims with emphasis on their sense of place and idenity. Do people's experiences of protracted displacement alter their sense of place and identity? To what extent do place and identity shape livelihood strategies and coping mechanisms in situations of protracted conflict-induced displacement? I ask whether and how they managed to cope with challenges in new localities and in re-making their lives in Puttalam.

**3) What are the perceptions of return under conditions of protracted exile?**

This question deals with the issue of 'return' by displaced Muslims in a post-conflict situation. It explores the dilemmas they face in making the decision whether to return to their places of origin in Northern Province or to remain where they are in Puttalam. Living as displaced persons for almost two decades, they have developed lifestyles that are different from those in their places of origin as well as their place of refuge in

Puttalam. This question examines the experiences in exile and the factors that influence the displaced Muslims' decisions to return or not to their places of origin.

## Structure of the thesis

This thesis is woven around the stories of a group of people displaced by civil conflict nearly two decades ago. In six chapters (see Figure 1), it explores their memories and experiences of pre- and post-displacement life. The first chapter presents the theoretical perspectives and methodology that guided my field research in Sri Lanka. It begins with an examination of two concepts, *place* and *identity*, and their relevance to understanding the protracted displaced conditions. The sociological meanings of 'place' and 'identity', debates on the applicability of these concepts in the global migration context, and their relevance to understanding the lives of refugees and displaced persons are briefly discussed here. The second part of the chapter is a description of data collection methods and the field research process. It discusses methodological approaches to examining a protracted displaced situation from three time dimensions: before, during and after the conflict.

Chapter Two sets the background for the field research. It reviews literature about the nature and scale of ethnic conflict and conflict-induced displacement globally. The chapter also provides an understanding of the reasons behind the conflict in Sri Lanka and the mass displacement of Muslims. The nature of conflict-induced displacement, and the trends and complexities that are unique to the Sri Lankan context are described in detail.

Chapter Three provides a descriptive account of the pre-displacement life of Muslims of Northern Province. This chapter is divided into two sections. First, the social, cultural, and economic importance of 'place' in the pre-displacement phase is examined through presenting experiences and memory of place and attachment to their homes in the north. The second part presents the narratives of expulsions and reasons for the forceful eviction by the LTTE, from the displaced peoples' point of view. These narratives are presented in the form of stories and ethnographic descriptions, which are then related to the wider social and political context of the conflict in Sri Lanka.

Chapter Four examines the lives of displaced northern Muslims living in Puttalam. Responses at the local level and from a range of agencies to the needs of displaced

Muslims and the types of settlement initially used are described in the first section of the chapter. Then an analytic account is given of how displaced Muslims gradually transformed their initial settlements into permanent shelters through resettling as groups and remaking homes that replicate the northern social and cultural contexts. The chapter also explores the ways through which displaced Muslims attempted to construct an identity separating them from the local host community, a community that is also Tamil-speaking Muslims. Finally, the process of forming an identity different from their place of origin as well as the factors that led them to evolve such identities is discussed.

Chapter Five explains the strategies that Muslims followed in rebuilding their lives in Puttalam after displacement. Their coping strategies include drawing on experiences prior to the displacement and innovative livelihood activities not utilized by local host communities. This chapter also examines how the closely-knit social and intra-familial relations and gender roles of the pre-displacement phase have been altered to face the challenges in their new setting. The chapter concludes by presenting some of the social divisions among displaced Muslims that challenge the categorization of both displaced people as well as refugees in general as homogeneous social entities.

Chapter Six explores the factors that influence the decisions of Muslims to return to their places of origin in the north. After nearly two decades of living in Puttalam, they are in a dilemma as to how to respond to the government's call to resettle all people displaced by war. By presenting narratives of families who are willing to return and other families who want to remain, the chapter examines the broader question of whether displacement ends with the end of the war.

Finally, the Conclusion emphasises the need for in-depth understanding of the pre-and post-displacement experiences of displaced people in order to find durable solutions to long-term displacement. In a context of protracted displaced situations, 'collective and self identities' of people are subject to change. Social meaning and sense of place are also in a state of constant flux as people perceive place in the context of their experience in the social sphere in which they live.

**Figure 1:** The relationship between research questions and chapters

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | **Chapters** |
| | | **Introduction** |
| | **Research questions** | |
| **Aim of the research** | Background: How has the concept of 'place' and 'identity' examined in the research on conflict and displacement | **Chapter I** Research perspectives and methodology |
| To examine the perceived sense of 'place' and 'identity' among displaced northern Muslims and it influence on their pre- and post-displacement lives and post-conflict return decision making | What was the context in which Muslims became displaced? | **Chapter II** Ethnic conflict and displacement in Sri Lanka |
| | Does the conflict-induced displacement affect the Muslims' attachment to place and identity? | **Chapter III** Place, flight and refuge: Narratives of displacement |
| | | **Chapter IV** Reinvoking homes in Puttalam |
| | What are the perceptions of return under conditions of protracted exile? | **Chapter V** Living displaced in Puttalam |
| | | **Chapter VI** Return or not: Post-conflict dilemma |
| | | **Conclusions** |

**CHAPTER ONE**

**PLACE, IDENTITY AND (DIS)PLACEMENT.**
**THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY**

> In this place [Puttalam] everything is new. We have no connection to this place. We don't see our life getting any better here. We have lost our roots. In our village, we used to visit the burial ground [kaburadi] where our parents and grandparents were buried and we prayed for their souls to be in heaven [*sorghum*].When I die I want my body to be buried in my home village. I pray every day that my body and soul will be laid to rest in my home village near the place where my parents and grandparents were buried. Allah must give that opportunity to me.
>
> Ibrahim (LI 35), 65 year-old man displaced from Mannar sixteen years ago.

## Introduction

For those people who lost their homes or moved into another place because of natural or human-made disasters, the longing for 'home' is a strong factor in feeling 'unsettled' until they find a viable resettlement option. As noted by the displaced man, quoted above, people have continuing attachments to place and home even though they are forced to move for various social, economic and political reasons. I begin this chapter by outlining the theoretical perspectives that provide insights into the notion of place and identity in the context of displacement. It is not a comprehensive review of all the literature on the concepts of place and identity as this literature is large and spans many disciplines. Instead, a selected number of readings relevant to the comprehension of the forced displacement situation are reviewed and discussed.

The second part of the chapter deals with the methodological approach, including the overall design and process of the field research. It elaborates the data collection methods, research participants, field locations and data analysis. My own reflections on the experience of doing ethnographic research in my home context are given at the end of the chapter.

## Theoretical perspectives

Two theoretical perspectives guide this research: *place* and *identity*. In general, people identify themselves with a location that they inhabit. It may be a country or village, in which they feel they rooted, and attached to its social and cultural attributes. In other words, place or territory is a strong boundary marker of people's identity. When displacement occurs, identity is destabilized. Thus these two concepts are useful in analysing the conflict-induced displacement and socio-political context and finding durable solutions to re-placement following the end of the conflict in Sri Lanka.

Literature on place and identity encompasses many disciplines, including anthropology, cultural studies, human geography and political sociology. It covers a wider body of theories and conceptual frameworks that deal with sense of place, place attachment, home and belonging, as well as identity-related issues such as personal identity, social identity, cultural identity, and national and ethnic identities in various contexts. In the past few decades, particularly, the literature on place and identity has proliferated due to rapid increase in the global migration. (Appadurai 1996; Creswell 2004; Giddens 1991; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Lovell 1998;Malkki 1995b). In addition to the above serious anthropological enterprises, a number of research and analytical models have also been proposed for the study of forced migration scenarios and how governments and humanitarian agencies should deal with the mass displacement of people (Cernea 1997 & 2000; Guggenheim 1994; Muggah 2000;Scudder 1993; Sorenson1996). Although it is not possible to discuss all these different theories and analytical frameworks, those theoretical and conceptual ideas that have influenced displacement and refugee studies are given careful examination.

### The place perspective

The concept of place is a highly contested one but can be treated as a unifying concept of various disciplines. Since it has roots in several disciplines, discussions about the meaning of place has produced a plethora of interdisciplinary research in anthropology, human geography, social psychology and refugee studies in which researchers have attempted to understand how people develop, act upon and make connections to place (Gieryn 2000; Hidalgo & Hernandez 2001; McDowell 1999; Massey 1995; Relph 1976;Tuan 1977). This literature has produced a rich mosaic of place understanding and suggests that when people think of place, they not only think of a physical location but

also the social and psychological attachment to it. In this regard, Gieryn (2000: 464–5) provides a useful analysis in which he identifies three necessary features that make a mere physical location a lived social concept:

> (1) Geographic Location – a place is a unique spot in the universe. It allows us to make a distinction between here and there or near and far. (2) Material Form – Place has physicality. Whether built or just come upon, artificial or natural or rocks and trees, place is full of stuff. (3) Investment with Meaning and Value – place has an identification or representation for ordinary people. Places are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined. These three defining features of place - location, material form, and meaningfulness – should remain bundled. They cannot be ranked into greater or lesser significance for social life, nor can one be reduced down to an expression of another.

According to this definition, 'place' is physical space in which people can be and interact as social beings, and develop a sense of attachment through living there. People make attachments to a place by building emotional and sentimental bonds. As argued by Gieryn, such attachments result from accumulated biographical experiences and the interactive and culturally shared processes of endowing rooms or buildings or neighbourhoods with emotional meaning. Thus, the longer people have lived in a place, the more rooted they feel and the greater their attachment to it (Gieryn 2000: 481). That is also why place exists in the memory and in our nostalgic remembrance of past events of life, and landmarks are often recalled as the 'home' in which we lived.

Notion of place is a human experience in which people build their lives and to which they attach meaning. In the social world, 'place' or geographical space has no meaning unless it is inhabited and nurtured by people who invest their skills and innovations in it. People who inhabit in a locality make it a representation of their collective identity (Massey 1995). Though the notion of place as a concept relating people and their experiences is a highly debated topic because of the increased global migration of people, it remains relevant in understanding the complex nature of human experience of the world. Thus, as Harvey (1989) argues, 'place', like 'space' and 'time', is a social construct developed through human experience and is still central to the analysis of identity and belonging.

In this sense, place is not merely a geographical space, but is rather a social construct and consists of built images of homes, ancestries and properties. Therefore, attachments to home (place) can evoke intense emotional feelings as they are not merely physical objects but also social constructions of which our lives are a part. But people's attachment to a place is not always a fixed one. It may change as they move from one place to another in their search for better and more secure living. Relph, in the discussion of a theory of place, emphasises the importance of understanding it in the moving social contexts:

> The changing character of place through time is of course related to modifications of buildings and landscapes as well as to changes in our attitudes and is likely to seem quite dramatic after a prolonged absence. On the other hand the persistence of the character of places is apparently related to continuity both in our experience of change and in the very nature of change that serves to reinforce a sense of association and attachment to those places (Relph 1976: 31).

These ideas of 'place attachment' and the 'rootedness' to a physical location through material investment are important determinants in finding durable solutions to the displacement, which is analysed in the proceeding sections. However, the notion of place has been subject to great deal of debate when it comes to linking people and their identity. The following section elaborates how people evolve identities and the importance of place in these evolving identities.

### *The identity perspective*

The concept of identity is a core and much debated construct in sociology and anthropology. Why identity is so important and how people construct and reconstruct it in the context of social, political and cultural changes are key questions that have been examined and debated by researchers over the past few decades. There are two theoretical rituals that provide the basis for the debate and discussion on identity: Essentialist vs. Constructionist. The *essentialist* or *primordial* view strongly links the individual identity with place or geographical space where people are seen as being firmly settled inhabitants in a home environment (Benwell & Stokoe 2006; Massey 1995; Rose1995). On the other hand, the constructionist perspective, which has gained considerable influence in modern and post-modern literature on identity, sees identities as reshaped or reconstructed in the new social and political scenarios created by global

migration. For understanding my research data, both of these theoretical approaches are useful.

The essentialist perspective was widely used in understanding cultural and social identities of communities by anthropologists who spent considerable time and in-depth empirical research in early 1940 and 1950s, largely in non-Western societies. 'Place' was ideologically linked with 'group identity' and race (Jackson 2004). It stresses that 'national culture' directly influences the identity formation of people, who derive their sense of identity from the existing cultural and social surroundings of the place they inhabit. As a result, essentialist discourses were concerned with studying how such a place-based (territorialized) identity that fixes inhabitants with a locality is established and maintained. Some argue that this pre-modernist essentialist notion of group identity was greatly influenced by the ethno-centric perspective which the Western colonial powers used to rank non-Western societies on a continuum of 'civilized to uncivilized' (Jackson 2004;Kobayashi 1994; Wickramasinghe 1995, 2006). As a result, in early anthropological writings, people in non-Western societies were often categorized on the basis of 'racial' or 'ethnic' characteristics, which often masked complex and deep-rooted differences among populations (Wickramasinghe 2006: 44–8).

During the past two decades, however, discussion of identity has overcome the historical limitations of ethno-centric perspectives. In more recent literature, identity, especially group identity (Brubaker 2004; Eriksen 2004; Jenkins 2008), is regarded as emerging both through establishing perceived similarities and differences with others. This suggests that identity of a person or a group should be studied by examining the social context in which they live:

> Identity is our understanding of who we are and who other people are and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which include us). It is a very practical matter of synthesising relationships of similarity and difference. The outcome of agreement and disagreement and, at least in principle, always negotiable – identity is not a fixed *phenomenon* (Jenkins 2008: 18, emphasis added).

As Jenkins notes, the term identity refers to social or group identification, which gives people living in complex societies a sense of belonging. Identity is also a social construction by individuals or groups through which they can distinguish themselves

from 'others' thus safeguarding the common interests or characteristics of that group (Brubaker 2004). Language, religion, locality, kinship, nationality and ethnic memberships are markers of group identity. All these attachments provide a sense of belonging to a group. In this sense, as Jenkins argues, identity 'does not, and cannot, make people do anything: it is, rather, people who make and do identity, for their own reasons and purposes' (2008: 9).

However, theoretical discussion about identity has been further complicated by the rise in global migration over the past few decades. In general, when people migrate, they tend to reconstruct their identities in order to adapt themselves to the situation and culture into which they arrive and settle. In order to capture the dynamics of the changing conception of identity in the global migration context, new theoretical notions such as 'double consciousness' 'in-betweenness' and 'hybridity' have been explored by researchers (Anthias 2001; Gomes 2006;McDowell 1999).

The idea of 'double consciousness' simply refers to dual self-perception or simultaneous coexistence of two different souls (identity) in one body (personality). This notion, originally developed by Du Bois (1963),[12] has become a point of interest for some researchers (Berry 1997; Dennis 2003 ;Lyubansky and Eidelson 2005) who have explored the multidimensional aspect of identity in the context of migration. Double consciousness is a state of mixed feelings about belonging. According to this notion, in moving from one cultural context to another, a person may have doubts about his or her identity and belonging. Such a 'contradiction' in identities is more often an outcome of the efforts by a group to preserve or enhance their positions relative to others. As Barbara (2003: 45–6) notes, it is a natural part of being human to gather sentimental and cultural ties to protect oneself and survive in a competitive social environment. In a situation such as forced displacement, therefore, 'a person can relate his identity by refiguring which is shadowed by refactoring memories of place to emerge newness' (Venn 2009: 10).

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[12] Du Bois, in *The* **Souls of Black Folk** **(1963 and 1994)** first developed the concept of *double consciousness.* **He used it to campaign for the betterment of Black Americans throughout his life. He himself highlighted the perception and feelings of Black Americans '**One ever feels his two-ness', **in the White-dominated cultural context of the USA.** This dual self-perception is now widely known as 'double consciousness'.

*Invoking place and identity in displacement studies*

Forced displacement refers to a physical uprooting of inhabitants from a place or territory. This disrupts the attachments that people have to their localities but also those social relationships that they build and the values they hold in relation to the environment around them. With the rise of mass population displacement in recent decades, the question of how forced displacement affects people's sense of place and the construction of identity has been subject to a great deal of scholarly debate.

As mentioned earlier, the essentialist perspective views identity as fixed and linked to a particular group that inhabits a nation-state or politically demarcated territory. The identity of a group of people in such a politically defined territory is considered to be, therefore, a part of that 'national culture' in which language, religion, ethnic belonging and customs are important markers of group boundaries. The essentialist perspective also stresses that once people are deeply rooted in a territory, they develop a nostalgia or psychological bonding with that locality which becomes 'home' (Giuliani 2003: 138). Such psychological attachment or nostalgia developed through the rootedness to a place creates a situation in which people do not like to move away from a place (home) that they have inhabited for a prolonged period. Therefore, when people are uprooted or forced out of their homes they may have a strong preoccupation for bonding with their places of origin which makes it difficult for them to settle in a new place. The loss of place can have devastating implications for individual and collective identity, memory, and history – and for psychological well-being (Gieryn 2000). In other words, displacement disconnects the people from their roots in a habitat in which they had lived. As Tuan argues (1977: 149), people do not know who they really are unless they can trace their roots. In this sense, the essentialist perspective strongly links particular people with a geographical space, arguing that displacement (exile) and uprootedness is 'being out of place' rather than a condition of a migrant identity.

In the past two decades, particularly in the context of global migration, the essentialist notion of identity that links individual attachment to a particular place has been critically examined by several researchers (Appadurai 1996; Giddens 1991;Gupta and Ferguson1997; Mallki 1997), who have contributed to an influential body of literature on the constructionist perspective of identity, arguing that traditional boundaries of nation-states, that is, politically demarcated territories, are becoming increasingly invalid for studying people's identity as more and more people move from one place to

another in the context of globalization. Appadurai (1996) argues that we must view the social and cultural meaning of group identity as largely a 'production of locality' in a de-territorialized world. Malkki (1995, 1997) states that with the increase in civil wars, more and more people are being uprooted from their 'places' or original habitats and cross the borders of so-called nation-states seeking protection (refuge) in other countries. Such mass movement challenges the 'national order of things' (Malkki 1995: 496). According to this view, the sense of place is not fixed and does not remain central to the person's identity. People such as refugees (displaced persons) who are forced to leave their homes may develop identities that are not necessarily linked to their places of origin but to a complex mix of past and present in a deterritorialized social context (Malkki 1995). Thus, from the constructionist perspective, displaced persons or refugees are not just people thrown out of a place or victims of political, social and natural calamities, but are rather individuals with considerable capabilities and creativities, people who can reconstruct new identities linking their past and present experiences of locality (place) in new social environments.

Kibreab (1999), however, criticises the constructionist and post-modernist view of the diminishing importance of place in the identity discourse. He argues for treating all people, regardless of their place of origin, as 'global citizens'. Place (physical location) still remains the major repository of rights in societies where land still constitutes the major source of livelihood and social mooring (1999: 387). He suggests that regardless of the declining importance of place in contemporary (global) identity discourses, it is symbolically central to the constitution of accepted forms of identity. Displaced people tend to identify themselves strongly with the place (territory) they inhabit because it provides access to livelihood resources and social protection as a community. If a place become less safe or does not provide sufficient access to resources for livelihood, people move away from it to find other places where they feel such requirements are met (Kibreab 1999: 404).

Despite the criticisms of and continuing debate about place and identity in displacement studies, an important theme has emerged from the post-modern constructionist perspective of identity. That is, those individuals forced to move away from their place of habitat are creative and active in developing new forms of identities in the context of displacement, migration and resettlement. Nevertheless, theoretical analyses dealing with the notion of place and identity have limitations for the study of specific forced

displacement scenarios. First, the notion of place and identity is explored largely in the context of international migration. How people living in long-term displaced or 'protracted displaced' conditions perceive their 'homes' and changes in 'identity' are emphasised in only a few studies (Loizos 2008;Malkki 1995; Zetter 1999). Second, the influence of international humanitarian agencies and their regimes that affect the lives of displaced, as well as host communities who share and compete for livelihood resources and opportunities are rarely considered. Finally, the emphasis on the global context for understanding refugee social environments provides little understanding of the localised experience of people living in protracted displaced situations.

### *Place, identity and displacement: The Sri Lankan context*

The conceptual frameworks outlined above provide insight into Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict and resultant mass displacement over the past twenty years. For example, on the one hand, the ethnic conflict in the country can be understood as a relational, situational and constructive process of identity formation by communities on the basis of ethnic boundaries. On the other hand, it is also possible to look at group identity in the context of place, which forms the basis of separation and dislocation of people belonging to different ethnic groups. By strengthening their social and physical boundaries, these groups develop a strong sense of belonging and reconstruct an identity of their own to safeguard their interests within the conflict. In particular, 'ethnic' identity has become more important as a boundary marker than class or caste identities in the recent past (Wikramasinghe 2006: 252). Ethnic identity has become more important in recent years because those sentimental affiliations were deemed necessary for survival and protection. Some argue that the civil conflict in the country has sharpened the ethnic identities of all communities during past three decades (Ameerdeen 2006; Liyanage 2008; Nuhuman 2006;O'Sullivan 1999; Senanayake 2002, 2004).

In conducting this research I reviewed three studies that directly focus on displacement in Sri Lanka which must be mentioned: *Relocated Lives; Displacement and Resettlement within the Mahaweli Project Sri Lanka* (Sorenson 1996); *Relocation Failures in Sri Lanka: A Short History of Internal Displacement and Resettlement* (Muggah 2008) and *Finding a Place: Local Integration and Protracted Displacement in Sri Lanka* (Brun 2008). Sorenson conducted a study of development-induced displacement in Sri Lanka. She explains how a group of displaced people from a

development project called Mahaweli were able to evolve a 'place' and build an identity unique to them in a host community village environment. Her argument lies within the broader context of development-induced resettlement and relocation perspectives. The major contribution of her work is in locating the micro-context of displacement and relocation in the global context. However, her study did not examine the pre-displaced lives of the displaced people. She emphasises the need for recognition of relocation (displacement) as a local and lived experience that always take place in the wider social and political context of globalization. Her study was based on field work in a new colonization scheme in a major river basin development in a north-central part of the country. Her findings suggest that people who moved from one place to another by choice or by force reside and live everyday life in a transcultural and interconnected world. Thus, globalization is an inevitable dimension of relocation, though its ramifications and particular meanings vary from one context to another (Sorenson 1996: 52–3). The central message of her study is that people who have been forcibly displaced and relocated in a territory with which they were not familiar may attempt to evolve new identities. She emphasises that when people relocated, their past sense of identity and way of life become less important because of their limited strategic importance in the realization of their present needs and interactions with the host community where they were forced to resettle. By narrating the stories of relocated families, she builds a strong case to suggest that relocation is a deliberate attempt to escape the past by people facing the challenges of the present (Sorenson 1996: 230).

Muggah's work is perhaps the most specific to the case of Sri Lanka's unique experience in that it presents all three types of displacement scenarios: conflict, disaster and development. He provides an overview of the basic commonalities and distinguishing characteristics of all three types of internal displacement and resettlement. The strength of his work lies in the two key issues he addressed: a) a critique of the country's national policies to address the displacement in a broader development context; and b) the use of several analytical models to assess the risks and impoverishment of displaced persons. Muggah engages in a critical assessment of the state and humanitarian regimes and finds many drawbacks in the policies and programmes for displaced persons. He stresses that despite massive international support, the state has failed to address the issues of displaced persons in a broader development context. In his view, despite Sri Lanka's higher performance in 'human development' aspects than other South Asian countries, its progress and achievements

in the resettlement of displaced population is rather weak. His discussion of the failure of the state and humanitarian agencies to recognize the needs and aspirations of displaced people has relevance for this study which are analysed elsewhere.

Catharine Brun's study focuses on conflict-induced protracted displacement from a human geographical approach. She describes the protracted displacement of people as 'permanent impermanency' in the context of unending civil war. Brun's study is one of the key pieces of research of conflict-induced displacement in Sri Lanka, which shows how the displaced people of the north-western part of the country negotiate their rights to livelihood opportunities and citizenship in a local context in which they have been always considered as outsiders by the host communities.[13] Her research focused heavily on host–displaced community disputes as the central interactive process in a context where both communities sought solutions to their livelihood and citizenship problems. More importantly, she emphasizes the need to look at displaced persons as innovative contributors to local development. In sum, her research is a study of negotiating a right to a place (physical entity) by displaced persons who have become influential members of the local economy and in community interactions. Brun carried out her research in an ongoing conflict situation. Therefore, the post-war context and ideas of 'return' after the war by displaced people received little attention.

The present study draws from a critical reading of the above literature on displacement in Sri Lanka, with more emphasis on examining the local experiences of long-term displacement and how such experiences affect the reconstruction of 'place' and 'identity' among displaced persons, and their decision to return to their places of origin post-conflict. In other words, I used previous research and perspectives on place and identity as useful insights rather than as particular theoretical frameworks for looking at the 'on the ground' situation. I went to the field to understand the emerging social realities of people who have been living for nearly two decades in exile and are not a direct party to the country's ethnic conflict.

Notions of identity and place have specific relevance in understanding the present political quagmire of Muslims of Sri Lanka. The issues face by this community today can be viewed as a result of long standing 'double consciousness' in their identity. On

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[13] Brun's study focuses on displaced persons from the north and covers some parts of Puttalam district in which this research was also carried out.

the one hand, Muslims sympathized with the Tamils' grievances and problems because their linguistic and cultural ties to the Tamil community are strong. On the other hand, they do not want to identify themselves as part of a broader Tamil-speaking community or as 'Tamil Muslims' because it jeopardizes their distinct religious identity with Islam and risks their relationship with the Sinhalese majority. As Muslims, though they are highly devout (*thablig*),[14] they did not, until recently, make any serious attempt to link themselves physically or culturally to the pan-Islamic or Arab world despite migrating to Middle Eastern Arab countries for work. Rather, they historically showed that they preferred to assimilate with the majority Sri Lankan culture (Nuhuman: 2006).

As Muggah argues, conflict-induced displacement, compared with other types of displacement such as development-induced or natural disaster related displacement, has a profound political dimension. This is because the displaced people are of political interest to the governments as well as to the politicians among the displaced people. From the displaced Muslims' perspective, they are struggling to connect with a particular place and identity in the conflict and post-conflict situations. The forced expulsion of Tamil-speaking Muslims from Northern Province has significant political dimensions at both macro and micro levels for understanding people's experience of displacement and post-displacement. For example, while some displaced people use 'place'-based identity as 'northern Muslims' to emphasize their right to return to the places of origin, others attempt to develop a 'refugee and displaced' identity in order to get benefits and assistance from the agencies in their present displaced localities. Also, as displaced people are Muslims and migrants to the host villages, they do not challenge the core values of the existing social system of the host community in Puttalam – also a Tamil-speaking Muslim community – but are able to strengthen their position as a distinct community by evolving an alternative 'displaced' (northern) identity within the local settlements.

As is shown by this study, while the first generation of displaced elderly people have a deep-rooted sense of attachment to their places of origin, the second-generation Muslims who were born or spent most part of their lives in Puttalam have developed a strong sense of belonging to their current places of residence. The rootedness to a place of origin or nostalgia to 'home' in the north felt by their parents is not seen in or expressed by these young people. In the protracted displacement scenario, while an

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[14] Ancient Muslims scholars and travellers like Ibn Batuta of Turkey remarked that the Muslims of Sri Lanka were one of the most devout Muslim communities in the world.

identity that is rooted in the past history of belonging to the north has become an obstacle to local integration of elderly displaced persons, the newly evolved sense of belonging to Puttalam by young displaced Muslims becomes an obstacle to voluntary return to the north after the war. In a sense, the identity formation is rather a 'locality production' among members of a second generation of displaced persons, in contrast to their parents' identity formation and belonging to a 'home' that is rooted heavily in the places of origin. Especially in the post-conflict context, for people living displaced for protracted periods, decisions to return or to remain depend on the extent to which this second generation of displaced people have internalised 'home' and identity in the post-displacement context. For example, while some northern displaced Muslims struggled to maintain a 'northern' place-based identity in their displaced localities because of the strong sense of place attachment and nostalgia, others in search of solutions to their displacement have engaged in various activities that allowed for the development of a sense of belonging to the new places in which they were settled. As a result, some displaced Muslims who desired to return to their places in the north after the war strongly emphasised their 'right to return' because they felt that they were more secure and had better access to resources in the north. Others, who had managed to rebuild their lives in the current displaced localities by manipulating available resources and opportunities, made use of their pre-displaced livelihood experiences to make new homes in Puttalam. Thus as is shown in the proceeding chapters, in the context of a protracted displacement, 'identity construction' may become an adaptive strategy rather than just a way of differentiating people on the basis of cultural or some place specific attributes.

# Research design

Doing field research in a home country is always a challenging task. When it is a politically sensitive subject of ethnic conflict and the resultant displacement of a minority community, it requires a certain amount of courage and determination. On my first visit to Sri Lanka, I had not gone with a clearly structured research topic or methods to be used. As a sociologist trained in development studies, I was thinking of conducting a social survey of a representative sample of the Muslim community and their perspectives on the conflict. However, after my initial field visit, and having decided to do an in-depth study of displaced Muslims, I started to think of alternative methods of collecting qualitative data to write my thesis on the lived experience of displacement and local perspectives on this topic.

## *Methodological approach*

I conducted the field research in three stages using mixture of methods (see Figure 2). Briefly, the research involved in-depth field research over an eighteen-month period. The research was carried over three visits, as noted in the introduction, the first in 2007 (for three months), the second, late 2007 to mid-2008 (for ten months), and the third in late 2009-early 2010 (for three months). I conducted  in-depth interviews (see Appendix 1, Social profile of research participants), and participant observations that included focus group discussions, informal interviews and conversations. The following section describes the methods and stages of the field research in detail**.**

## *The Research Process*

### Stage one

My first field visit was a scoping mission rather than comprehensive field research. I began with the intent of conducting broader research on 'Muslims and ethnic conflict.' I wanted to define and refine my research problem and pave the way for comprehensive field work at a latter stage. I began by visiting libraries, universities, and research institutions in Kandy and Colombo that hold research reports, articles and monographs related to the ethnic conflict. I was surprised to see the amount of literature written on the Sri Lankan conflict during the past 30 years and this helped to narrow down my research. Through reading the existing research, as well as reflecting on my own experience as a researcher in the field of development in Sri Lanka, I identified broad research questions. I then conducted interviews with selected individuals (key

informants) who have written about and were working on the topic of conflict-related displacement of Muslims in the country.

Twenty key informant interviews were conducted with individuals involved in research at the national and local (Puttalam) levels. A total of twenty such interviews were conducted. National level key informant interviews were conducted with people working in academia, research institutions and aid agencies. Social activists and politicians who were closely linked to the displaced people were also interviewed. The interviews focused on a) the origin, history and evolution of 'Muslim identity' over the past four decades; b) the most pertinent problems that the contemporary Muslim community in Sri Lanka was facing in the conflict; c) how the civil conflict had impacted on the Muslim community; and d) the possible future directions of the Muslim community in the context of conflict and post conflict situation. (See Appendix 2, Key informant interview guide)

**Figure 2:** Sequential Mixed Method Design

| **Phase 1** (Jan-March 2007) | **Phase 2** (Oct 2007- Aug 2008) | **Phase 3** Dec 2009- Mar 2010 |
|---|---|---|
| **Key informant interviews** <br><br> In-country literature review | **Ethnographic field work in Puttalam** Participant observations, focus group discussions and interviews | **Rapid Appraisal** Field visits Semi-structured interviews Focus group discussions |
| **Descriptive analysis** | **Narrative analysis** | **Thematic analysis** |

After obtaining a reasonable understanding of the situation and taking into account the key issues and themes from the interviews, I made a brief visit to Puttalam where a large number of displaced Muslims were living. The local key informant interviews were aimed at seeking more specific information related to the displaced Muslims, in Puttalam in particular. Those interviewed included government officers such as village officials (*grama niladharies*), social activists, religious leaders and project officials who were in charge of development programs for the displaced community. The discussions mainly revolved around problems faced by displaced Muslims, interactions between

host and displaced communities, the positive and negative consequences of the presence of a large displaced community in certain localities, and future prospects and problems. This first visit to Puttalam was largely a fact finding and familiarisation one. I also collected socio-economic and demographic data from UNHCR surveys, as well as from the projects and programs then in progress. However, on this first field visit, I did not have much time to meet IDPs or to see the camps and welfare centres where they lived.

**Stage two**

> Ethnography is not a particular method of data collection but a style of research that is distinguished by its objectives, which are to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given 'field' or setting, and an approach, which involves close association with, and often participation in, this setting (Brewer 2000: 59).

The second phase of my field work was largely a qualitative data collection process that focussed on the lived experiences of pre- and post-displacement conditions and the everyday interactions among displaced and host community members. Due to its sensitive nature, this approach eased my acceptance by the community and also ensured their endorsement of and genuine participation in the research process. This second part of the field research produced a rich set of qualitative information which I found useful and helped me to refocus the specific research questions of the thesis.

My previous experience as a participant observer (field investigator), in research on an urban slum community in Kandy under the guidance of a senior academic at Peradeniya University, also gave me the courage and confidence to immerse myself in the field. The memory of this research encouraged me to engage in my own research with an open mind and free of value judgements. Also, my proficiency in local languages, Sinhala and Tamil, and my religious affiliation (Islam) with the displaced community were of great advantage in conducting this 'ethnography at home' over ten months in two localities in Puttalam. However, doing ethnographic field work in a home country is not an easy task and I discuss some of my encounters in the field at the end of this chapter. As Madden argues, doing ethnographic field work in a home environment has disadvantages as well as advantages. The advantages are that the researcher is well versed in the 'field'. However this familiarity can blind the researcher to what he/she takes for granted, and can raise issues of identity with those researched. Thus the

atmosphere and mechanics of doing field work at home requires careful positioning of 'self identity' when interacting with research participants, and a critically reflexive approach (Madden 2009: 23).

During the first two weeks, I travelled extensively, to all the welfare centres and camps and resettlement schemes where displaced Muslims were housed in the four divisional secretary (DS) areas in the Puttalam district[15]. Out of this, Kalpitiya DS four (Map 6) had the largest displaced population (UNCHR 2006: 2). Thus, I decided to select my field locations from this division. (Distribution of IDPs in the district is given in detail in the Chapter III.)

However, the selection of specific field sites became a challenge as these displaced settlements are spread over a vast area of the Kalpitiya DS area. My preference for field sites was 'village' or *grama niladhari* (GN) divisions which consist of two or three village communities.[16] After travelling to locations where displaced people were settled, it became apparent that the notion of 'village' and GN divisions as field sites was unrealistic for research on a migratory displaced community. The IDP camps and settlements are located as clusters, crisscrossing village and GN boundaries. I discussed the social profiles of displaced people in different cluster settlements with local officials. These clusters included a number of 'camps' or 'welfare centres' which were bigger than a GN division or village in Sri Lanka. Therefore, while my decision to conduct field work in a geographical site larger than a GN division was challenging, it allowed me to locate my ethnographic research within specific geographic boundaries.

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[15] Welfare centres are temporary settlements of displaced persons currently living as small groups. These centres are either old buildings converted to houses or built in palm leaf shelters or cluster of houses. These are in structurally better conditions than camps or collective centres. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four

[16] *Grama niladhari* (village official) division is the lowest local government administrative unit of Sri Lanka.

**Map 6**: Kalpitiya divisional secretariat division, Puttalam
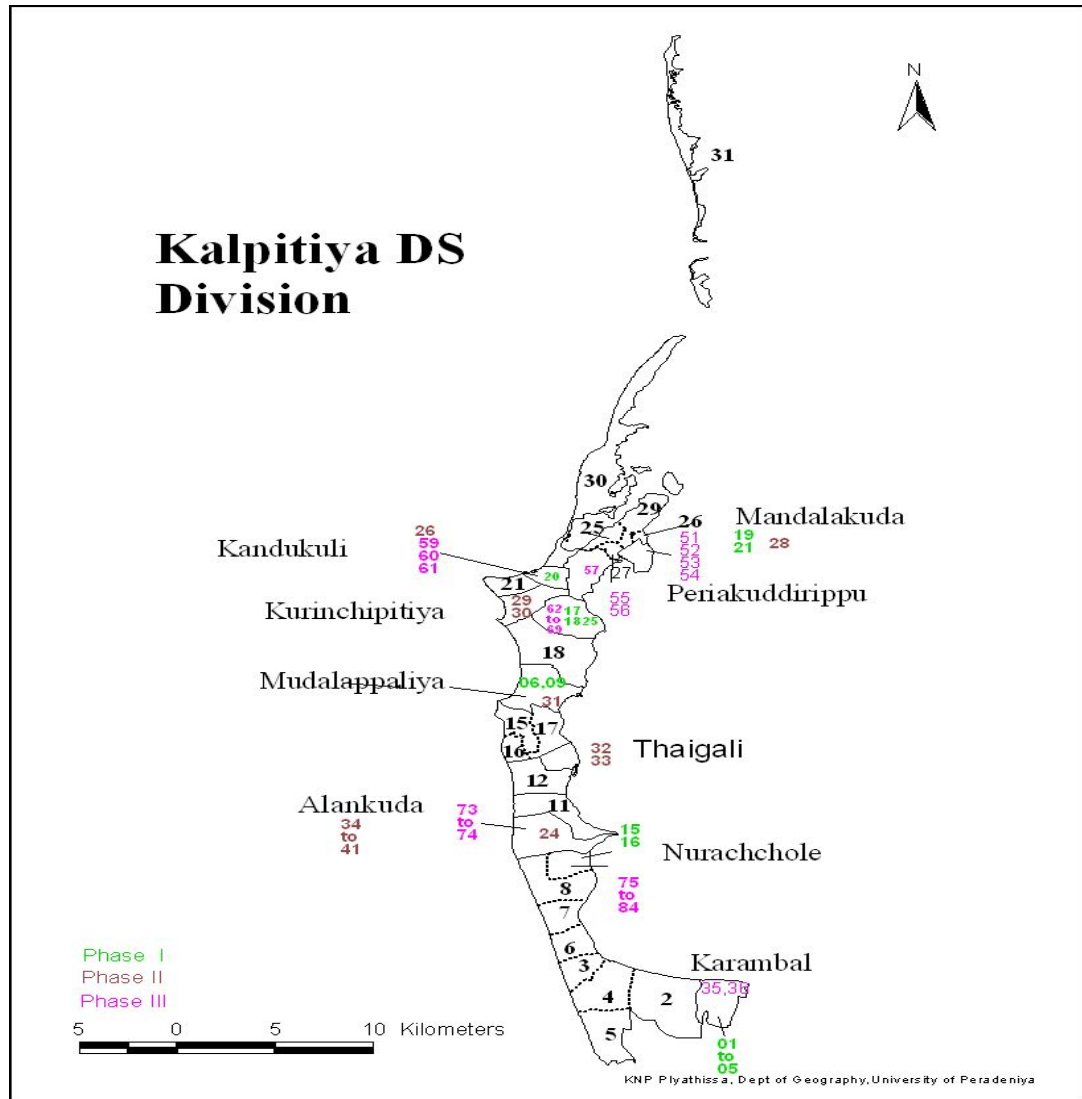


Source: Department of Geography, Peradeniya University, Sri Lanka

I decided to conduct my field research in camp clusters. The cluster-type settlements **a**re cultural entities where IDPs from different villages and districts from the north settled in camps and welfare centres**,** and lived as kinship groups, village communities and neighbourhoods . As described in Lacey's (2008) research on Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea, these camp clusters are geographic and cultural 'microcosms' which have a profound effect on displaced peoples' livelihood opportunities, social networks and everyday life. Another practical advantage of the 'camp cluster' as a unit of investigation is the presence of large number IDP families in a limited physical space. This reduced considerably my travel time between camps.

Finally, I had to decide whether to select just one cluster or more than one, because some clusters have IDPs from different districts of Northern Province and also their

interactions with host communities vary according to the location. In certain clusters, displaced people live as the majority and their interaction with the local host community is limited. They are the dominant community in the locality. There are other clusters of IDPs where they are dispersed in and around the host villages, resulting in greater exposure to the host community. Considering these diverse characteristics and my research questions, I chose two locations (clusters) which were representative of different living conditions of displaced Muslims in Puttalam (see Map 7, field locations).

### *Location 1: Alankuda*

Location 1, in Alankuda, is situated along the main road between Puttalam and the northern tip of the Kalpitiya peninsula, and is the largest cluster of IDPs in the Kalpitiya DS area.[17] Established in 1991, it is also one of the oldest and most densely populated IDP clusters, with sixteen camps and settlements (Table 1.1). The different types of IDP settlements are described in detail in Chapter Four.

**Table 1.1**: Distribution of IDPs Settlements in Alankuda in 2007

| No | Camp/settlement name | Number of families | Population |
|----|----------------------|--------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Al Arafa | 37 | 156 |
| 2 | Al Azam | 71 | 304 |
| 3 | Al Hijra | 220 | 916 |
| 4 | Alhira | 74 | 280 |
| 5 | Al Manaar | 48 | 207 |
| 6 | Ali- Jinnah | 84 | 350 |
| 7 | Arafa Nagar | 435 | 1,735 |
| 8 | Darushshalam | 48 | 188 |
| 9 | Jinnah 1 | 64 | 252 |
| 10 | Jinnahpuram | 67 | 299 |
| 11 | KalmunaiKudi | 212 | 848 |
| 12 | Mullai-B | 181 | 778 |
| 13 | Madeena Nagar | 69 | 294 |
| 14 | Mazoor Nagar | 205 | 811 |
| 15 | Sarafiyapuram | 54 | 235 |
| 16 | Thahib Nagra | 120 | 456 |
|    | Total | 1989 | 8,129 |

Source: Secretariat for the Northern Displaced Muslims, Puttalam

I selected this cluster for two reasons. First, it represents the diversity of displaced people. Nearly 2,000 displaced families from all five districts (Jaffna, Mullaithivu,

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[17] In Puttalam, IDPs live in four DS divisions: Kalpitiya, Puttalam Town, Vantaha Villuwa and Mundal. More than 80 per cent of IDPs live in the Kalpitiya DS area.

Mannar, Kilinochchi and Vavunia) of Northern Province live in Alankuda. Most families include members of both the first and second generations. Second, the host community population is predominantly Muslim and is relatively small in number. According to the local GN, only 386 local families lived in the adjacent villages in 2008, compared with the 2,000 displaced families.

Camps and settlements in this cluster are located strategically, linking main and rural roads of the area. The local township, Nurachcholai, has become a major economic hub in the recent past. It is located at a junction of all major roads to Kalpitiya (to the north) and Puttalam town (to the south) via the Puttalam–Colombo main road. Nurachcholai town is, in a way, a gateway to a modern world and is a place of local articulation for the displaced people (Figure 3). In the town, shops are owned by both displaced persons and members of local host communities. On some days of the week the town becomes busy with migrant traders from distant areas such as Colombo and Kandy who come to purchase fish, vegetables, dried fish and other locally produced commodities. According to a displaced man (LI 7), 'this is a "town culture". In this town we have everything – from rice to bicycles, from local tea shops to beauty parlours, banks, gas stations and mini-markets [one stop convenience stores].'

One of the other salient characteristics of this township is the presence of mosques, newly built by local and displaced Muslims. The changing landscape symbolizes the competing cultural and economic powers of displaced northern Muslims and the local Muslim community. For example, I was told that, when displaced, the people constructed a new mosque because of the lack of space for them to conduct prayers on Fridays; the local host community became agitated and rebuilt their mosque in a modern style (see Chapter Five).

### Location 2: Pallivasalthurai

The second site is about 25 kilometres north of the first. This cluster is known as Pallivasalthurai which means 'mosque-land' and symbolizes the community's strong religious affiliation to Islam. The displaced Muslim community lives in camps and welfare centres scattered in various places surrounded by host villages. Access roads to some camps and settlements run through the latter. In Pallivaslathurai, mosques are small and often known as *madrasas*. There are fewer shops than in Alankuda. Infrastructure facilities such as access roads and the supply of electricity are not well

developed. It looks more 'rural' and the land area of this cluster is large (Figure 4). It covers nearly 150 acres, planted with coconut, vegetable, onion and other crops.

There are fewer camp settlements and a smaller population there than at the first location (see Table 1.2). Also, in the second cluster almost all of the displaced people are from one district (Mannar). This makes it the biggest homogeneous community of northern Muslims in the DS area. Second, as mentioned earlier, this cluster is located in the midst of a large host community living in adjacent villages. The host population comprises 1,200 families, which is greater than the displaced population, and includes both local Muslims and Sinhalese families.

**Table 1.2**: Distribution off IDPs in settlements in Pallivasalthurai-2007

| No | Name of the Camp/settlement | Number of Families | Population |
|----|------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Thembiliwatta | 159 | 685 |
| 2 | Ahamedpuram | 80 | 477 |
| 3 | Pallivasalturai | 45 | 188 |
| 4 | Jinna | 57 | 236 |
| 5 | Al Rahma | 59 | 221 |
| 6 | Decennt | 36 | 140 |
| 7 | Koofa | 31 | 150 |
| 8 | Musalpitty | 43 | 187 |
| 9 | Al Hamra | 169 | 811 |
| 10 | New Safra | 110 | 421 |
| 11 | Sammaddiwadi | 73 | 320 |
| | Total | 862 | 3,836 |

Source: Secretariat for the Northern Displaced Muslims- Puttalam

A common characteristic of both clusters is the names of the camps and settlements. As shown in the above tables, these names are not local. Often, an influential person among the displaced Muslims gave the camps or settlements an Islamic name or the name of their old villages in the north. The reasons and basis for the naming of IDP settlements are discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

During the first two months, I stayed in a rented room in a house in Alankuda. The house owner often came to my room and we had conversations after dinner about the issues of displaced Muslims. At first, I felt that this was very helpful and that I could learn a lot from these conversations. However, as time passed, I observed that some people stopped interacting with me as they had done previously. I worked out that some

disliked the house owner. I then decided to move to a place in the middle of two clusters. There, anybody could easily approach me and it was also easy for me to travel back and forth between the two field sites. I chose Museen's NGO office building, which was within walking distance of Nurachcholai town. Living in this place had several advantages. First, I was able to observe the everyday life interactions of people from different camps coming to town for various purposes. Second, in the evening I spent time in teashops and other places in town and walked back to my room late in the day. Last, and more importantly, the office room had an internet connection and large tables and chairs so it was a good place for a researcher. Unlike the previous accommodation, neither displaced nor host community members were reluctant to visit whenever they wanted to talk to me. It was a neutral place.

**Map 7**: Field work locations in Kalpitiya, Puttalam



Source: Shanmugaratnam, N. "Map 2: Concentrations of IDPs in Puttalam" [map]. SCALE Unknown. Norway: NORAGRIC, 2002: 50 (Adapted from Hasbullah, S.H., S.H.M. Rizni and A.G. Anees, 'Preliminary findings on the living conditions of the IDPs in Puttalam Districts' 1999.)
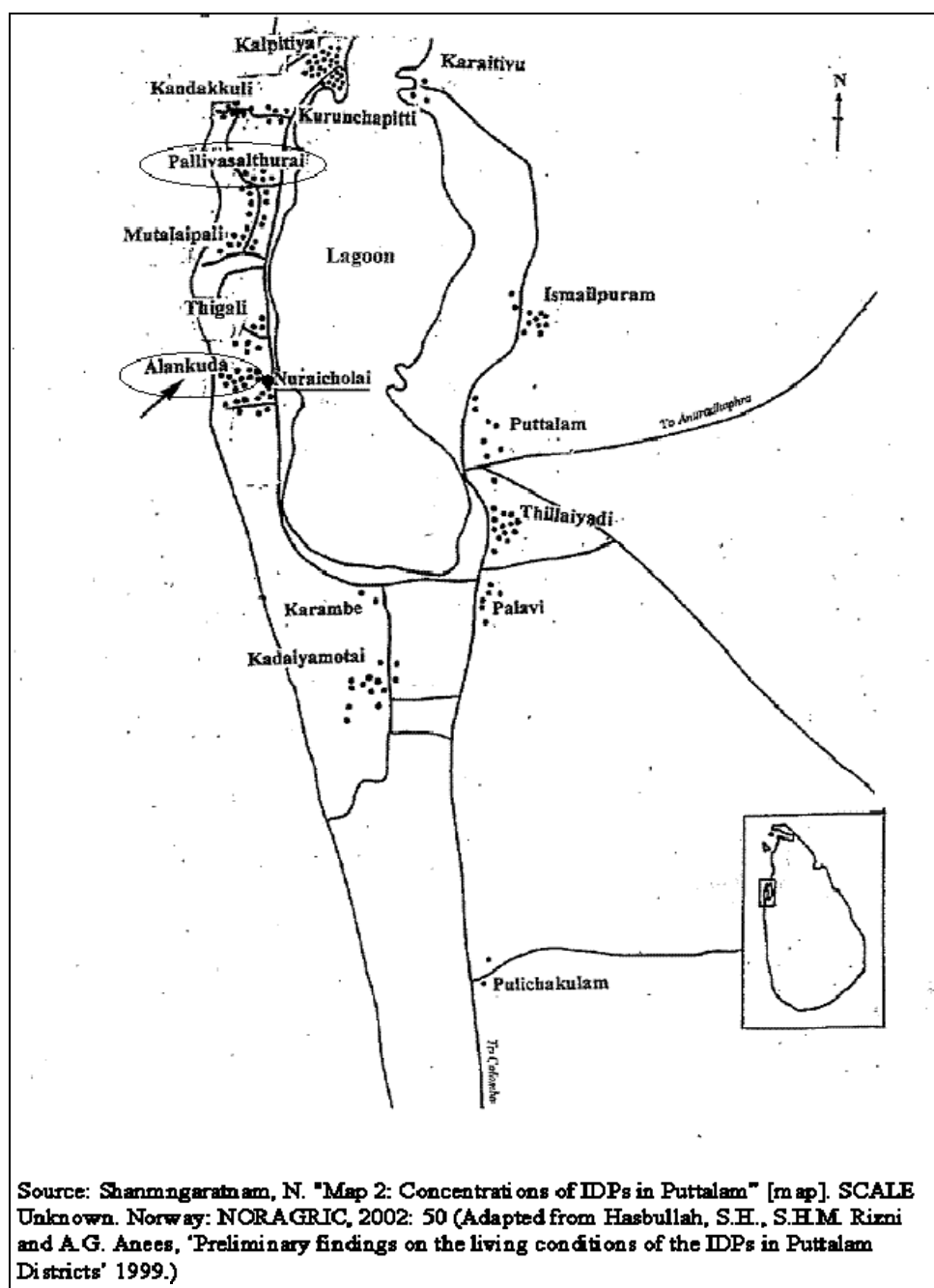
Figure 3: Location 1, Alankuda (*Nurachcholai*) main street, Kalpitiya, Puttalam



Source: Author's register

**Figure 4**: Location 2 Pallivasalthurai, main street leading to settlements



Source: Author's register

*Methods of data collection*

> Qualitative research provides in-depth analysis focusing on a specific group or
> community as a sample to arrive at basic themes. It is an inquiry process where
> the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, interviews,
> discussion, reports, detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a
> natural setting (Creswell 1998: 15).

After gaining an understanding of the field situation, I adopted a qualitative research
approach, incorporating a number of methods ranging from participant observation, in-
depth personal interviews, and informal and more formal focus group discussions.

**Participant observation**

My ethnographic encounter, or qualitative inquiry, was a two-way process, a form of
communication with the participants in which questioning goes both ways. These were
informal interactions, which typically began with people asking questions of me that
ranged from asking advice about their personal problems to national politics. Similarly,
I asked questions and inquired about things I was interested in. I engaged in long
conversations with women and men during most of the time in the field. Their
narratives of their experiences of flight, life in refugee camps, the problems they face,
their identity and belonging to the original villages, as well as places where they were
living in Puttalam and their future intentions were all topics of conversations. I also
participated in the important events and everyday life activities as often as possible. I
spent time in market places and construction sites, walked through farm lands where
people engaged in everyday livelihood activities, travelled with local youth and taxi
drivers to places where disputes occurred between groups and attended political
meetings. I also took part in evening gatherings with youth and community leaders at
local tea shops and playgrounds. I made visits to places where development activities
were taking place.

One of the most useful field experiences as well as informative activity was the
engagement in evening prayers with local and host communities in mosques in the
locality. My being Muslim was an advantage in the sense that I participated in daily
evening prayers of Muslims between 6 and 7 pm (*magrib*) whenever possible. Since
these prayers are in the evening, the participation of people was high. Many working

men come to prayers in the evening. After completing the prayers which last about fifteen to twenty minutes, many stay back in the mosque until the fifth and last prayer (*isha*). I used this opportunity to talk to men attending the prayers in the mosques. It was a very useful event because I had time to discuss the things that I had observed and listened to during the day in various places and with different people. These are more informal group discussions where sometimes the mosque leader (*imam*) prepared tea and snacks for the group. Some of these informal discussions became so interesting to the participants that they often asked whether I would come for prayers the next day. Sometimes these discussions were not entirely relevant to my research. On occasion, people wanted to clear their doubts, ask questions about how I was going to help them or what use my work was to them. They would also ask how they could approach or make a request to external agencies to get assistance for some of their problems.

In addition, I attended the special Islamic prayers (*jumma*) on Fridays in mosques belonging to both displaced and host communities. The sermons delivered by chief *imams* during these *jumma* prayers sometimes related to ongoing local issues. For example, a dispute between two youths or groups (host and displaced) in the community often became a point of discussion in the sermons. Friday prayers, then, in particular the sermons, provided an important opportunity to gain a better understanding of local (political) views. Sometimes, after the prayers, I stayed back for awhile and talked with the chief *imam* about points he raised in the sermons.

Through these daily encounters, I was able to generate an understanding of the lives of displaced people and their culture through the emic or insider perspective.[18] This privileged insider's perspective came with certain obligations that were not always easy to negotiate. Ethnography is not exclusively an academic exercise and one is not able to completely detach oneself from culturally defined responsibilities. It was important that I listen to the individuals I had come to know and provide a service as a 'known person' from the outside world. For example, I helped some people to prepare their applications for housing grants. More importantly, when I was in the field, a foreign-funded project was conducting a needs assessment among displaced people. One man, Museen, wanted

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[18] The emic perspective suggests studying the community from its own culture-specific lenses. Through engaging with people's daily activities, understanding their own logic, language and symbols and attempting to investigate the deeper and cultural meanings of their views and behaviour, the researcher builds an insider world view.

my assistance to develop some proposals that would help him to become involved in the project and assist his fellow IDPs. A researcher who is attempting to uncover social realities cannot decline such community requests. Not only would the researcher lose the trust and acceptance of the community he is studying, but there is a moral obligation to provide assistance in certain situations as the above.

**In-depth interviews**

The observations I made were only a part of the daily lives of displaced people. They provided a snap-shot of one part of a process. In order to understand the history of displaced people, how they relate their experiences to day-to-day activities, their interactions with others and, more importantly, their future aspirations, I conducted interviews with a selected number of people. These were in-depth interviews that focused on people's life stories, including their past and present experiences, personal encounters and future expectations of life. The interviews were carried out intermittently during the field work. I selected participants based on my interactions with individuals I knew and sometimes on information I received from others. I did not follow any specific sampling procedure to interview displaced Muslims from various parts of Northern Province and different socioeconomic categories. Rather, I chose individuals who were able to narrate their stories in 'information rich' ways. I conducted 37 such interviews (see Appendix 1for their social backgrounds) in the two field sites. These interviews were semi-structured in nature but conducted mostly in conversational mode. I developed an interview guide using four broad themes: life prior to displacement, experience of expulsion, flight and arrival, post-displaced experiences and future plans. Within these broad themes I was able to raise questions on their attachment to places of origin, identity, experience of protracted displacement and the process of making decisions for the future.

**Focus group discussions**

Another method I used to generate qualitative information was to conduct a series of focus group discussions (FGD). These FGDs were conducted during the latter part of my field work. There were several reasons for using this method. Through day-to-day informal interactions, I realized that there were certain individuals and groups whom I had less opportunity to meet. Meeting and discussing with them individually was not possible given the limited time frame of my field work. I also found that leaving out some of these groups out would create gaps in the research. I conducted a series of

FGDs with four different social categories: IDP men, IDP women, young IDP men (second generation) and host community members. The discussions were conducted in common access places such as mosques, community halls and schools in order to ensure impartiality and the participation of women in particular. Since women could not attend meetings in mosques,[19] I had to arrange community halls for discussions with them.

In FGDs, five to six key questions were posed to generate discussions among participants. One of the major problems in conducting such discussions is controlling those participants who try to dominate the discussions. Often I intervened in the discussion proceedings in order to allow others to present their views. Sometimes my interference was not accepted by a few participants, who became defensive on certain occasions. But I continued this kind of interference and brainstorming as it was necessary to get diverse opinions from different participants. As noted by Morgan (2007), such an atmosphere is natural in focus group discussions.

It is also not possible for one researcher alone to conduct a proper focus group discussion. Since two or three participants often attempt to present their opinions on a given point at the same time, a researcher, as moderator, might not be able to record or listen to all the points clearly. Even if one records the voices, it is hard to transcribe the recordings as they become congested by interruptions. Therefore, after learning from the first FGD, I obtained assistance from two school teachers (graduates in social science). They were also from Puttalam and helped me to record and take notes. These two men still correspond with me and have become my 'cultural brokers' or 'informants' since I left the field.

**Stage three**

This phase of the research was not in my original study plan. During the second phase of my field research I asked questions about the future aspirations and intentions regarding return to their places of origin in a no-war situation. It was a hypothetical question and many displaced people thought that the Tamil rebels were strong militarily and would never give up their separatist armed struggle. However, as the government forces defeated the LTTE in May 2009 and the government declared its intention to resettle all those displaced by civil conflict, this new political situation prompted me to

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[19] Muslim women are not encouraged to enter mosques unless for specific religious functions.

conduct another round of field research to capture the post-war dynamics related to the displacement of Muslims.

The purpose of this short visit was not to do more in-depth field work but rather to meet some of my previous research participants and inquire further into their plans and decision making after the war. I interviewed families whom I had met before and asked about their intentions and experiences after the war. One of the noteworthy parts of this third research phase was meeting second-generation displaced men and women. They were influential in households' return decision making. I also made a trip to the original homes of displaced people in the former war zone in Mannar district (Northern Province) and observed government activities in resettling IDPs. I met a few displaced Muslim families of Puttalam who were cleaning and reconstructing their old homes and lands with the intention of permanent return. The third phase field data became a rich source of information in locating my research within the post-conflict context.

*Methods of data analysis*

An important aspect of data collection was the extensive effort to take field notes of the interviews, conversations and discussions. Many research participants expressed their objection to recording of the conversations and interviews as they felt that might affect their everyday life activities and relations with others. As I developed trust with participants, I wanted to avoid any actions that might jeopardize my relations with them. So I often took notes rather than record conversations. I spent nearly three months interpreting the empirical data and information gathered through multiple sources. There were questions of rigour that required me to rethink and reprocess some of the data that I found contradictory. Whenever possible I used triangulation to compare and contrast data and information collected from different sources to arrive at more robust interpretations and conclusions.[20]

In the final analysis, I closely examined people's narratives to build analytical themes. Narratives are stories about experience and practices which people communicate to others. I used these stories as the key source of data. In particular, I benefitted from the writings of Riessman on how to make use of stories told by research participants in developing arguments. She suggests that narratives are social products that make sense

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[20] Patton (2002: 247) advocates the use of triangulation in qualitative research analysis stating that 'triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods'.

of social reality. Therefore analysis of narratives allows us to study personal experience and meaning systematically (1994: 54). However, I found that narrative analysis, though providing a rich and thick description about the real life of displaced people, is a challenging task. Particularly in ethnographic research, the researcher's personal judgments and familiarity with the *subject* and *object* have certain impacts on the writing. As Eastmond (2007: 248) suggests, the researcher must pay particular attention to his/her own role in the production of narrative data and the representation of lived experience as text. Though I tried to be aware of my personal experiences and knowledge and how these might influence interpretation of the empirical data, there are some unavoidable interferences which I believe were justifiable. It is hard to be completely *de-centric* in doing a research of one's own culture and society. Some of my own reflections are briefly outlined in the next section.

### *Reflections on the researcher in the field*

> The myth that ethnographers are people without personal identity, historical location and personality, and would all produce the same findings in the same setting, is the mistake of naive realism (Brewer 2000: 99).

There is large body of literature about what is meant by 'home' in ethnographic research (see Jackson 1987). 'Home' for a native Australian ethnographer might be a small town or the place in which she/he grew up. For a Sri Lankan ethnographer residing in the USA or Australia and doing field work in his/her country, 'home' means the entire nation-state. I belong to the second category. I did my research in my home country, where I am a member of a specific ethno-religious community. This presented me with a range of dilemmas. I faced a number of 'role conflicts' as a researcher doing 'ethnography at home'. The first was that I am a 'Tamil-speaking Muslim' of a minority community who was part of the civil conflict. As an 'insider', I had the tendency to see participants' problems with sympathy. I did my best to detach myself from this position so as to study the phenomena more objectively. For example, when a displaced Muslim asked me whether LTTE's expulsion of Muslims from Northern Province was 'ethnic cleansing', I tried to avoid commenting. This was because my answer might provoke different opinions among others about my position in the conflict. But I found it difficult to remain silent. I made them aware that these are 'politically' decorated terms

and we have to be careful in speaking to an outsider. But I agreed with them that there are grievances of northern Muslims that to be addressed.

The second type of role conflict was as an 'outsider'. While I am a member of the same ethnic group, I am neither an internally displaced person nor a local of Puttalam. Many displaced Muslim community leaders saw me as an 'influential' member of their own ethno-religious community.[21] Accordingly, people were willing to tell me their stories of flight and desperation. This proved challenging, as I wanted to observe things from the point of view of an 'outsider'. For a few weeks, I struggled to convince the displaced community members that I was not one of their representatives or a person to carry their stories to the outside world, but that I was undertaking a research on 'displaced' people and the social realities of displacement. Later, however, I told them that I will do justice to them by writing a report for general distribution on their plight.

The third type of role conflict related to my past work experience in Sri Lanka. I worked for one of the aid agencies that was assisting the displaced community to build infrastructure facilities in 2005. Some individuals, including community leaders of IDPs, misunderstood my doctoral field work in 2007. They first thought that I was collecting data for the aid agencies to implement another project. On a number of occasions, people came to meet me in the evening and wanted to talk about their problems and grievances related to the externally funded projects in their localities. It was hard for me to convince some people that I did not represent aid agencies or projects anymore but that I wanted to see the issues differently as a researcher.

Thus, doing ethnography in a known social context is a significant challenge. It is hard to avoid the requests and listen to the problems and questions of research participants while having lunch and dinner, chatting all the time, at tea shops and mosques. I believe that I made a reasonable attempt to keep the balance between 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' in doing this research with a community of my own. My experiences are well captured in Madden's remarks: 'I cannot approach an issue as complex as culture in my area by dealing with purely dichotomous approach models of "self" and "other", those us-and-them categories ascribed form a position of the so-called "dominant culture"'(Madden 1999: 269).

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[21] In the local context an educated Muslim person and particularly a university teacher is highly respected. Consequently, I was viewed as a person who has more power and right to talk about the community issues with politicians and development agencies than a normal citizen.

## Conclusion

Researching conflict-induced displacement in Sri Lanka is politically sensitive, which creates both theoretical and methodological challenges. It also requires an understanding of how the issue might be addressed locally as well as in the context of global migration. In the first part of this chapter I discussed two theoretical concepts – place and identity – and their relevance to refugee studies. I argued that conflict-related displacement can be better understood through looking at experiences of place and identity from the perspectives of displaced people themselves. The three key questions I seek to explore are: What are northern Muslim's experiences and recollections of expulsion from the north? What are their experiences of 'place' in the context of resettlement, and how do they construct their identities in Puttalam? How do northern Muslim's perceive 'return' after their protracted exile?

To engage with these questions, I used a research design involving collection of data from several sources. The data is largely qualitative in nature and provides rich information on the experiences and perspectives of displaced people. This is a key strength of the ethnographic approach. The next chapter sets the background to the research context by describing the historical and current situation of Sri Lanka's conflict-induced displacement.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**ETHNIC CONFLICT, DISPLACEMENT, AND MUSLIMS IN SRI LANKA; SETTING THE SCENE OF THE RESEARCH**

> Personally, I don't think Muslim youth will take up arms or form militant movements like the LTTE or JVP.[22] This is because there is no clear appetite for such a situation at the moment, even though the Muslims in the East and the North suffered a lot during the 30 year-old conflict. There are some extreme Sinhalese political groups, like Hela Urumaya, trying to create a reason for persecuting Muslims after the war against the LTTE ends. It is up to Muslim political leaders to work carefully with the government to avoid such situations. I believe the Sinhalese or the government may not take harsh actions against Muslims because they fear that Arab and Muslim countries may come to support the local Muslims.
>
> A Muslim political leader (KI 20) of Eastern Province.

## Introduction

The above remarks reflect the political quandary of Sri Lankan Muslims in the context of conflict. Muslims, as a minority and group of 'people in-between' in the conflict between two major ethnic groups have struggled to find their place in the socio-political landscape in the country since independence in 1948. This chapter describes the ethnic conflict and contemporary social and political issues face by Muslims including the displacement. First I present a brief history of the civil conflict in Sri Lanka and its causes. Next, I analyse the nature and scale of the population, and finally, I discuss the perspective of Muslims who have been affected by the conflict, and their stance in the conflict and post-conflict contexts.

## The ethnic conflict: A brief history

The conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils, which has often been described as an ethnic

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[22] Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or People's Liberation Front is a radical Marxist party that led Sinhalese youth to rebel against the government in 1971 and 1989.

antagonism, has historical origins. The Sinhalese believe that they are descendants of the Aryan people of northern India, while the Tamils trace their origins to the Dravidian people of South India (Meyer 2001: 145–9).[23] Thus, even during the pre-colonial era (that is, before 1500) the Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka had developed their own group identities and differentiated themselves from each other on the basis of ethnic origin, ancestral territory, language, religion and cultural attributes (;Fernando:1999; Manogaran 1987: 23; Tambiah 1986).

Though there has been much interpretation of the origin and causes of the Sinhalese–Tamil ethnic antagonism, it can be studied from two contrasting perspectives: *materialistic* and *ideological*. From the materialistic perspective (Shastri 1990: 57), the conflict is the result of increased competition for limited opportunities. This model argues that ethnic movements emerge because of competition for limited resources and opportunities for minorities (Belanger & Pinard 1991: 446–57). For example, unequal distribution of lands through resettlement projects by the state, restriction of opportunities for educated minority youth to enter national higher education institutions, limited opportunities in government jobs, and inadequate representation of Tamils in governance and the national political system, are the key grievances of Tamils that paved the way to an armed separatist movement (Bastian 1985; Manogaran 1987; Perera 1992; Shastri 1990;Tambiah 1986).

The second perspective is an ideological interpretation that treats the conflict as primarily an identity struggle in which the Sri Lankan state, dominated by a Sinhala Buddhist majority, sought to establish and retain its hegemony over the ethnic minorities (Little 1999; Liyanage 2008; Obeyesekere 2001; Senanayake 2002; Wickramasinghe 2006). In this view, the conflict in Sri Lanka is primarily due to the 'non-accommodation of minority rights by the majority community, the Sinhala, which portrays the Sri Lanka society as Sinhala-Buddhist, and thus denies its multicultural and plural identity' (Korf & Silva 2003: 3). In order to understand the origins of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, we must consider both the material and the ideological perspectives. The following section describes the key factors that led to the armed conflict between the Tamil rebels and the Sri Lankan government.

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[23] The origins of these two groups are still a much debated issue. Though each claims that historical and archaeological evidence prove that they have distinct cultural origins through language and skin colours, some scholars criticize these claims as having no scientific basis (Roberts 1979).

*Causes of the ethnic conflict: Beyond identities and territories*

The ethnic conflict has strong political and territorial dimensions. On the one hand, it has been considered as an outcome of the manner in which the two major ethnic groups and their political leaders manipulated the political system and the people to safeguard their vested interests (Perera 1992: 136). On the other hand, demands by Tamil political leaders for a separate state for Tamils in the north and east of the country, and denial of this by the majority Sinhalese is considered as the core of the conflict (Jayawardhana 1987; Manogaran: 1987; Tambiah 1986).

There are at least three main reasons cited by researchers as the basis for Tamil separatism and the conflict:[24] a) colonization and land settlement projects that changed the ethnic representation of Tamils and favoured the Sinhalese; b) discrimination against Tamils in higher education and government employment; and c) denial of the right to Tamil ancestral lands in the north and east as a homeland (Bastian 1985; Manogaran1987; Perera 1992; Roberts1979; Tambiah 1986). Among these reasons, the establishment of agricultural land settlements through irrigation development in the north-east of the country is considered a major issue. Michael Roberts states that the 'principal ground of friction between Tamils and Sinhalese has been with regard to the disposal of land in certain areas considered to be traditional homelands of Tamils for the settlement of Sinhalese farmers' (Roberts 1979: 74). In 1954, the first such irrigation-based agricultural settlement, called the Gal Oya colonization, was regarded not only as an agricultural land development program but also as a *sinhalization* of the traditional lands of minorities and as an attempt to revive the Sinhalese Buddhist society in the traditional Tamil homelands in the eastern parts of the country (Manogaran 1987: 90; Scudder 1996: 66). Since then, successive governments have carried out a number of river basin development projects, such as the Mahaweli programme from 1978 to 1990, which also resettled a significant number of Sinhalese families in the sparsely populated northern and eastern provinces. It is estimated that, in the Mahaweli project alone, nearly 50,000 Sinhalese families from the southern rural areas were resettled (Bush 2003: 42; Muggah 2008: 106; Shastri 1990: 65).

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[24] It is not suggested that there are no other reasons for Tamil separatism. There are many others, such as the Sri Lanka government's language policy or infamous 'Sinhala only' bill of 6 June 1956, which provoked the violent clashes between Tamils and Sinhalese in that year. This act gives official language status only to the Sinhala language, causing immense problems for Tamil speaking people including Muslims and Tamils in the estate plantations.

The major complaint of Tamils, however, was that state-sponsored colonization schemes were deliberately carried out to marginalize Tamil peasants living in destitute conditions in the north-eastern areas. It was argued that, despite the availability of lands for irrigation development outside the Tamil-dominated areas, the government colonizations were targeted mostly at border areas of the northern and eastern provinces where a large number of Tamils and Muslims lived and had engaged in cultivation for centuries (Ameerdeeen 2006; Chandrakanthan; 2000;Manogaran 1987; Tambiah 1996;). This process of state-sponsored colonization was seen as a threat not only to the ownership of land by Tamils and Muslims and to their political status in these areas, but also to their existence as a community with its own linguistic and cultural identity (Jayawardhana 1987:13).

The second major argument supporting separatist claims and the subsequent conflict involves the denial of access to state employment and education for ethnic minorities. The introduction of the Sinhalese-only language policy and the opening of schools for local language (Sinhala and Tamil) education in late 1950s resulted in an upsurge in the school-going population. Although local universities also expanded to accommodate more students, only about one-fifth of all those qualified got the opportunity for university entrance (Bastian 1985). This created intense competition among students in both language streams (Perera 1992). In particular, entry to the science disciplines (medicine, engineering and physical sciences) had been relatively dominated by Tamil students in university entrance. For example, in 1970, Tamil students constituted 35 per cent of the total intake for courses in physical and biological sciences, and over 45 per cent in courses in engineering and medical sciences (Manogaran 1987: 103). This dominance of Tamil students in science-related fields was mainly due to their high literacy rate and the better educational facilities that were available in areas where Tamils lived, including Jaffna and Colombo (Perera 1992: 143).

A system of 'standardization' was introduced by the government of Sri Lankan (GOSL) in 1970, whereby university students were selected according to the proportion of students in each language streams who sat for the GCE (Advance Level) or university entrance examination. This system impacted unfavourably on Tamil students. The minimum entry requirements for higher education for a Tamil medium student were higher than for a Sinhala medium student (Bastian 1985: 220; Jayawardhana 1987: 13). Tamils saw this as discrimination and many educated Tamil youth who were unable to

enter universities became unemployed and frustrated by their lack of access to career development. According to the available statistics, the proportion of Tamil students admitted to science courses in national universities declined from 35 per cent in 1974 to 19 per cent in 1975. The Sinhalese students intake to universities, on the other hand, increased from 75 per cent to 86 per cent during the same period (Perera 1992: 143).

Finally, as a result of the above, some government jobs required knowledge of Sinhala. By the beginning of 1980, Tamils were seriously underrepresented in state sector employment (Abeysekera 1985: 243). In 1970, they constituted 12 per cent of the total population and occupied 40 per cent of public sector employment. By 1985, the Tamil share in public sector employment had dropped to 12 per cent. During the same period, Sinhalese representation in public sector jobs rose from 60 per cent to 85 per cent (Perera 1992: 144). Thus, Tamils who, as an ethnic minority, looked to education and public sector employment as means of upward social mobility became frustrated. Unemployment and lack of resources for career development for Tamil youth have made them seek alternative means to achieve their goals and aspirations since the early 1980s.

### *Towards Tamil separatism through armed struggle*

The immediate conditions leading to the violent conflict between Tamil rebels and the majority Sinhalese government were in place in the first years of 1980 (Shastri 1990). Several militant groups started to emerge in the northern Tamil heartlands, especially in Jaffna and Kilinochchi.[25] They began their campaign of guerrilla warfare, killing Sinhalese policemen and security force personnel, as well as Tamil political leaders who supported the Sinhalese government. The LTTE was the most prominent and most organized rebel group among early Tamil militants (Aruliah 1993: 7).

The major assault carried out by the Tamil rebels in July 1983, which resulted in the killing of a group of Sinhalese army men, triggered the country's worst ethnic riots. In what become known as *Black July*, assaults on Tamils spread rapidly, mostly because of the failure of the government to control the violence (Obeyesekere 2001: 154) The riots made many Tamils in the southern part of the country feel socially insecure and discriminated against. They began to flee to the north and elsewhere seeking refuge and

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[25] In the beginning, a number of Tamil militant groups were formed. All shared a common objective: winning a separate country or self-government for Tamils in the north-east. LTTE, EROS, POLTE, EPDP were the major Tamil militant groups which emerged during this period (RAM: 1990).

safety. Another 50,000 left the country seeking asylum elsewhere, including Australia and India (Ram 1989: 81).

This internal migration of the majority of Tamil towards the north-east from the south marked a significant change as there was a territorial segregation of Tamils and Sinhalese and a polarization of society along ethnic lines (Shastri 1990). An armed campaign for a separate territory by Tamil militants gained considerable support from 'moderate' Tamils after the riots. Ram (1989: 80–4) reports that Tamil militancy in the north gained firm ground among Tamils in the region and it grew from a small hit-and-run squad to a 1,000-member guerrilla group by 1985. Thus the 1983 riot and years immediately after that incident marked a clear shift from a parliamentary democratic struggle to an armed militant struggle by Tamils to achieve their demands (Aruliah 1993: 7).

### *Indian intervention and the institutionalization of separatism*[26]

As the closest power in the region, India played a major role in the Sri Lankan conflict. Cultural and economic ties between the two countries were strong enough for it to consider intervention in the Sri Lankan conflict a moral responsibility (Jayawardhana 1987). It was pressured by the politicians and people of its southern state of Tamil Nadu to intervene in the Sri Lankan conflict. After the riots in 1983, India was keen to resolve the conflict by mediating between the GOSL and the Tamil rebels though a series of peace negotiations (Jayawardhana 1987; Liyanage 2008). The Tamil rebels put forward four major demands[27] for political negotiations but the talks ended in failure as none of the four demands was accepted by the Sinhalese majority government. In 1986, the GOSL launched a military operation against the LTTE security forces and was successful in gaining control of the entire north-east and limiting LTTE to a small jungle area in Jaffna.[28]

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[26] Since 1987, I have been involved in various research studies related to conflict, displacement and development issues in north-eastern Sri Lanka. Therefore some of the interpretations are my own experience and explanations and I hence do not cite references.

[27] The four demands were:1) the recognition of Tamil national identity; 2) respect for the integrity of the Tamil homeland; 3) recognition of Tamils' right to self-determination and 4) citizenship rights for all Tamils who had made Sri Lanka their homeland (Mohan Ram 1990: 53).

[28] The military campaign of the Sri Lankan government of President Rajapakse greatly resembles that of Jayewardene's government in 1986.

India requested that Sri Lanka halt the military campaign against Tamil rebels or face an intervention.[29] Indian military aircraft dropped food consignments to the Tamils in the northern and eastern areas who were trapped by the war, violating international law in soothe process. With few other options, the government halted the military operations in the north and accepted India's proposal for devolution of power and the re-integration of Tamil militants into democratic politics (Jayawardhana 1987). Then-Indian Prime Minster Rajeev Gandhi agreed to send Indian troops to establish law and order in north-eastern Sri Lanka and disarm the Tamil militants.[30] Finally, the historic 'Indo-Lanka' peace accord was signed between India and Sri Lanka in 1987 and another chapter of 'ethnic conflict' began.[31]

There were two important features in the 1987 accord. The first was the deployment of an Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to disarm the Tamil rebels and re-establish law and order in Northern and Eastern Provinces. The second was the merger of these provinces into a single political and administrative entity (Premdas and Samarasinghe 1988: 677). However, by the end of 1988, the LTTE had become angry with the IPKF over its lack of discipline (see Thiranagama et al 1990).[32] In 1989, a new president was elected who had opposed the Indo–Lanka accord at the beginning.[33] He entered into a truce with Tamil rebels in 1990. Both sides, Tamils and Sinhalese, strongly protested against the Indian intervention and wanted the IPKF to leave the country. In particular, the leftist JVP, which disappeared from democratic politics after the 1983 riots, re-emerged in the late 1980s to campaign against the Indian intervention (Kodikara 1989: 716).

However, the merger of Northern and Eastern provinces, and the withdrawal of Indian forces in early 1990s, provided new grounds for the LTTE to regroup, re-arm and renew their struggle for a putative Tamil state in north-eastern Sri Lanka (Samaranayake 1997;

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[29] India also supported the Bangladesh separatist insurgency led by Mujibar Rahman by sending its troops to east Pakistan. With Indian support it become the sovereign state of Bangladesh in 1971.
[30] Indo-Lanka Peace Agreement July 29, 1987 Para 2.15 – Government of India to afford military assistance to implement the proposals.
[31] A peace accord was been signed between Sri Lanka and India in July 1987, the main objective of which was to restore peace in north-east Sri Lanka and end the Tamil militancy through the devolution of power to the Tamil minority.
[32] LTTE reinterpreted the IPKF as Innocent People Killing Force.
[33] Mr Premadasa of UNP was the successor to President Jayawardena, opposed the accord and boycotted the parliamentary debates.

Liyanage 2008). The LTTE began its guerrilla war in Eastern Province where another Tamil party (a former rebel group) was in power.[34]

This period also marked an era of hostility between Tamils and Muslims and the beginning of ethnic conflict (Ameerdeen 2006). The LTTE strategy for a separate state was this time to target Muslims, who had considerable representation in the population of the north-eastern region and who historically maintained close cultural and linguistic ties with the Tamils.[35] Prior to this time, except for a few minor incidents, the Muslim–Tamil relationship in the country was stronger than the Muslim–Sinhalese relationship (Nuhuman 2006; Anes & Ameerdeen 2003). In 1990, the LTTE forced the Muslims in Northern Province to leave their homes, to ensure the Tamil dominance of its *imagined* state of Tamil Eelam (Map 8) by declaring the boundaries of its territories (Hasbullah 2001). The expulsion of Muslims from Northern Province is covered in detail in Chapter Three.

The conflict turned more violent as a series of killings of political leaders took place from 1991 to 1994.[36] Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who sympathized with and supported the Tamils' grievances in the country, was killed by an LTTE suicide bomb in 1991. In 1993, President Premadasa, who once saved the LTTE by re-arming them against Indian forces, was killed in a May Day rally in Colombo by a suicide bomber. The LTTE also killed two prominent and highly educated political leaders of the country who had the courage and charisma to lead the country: Gamini Disanayake and Lalith Athulathmudali.[37] This political turmoil in the south resulted in the election in 1994 of a new president (Chandrika Kumarathunga), daughter of two former prime ministers. Like other leaders, she also wanted to address the Tamil ethnic issue and negotiated for a ceasefire with the LTTE in 1995.

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[34] The rival political party, led by former armed rebel leader Vardarajah Perumal (EPRLF), took political control of the province with the support of the Indian and Sri Lankan governments.

[35] It is estimated that one-third of the country's eight per cent Muslims live in Northern and Eastern Provinces where they are a majority only in the Ampara district (around 40 per cent of the population). In the north, they lived in many places but there were a large number in Mannar District (approximately 30 per cent of the total district population in 1981) (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka 2001).

[36] The period between 1989 and 1990 was also marked by political violence led by the JVP. The government found it difficult to face the two fronts of Tamil rebels in the north and the Sinhalese youth rebellion in the south.

[37] Both of these leaders took a tough stand on the LTTE. Dissanaykje prepared to devolve power but wanted the LLTE to give up its armed struggle. Athulathmudali, on the other hand, was the Sinhalese leader who crushed the LTTE militants in 1986 as the national security minster of the Jayewardene government.

**Map 8**: Areas claimed by Tamils as Eelam
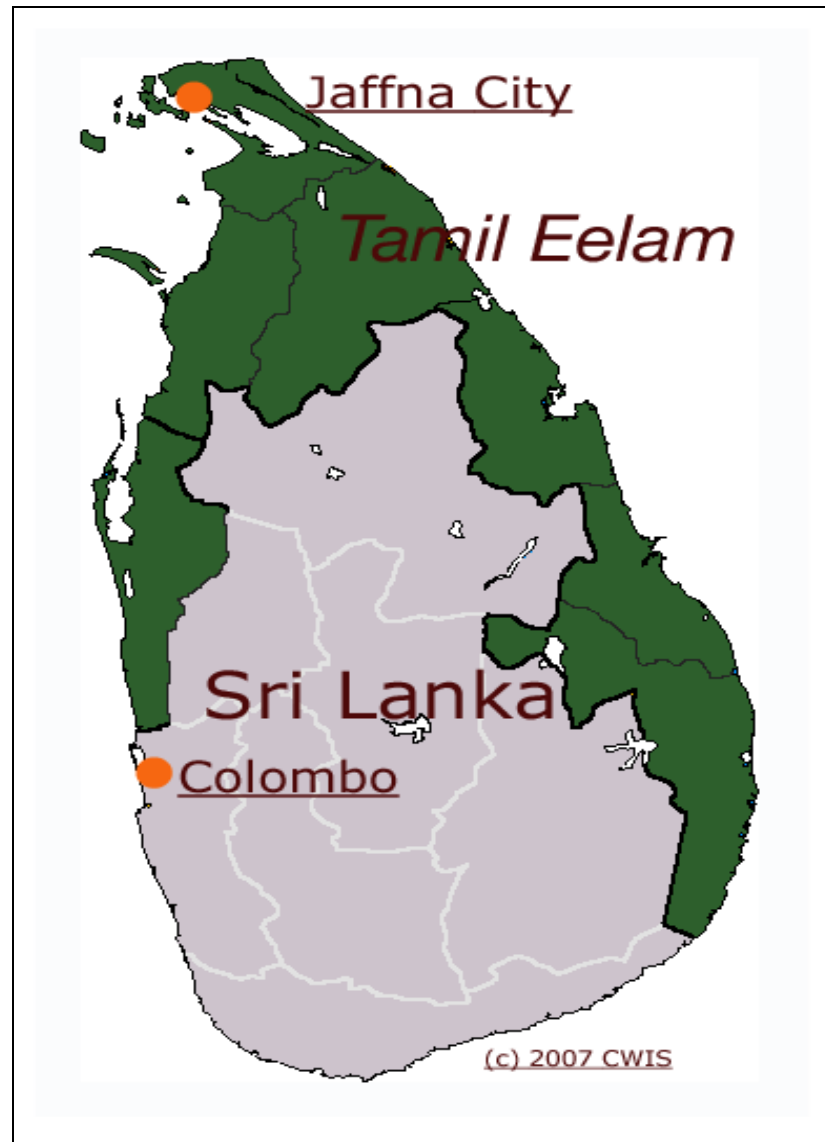
But the LTTE trusted more in its armed struggle and continued to engage in confrontation with security forces after a few months of cessation of hostilities. From 1995 to 2000, the armed confrontation between the LTTE and the government became intense. A number of major security establishments and the country's only international airport in Colombo were attacked by the LTTE. On the other hand, the GOSL captured the symbolic town (Jaffna) of the Tamils in the north (Liyanage; 2008: 66).

The armed conflict between the LTTE and the GOSL entered a new phase after 2001. A successful international campaign against the LTTE, led by the foreign minister,

Luxman Kadirgamar, who was himself an ethnic Tamil, contributed to an anti-LTTE attitude in many Western countries. Also, the 9/11 incident in the USA changed Western countries' attitudes towards militant organizations. As a result several countries, including the USA, identified the LTTE as a terrorist organization.

In this context, the Norwegian government brokered a ceasefire agreement between the LTTE and GOSL in 2002 for a political settlement of the conflict. The agreement allowed political and administrative links between the government and the LTTE, and several infrastructure development activities were launched thereafter. Six rounds of talks about a political solution to the conflict were conducted between February 2002 and March 2003, with the support of the international community (Liyanage 2008: 132).

The GOSL proposed a system of regional councils similar to the Indian model of provincial states, which would devolve political power to the Tamil-dominated areas. It included, among other things, administration and management of inland water and lands in the North-Eastern province or so- called Tamil Eelam, incorporation of the LTTE rebels into a police force and, more importantly, recognition of Tamils' right to live in their ancestral lands (Uyangoda 2006). However, the LTTE insisted on greater political power and wanted a high profile regional administration, called the Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA) for the merged northeastern province. The ISGA was drafted by the Tamil diaspora, which demanded more power in the proposed self-governing body (Liyanage 2008: 133). The ISGA proposals created much debate and unrest among Sinhalese Buddhist political parties and also among Muslims. The latter found that they had no clear mandate or share political power within the ISGA though they formed one-third of the population in the proposed merged 'Tamil territory' (Ameerdeen 2006).

In 2004, the LTTE split into two factions because a strong contingent of its fighters of the eastern front left the movement due to ill-treatment of the Tamils of Eastern Province in the peace negotiations (Liyanage 2008: 154). At the same time, there was change in the political regime in the country and a pro-Buddhist, leftist leader, Mahinda Rajapakse was elected president in 2005. In many ways, this change in the political regime in the country marked the last phase of the armed struggle of the LTTE.

**Figure 5**: House destroyed by the civil war, Musali-Mannar (north)



Source : Author's register

**Figure 6**: Abandoned mosque damaged by aerial bombing, Mannar



Source : Author's register

***Beginning of the end of the armed struggle***[38]

Compared with previous political leaders, President Rajapakse represented a new generation of politics. He is from the rural south of Sri Lanka and is considered to be a devoted Buddhist. He is also the first political leader outside Colombo to become head of state. In order to re-activate the peace process, he sent a delegation to meet the LTTE political leaders, with the support of the Norwegian mediators. However, the talks did not lead to any positive outcomes and the LTTE showed little interest in continuing the peace talks with the government.

In spite of engaging in serious political negotiations, the LTTE decided to test the political courage of the new president. First, its war tactics began with the blocking of supply from an irrigation tank situated within the rebel territory of Eastern Province which distributed water downstream for agriculture to mostly Muslim and Sinhala farmers. They had received water for the farming in this way for a long time and found it extremely difficult to continue farming without it. This led the president to send security forces to take control of the tank. Government forces captured all the land associated with the disputed irrigation tank, a victory that led the president to begin a military offensive against the LTTE, in the middle of 2006.[39] The offensive led to government forces taking control of vast areas formerly under LTTE control by the end of 2007. In the meantime, the Sri Lankan Supreme Court ordered the de-merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces that had occurred under the 1987 accord.[40]

After gaining full control of Eastern Province, government forces advanced into the rebel territory of the north from the beginning of 2008 and captured the main LTTE strongholds by the middle of 2009. All the high-ranking cadres of the LTTE, including its leader, were killed in this final military operation on 18 May 2009 (see Table 2.1 for the chronology of the conflict).

Since the December 2010 military success against Tamil rebels, the majority Sinhalese have felt patriotic and victorious. On the other hand, particularly among Sri Lankan Tamils of the north, there is a widespread sense of insecurity and vulnerability, and a

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[38] Some of the facts and analysis are based on my own experience, knowledge and interpretations as a researcher in my home country.
[39] Political writers on the conflict describe the armed conflict between the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE in several stages and it has been refereed as Ealam (Tamil state) wars. The first Eelam war was in 1983, the second in 1990, the third in 1995 and the fourth in 2006 (Liyanage 2008: 61–80).
[40] News report on Sri Lanka government website, 27 October 2007.

feeling of despair and hopelessness as they witness the destruction of their imagined Tamil homeland. A Tamil university student of Jaffna told me:

> We, as Tamils have now lost our hopes for a life with dignity in this country. Our people will very soon experience isolation and frustration because we have no proper leadership now. I do not mean that the defeat of the LTTE is wrong but it provided a leadership that was not seen from any of those that led our community in the past. As young educated Tamils, we can migrate to other countries, but thousands of poor people have no option but to continue their journey of misery *(thunba- vaalkai)*.[41]

With the conclusion of the war, there was a vacuum in the Tamil political representation. The Tamil community lacks proper voice in the post conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction process. But the Tamil Diaspora which is a strong phenomenon in the Sri Lankan Tamil separatist struggle continues its political campaign to isolate the Sri Lankan government internationally on the ground of violation of human rights and death of hundreds of civilians during the last stage of the war. The post-war political situation in the eastern province has began to change with the establishment of provincial council and election of a former Tamil rebel as the Chief Minister who supports the president Rajapakse's government. But the north is becoming increasingly isolated in the political representation and some sections of the Tamils still hope that India will rescue and help them to get their grievances resolved through a political settlement.

However, the government of Sri Lanka has reiterated its commitment to a political solution to the problems and grievances of the ethnic minority community. It has proposed a robust resettlement and rehabilitation programme for the post-war ethnic reconciliation. The president on the other hand, meticulously capitalised on the war victory politically and was elected for a second term in December 2009, to lead the country until 2015. However, many, including in the international community, are sceptical about the hopes of true peace and ethnic reconciliation in the country. One of the issues that remain central in the decades-old conflict situation is the thousands of displaced people of all three ethnic communities who are looking for a sustainable peace and resettlement.

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[41] Personal communication with a group of Tamil university students in Jaffna after the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009.

**Table 2.1**: Chronology of the Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict1976: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) form in the north-east

1983: Riots in July that killed Tamils and destroyed properties

1985: India mediated peace talks between Sri Lankan government and rebel groups

1986: LTTE eliminated all other Tamil rebel groups to become the most powerful

1987: India deploys peace-keepers to Tamil areas of north and eastern regions under the Indo-Lanka peace accord

1989: Massive political unrest in southern Sri Lanka

1990: Indian peace keeping force leaves the country

1991: LTTE suicide bomber killed Indian Prime Minister Ghandi

1992: Expulsion of Muslims by the LTTE from Northern Province

1993: President Premadasa killed by LTTE bomb

1994: New government and president-elected (Chandrika Bandaranayke)

1998: LTTE attacks on security establishment and camps in the north

2000: Norway interference in the conflict resolution as the mediator

2001: Attack on airport destroys half of Sri Lankan Airlines fleet

2002: Government and rebels agree to ceasefire

2004: Split between two fractions of the LTTE (East and North)

2005: Mahinda Rajapakse becomes president

2006: Fighting between Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE resumes

2007: Capture of entire Eastern Province by Sri Lankan forces

2008: Demerger of North-eastern Province and election of new provincial government in Eastern Province

2009 April: Army takes main rebel bases of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu

2009 May: LTTE Leader killed by an Army raid and Sri Lankan government officially announced the elimination of the LTTE military capacity


Sources: Jayawardhana 1987; Brun 2008; BBC reports and my field research notes.

*Internally Displaced Persons in Sri Lanka: Trends and reasons*

Conflict-induced displacement is not new to Sri Lanka. The first such internal displacement occurred during the Sinhalese–Muslim violence of 1915 (Kannangara 1981). Clashes between Sinhalese and Tamils in 1958 also led to the displacement of Tamils living in predominantly Sinhalese areas (Refugee Council Report 2003: 17). However, large-scale displacement began to occur during ethnic violence that erupted after the general elections in 1977 and 1981. Since then, Tamils living in predominantly Sinhalese areas have moved to the north and the east, and Sinhalese living in mainly Tamil areas in the north and east moved to the south. Social insecurity emerged as a major concern for people who identified with particular ethnic groups and many moved into areas where their own ethnic group was the predominant community because of a fear of being persecuted by another ethnic group (Jayewardhana 1987; Obeysekeare 2001). Also, a sizeable number of people were displaced for other reasons, including natural disaster (tsunami) and development-related involuntary settlements (Farook 2009 ; Scudder 1996; Sorensen; 1996;).[42] Conflict-related displacement is, however, the biggest and the volume of displacement radically changed during the post-1980 period, as ethnic tensions became acute (Refugee Council Report 2003: 16).

Large-scale displacements occurred after the riots in 1983, during which more than 100,000 Tamils, largely from the central and western parts of the country fled to northern Sri Lanka and southern India as refugees (World Refugee Survey: 1990). Also, as already mentioned, a considerable number of educated and skilled Tamils migrated to Western countries. As the armed conflict became more violent and was fought mainly to capture territories, people living in the war fronts were compelled to move from their homes. Several large-scale displacements occurred between the mid-1980s and 2009. The 1986 government offensive against the rebels in the north led to nearly 300,000 Tamils fleeing their homes. Again, after the arrival of the Indian peace keeping forces, and the renewed conflict between Tamil rebels and Sri Lankan forces between late 1987 and 1988, another one million people were made homeless. By the end of 1990, the total number of displaced people was 460,000. The forced expulsion of Muslims from Northern Province in 1990 and 1991 added another dimension to the

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[42] There is a lack of comprehensive data on development-induced displacement in Sri Lanka. During the Mahaweli Dam development project, nearly 200,000 people were relocated to dry zone settlements. In addition, a number of hydropower, highway and small-scale development projects contributed to the displacement and relocation of approximately 100,000 people around the country. A tsunami in December 2004 displaced 120,000 people, a majority of whom have been resettled or relocated by the government.

internal displacement, forcing nearly 75,000 people to find refuge in other parts of the country. Between 1991 and 1995 saw a series of massive military operations by the government that led to more than 300,000 Tamils in the Jaffna and Vanni areas[43] fleeing their homes. By the end of 1999, the total number of IDPs in the country had risen to 612,518 (Acharya 2007: 113).

Conflict-induced displacement in Sri Lanka began to decline after the ceasefire between Tamil rebels and the government in 2002. Considerable progress was made by the government and international humanitarian and donor agencies in resettling displaced people in their original places. For example, the clearance of land mines, the opening of access roads through rebel control areas, and the rehabilitation and reconstruction of infrastructure and housing raised the hope of thousands of displaced people that they could resettle in their own places (Sarvananthan 2004). Nearly 200,000 people were resettled in their places of origin or in settlement villages in North and Eastern Provinces under the North-East Housing Reconstruction Project (NEHRP) (World Bank Country Report 2007). As a result, by the end of 2004 the total number of IDPs in the country had officially declined to 352, 374 (UNHCR 2006).

While the resettlement of displaced families in the north-east was in progress, the tsunami that struck the country's south, east and north in December 2004 killed 39,000 people and displaced approximately 120,000. It was difficult for some Tamils and Muslims in the north and east to cope with the 'double impact' of tsunami and conflict simultaneously, which seriously threatened their security and survival (Razaak & Wei: 2007). However, with the assistance of donors and humanitarian agencies, the government continued its resettlement efforts for both war and tsunami-affected IDPs.

This positive trend of ending displacement through resettling people in their home localities was interrupted again when the Norway-mediated ceasefire agreement between the Tamil rebels and the Sri Lanka government broke down in the middle of 2006. As discussed in previous sections, the fighting between rebels and government forces for control over territories in the eastern region recommenced in August 2006. This led hundreds of Sinhalese and Muslim people to abandon their lands. The final assault on the LTTE by the security forces began with the slogan 'Regaining the East'.

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[43] Vanni is Tamil word used to refer the swathe of land comes under districts of Mannar, Mullaithivu and Kilinochchi

With the support of a renegade leader of the LTTE and his paramilitary group,[44] the Sri Lankan security forces engaged in a massive military operation in the east in 2007 (Jayasekera 2009), which led to the displacement of at least 120, 000 persons of Eastern Province, mainly Tamils and Muslims. After gaining control of Eastern Province by the end of 2007, the government made arrangements to resettle people in their homelands but the number of people displaced by the conflict continued to rise as the Sri Lanka security forces engaged in military operations in the Vanni areas in the north. According to UNHCR reports, there was an influx of displaced persons in 2008 and the beginning of 2009 due to fierce fighting between government forces and the LTTE (see Table 2.3). It is estimated that nearly 250,000 persons fled the rebel-held territories, bringing the total of displaced persons in the country to more than 876,000 by the end of 2009 (UNCHR 2010). Figure 7 shows the trends of internal displacement from 1983 to 2009.

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[44] An LTTE Eastern Province leader called Karuna defected with a contingent of 2000 militants in 2004

**Table 2.2**: Internally Displaced people in Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009

| Year | No of IDPs | Reasons and ethnic groups displaced |
|------|-----------|-------------------------------------|
| 1983 | 100,000 | Riots that took place in Colombo and other areas of the South of the country – **Tamils** |
| 1987 | 250,000 | Sri Lanka forces entered into war in the north (Jaffna) **Tamils** |
| 1990 | 377,000 | Indian Forces and LTTE engaged in the fighting and Wanni districts fled homes – **Tamils/Muslims/Sinhalese** |
| 1991 | 460,000 | LTTE expelled Muslims from northern districts – **Muslims** |
| 1992 | 595,000 | LTTE attacked several border villages in the east and north – **Sinhalese** |
| 1998 | 612,518 | Renewed fighting between Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE – **Tamils i**n Vanni districts, Mannar, Kilinochchci |
| 2000 | 731,000 | Continued fighting in Vanni and eastern Sri Lanka – **Tamils/Muslims** |
| 2001 | 788,000 | Sri Lankan forces fighting with the LTTE Jaffna – **Tamils** |
| 2002 | 462,000 | Resumption of peace talks, resettlement of IDPs |
| 2003 | 386,000 | Resettlements and rehabilitation in the north-east |
| 2004 | 352,000 | Resettlements and resettlement in the north-east |
| 2006 | 468,000 | Renewal of fighting in the east – **Muslims/Tamils** |
| 2007 | 714,000 | Fighting between GOSL forces and LTTE north and east – **Tamils** |
| 2008 | 824,000 | Fighting between GOSL forces and LTTE in north – **Tamils** in Vanni-Mullaithivu, Kilinochchi |
| 2009 December | 876,000 | Fighting between GOSL forces and LTTE in north – **Tamils** in Vanni-Mullaithivu, Kilinochcchi |

Sources: IDMC, UNHCR Reports, Ministry of Resettlement and Rehabilitation of Sri Lanka; Ministry of Nation Building of Sri Lanka 2009; Acharya (2007: 113); and UK Refugee Council Report 2003.

**Figure 7**: Trends of internal displacement in Sri Lanka (1983–2009)



Trends in Displacement in Sri Lanka since 1983
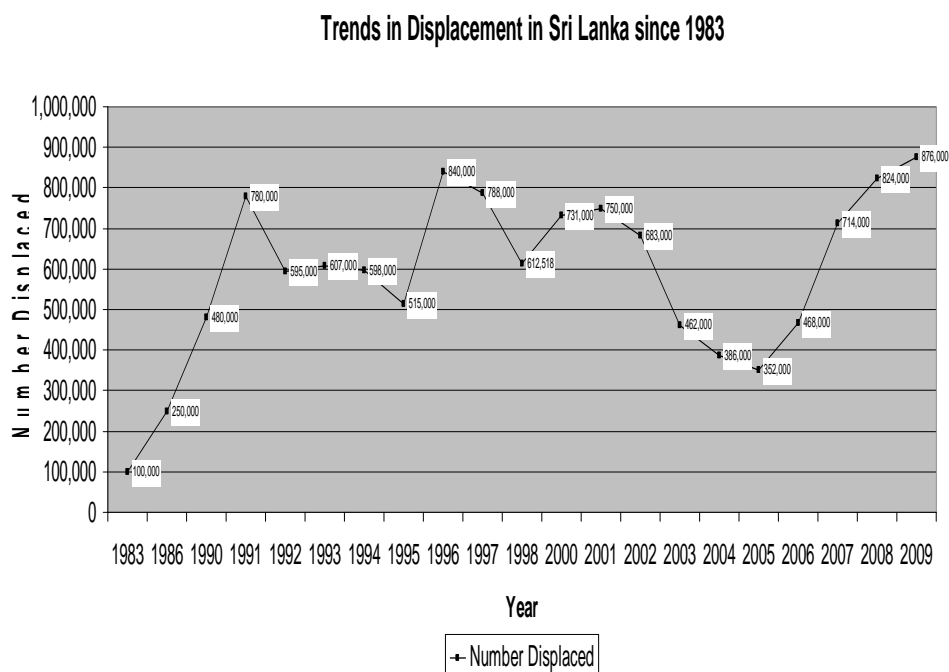
*Types of conflict-induced displacement*

Internal displacement due to the conflict in Sri Lanka has some unique characteristics. In general, displacement by war is understood as people fleeing their homes because of a fear of being caught up in the war. However, this does not cover the reasons for and complexity of the displacement. In Sri Lanka, within the broader context of war, people became displaced due to several reasons:

- People living near army and LTTE camps fleeing to avoid being caught in the crossfire
- Fear of being killed or fear of damage to the property due to aerial bombings by the security forces
- People vacating homes due to advancing troops/government forces during major battles
- Fear of being arrested, abducted or tortured by security forces
- The take-over of lands by security forces to establish military camps or what are popularly known as High Security Zones
- Attacks by the LTTE on border villages of Northern and Eastern Province where Sinhalese live
- Forcible expulsion of people by the security forces and the LTTE
- Violence and riots against ethnic minorities in predominantly Sinhalese areas
- Reluctance of Tamils and Muslims to be subject to LTTE control; forcible recruitment of young people into the militant groups
- Economic hardship and food shortages created by the fighting

Source: Refugee Council Report:UK 2003: 18; ICG Report 2007

Thus people moved away from their homes not only because of forceful eviction or direct persecution by forces and Tamil militants. They also made decisions themselves to move out of their homes to avoid or escape fearful situations.

Second, the distribution of displaced persons within the country follows certain trends. As described above, the conflict took place mainly in the two provinces: the Northern and the Eastern. Therefore, the movement of people has mainly been from these two provinces to elsewhere, as well as within these two provinces. By the end of 2009, after the major government offensive, more than 80 per cent of the IDPs were concentrated in Northern Province, particularly in the southern-most district of Vavuniya. These were the people who fled their homes in areas considered the heartland of the LTTE: Mullaithivu and Kilinochchi. The rest of the IDPs lived outside of the war zone, mainly in the bordering districts of Puttalam, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa (see Map 9). Some IDPs even migrated as far as Colombo, seeking refuge with NGOs, friends and relatives. However, it must be noted that out of the total displaced in 2009, more than

half were in government-supported welfare centres and camps. Another one-third lived
with relatives and friends, or rented houses of their own outside the war zone (Ministry
of Economic Development, Sri Lanka 2010).

The ethnic identities of IDPs are another important factor. The conflict created
uncertainties not only for the main rival ethnic groups but also for the others, including
Muslims and small ethnic minorities living in the war zone. However, among the total
IDPs, the Tamils were the largest group, comprising 84 per cent (738,000) of the total
(876,000) in 2009. Muslims and Sinhalese made up eleven and four per cent
respectively (Ministry of Rehabilitation and Relief services/UNHCR 2009; Silva 2004:
11 ).

**Map 9**: Sri Lanka north-east and border districts



Source: www.ep.gov.lk/Project/BriefProgress/Neiap-II

Finally, the nature and duration of the displacement has implications for this study.
Conflict-induced internal displacement has three important elements: a) long-term or
protracted displaced conditions; b) short-term or temporally displaced conditions and c)

62

multiple displacements. Long-term displaced people are those forced to evacuate their homes by the LTTE and the security forces. There are two important groups in this category: the Muslims of Northern Province who were evicted by the LTTE in 1990 and the Tamils living in the Jaffna district of the north who were made to leave by the security forces in order to establish High Security Zones (HZS). These two groups now live in camps, welfare centres and other types of settlements within and outside the war zone. My study focuses on one of these groups; the Muslims who have been living in Puttalam for the last two decades. The Tamils who have lost their homes due to HSZs currently live in similar arrangements within the district of Jaffna (Sivakanthan 2008).

Multiple displacements are among the worst forms of displacement. People subject to multiple displacement are not only the poorest, having repeatedly lost belongings, property and livelihoods, but have also lost family members. They commonly become the most destitute and vulnerable populations of displaced persons (UNOPS 2010: 26). The majority of those who have experienced multiple displacements in Sri Lanka are Tamils from Vanni and at the battlefront of the Mullaithivu, Kilinochchi and Mannar districts (see maps 3 and 7). The above categories and complexities related to conflict-induced displacement in Sri Lanka are politically loaded. Ethnographic research such as this sheds light on the views and lived experience of displaced people themselves. The lived experiences of the displaced are important for filling gaps in the understanding of these issues and policy making directed at durable solutions.

## Muslims' perspectives on the ethnic conflict

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is widely regarded as a longstanding antagonism between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils in the country. Yet binary explanations of the conflict largely ignore the Tamil-speaking Muslims, who constitute the second largest minority, and one-third of the population of the northern and eastern parts of the country. This section describes the Muslims and their stance in the decades old conflict.

### *The Muslims of Sri Lanka: A brief history*

The origins of Sri Lankan Muslims can be traced to the eighth century. With the advent of Islam, Arab commercial activities expanded and Islamic settlements were established along the coastal belt of south-western India and Sri Lanka. Muslims in the country

were originally indentified as Moors or Mohammadans[45] (Abeyasinghe 1966; ; Devaraja 1994; Kiribamune1986; Shukri 1986).

From the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, the south Indian area, including Sri Lanka, became a busy trading hub for Persia, India and the far east (on the Silk Road route). Arab traders who arrived in south Indian ports (Cochin, Malabar) sailed toward the Sri Lankan west coast and established a presence in areas such as Beruwala (Figure 8), Panadura and Puttalam (;Ali 2001 ; Devaraja 1994; Shukri 1986). Islam and the Tamil language were introduced to Sri Lanka during this period of intensive trading. Tamil was the mother tongue of the native people of the southern coastal areas of India and was a language of trade (Devaraja 1994: 17). Both trading and Islamic religious practices, particularly a translation of the Holy Quran were spread through the Tamil language (Ali 1997). Since then, Tamil rather than Arabic has been the mother tongue of most of the local Muslim population of Sri Lanka and southern India. (Mohan 1987; Varma 2004).

Muslims led peaceful and prosperous lives and maintained cordial relations with the rest of the population until European colonial powers arrived in the island in 1505 (Shukri 1986). Muslim traders from India and the Arab countries married both local Sinhalese and Tamil women in the areas they settled (Ali 2004: 373). They gradually dominated both local and international trade and Sinhalese kings allowed them to stay in the country as they considered that the Muslims posed no threats to their rule (Devaraja 1994).

*Muslims in the Western colonial period*

Sri Lanka was ruled by three colonial regimes – the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British – for more than four centuries (1505–1948) (Varma 2004). The Portuguese, the first colonial power to enter the country, disliked Muslims as they had to face stiff competition in international trade in the other parts of the world they had conquered. They were suspicious of the Muslims' cooperative relationships with locals and drove them away from the commercial city centres in the western and southern coastal towns (Devaraja 1994: 49). As a result, many Muslims who had trade and business establishments moved out of the city centres towards the interior. Gradually, most

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[45]   According to Abeyasinghe, the first Muslims (Mohammadans) of Ceylon were Arabs who sailed from Arabia in the early part of the eighth century and settled in the southern parts of India and Ceylon. (Abeyasinghe 1986: 129).

Muslim settlements in the western and southern port cities moved to the interior of the island and thereby secured a greater stake in the rural countryside. The Sinhalese monarchs in those parts of the country, who rejected Portuguese rule as a threat to Buddhist beliefs, assisted the Muslims by giving them refuge and resettlement in Sinhalese areas.[46] In return, the Muslims used their external contacts with India and the Arab world to protect the Sinhalese kingdoms and also fought in Sinhalese armies. In the seventeenth century, Muslims formed a respected regiment in the Sinhalese army and helped guard the Kandyan kingdom against foreign threats (Devaraja 1994: 50).

**Figure 8**: The oldest Muslim mosque in Sri Lanka



The oldest mosque (Beruwala) on the south-west coast,
believed to be the site where the first Arabs landed in Sri Lanka
Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/srilanka

Since then, Muslims gradually integrated into local culture and customs and shared a rural lifestyle with fellow Sinhalese. They mastered other vocations such as barbers, tailors and weavers, and also adapted to a new peasant-farmer lifestyle mainly in the eastern part of the country (Devaraja 1994: 137–8). Even today, there are a number of villages in the south, central and north-western parts of the country, where Muslims and

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[46] Pre-colonial Ceylon consisted of three major kingdoms: Kandiyan (the hill country of the central, north-central and eastern mountain ranges of Dumbara); Ruhunu (the southern, western and lower hills of Eastern Province) and Jaffna (Tamil).

Sinhalese co-exist. A harmonious ethnic relationship and a sense of 'civility' existed among Sinhalese and Muslims in the rural areas during this period (Devaraja 1994).[47]

The Dutch were the second European colonial power to enter the country. They ruled from 1676 to 1796 and dominated South and Southeast Asian trade. Like the Portuguese, the Dutch disliked Muslims, whom they regarded as both rivals in trade and enemies in faith (Shukri 1986). One of the key developments during the Dutch rule in the country was that they brought in Malays from Java who were ethnically different, but Islamic in religion. The Dutch found Malays, though followers of Islam, to be loyal and not hostile towards European customs (Husseinmiya 1986: 280). A large number of Malays were also brought in to serve as soldiers in the Dutch army. The Malay community adapted to Western customs and the English language, and the majority of their descendents currently live in urban areas of Colombo (see Hussainmiya 1987).

The British, the last European colonial power, arrived in 1796. Unlike their predecessors, the British did not continue hostile attitudes towards Muslims (Roberts 1979; Varma 2004). They allowed Muslims to continue their local business ventures without imposing restrictions. However, under British rule, Tamils and Sinhalese benefited from missionary education, learning English, while Muslims did not send their children to missionary schools for fear of losing Islamic religious practices (Nuhuman 2006). As a result, compared with Tamils and Sinhalese, the upward social mobility of Muslims through education was relatively restricted until the 1960s (Ismail 2001).

*Mobilization of Muslims in the post-colonial period*

The social and political changes among Sri Lankan Muslims that took place during the post-colonial period can be divided into three phases. The first began in the early nineteenth century. As Wickramsinghe (2006: 49) has pointed out, the racial categorization of people in Sri Lanka, including Muslims, became prominent during the British colonial rule in the country. For census and administrative purposes, the British categorised the country's Muslim population into three main divisions – the 'Sri Lankan (Ceylon) Moors', the 'Indian (Coast) Moors', and the 'Malays'.

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[47] On the concept and importance of civility in community life in Goa, see Gomes (2006).

The matter of identity formation of Muslims first began to surface during the early nineteenth century as a political debate between Tamil politicians and Muslim businessmen. The debate centred on the origins of Sri Lankan Muslim or 'Moorish' identity (Ali 2004: 374). Ramanathan, a high profile Tamil politician at the time, claimed that the Muslims were Tamils converted to Islam. In 1887, he made a speech in front of a Royal British commission emphasizing that there was no need for separate political representation for the Muslims as they were part the Tamil-speaking community (Ali 2004;Ismail 1995; McGilvray 1998). This sparked an uproar among politically active Muslim businessmen in Colombo. In response to Ramanathan's claim, Razik Fareed, a pioneer Muslim political leader, presented a memorandum to the British government and the administrators stating that Muslims were descendants of the Arab and Persian migrant trading community, and identified them as 'Moors'. Moors, he argued, though they speak Tamil, have a separate identity based on Islam (Ali 2004; Mohan 1987; Nuhuman 2006 ;Varma 2004).

The arrival of an Egyptian exile called Arabi Pasha in 1883, an Islamic scholar from Egypt who had been deported for criticizing the Egyptian monarchy, gave Muslims new courage to articulate their political rights (Mohan 1987: 56). Arabi Pasha, with his knowledge of English and charisma , was able to provide the much needed leadership that led a Muslim revivalism in the country in the late nineteenth century (Samaraweera 1978). His leadership led the businessmen and politicians in Colombo and Kandy to develop a *Moor* or *Moorish* identity for the Sri Lankan Muslims. During this initial revivalism, Muslims wanted to identify themselves as Moors because it provided a unique cultural identity distinguishing them from Tamils (Ali 1997: 259).

Another factor that encouraged Muslims' social mobilization towards a distinct identity was the 1915 ethnic riots between Sinhalese and Muslims (Tambiah 1986: 184). Although it has been described as a 'religious dispute', the incident had a lasting impact on Muslim identity formation. It is considered the first major outbreak of communal violence in Sri Lanka. As described by Kannangara (1981: 5), 'although the origins of the 1915 riots lay partly in a dispute between Buddhists and Muslims over the rights of the former to take their traditional religious ( Buddhist) processions past mosques, it was a manifestation of underlying grievances by rural Sinhalese against Muslim traders, aggravated by Sinhalese Buddhist revivalism and led by prominent Buddhist leaders'. This riot was not only communal but also due to religious and business rivalries.

According to British census, Muslims were divided into Sri Lankan (Ceylon Moors) and Indian Moors (Coast Moors). The latter were the dominant trading community in rural Sinhalese areas (Kannangara 1981: 7–9). During the riots, the Coast Moors or the Muslims of Indian origin were the main target of the Sinhalese. Sri Lankan Moors, on the other hand, attempted to keep a low profile and were silent about the persecution of their Indian counterparts by the Sinhalese. As described by one of the key informants, the 1915 riot was the first historically decisive mistake by Muslims of Sri Lanka in their struggle for a separate identity in the country: 'By silently favouring the Sinhalese chauvinists' attacks on Muslim traders of Indian origin, local (Sri Lankan) Muslims missed the opportunities for building a strong "Moorish' ethnic identity' (KI 8). After the riots, hundreds of Indian Muslim traders left the country. But they created a perception of Muslims as a business and trading community (*thambi-mudalali*) among Sinhalese in the country (Kannangara 1981: 7).

The second phase of social changes among Muslims occurred between the 1960s and the 1980s. Muslim politicians and wealthy businessmen in Colombo influenced the central government to promote Muslim education, culture and religious practices as they enjoyed a greater stake in the ruling political parties. (Liyanage 2008; Mohan 1987). But some critics argue that the Muslim politicians of this period were interested mainly in the betterment of urban Muslims and those living in the southern parts of the country (Ameerdeen 2006; Ismail 1995). Ismail argues that twentieth century Muslim politics of the country were dictated by the urban trading classes of Colombo and that the needs of rural Muslims in the eastern region were largely ignored (Ismail 1995: 47).

One of the most significant aspects of the Muslims' social mobilization and identity formation during this period was the language issue. Language, until the present, poses a paradox for the Muslims in Sri Lanka as it is both a unifying factor and a source of division (Nuhuman 2006: 42). In most parts of Sri Lanka, the mother tongue of the majority of Muslims is Tamil. Muslims are often identified as Tamil Muslims or Islamic Tamils (*Islamiya Thamilarghal*) by Tamil nationalist leaders and Indian scholars because of their close affinity to the Tamil language and cultural traditions (Mohan 1987; Nuhuman 2006). More importantly, though the majority of Muslims speak Tamil, they do not take their identity from the language. They have not maintained a strong affinity with or great emotional commitment to the Tamil language as Tamil Hindus

have (Mohan 1987). In this context, though Muslims widely use Tamil in their everyday life and school education, most do not support Tamil separatism (Ameerdeen 2006).

Muslims' social mobilization through education and political affiliations with Sinhalese majority governments' was evident from the 1970s (Mohan 1987). Although Muslims suffered to the same extent as the Tamils because of the 'Sinhala-only' bill in 1956, they supported the Sinhalese majority government bill because they wanted to carve out a separate identity from the Tamils (Farook 2009: 41). There were significant changes in education during this period, as separate Muslim schools were established by the government under a Muslim education minister.[48] Muslims also influenced the government to obtain special holidays as well as permission to implement Muslim family law (McGilivray 1998; O' Sullivan 1999). Nevertheless, the language controversy still remains as a part of the identity crisis of Muslims in the country (Nuhuman 2006). In particular, during the conflict, speaking and using Tamil in Sinhalese-dominated areas created an uneasy situation for Muslims. Many Sinhalese people believe that Muslims are part of the Tamil community and sympathize with the Tamil separatist struggle. Thus, there is a increasing tendency of Muslims in the southern part of the country to speak Sinhalese instead of Tamil nowadays (Farook 2009; Nuhuman 2006).

The third phase of Muslim social mobilization began in the middle of the 1980s with the establishment of a separate political party called the Sri Lanka Muslims Congress (SLMC) (Ameerdeen 2006; Liyanage 2008). This marked a critical juncture in the Muslim community which many argued was a shift in political power from the urban businessmen in Colombo and the south, to the hands of rural-educated Muslims in Eastern Province (Ameerdeen 2006;Ismail 1995; Nuhuman 2006). According to Ismail (1995), the most notable feature of this political power transition was the decline of the Moor identity and an emergence of a pan-Islamic Muslim identity with international links. Ameerdeen (2006: 126) refers to an 'eastward movement of Muslim politics' and the heightening of ethnic consciousness among Muslims.

In addition, two recent phenomena accelerated the ethnic consciousness of Muslims in the country. The first was the Islamization process which began as a result of the

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[48] Badu din Mohamed, a Muslim from Kandy, was education minister and he helped Muslims to improve their educational levels and encouraged Muslim parents to send their children to Sinhalese medium schools (Farook 2009: 45–8).

political affiliation of Sinhalese governments with Arab countries in the Middle East through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in the late 1970s (Ameerdeen 2006). The NAM members countries of Africa, the Middle East and Asia boosted economic ties and political cooperation among themselves, which had a significant impact on Muslims because low-income Muslims of Sri Lanka in both urban and rural areas found opportunities to work in oil-rich Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Oman. Muslims had an added advantage over Tamils and Sinhalese finding employment in the Middle East because of their religious affiliation (Gamage and Watson 1999). The previously poor Muslim migrant workers emerged as a new middle class in Sri Lankan Muslim society (O'Sullivan 2001: 256). These migrant workers were more conscious of their religious identity after they returned. They had been heavily influenced by the Islamic way of life and codes of conduct of their employers in the Middle Eastern countries. The wearing of hijabs and Arabic style dress among Muslim women has become more common with the influence of the Middle East experiences of Sri Lankan Muslims.

Secondly, a localized Islam in Sri Lanka popularly known as *Sufism,* has given a unique character to the Muslim community, particularly to those living in rural areas. Sufism is personalized by *moulanas* and *thangals* from southern India who make visits to Sri Lankan Muslim villages. Rural Muslims believe that these persons possess supernatural powers to heal the physical and psychological ailments of the human body and can restore village prosperity (Munck 1994). There are many places in southern and central Sri Lanka where Muslims worship tombs and follow *Sufism*. However, during the last two decades, *Sufism* has been challenged by the members of the *Tahblig Jama'at* (a transnational, orthodox Islamic movement) (Nuhuman 2006). Islamic fundamentalist groups like *Tahblig Jama'at* are growing in number and are becoming attractive to young Muslims.[49] One of the goals of these groups is to eradicate heretical practices such as the worship of *Moulana* and the tombs of saints in popular mosques (Munck 1994: 289). In recent years orthodox Islam is gaining popularity among young and educated Muslims who want to connect local Muslim communities to a global Islamic identity that supersedes the Sri Lankan national identity from which they are presently excluded (Nuhuman 1997 & 2006).

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[49] There are four or five Islamic fundamentalist groups operating in various parts of the country. I met one group operating in Puttalam and gaining support from both displaced and local young men.

*Muslims in the context of civil war*

Muslims, though not a direct party to the ethnic conflict in the beginning, have become an integral part of the conflict and, because of situational factors have been compelled to safeguard their political rights (Ameerdeen 2006;Ali 2004; Fazil 2005). The heightening of the armed conflict in the country from the middle of the 1980s compelled Muslims to intensify their search for a separate identity and political mobilization (Ismail 2001: 2; Haniffa 2007: 52; Nuhuman 2006: 21).

Prior to the armed conflict, relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, particularly Tamils, were for the most part amiable( Mohan 1987: 41). Mutual understanding and respect prevailed between the communities. Their lives were interwoven because Tamil and Muslim villages lie interspersed in the north-east Tamil-dominated region (Fazil 2005; McGilvray 1998). Some cultural occasions and customs were shared between the two communities. For example, making a gold necklace (*thali*) for the bride by a bridegroom is common at Muslim and Tamil weddings. Though prohibited in Islam, the Tamil system of *dowry* is still practiced within Sri Lankan Muslim marriage traditions (Mohan 1987; Rameez 2005).

Moreover, the lifestyles of Tamils and Muslims in the north-eastern part of the country bind them together as partners in peasant agricultural production. The majority of the people in the rural areas are engaged in paddy cultivation (rice farming) as the major livelihood activity. Since rice farming requires considerable labour input throughout the season, both Tamil and Muslim peasants exchanged labour to their mutual benefit. The problems faced by both communities were also the same. For example, the education and land colonization policies in the post-independence era affected both. Consequently, until the late 1980s, the two communities were on the same side in their struggle to free themselves from Sinhalese domination. Sometimes, Muslims contested elections through Tamil political parties (Ameerdeen 2006;Ranjit 2000).

This peaceful social atmosphere and collaborative lifestyle began to change after the signing of the Indo–Lanka accord in 1987. This accord was signed between India and Sri Lanka to end the hostility between Tamils and Sinhalese and to find a political solution to the ethnic problem. In order to gain full territorial control in the north-east region after the merger of the two provinces under the accord, the LTTE began to persecute the Muslims in order to secure their control. A number of human rights

violations were committed by the LTTE against Muslims. One such incident that damaged the coexistence of the two communities was the killing of more than 200 Muslims returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1989 (Ameerdeen 2006;Fazil 2005; Ismail et al 2005). Since then Muslim majority areas (Ampara) in Eastern Province have became areas of violent conflict between Tamils and Muslims (Ameerdeen 2006). Because of this increased animosity, Muslims abandoned their farm lands that were close to Tamil villages. Most of these were fertile, irrigated lands and were left uncultivated for a long time (Fazil 2005).

In response to the insecurity of the Muslims and to take control of the troubled areas in the east, the Sinhalese government sought to involve Muslim youth in the police force and home guards. Not surprisingly, Tamils accused the Muslims of aligning themselves with the Sinhalese government (Ameerdeen 2006; Fazil 2005; Ismail et al 2005). The LTTE began to view Muslims as an obstacle to their armed struggle. The culmination of the persecution of Muslims was the expulsion of all the Muslims by the LTTE from the Tamil-dominated areas in the north and some areas of the east in October 1990. This caused irreparable damage to the relationship between the two communities and led Muslims in the region to seek separate political representation within the north-east region (Ameerdeen 2006; Ismail et al 2005;Hasbullah 2001;McGilvray and Raheem 2008).

In 2009, after the end of the decades-old civil conflict in the country, Muslims have faced a number of problems. Those in the former war zone still carry bitter memories of expulsions and extortions carried out against them. Some of the displaced northern Muslims whom I interviewed believed that they might face problems from Tamils in their places of origin even if the Tamil rebels were eliminated by the Sri Lankan government.

In this post-conflict scenario, Muslims have complex social and political needs and aspirations that must be acknowledged and addressed. As noted by a Muslim academic,

> Muslims are at a crossroad. Muslim politicians must think wisely and guide this community towards ethnic reconciliation not allow young Muslims to feel frustrated. If the Muslim political leadership is emasculated, then the rise of radicalism among educated Muslim youth similar to the Sinhalese and Tamils in the past is a distinct possibility (KI 18).

However, not all Muslims endorsed the above view. For many Muslims, the most significant problem facing thier community today is the increased number of homeless and displaced people caused by the ethnic conflict.

## Conclusion

This chapter has described three important aspects of conflict-induced displacement in Sri Lanka: the causes of the ethnic conflict, displacement, and the Muslim perspective of the conflict. Ethnic conflict has historical roots and both Tamils and Sinhalese claim their historical rights to exist and to defend themselves on a territorial and ideological basis. Tamils initiated an armed separatist struggle after 1983 to demand their rights from the Sinhalese governments. The latter continued to suppress the separatist struggle through military operations. After heavy loss of lives and properties, both parties attempted several negotiations mediated through India and Norway in 1987 and 2002 respectively. Indian intervention resulted in further complications. Conflict and antagonism not only increased between Sinhalese and Tamils but also eroded the relationship between Muslims and Tamils who shared a language and culture. The culmination of the Tamil–Muslim animosity was the forcible expulsion of the Muslims of Northern Province by the LTTE in 1990. Thereafter, the conflict became acute and the government experienced heavy losses and an anarchic situation emerged in the country. The intervention by Norway resulted in a ceasefire followed by a series of peace talks to find a political solution to the long standing issues of the Tamils. The change in the political regime in 2005 and the split in the LTTE movement prompted a massive military assault by the Sinhalese government to secure territories held by the rebels and defeat the military capacity of the rebels. These military operations succeeded and the LTTE separatist armed struggle ended violently.

The outcome of this protracted conflict situation was a substantial increase in the number of displaced people of all ethnic groups. People were displaced during military confrontations and the numbers fluctuated depending on the region and nature of the fighting. However, by the end of the conflict in May 2009, the number of displaced persons reached almost nine million, making it an issue of national concern.

Muslims, the second largest ethnic minority, were pulled into the war for many reasons. Though they were largely a Tamil-speaking people who lived among and shared a common culture with Tamils in the north and east, they did not support the separatist armed struggle wholeheartedly. On the other hand, the government did not allow Muslim political parties to participate meaningfully in solving the ethnic problem. Muslims had their own weakness as well. Due to the lack of a distinct ethnic identity based on language and territory, they were unable to win their rights and demands from both the Sinhalese government and the Tamil separatism. The Muslim community as a whole mobilised politically as a force to be reckoned with only after the ethnic conflict began to affect their lives. After the military victory, the Sinhalese government seemed strong and all minority groups, including Tamils and Muslims, found it difficult to raise their voices and demands as strongly as they had in the past. Muslims view the future with mixed hopes. One of the biggest dilemmas they face is the repatriation or reintegration of their displaced families after the conflict. The next chapter begins the story of one of the Muslim communities most affected by the ethnic conflict: the Muslims of Northern Province.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**PLACE, FLIGHT AND REFUGE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF PRE-DISPLACEMENT LIFE AND EXPULSION OF NORTHERN MUSLIMS**

> I still cannot figure out why we have been chased out by the LTTE. The LTTE people (rebels] were good with us. They used to come to our tailoring shop once in a while and inquire about any news [*vidayangal*] and the problems [*pirachchinaigal*]. Tamil neighbours living next to our place were also friendly. I have no hard feelings about my Tamil neighbours.

> Lamika (LI 32), 48 year-old woman displaced from Jaffna for sixteen years.

## Introduction

Like Lamika, many men and women from Jaffna and other parts of Northern Province, was displaced almost twenty years ago and lives with memories of the past in her refugee settlement. The forceful expulsion from their homes by the LTTE in October 1990 remains a shock to many and continues to cause grief and hurt. Their suffering depends on how they lived, how they experienced dislocation from their families, how much they loved their place of origin and how much they were attached to their homes and habitats. While reconstructing their shattered lives in unknown new territories in Puttalam, these displaced people also retain connections with their past experiences.

This chapter analyses pre-displacement lives and social relations. It focuses on people's recollections of place and belonging, and their memories of expulsion, experiences of flight, and initial encounters in finding refuge in Puttalam. The findings are presented largely in the form of narratives. Narratives are a rich source of information for understanding how people construct their reality and are used here to see displacement from the displaced people's perspective. Narratives are also stories that have a beginning, middle and end. For researchers, the stories provide useful insights into the meanings that people, individually or collectively, ascribe to lived experience (Aunger 1995: 104; Eastmond 2007: 248). This chapter presents a thematic analysis of people's narratives of their lives prior to the displacement, and follows the chronological stages

of the life histories of individuals and families from everyday life in their place of origin to seeking refuge in Puttalam in 1990.

### *Northern Muslims: The Tamil connection*

Muslims in Sri Lanka are often portrayed as a socially homogeneous community because they do not have the 'caste' or distinctive 'class' differences seen among the Sinhalese or Tamil communities (McGilvray & Raheem 2008: 7). To the outside world, they are a close-knit group, socially and culturally interactive with their fellow community members through Islam. However, this view of Sri Lankan Muslims does not adequately explain the social and political reality of this group. Among Muslims, there are differences based on their place of living, lifestyle, ethnic relations and response to the decades-old ethnic conflict in the country. For example, the majority of Muslims in the north and east are farmers and fishermen and have close ties with Tamils through language and culture (McGilvray 1998; Knoerzer 1998). On the other hand, Muslims in Colombo and southern coastal areas are largely cosmopolitan and better educated, with a Western lifestyle (Ismail 1995). The Muslims living in the central and interior parts of the country are rural and their lives are interwoven with Sinhalese people and their culture (Devaraja 1994). I use the term *northern Muslims* to distinguish the people who are native to five districts of Northern Province: Jaffna, Mullaithivu,[50] Kilinochchi, Vavuniya and Mannar (see Map 4) who share a language and culture with majority Tamils in the province. Prior to the conflict, the Muslims constituted approximately five per cent of the total provincial population.[51]

Just over half of the Muslims of the province lived in Mannar and clearly dominated in agriculture, fishing and the coastal trading activities in the district. However, a sizable Muslim population in Mannar and Jaffna in particular, like their Tamil counterparts, were able to mobilize themselves through education (Hasbullah 2001). They are well educated, Tamil-speaking Muslims engaged in professions such as law and teaching, and public sector clerical and administrative jobs. A number of Muslim scholars and intellectuals were experts in the Tamil language and culture (Nuhuman 2006). Also, a significant number of Islamic worship places can be found in the Jaffna and Mannar districts and some are nearly 500 years old. This shows that Muslims have lived in the

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[50] The district of Mullaithivu was established after 1984.
[51] According to the 1981 census, the total population in the province was 1,203,109. Muslims constituted 4.51 per cent (54,205) while Tamils were the majority (94 per cent) (Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka).

province for a long time.[52] Muslims of other districts comprised less than ten per cent of the total northern Muslim population prior to the conflict. They were primarily farmers and fishermen who had firmly established livelihoods by owning lands and properties in the areas where they lived.[53]

Like their fellow Muslims in the eastern parts of the country, Muslims in the north shared the aspirations of the Tamil minority affected by Sinhalese governments since independence (1948). They sympathized with the separatist Tamil cause, until they were expelled from their homes in early 1990s. In the early stages of Tamil militancy many Muslim youth joined with rebel groups against the Sinhalese government because they collectively faced discrimination and humiliation in education, employment and state land colonization projects (Ameerdeen 2006 McGilvray 1998). But after the expulsion, as is shown in the succeeding chapters, their attitudes towards Tamils, fellow Muslims and their political aspirations has changed. Today, they wanted to be recognized as *wadapula Muslimgal* (Muslims of the north), a distinct identity based on their place of origin which separates them from the rest of the Muslims in the country. One of the political leaders of the northern Muslims, whom I interviewed, gave the following as reasons for their quest for a separate place-based identity within the broader Muslim community of Sri Lanka:

> Northern Muslims have specific problems and grievances ( *adhandangal* -a pure Tamil word] They are part and parcel of the Tamil culture and tradition of the North. No Muslim political leaders cared about the northern Muslims and their problems when they were expelled by the LTTE in 1990. Therefore, our strength is organizing ourselves as northern Muslims (*wadapula Muslimgal*) to get our rights and secure our political future. I have already initiated several programs for this purpose. A Peace Secretariat for Northern Muslims has been established. We need our own identity and political future. It is not our choice, but the circumstances have led us to think and act like this.
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> A member of the Sri Lanka parliament of Vanni, displaced from Mannar in 1990 (KI 2).

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[52] Personal communication with Muslim intellectuals from Jaffna.
[53] Personal communication with Mr Mohideen (KI 4), director of the Documentation Center for displaced Muslims in Colombo.

## Pre-displacement social context

This section presents an ethnographic account of the lived experiences of northern Muslims, their attachment to place, economic activities and social relationships, including with Tamils in their places of origin prior to displacement. People's past experiences and memories have ongoing significance in their lives following displacement. Their livelihood strategies, finding a place of temporary settlement and their decisions to return after the war, are all influenced by such experiences and the sense of belonging to and identity with their home places in the north.

### *Memories of Home: The sense of place among northern Muslims*

Forced displacement is an involuntary event that, by its very nature, increases the sense of belonging that people have to their place of origin. This is because people move away from the habitats with a feeling of unresolved loss (of the lived experience in their places of origin). My conversations with displaced people in Puttalam made it apparent that people constantly recreate their memories and lived experiences of the past.

In their places of origin, most northern Muslims lived in villages. The village, in the South Asian context, 'is a "place" that is linked to a sense of identity with and "belonging to" that has roots. This may be contrasted with "space", which is an "epistemic unit"; it provides a way of seeing the world' (Dasgupta 2005: 5). In Tamil, a village is called *ur* or *oor*. *Ur*, for northern Muslims, includes a sense of belonging to a natal village (hamlet) and a personal link to its habitat. Daniel (1984) in his study of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in southern India, differentiates between *Ur* and *Kiramam* (larger village settlement). *Ur* denotes the quality of the habitat where people have intimate relationships in their everyday lives and *Kiramam* is a collective entity which has clearly demarcated boundaries (Daniel 1984: 9). In the case of northern Muslims, both person-centric *ur* and the collective grouping *kiramam* are important: For Muslims, like their Tamil counterparts, the association with *Ur* remains an intimate part of their social construct of a place and world view. However, in everyday life transactions, Muslims are not confined to their natal village or *ur*. Their experiences go beyond it to encompass long stretches of rice farms linking several villages, *chenai*[54] located a few miles from *ur* and townships, which they visit to market their produce and so on. Also,

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[54] *Chenai* is a Tamil word for highland farm plot situated some distance from the village or hamlet. In Sinhala it is *hena*. Though these highlands farms are now not so visible or popular in the southern rural areas, in the dry zones such as Mannar, Mullaiuthivu and Kilinochchi, Muslims and Tamils still engage in *chenai* cultivation which they use to grow vegetables, chilli, ground nuts and so on.

for northern Muslims, *ur* is not only a micro space or hamlet; it has different levels of meaning – all referring to an individual attachment or belonging to place, but with different levels of specificity depending on the context. *Ur* is symbolic of the physical location where a person comes from which could be a village or township. For example, for a displaced person from Mannar, *ur* could be a village, but for a Muslim from Jaffna, it may be a street, town or bazaar. Also, for northern Muslims, the attachment to place and belonging is not confined to a small spatial territory (*ur*) but to the whole spectrum of locations that they live in and travel to, and places that are linked to their everyday lives. Thus, the sense of place and the belonging to place is created and lived through the social interactions in everyday life in the physical and geographical environment.

### *Bonding and attachment to place*

Attachment to a place is a kind of emotional bonding to a geographical location. Such bonding may develop through various types of interactions with the physical space (Bisht 2008: 56). In the case of northern Muslims, especially those who were born and spent most part of their lives in a village environment, the bonding with their places of origin takes three forms: genealogical, economic and social .

### Genealogical bonding

Genealogical bonding to places of origin was most evident among people who lived in traditional villages in the North. In traditional village society, the family is an extended and patrilocal one. It is also an economic unit as family livelihood is based on farming. In a patrilineal family, land is transferred from father to eldest son. This traditional form of inheritance strengthens the bonding to land through the male ancestral lineage. The northern displaced families who come from village backgrounds tend to see the land they left behind as ancestral properties rather than economic units. The ancestral land for them is  a "family property" and therefore attachment to the place is holy or spiritual. The key word used most often by displaced Muslims for their lands in the North is *sondha-man* or s*ondha bhoomi*, which refers to a sense of possession as these expressions mean 'our soil' or 'our land'. An elderly man, displaced sixteen years ago and currently living with his son in Puttalam, replied emotionally when I asked why northern Muslims are so attached to their villages back home:

> You don't understand the value of ancestral homes and the land we inherited.
> The land where we were born is a holy place for us. That is our *sondha bhoomi*

(our land), *sondha man* (our soil). We can smell the soul of our parents and grand parents in the soil of our land. This [Puttalam] is not our land. *Insha Allah,* I will return to my ancestral home one day (LI 35).

Another person (KI 1), a social activist campaigning for the rights of displaced Muslims, told me that  they are prepared to do anything to get their ancestral lands back after the defeat of the LTTE. According to him the place where they now lived and the place where they were born were not comparable. It is difficult for a person to give up his religion or the right to the place where he was born. He said:

We can afford losing our house or property. We can get back those when we can. But we cannot negotiate our dignity, religion and our soil at any cost. The north is our mother land (*thai man*).

For most elderly people, the refugee camps and resettlement sites they currently occupy have no spiritual significance and they do not feel connected with the site. They see the expulsion and subsequent arrival to camps in Puttalam with their children as their destiny or Allah's will rather than their choice of a place to live. Life in Puttalam is mechanical, meaningless and devoid of the rhythm that was there when they lived in the original village. This is expressed by the following statement by an elderly displaced man:

I was born and spent most of my life in Musali [a village of the Mannar district]. For me, this [resettlement village] is a temporary place [*thatkalika idam*]. This is not my home…I am a stranger here. With the help of Allah my family somehow is able to get out of the difficult times of the past. My son knows the politicians and he was able to build a house here. You can see this house is beautiful and has everything. But for me, something is missing. I pray every day for an opportunity to get back to our own soil [*sondha man*], our own land [*sondha boomi*].

Hameed (LI 1), 62 year-old displaced man from Mannar.

When I asked why displaced people were so negative, despite getting assistance from the government and donor-funded projects, Hameed replied with mixed feelings.

We thought that we would be able to get back to our homes within a few weeks or a few months. But now almost 18 years have gone by. In our old house we

had many rooms and space. Here we all live on less than 10 perches of land. I sleep in the front living room. I have no respect [*mariyathai*] in my family. In my *oor*, I can do the things I want. There are no boundaries there. Here, people have fences and boundaries [*valawu*]for the camps. At our homes, we can lie down under a tree for hours. Nobody disturbs us. Here I have no place to rest or relax. That's why I used to go to the mosque and spend the day there. I feel comfortable [there]. I used to go home after the prayer [*mgarib*] late afternoon. The mosque is the only place where I feel I am doing something meaningful. It resembles my past routine and recalls memories of my home village.

Genealogical bonding to place of origin becomes stronger as people see it through cultural lenses. The village community environment is holistic; livelihood activities were interwoven with other villagers and with their feelings of belonging to place and community. The physical environment of the village – the long, narrow roads and pathways linking paddy fields and farms, the small tanks from which they got water for cultivation, tea shops with a variety of homemade foods, the forest plots close to the *chenai*, mosques and common lands where people sit and relax – are part of cultural artefacts that they recall with a sense of longing and belonging. Climatic conditions and the natural resources that they used in everyday life also contributed to a strong sense of belonging. A community leader, who has been displaced since 1990, recalled:

We can live there under any hardship. Even the water we drink is refreshing at our home [*pachcha thanni kudichittu paduthirukkalam*]. We can sleep happily even with just a glass of water(LI 13).

**Economic bonding**

A large majority of the Muslims of North were engaged in paddy farming and the cultivation of other crops prior to their displacement. In particular, people from Mullaithivu, Kilinochchi and Mannar, who come from a farming background, have a strong attachment to their farmlands on which they spent most of their everyday life. Many of them were successful farmers, but lost their interest in farming after displacement. Though some have made use of their agricultural and farming skills to find other sources of income for survival, there is no sense of attachment to the new places to engage them in farming activities.

In their home villages, engaging in farming was not merely a source of income; it was also a way of life. Through their work, farmers engaged with the environment and nature. Those who were successful farmers back in their villages spent most of their days in the farm plots. They left home early in the morning and worked hard, and depended on family labour for major farm activities. A displaced man who was a farmer from Mannar describes his pre-displacement life:

> We spend most of the time working in our *chenai* . Not only me, but all my family members loved to work in the *chenai*. I left home after early morning prayers [*fajr*]. Sometimes, my son used to come with me to the *chenai*, if he had no school or other work at home. But mostly I worked alone until my wife brought food at around 11 am. Then she helped me to continue the work. Sometime she collected firewood and we came home together in the afternoon. It was more like a routine during the cultivation season. Whether we had work or not, we went to the *chenai* every day.

> A 62 year-old man displaced from Musali, Mannar sixteen years ago (LI 1).

Not only men, as the heads of households, but also wives and children engaged in farming. For these hard-working people, being displaced meant not only loss of home and property but also the abandonment of a way of living of which they were proud. However, they have made considerable efforts to remake village environments in the places of current settlements in Puttalam. The village and urban distinctions were kept intact when displaced people settled in various locations in Puttalam. These aspects are discussed in Chapter Four below.

**Social bonding**

People are bound to places socially. Kinship ties and intra-familial relationships among northern Muslims were strong and functioned as the central network for economic and social activities. In village community life, kinship (*sondham*) is a strong social bond, providing social capital and families support each other in important social and economic activities. For example, in a particular *ur* or *kiramam* Muslims live as extended families through kinship ties as 'clans' (*sondhakarangal*).[55] They exchange labour through ploughing, weeding and harvesting of rice fields, much being done as communal activity. In the village community, an elderly person (*mooththawar*) who is

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[55] In the eastern part of the country, Muslims practice a similar kinship-based social arrangement called *kudy*, where the leader of the group makes all important decisions affecting his clan (see Mahroof 1986).

normally an elderly male member of the kin group or clan makes decisions and guides all the families belonging to his clan. Some of these local *mooththawars* were the people who guided and made the decision to come to Puttalam when the Tamil rebels asked them to vacate their homes. In particular, the *mooththawars*, extended family chiefs and mosque leaders made efforts to minimize the psychological shock, and to get relatives and families out of the rebel areas when they were expelled in 1990. However, social respect for these elderly men has declined not only because of dislocation of his relatives by the displacement, but also because of the loss of social status, in which land ownership was a strong element.

A *mooththawar* who is now idling in a local camp site in Kalpitiya says that he was the leader of his kinship group in the village called Koolankulam (in Mannar). He explained his social status pre and post displacement as follows:

> In my village, relatives used to come to my home after *magrib* [dusk] and ask my opinion and advice on matters affecting them. All types of matters, like a marriage proposal or what pesticide should be used for weed control in the paddy fields, were discussed. We met and talked for hours and days to decide when we should start land preparation and whether the rain was sufficient to start ploughing, and so on. But now everything is changed. Now I don't receive any respect from our families since we were displaced. I don't know even where some of my relatives [*sontahkarangal*] are residing. A few of them live here [in the camp] but I have no role to play. I feel worthless.

> Ibrahim (LI 35), 65 year-old man displaced from Mannar sixteen years ago.

Not only the leaders or *moothhawars* of kinship groups, but all elderly men, particularly fathers, enjoyed authority and social respect in the family. Intra-familial relationships were strong and formed the basis for the smooth conduct of family roles and functions in everyday life. Unlike Tamil youth, young Muslim men were not under threat of being recruited for the rebel forces (this happened occasionally at the beginning of the LTTE movement in 1980s). Young men obeyed their fathers by helping them with the farming, or by migrating to other parts of the country to find work to support the family after their schooling was finished. One second-generation displaced person, who was 10 years old when he came to Puttalam with his parents, described his intra-familial relationship in his home as follows:

In our family we all do what our father says, nobody questions his decisions. If he wanted us to go to the farm during the harvesting season we did not go to school. He was so powerful and we obeyed his orders (LI 2).

Social bonding also has gender specific dimensions. Muslim women, like their Tamil counterparts in the north, play a vital role in the day-to-day household activities at their places of origin. However, they have had very little social exposure because Muslims practice a patriarchal system and following religious Islamic norms, women do not participate in life outside the home. Neither do women have much influence in household decision making and they maintain a social distance from men in their home environments. Women, especially married women, had to serve meals first to men, including their husband, son and any other males visiting or staying at the home during lunch or dinner. They are not supposed to be in front of the men or interfere in conversations, even at home, and strictly followed rules by wearing a headscarf [*purda*] or a veil [*mukkadu*]. A displaced woman, who lost her husband after they arrived in Puttalam, explained her intra-family relationship as follows:

I was usually afraid to talk face-to-face to my daughter's father [*inda pillaida vaappa* – married women do not refer their partners as husbands. Rather they say children's father]. This was because I felt that it was not ethical and religiously correct. I usually waited until he [*vaapa*]came home for dinner in the evening after *isha* prayers. I never sat together with him when dining . Sometimes he comes with one or two of his friends for dinner. Those days I tried to make some additional food but most times we ate whatever was left after serving to him and his friends. But after we came here [Puttalam], he felt frustrated and powerless. He was not as serious in family matters as he was in the past. He got sick after we came here and died a few years ago.

Hajara (LI 25), 58 year-old woman displaced from Mannar sixteen years ago.

Such strict home rules were often not followed during the farming season. Gender roles were altered according to environmental and social context. In addition to household work, married women did seasonal farm work such as planting, weeding and carrying the harvest to the home from the fields. Young unmarried women are exempt from hard labour, but the young men of the family helped their parents in the seasonal farming work. Unmarried young women stayed at home or study in schools. They looked after the cooking and other household chores when the mother was away from home or in the

farm fields. Jennath (LI 36), a 57 year-old woman from Mannar who is now staying in her son's newly built house in a resettlement village in Puttalam, explained her daily household chores back at home village:

> At my home I used to wake up before *fajr* [first prayer of the day, around 4.30 am] and prepared meals for my husband to take to the *chenai*. Then I got my children ready for school. After sending them to school I spent about an hour or more sweeping the front yard [*waasal*], washing clothes and cleaning rooms. However, before noon I went to the *chenai* to help my husband. I worked with him doing various things in the *chenai* and returned home with him carrying firewood collected from the nearby jungle or from the *chenai*. We both arrived home at sunset. Then I prepared the dinner for the family and went to sleep by midnight or sometime later.

*Sondham*[56] or bonding with land, village and family through genealogical, economic and social structures played a vital role in the lives of northern Muslims in their pre-displacement life. Some families, after being displaced, attempted to re-invoke *sondham* through buying land, building houses and settling as neighbourhood groups in Puttalam. Nevertheless, people recall with their nostalgia and their lives in the north of Sri Lanka, where there were clear structures that gave meaning and order, and provided a sense of community and belonging

### Tamil–Muslim relations

Muslims, as the second largest ethnic community in the north, share language and certain cultural traditions with their Tamil counterparts. Muslims and Tamils in the north had been traditionally integrated into local life as interdependent communities. Apart from agriculture, Muslims were strong in trading and business activities in the townships of Mannar and Jaffna. Muslims in the urban and towns areas of the north engaged in service sector occupations and were barbers, tailors, butchers, or drivers of public transport services and so on. Some occupations dominated by Muslims, such as butchers and barbers, were originally considered as low-caste occupations by the predominantly Hindu caste-based society in Jaffna.[57]

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[56] Tamil word 'shodham' or sontham has multiple meanings. It is used to refer, kinship (relatives) and also to denote the personal attachment or ownership to land and properties
[57] Personal communication with a scholar of Tamil culture and literature (KI 10).

Their dominance in trade and business activities allowed Muslims to gain prominence in local politics. For example, in both Mannar and Jaffna, a significant number of Muslims were elected as local government councillors. In Jaffna, the municipal council had at least two Muslim representatives until 1985. Before the LTTE domination of the area, political power was held mostly by educated, high-caste Tamils and wealthy Muslim businessmen.[58]

In rural areas, Tamils and Muslims were socially integrated and shared a number of cultural traditions. Tamils usually call Muslim men *kaaka* or *naana* (elder brother). Young Muslim men are called *thambi* (a boy or younger brother) by fellow Tamil members. Muslims draw from both Tamil Hindu and Islamic traditions. In Muslim wedding ceremonies, the practice of *dowry* and holding an event of *tahli kattu* (the bridegroom offering a gold necklace to the bride to symbolize their lifelong bond) were common and were borrowed from Tamil Hindu culture. This does not, however, indicate that Sri Lankan Muslims are 'Tamil Muslims' or 'Islamic Tamils' (Nuhuman 2006). There are significant differences between these two communities. Muslims have distinctive, religiously informed style of dressing. Muslim women cover their heads using a portion of the *saree* (*mukkadu*) or *purda*. Muslim men usually wear white caps and *sarongs* (*lungi*).[59] Tamils and Muslims have separate places of worship which are often located close to each other. As revealed by the interviews, the communities show a great religious tolerance towards each other. Muslims participated in feasts such as *poojas* in Hindu *kovils* and Tamils visit *kandoori* in mosques. Although northern Tamils belong to a hierarchical society based on the Hindu caste system, Muslims have no caste-bound hierarchical divisions but distinguish themselves on a loosely structured class system (Gamage and Watson 1999). Muslim children undertake their education in Tamil with fellow Tamil children. Most times, Muslims and Tamils lived close to each other in everyday life.

> I do not have a dislike for Tamil people. Tamils and Muslims lived in harmony before 1990. Even after we got expelled, we had no feelings of hatred towards them. In our village, Tamils and Muslims shared a lot and had a lot in common. Muslims attended the weddings, funerals, house warming ceremonies, age attaining ceremonies and various other ceremonies of the Tamils, and Tamils attended similar function of Muslims…We lived like brothers and sisters. I am

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[58] Personal communication with researcher on Muslim politics in Sri Lanka (KI 12).
[59] A cloth, often of brightly coloured silk or cotton, that is used as a piece of clothing, especially the traditional skirt-like garment made in India.

looking forward to a day when Tamils and Muslims will rejoin each other and forget the bitter past.

Fareeda (LI 9), 49 year-old woman displaced 16 years ago from Mannar.

Most of those displaced from the north expressed similar views and had fond memories of their Tamil neighbours in their places of origin. It was also surprising to hear that they still have some sympathy for Tamil rebels. However, few people feel sympathy for the Sinhalese soldiers or the Indian forces that fought against the Tamil rebels. A social activist of the northern Muslims and a local university graduate told me:

> As I see it, Muslim political leaders lack long term vision. They are just changing their positions for short-term benefits. Muslims can get their rights from Tamils but not from Sinhalese. Muslims in the north are facing same challenges as Tamils. That's why some Muslim youth in the past joined with Tamil rebels in their fight against the Sinhalese government. When all is said and done, Tamils have some kind of feeling for the plight of Muslims. That's why the Tiger leader once publicly apologised for expelling us from the north. But the Sinhalese have no sympathy for Muslims. They killed and shelled our people in villages in Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu when they were fighting against the LTTE in the past.

Social Activist (KI 15), a 34 year-old man displaced from Mannar.

According to some of those who experienced persecution by Indian forces in the late 1980s, Muslims treated Tamil youth like their own youth. There were incidents when Tamils who fled to avoid persecution by Indian forces were kept in Muslim homes and treated like relatives. For example, Irfan (KI 5), a 48 year-old man who was displaced from his home in Jaffna fifteen years ago explained:

> We are angry about what LTTE did to us. But we know that they are not the only enemy of Muslims. Before that we had so much harassment when Indian forces were in our areas. They killed Muslims who gave protection to Tamils who came and asked help from us.

The expulsion of the Muslims community from Northern Province by the LTTE that took place in 1990 came as a shock not only to the Muslims but to for the Tamil people in the neighbourhoods. According to the stories told by displaced Muslims, there were

instances when Tamil neighbours cried on the day they departed with their children. Some Tamil neighbours went with Muslims until the rebel checkpoints. A woman (LI 17) recalled her story as follows:

> I used to visit and eat at my Tamil friend's home in my village. The day the Tigers announced that we were to get out of our homes she came with her husband to our home in the night.. They told me that they are going to look after our house. She cried and consoled me. But I don't know what happened there since I didn't get a chance to visit my village after I came here. I heard that everything has changed now.

There are many stories of displaced persons who had close and emotional social relationships with Tamils in their villages. They, as a community belonging to a geographical place, and sharing customs and the resources for livelihood, felt that the expulsion of Muslims was emotionally unbearable. A school principal (LI 28) from Mannar made the following remark, which summarizes this close ties between two communities.

> We did not feel that the Tamils were different from us at that time. We used to work together. It is very difficult to identify Muslims from Tamils in the north. Frankly speaking we feel we are different from local Muslims here [Puttalam]. But we never felt that way in our old village with the Tamils. We shared a common language as northern people [*vadakku makkal*]. Only the religion is different. Otherwise we all are same.

In sum, the northern Muslims had significant interaction with their Tamil neighbours and, in their economic and work relations, had close ties with Tamils. This was an underlying theme in the sense of identity among northern Muslims. People articulated a sense of belonging to place coupled with a cultural belonging as a 'Tamil speaking community'.

## We have pulled out from our homes: Narratives of northern Muslims on their forced expulsion

In October 1990, around 75, 000 Muslims of all five districts of the province were forced to leave their homes at gun point on the order of the LTTE. The stories of expulsion that people told were constructed and reconstructed over the period of their

displacement. These stories are a releasing of their anger – therapeutic narrative – and a linking of past glories to the present. More importantly, the stories show the growing consciousness of northern Muslim (*vadapula muslimgal*) identity and the centrality of their relationship with Tamils as their co-inhabitants.

The deadline to leave homes for Muslims varied from two hours to two days. Most people had only 48 hours to leave their homes and left behind all material belongings, including basic assets such as livestock, water pumps and fishing nets. The Muslims in Jaffna were given only two hours to leave their homes. A scholar and activist (KI 9) of northern Muslims, in a speech at a public meeting in Colombo described the days of expulsion.

> Quite unexpectedly, the LTTE announced over the loudspeakers in the streets and villages that Muslims must leave their homes, villages and towns leaving all their valuables and money behind, or face death. While Muslims of all areas of the north were given 48 hours to leave, from 7 am on October 22, 1990, the Muslims of Jaffna town were given only two hours to quit. Muslim mothers with small children and infants pleaded with the LTTE cadres to allow them time till the heavy rains stopped. The reply of the LTTE cadres was the point of the gun and shouting 'move on',

People subject to this forced expulsion still remember the events which unfolded during the last days of October 1990. The following story of a man from Mannar provides a vivid picture of their ordeal.

> We never thought that LTTE would do this to Muslims. We still don't know why they did this.. The Tigers-Puligal [LTTE] suddenly came in vans and trucks with loudspeakers and announced that all the Muslims should leave their homes soon. Nobody had the courage or strength to question them…We didn't have any help. We lost everything. The men who were in Tiger uniforms didn't care about anything. Some of our leaders went and begged the known leaders of the Tigers not to evict us from home so suddenly. 'Give us more time.' Some of the Tamils protested too. But they didn't change their decision (LI 1).[60]
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[60] These stories were confirmed by reports published by Jaffna University Teachers Association. (UTHR (J) Feb 1991)

Similar stories have been told by people from Mullaitiwu and other places. They did not expect such harsh treatment from the LTTE because they had had a good understanding and Muslims accepted the rule of the LTTE in their areas. 'We used to pay taxes to the LTTE and obeyed the rules and regulations imposed by the Tigers' (LI 24).

People's accounts of expulsion highlighted the psychological impact of the sudden announcement that they must leave their homes. Recounting their experiences of expulsion they described the mental trauma and shock that shook their lives and the powerlessness they felt in face of the armed rebels. I witnessed a few elderly displaced men in the camps and welfare centres in Puttalam who were mentally impaired due to the shock and the loss of familiar life in the north. Some of them were rich and had had shops, boutiques and even private vehicles of their own. It has been said that many of these formerly well-off Muslims live in a state of shock and do not mingle with fellow Muslims of their own village communities.

Explanations given for the expulsions vary from one individual to another, according to their educational background, knowledge and affiliations with political parties. A community leader of northern Muslims (KI 5) who was politically active during that time told me that the motive for the forceful eviction of Muslims was purely political. According to him it was premeditated conspiracy by a section of the LTTE.

> On October 30, 1990 a group of the LTTE whom we had not seen in our areas before came to our mosque and asked us to leave our homes in two hours. We asked 'why?' They said that [their] leader has been told that Muslims in the east are doing lot of harm to Tamils. 'Muslims in Amparai are working against our movement. Therefore we don't want you all to stay here. We are not supposed to tell you anything more. This is an order from our Thalaiwar (LTTE leader). We can't help you'…They were angry and telling us that our late leader Ashrof[61] was campaigning for a *sonahar desham*[62] [land for Muslims]. They asked us to go to places where we can find Muslims….Our Tamil friends also told us that the LTTE people from Eastern Province came to Jaffna and created a story saying that Tamils in their areas were suffering immensely because of Muslims. That's why the LTTE leaders took these harsh actions against us (KI 5).

[61] Mr Ashroff was the founder of the SLMC, a Muslim political party. He was a leader of the eastern Muslim community and strongly advocated for a separate political unit for Muslims as a proposed solution for the ethnic conflict. He was considered one of the most charismatic Muslim politicians in the country and his death in a helicopter crash on 16 September 2000 is still controversial.
[62] *Sonahar* is the word used by Tamils to refer to Muslims. Sonahar is a Tamil word refers Muslims

The term 'ethnic cleansing' was commonly used by educated persons and social activists amongst the displaced Muslims in Puttalam to refer to the forceful eviction of Muslims. According to them the expulsion was a reaction to Muslims' political stand in Eastern Province. The LTTE, which once wanted Muslim support for their struggle for a greater autonomy for 'Tamil-speaking people' turned against them as Muslims started to rally around their own political leaders.

Although the immediate reasons for the expulsion of Muslims were widely understood to be political, there were other reasons, including the social marginalization of Tamils and the economic advancement of Muslims in areas dominated by Tamils. For example, Tamils in the eastern region, lived in impoverished conditions compared with Muslims, who were economically dominant and had better living standards, housing and education (see UTHR Sri Lanka Report No 7, 1991 for the Tamil–Muslim relationship in Eastern Province). A large proportion of rice-farming land was controlled by Muslims (Ismail et al 2005: 13). Poor Muslim families, who lived in similar circumstances to Tamils, were able to improve their living through money sent by relatives from Middle Eastern Arab countries. This situation led local Tamil communities to feel unhappy and economically insecure. The LTTE members of Eastern Province, who were mostly from poor Tamil families, were agitated by the growing dominance of the Muslim community and harassed farmers by collecting illegal taxes in the late 1980s (Ismail et al 2005). Some of the main townships dominated by Muslim businesses and trades in the eastern region were attacked. A key informant (KI 12), who is an academic and has written about Muslim politics, mentioned the following:

> The LTTE group in Eastern Province was so angry with Muslims because most of their cadres were from poor Tamil families who worked in the farm fields or industries controlled by wealthy Muslims. Nine members of my family, including my parents and two sisters and their children, were hacked to death in 1989. My father was a leading businessman in Eravur. I see no reason other than the jealousy against wealthy Muslims to persecute them by the LTTE. Not only Eravur [but also] properties of Muslims who lived in places like Kalmunai, Sammanthurai and Kattankudi [townships in Eastern Province] were also attacked during that time.

It was in this context that a separate political party for Muslims was formed by educated Muslims in the eastern region. Subsequently the LTTE took an anti-Muslim stand which marked a clear deviation from its original aim as a force that fought for the Tamil-speaking community. northern Muslims, however, did not show any serious political interest in the separate Muslim political party originating from the eastern province until the expulsion. Muslims were not a party to the conflict and had little influence over the issues that affected them. But Muslims were among the primary victims (see also ICG 2007: 3). A leading northern Muslim politician (KI 2), who was 17 years old at the time of expulsion, described this situation.

> Muslims in Jaffna and other parts of Northern Province had no serious disputes with the LTTE until 1990. When they asked our people to leave our homes we realized that something must be done to challenge LTTE injustices. At that time there were ideas from youth to form a group to fight against LTTE injustices. But Mr Ashroff told us not take weapons and [that] our problems can be solved through a strong political alliance and joining with the SLMC

However, the forced displacement of Muslims from Northern Province cannot be totally accounted for as a politically motivated act or as a result of economic rivalry between Tamils and Muslims. Some sections of the northern Muslims that I interviewed said that the expulsion was motivated by other reasons, including personal jealousy, suspicion and an intention to loot Muslim properties. First, unlike most Tamils, Muslims in the north are able to speak some words of Sinhalese. Sinhala security personnel more often reacted in a friendly manner than to a Tamil man. Sinhalese soldiers in the streets or at checkpoints were pleased with Muslims as they can communicate with a few Sinhala words in a territory dominated by Tamils. Thus the LTTE was suspicious of Muslims who had contacts with Sinhala security forces or were on good terms with them. They suspected Muslims because they could be used as secret agents. Second, Muslims in the northern districts, particularly in Mannar, Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu, lived close to rebel camps and were aware of the strategic movements of the rebels. Thus the LTTE might have thought that Muslims posed a threat to their military activities .Thirdly, the northern Muslims suspected that looting and destruction of properties was a motive for expulsion. Although it is difficult to verify their claims, a few who had revisited their homes during the period of cessation of hostilities between the LTTE and the government in 2004, told of their experiences, which support this claim.

When I went back to Killinochchi in 2004, nothing was there. I could not find where our old house was. Only the foundations of my house were left. I have been told that soon after we left the house some people broke doors and windows and took the stuff in the house. Some time later roof and doors were also removed and my neighbours could not do anything to stop them.

Usman (LI 26), 48 year-old man displaced from Kilinochchi.

As revealed by the narratives, attachment to place of origin and rights to land or territory is central to the stories of expulsion. Both the LTTE and Muslims used to claim the north as their homeland. The LTTE wanted to show the Sinhalese government that they were in control of their motherland by evicting all non-Tamil people from the north.[63] However, many of the northern displaced Muslims currently living in Puttalam refer to themselves as 'northern Muslims', linking their identities to the ancestral lands they lived in before displacement.

## Experience of flight: Stories untold

Although Muslims from different parts of Northern Province were expelled almost at the same time and followed common routes in seeking refuge outside the province, their experience of flight varies according to their place of origin. People from Mannar, which is the border district of Puttalam, mostly came by walking through jungles or by sea using fishing boats. Muslims from Jaffna did not arrive in Puttalam at first. They spent days and weeks walking through jungles and along gravel roads, in sun and rain. They stayed in different types of accommodation either provided by religious organizations, government agencies or other Muslims, in villages from Vavuniya to Anuradhapura and then to Puttalam. Along the way they experienced abuse in places where they stayed temporarily. According to the stories, they were interrogated and harassed by LTTE cadres as well as security forces. Some families lost their belongings and relatives on their journey to Puttalam. A few others were able to manage to get transport provided by private and government organizations. The two narratives presented below from Mannar and Kilinochchi illustrate experiences of flight and memories of the journey to the camps.

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[63] Not only Muslims were evicted by the LTTE. Sinhalese people who lived in Jaffna and Vavunia were also expelled in 1990. But the number of Sinhalese people expelled from the north was less than 1,000 compared with nearly 100,000 Muslims. Some of these Sinhalese families sought refuge in Anuradahpura and Medawachchia, predominantly Sinhalese areas. In Puttalam, 26 displaced Sinhalese families live in a refugee camp set up by the government..

Story 1. Hameed (LI 1) and his family from Mannar

We first arrived at the southern border of Mannar called Silavathurai. There was an army camp. We stayed there for long time in the night. There were some people who were negotiating the price to transport people from Silavathurai to Kalpitiya (Puttalam). Boat people from Kalpituya started to come and picked up Muslims waiting to get some transport. They charged 5,000 to 8,000 rupees for a boat load of people (15 to 20 people). We didn't have much of a choice. We managed to get into a boat. My son and two daughters were in hungry and my wife was pregnant. So it was very hard for me to console them. I told my family not to worry as we can make it. I know some mechanical work [cycle repairing]. I told my family I can start a bicycle repair shop somewhere after we arrive in Puttalam and earn something for a living.

We travelled in the night. It took more than three hours. Many people were vomiting because of heavy winds in the middle of the sea. My wife fainted a few times. On one occasion a Sri Lankan navy boat stopped us. They asked what possessions we had. We said we had left all our valuables behind. One navy soldier grabbed my old motorbike. He asked me to give the bike to him. But I refused. He said OK, we will see you all in Kalpitiya and then we will 'do something' [in a kind of warning tone]. We were really afraid for our lives. We arrived at the Kalpitya beach area. Then we walked into a coconut land where lot of our people were staying in small huts. I think there were about 150 families in that site. We met some families from our village. One of them who were related to me gave us some food and my children and wife slept that night with them. But I spent the whole night outside without sleeping. The next day local people helped us to put up a small thatched hut [made of coconut leaf]. Local people and hotel [small local restaurant] owners in the town [Kalpitiya] provided our meals. We got rice and dahl curry most of the time. Some days Muslim people from Colombo came in vans and distributed rice and other things. We stayed there for few months. Actually, at the beginning, no government officers came to see us. It was only the local people, town shop owners and mosque people who were helping us in every way. My wife gave birth to our third girl at the camp. But the child died after few months because I think the infant was weak and underweight when she was born.

**Story 2. Usman (LI 26) and his family displaced from Kilinochchi**

When the LTTE announced [that we were] to leave our homes we were in a desperate situation. I waited until the next day morning although many our village people left the previous day. Only a few families started walking towards the main road the morning of the next day. We saw many people from other villages walking in the same direction. Some Tamil friends came walking along with us until the LTTE checkpoints where LTTE members were checking the people who were standing in the queue. We walked nearly ten to fifteen miles the first day to reach Mankulam junction. Here we were asked to stop for a few hours. There were lot of Muslims including children and women who had come from various directions. We had to wait until they checked every one. We were asked to take only clothes and 200 rupees. Young boys of the LTTE were rude. They asked us to give [over] everything we had. They searched all the bags and suitcases we carried. Some LTTE people grabbed the gold necklaces and earrings of our women. Then, next day, we came to a junction [Omanthai] where the Sri Lankan army had their checkpoints. Then we came to Vavuniya town. We spent the second day on a ground nearby a school. Lots of people like us were in the school buildings. Some of us didn't get a place inside. We stayed outside. Here the police and government officials helped us and provided food packets. Since we had no idea where to go we stayed few days in Vavuniya. But the police did not want us to stay there. We met people from our village and neighbouring villages. We were talking about where to go. There were some good local people. They gave us clothes and food. After one week we decided to find a place to settle because people were arriving from all over the place and many of us found it difficult to get enough food. We saw some people begging for more food when officers delivered food at the camp. We talked to the police to get help. They said many people are going to Puttalam and asked us to go. Then after some days, we were loaded into buses and trucks to Puttalam.

Vavuniya was the central point of arrival for Muslims from Jaffna, Mullaithiwu and Kilinochchi who had walked more than more than 120 kilometres through jungles for weeks (see Map10). Throughout the journey, they had experiences that they cannot forget. There were incidents of pregnant women giving birth to children in the camps and schools at which they stayed. However, not all northern Muslims found refuge at Puttalam. Some people stayed in villages along the A 9 road where they found received

help from local villagers.[64]. Others went to places such as Anuradhapura and Kurunegala, where there is a sizable Muslim population. Few Muslims went to Colombo, other than those who could afford to live there or had friends or relatives there. Also, government forces at checkpoints in Vavuniya and Anuradahpura had not allowed them to go to Colombo but told them to go to Puttalam or Kurunegala (Hasbullah 2001). As shown in the story of Usman, in some places government officials and police arranged buses and trucks to send the displaced people to Puttalam.

**Map 10**: Movements and Routes of Muslim IDPs
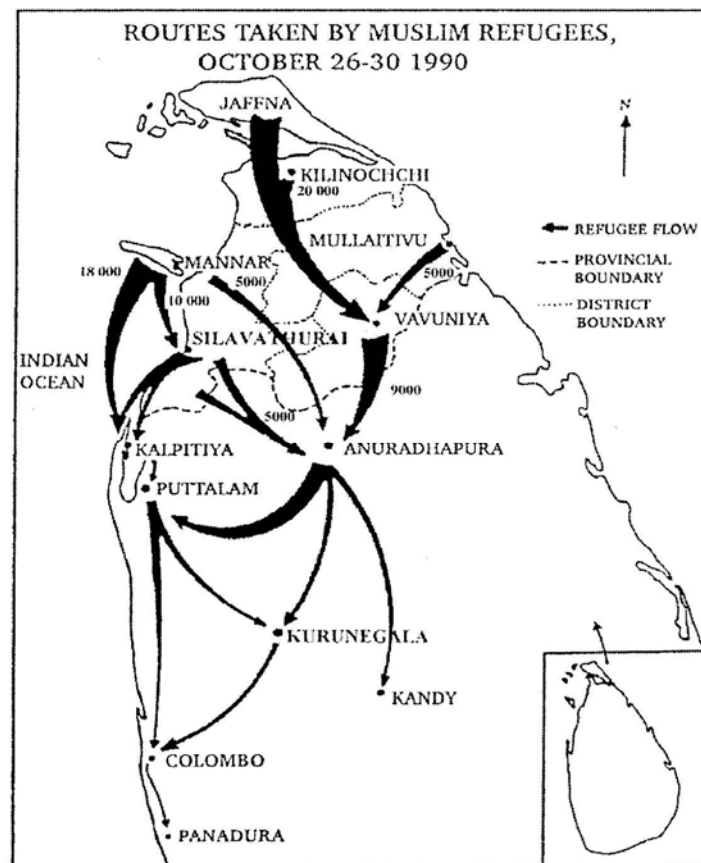


Source: Hasbullah 2001: 47; Brun 2008: 100

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[64] The main road linking Jaffna to the North and Anuradhapura to the south.

*Puttalam: The testing place of Muslim brotherhood*

The present name of Puttalam, is a Tamil construction which means the salt making place or **salt lake city**. In Tamil *uppu* means salt and *thalam* means valley. Since the coastal belt of Puttalam had been used as basins or valleys to dry sea water to make salt, this place was given the name Upputhalam and later became Puttalam (Sajahan 1992: 69). The popularity of Puttalam as a salt making place is directly linked to its economy and the culture of the people in the area until today.

Though the Sinhalese presence began in the area as early as the fifth century BC (Silva 1981: 3), they gradually moved towards the interior and settled in lands that were fertile for agriculture. As a result the Sinhala civilization flourished and was maintained in the north-central dry zone around large irrigation tanks in Anuradhapura (Gunawardana 1971). Puttalam remained sparsely populated jungle land until Arab and south Indian traders arrived in the region in the twelfth century. The arrival of the latter, and their integration into the local community, gave rise to the Muslim population in the region. By the middle of the fifteenth century, Puttalam was a predominantly Muslim area (Sajahan 1992: 79–81).

The most significant evidence of the history of Puttalam can be traced from the writings of Ibn Batuta, who arrived in the port city called Kalpitiya in September 1345 (Shajahan 1992: 88).[65] He wrote of his observations and experience in the island including his encounters in Puttalam. Since his writings about Puttalam were so important in making the Islamic connection to this area, a street in Puttalam town has been named Ibn Batuta street.

Puttalam was a busy trading centre even under colonial rule. In particular, the Dutch developed a harbour and a canal to Colombo, along the coast, to transport goods and commodities (Sajahan 1992: 206). However, the social, demographic and economic characteristics of the region changed after 1970 as the government began to settle Sinhalese villagers from neighbouring locations such as Nikaveratya, Anamaduwa and Kurunegala (Sajahan 1992: 217). Thereafter a gradual increase in the Sinhalese population occurred and the dominance of Sinhalese in Puttalam where they were

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[65] Ibn Batuta first arrived in India and then came to the Island of Serandib (Sri Lanka) on his way back from the Maldives. Also see Shajahan (1992) on Ibn Batuhta's stay in Puttalam.

previously a minority was believed to be cause of a number of incidents of communal violence during the 1970s. One of the most violent incidents of communal unrest took place in 1976. During the riot, which lasted nearly one month, 271 houses, 43 shops, 2 fibre factories belonging to Muslims and 2 mosques were destroyed by the Sinhalese (Piyasena and Senadheera 1987: 81) (see Phadnis 1979; Anes and Ameerdeen 2003).

However, as a result of the increased presence of Sinhalese, the relationship between different ethnic communities became tense in the 1990s and prone to disputes over trade, lands and politics (Anes and Ameerdeen 2003: 38). Bitter memories of the violence of 1976 remain today a constraint in building consensus between the two communities. A key informant from Puttalam who remembers the events of 1976 relates them to the present situation.

> In the 1970s, there were around 100 shops in Puttalam town. None [was] owned by Sinhalese. Apart from that, Muslim traders used to travel to Sinhalese villages outside the town and engaged in mobile trading (*naattu yaawaram*) of cloth and jewellery. The Sinhalese were unhappy about Muslim dominance in business because most of them were poor farmers. As I remember, the whole incident was led by a *Sinhala hamuduruvo* [Buddhist monk]. He promoted feelings of hatred among local Sinhalese who came to his temple. The violence, however, started because of a protest by Muslims against CTB [Ceylon Transport Board] bus drivers and conductors who purposely left Muslim school children without taking them to the schools in the morning. Some Muslim youth got angry and attacked one such conductor at a shop close to the bus stand. This was the main issue. Then the Muslim youths were arrested by the police. The police were Sinhalese men and the Muslims youth were beaten and remanded for few days. In the Grand Mosque [in Puttalam town], on the Friday of the same week, a large number of Muslims gathered in the main road and protested the arrest of the Muslim boys. Police arrived at the scene and assaulted the Muslims who were protesting. There was fighting between youth and police again. This was like a small battle (*sinna uththam*). Then on the same day night, Sinhalese mobs destroyed few shops of Muslims in the town. Though politicians from both sides (Muslims and Sinhalese) were involved and resolved the disputes, the Muslims were afraid of doing business with Sinhalese thereafter. These memories are there with some of us in Puttalam town. That's why some

local Muslims felt happy when Muslims from Mannar and other areas came to find refuge in 1990.

Alim (KI 7), 52 year-old local Muslim community leader of Puttalam.

### *Local context at the time of arrival of northern Muslims*

The Puttalam district is one of the driest zones in the country. Although the state has improved irrigation infrastructure and coconut farming, the district lags economically behind the other districts in the province (Dunham and Edwards 1997). In 1990, nearly 60 per cent of families in the district depended on fishing, and vegetable, onion and chilli farming. However, the town centre of Puttalam remains dynamic and a busy trade hub for local people. Coconuts, dried fish, salt and onions are the major commodities (Ranaweera Banda 2003).

Since the early 1990s, some significant changes have taken place in the socio-economic situation in the area for two main reasons: a) an influx of fishermen from other areas because a large number of fishermen from Mannar and northern coastal areas shifted their deep sea fishing to the Kalpitya–Puttalam coastal areas. This was due to security-force restrictions on deep sea fishing in conflict-affected northern coastal areas and b)the economic 'boom' created by the increase in onion production by local farmers Sahnmugrathnam 2000).

As described by Shanmugarthnam (2000: 16) there was economic growth in the area in the early 1990s, which generated local capital and a new group of rich people. A large amount of land belonging to the government was occupied illegally as small plots by migrant labourers and local landless families, and used for onion cultivation. Also, an increased number of prawn farms (to produce prawns for export to Europe) encouraged people to settle in the coastal side of Puttalam including the Kalpitya lagoon area (Ranweera Banda: 2003). At the time of the arrival of Muslims from Northern Province, the region was in an economic 'take-off position' (Shanmugratnam 2000: 14).

*Why northern Muslims sought refuge in Puttalam*

People who are forced to flee their homes seek possible destinations that offer safety and security. In this section, I explore the reasons for the influx of northern Muslims to Puttalam district. Why did Muslims, unlike Tamils, not seek refuge in southern India, or Western countries? At the time of expulsion, northern Muslims did not have much choice about where to go in the first instance. But, as shown in this section, in the longer run, they were able to gain a certain amount of control over their lives and to make decisions using their social networks and assets.

For Mannar people, the physical proximity (see Map 8), the occupational relationships through fishing activities and, more importantly, the hope of getting a positive response from fellow ethnic community (Muslim) members were the key reasons to migrate to Puttalam. Also the threat of being killed or punished by Tamil Tiger fighters led many to find quick ways to get to a safer place by boats or trucks. By motorboat, it is about a three hour trip to the Kalpitiya coast of Puttalam. A man (LI 1) displaced from Mannar for sixteen years explained:

> We didn't have any place to go. When the LTTE announced that we had to leave our homes everybody was in a panic. Then we were told that some people were arranging boat trips to Kalpitiya. We also thought it was better go to Kalpitiya because we can come back again if the situation becomes normal. Also, a lot of Muslims live there. We thought it was safe and they would help us. For a boat trip we had to pay 500 rupees per person. Some of us had a little money by selling jewellery to Tamil neighbours before we left home. Also some Tamil friends actually helped us by giving money and arranging boats to take us to Kalpitiya.

For others, from Mullithiwu, Jaffna and Kilinochchi, the first places of refuge were Vavuniya, Medawachchiya or Anuradhapura (see Map 11) where they stayed in camps and temporary huts provided by philanthropists and NGOs. Decisions to settle in Puttalam by these Muslims were largely choices made by them. When I inquired of people from those districts, they gave many different reasons for so deciding.

We didn't come to Puttalam first. We walked nearly two days and got to Chippikulam [Vavuniya]. We stayed there for some time. There were lots of Muslim people like us there. We used to have discussions about finding a place to settle. Government officials gave us food packets and some Muslim businessmen came and gave us money and clothes as well. However, it was only for few days and such support did not continue. Living was very difficult in that place. Then we heard that a lot of Muslims were in Puttalam and we may able to find a living there. So we decided to come here because we can work and get support from Muslims (LI 21).

Sites of refuge were also chosen according to how far one could afford financially to travel to a safe place (Van Hear 2004). Though Muslims were not allowed to take money or valuable items from their homes a few wealthy Muslims managed to go to areas such as Kandy and Colombo. They had money in bank accounts or invested in properties and business outside their homes. Only those who could not find any other place, and poor farmers and fishermen, went to Puttalam. Thus it is not only social factors but also the economic capacities of people who are subjected to forced migration which affect their choice of place of destination. The following account by a Muslim man (LI 22) from Jaffna illustrates this.

When the LTTE boys came to our village we had no idea what to do. Muslims in the town somehow managed to get out before us. They were mostly business people who had connections with businessmen in Jaffna and Colombo. But most of the people in our village had no choice. We came with only the clothes we were wearing. We walked a long distance on foot. Elders, youngsters and small children all were walking as groups, carrying whatever the belongings they could in small shopping bags. We came to Kilinochchi, then to Vavuniya by tractors. In Vavuniya we stayed two days in a school. When we were in the camp [school] the army and police were sending displaced people to Puttalam. The army said a lot of our people went to Puttalam and asked us to follow the same path. So we came to Puttalam.

Also, a large number of displaced persons were farmers and fishermen who did not have the money for better transportation, or housing in the other districts. Only those who had business relationships outside the province and investments elsewhere found better places or rented houses in towns and villages in Colombo, Kandy and other

places. One displaced Muslim said, 'We didn't have money. There were no people to support us. We found that a lot of Muslims live here. So we came here'.

**Map 11:** Migration patterns of northern Muslims IDPs to Puttalam



Source: Shanmngaratnam, N. "Map 1: Migration of Muslim IDPs from the North to Puttalam District" [map]. Scale unknown. Norway: NORAGRIC, 2002: 49
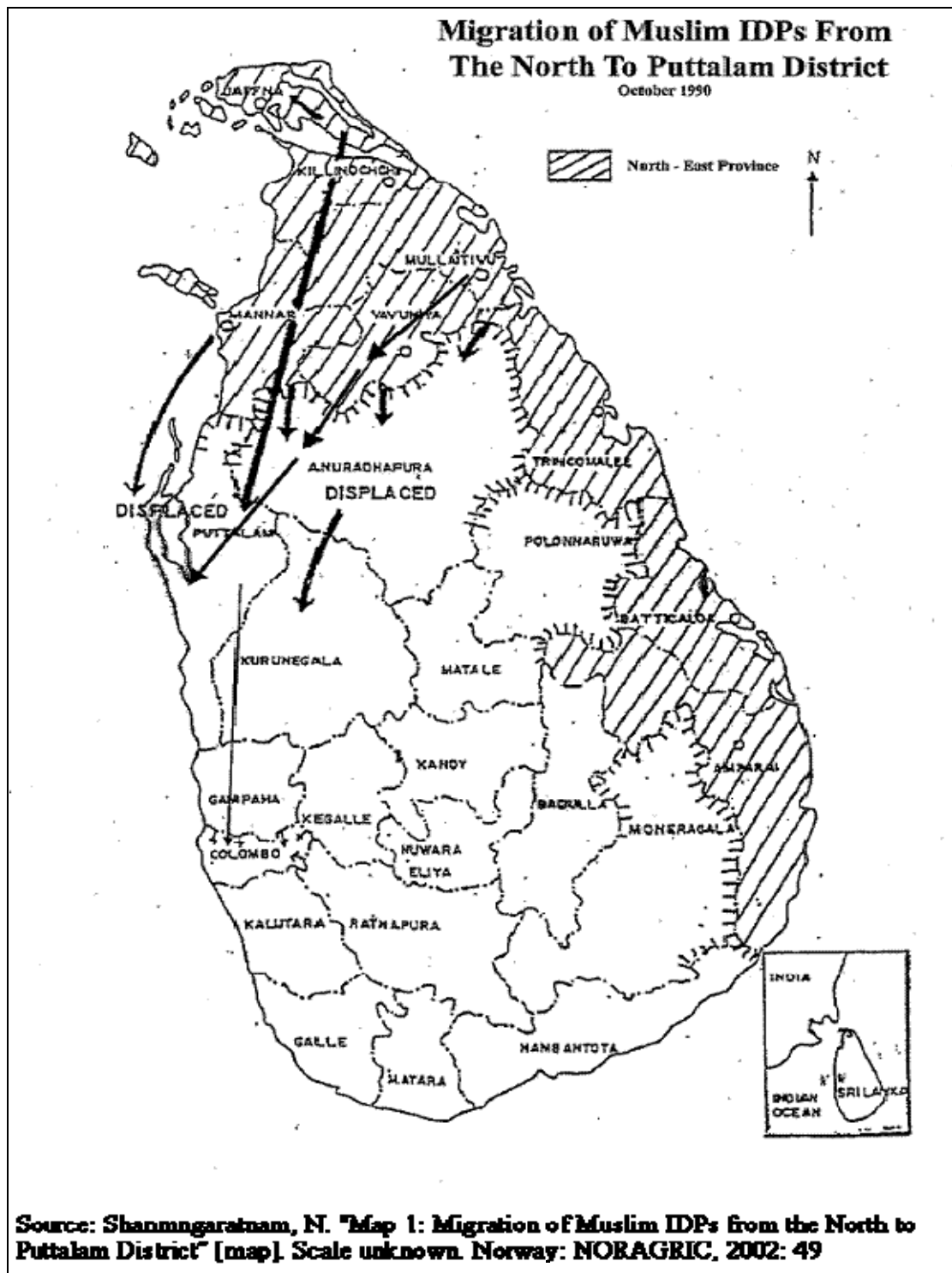
As far as Muslims were concerned, the rich and wealthy families in the north migrated to Colombo or other urban locations but not to outside the country (Figure 9). It must be mentioned that few Muslims from the north sought asylum in India or migrated as refugees to the Western countries. This was due to the lack of a transnational social network like the Tamil diaspora and the fear of losing Islamic values by migrating to

Western countries (Hasbullah & Morrison 2004). Muslims in Northern Province also did not seek refuge in southern India like the Tamils did. When I asked a Muslim man (LI 5) from Mannar about this, he said, 'We can't go to Tamil Nadu or any other places in India. They are Hindus and they don't like Muslims'.

Thus key factors in finding asylum or seeking refuge are how much money one could afford to spend and whether the place was socially secure. By migrating to Puttalam, Muslims expected social safety. They wanted to preserve their cultural and religious traditions. As argued by Krof and Silva (2003), conflict and internal displacement has strengthened ethnic polarization rather than integration. Such polarization paved the way to increased ethnic and religious identity among Muslims in the country (Nuhuman 2006) while promoting regional and social divisions among them. In particular, the ethnic segregation between Tamils and Muslims who speak a common language in most parts of the country has caused irreparable damages and separation which is a concern for post-conflict ethnic reconciliation in the country. The next section examines the situation of displaced Muslims after nearly fifteen years living in exile in Puttalam and how various agencies have responded their needs and problems.

**Figure 9**: Finding refuge: Sites and flows of northern displaced Muslims in 1990
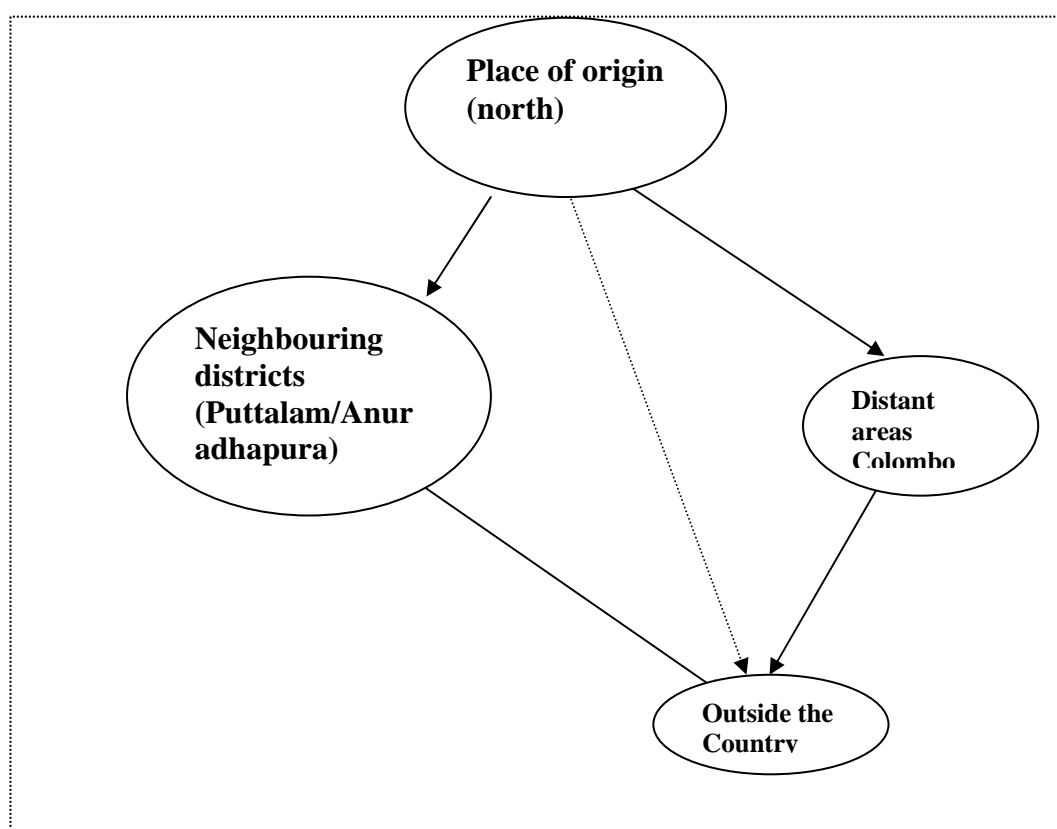


* Circle size indicates approximate number of displaced Muslims in different locations.

## Social profiles of northern displaced Muslims in Puttalam

At the time of my field work between 2007 and 2008, the social and economic situation of northern Muslims in settlements in Puttalam had changed considerably. They had become a community within the local social context and were now commonly known as IDPs by local people and agencies working in the area.[66] The following section provides a brief overview of the situation after fifteen years of displacement.

The influx of displaced people to Puttalam began in the middle of the 1990s. However, it is difficult to get accurate data on how many persons or families arrived in the first few years. Some estimates suggest that it was between 8,000 and 14, 000 families (Hasbullah 2001). The first official census of displaced persons in Puttalam was conducted by the UNCHR in 2004, according to which, a total of 61,763 people, of 14, 495 families settled in 123 refugee camps (UNCHR Sri Lanka IDP Survey 2004: 2). In 2006, the number of displaced persons had increased to 63,145 (15,480 families) and

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[66] Since the UN and other agencies use the term IDP to refer to displaced Muslims in their official encounters, people in Puttalam localized this term as *aideepee*, though they mostly do not know what the English letters stand for.

the locations to 141 (UNCHR 2006 :6). The majority of the IDP population originated from Mannar (72 per cent); some 14 per cent came from Jaffna, 10 per cent from Mullaitivu and 3 per cent from Kilinochchi. There were also families from Vavuniya, and other places in Eastern Province (UNCHR 2006 :6).

They were settled mainly in four locations (divisional secretariat divisions) in the district: Kalpitiya, Puttalam town, Mundel and Vanathavilluwa (Map 12). A large majority of northern Muslims, however, settled in Kalpitiya, which was predominantly a Muslim area. People who arrived by land routes settled in places close to townships and service centres, while those who came via sea routes settled in Kalpitya on the coastal side of Puttalam.

**Table 3.1**: Distribution of northern displaced Muslims in Puttalam in 2004

| Main IDP Locations | Number of IDPs | Percentage of total IDPs |
|---|---|---|
| Kalpitiya (coastal village) | 35,825 | 58 |
| Puttalam (town) | 18,529 | 30 |
| Mundal (semi-urban) | 4,944 | 8 |
| Wantahavillu (village) | 2,465 | 4 |
| Total | 61,763 | 100 |

Source: UNHCR IDP Survey Puttalam (2004: 2).

At the beginning, all those arrived from Northern Province were housed in temporarily built 'camps'. The camps are tents or small huts built of coconut leaf, in a designated place. The camp-type living was then transformed to more or less stable and better housing called 'welfare centres', which had some basic facilities such as common toilets and distribution of water from trucks. In some instances, toilets and public wells were provided by national and international NGOs. Most of these welfare camps were established on private coconut land provided by elites and businessmen in the area. In 1995, the government supported a new resettlement in which a number of welfare centres were transformed into 'resettlement villages' (World Bank 2008).

Among the total displaced persons settled in Puttalam, men accounted for 51 per cent. More than 70 per cent of the displaced population were below the age of 35 (UNCHR: 2006: 12). However, a World Bank survey revealed that the middle-aged and young female population is proportionally bigger than the male population of that category in localities populated by the displaced persons. It is also reported that nearly twelve per

cent of the displaced families in Puttalam are what donors call 'female headed households' (World Bank 2006: 43).

**Map 12**: Major locations of displaced persons in Puttalam
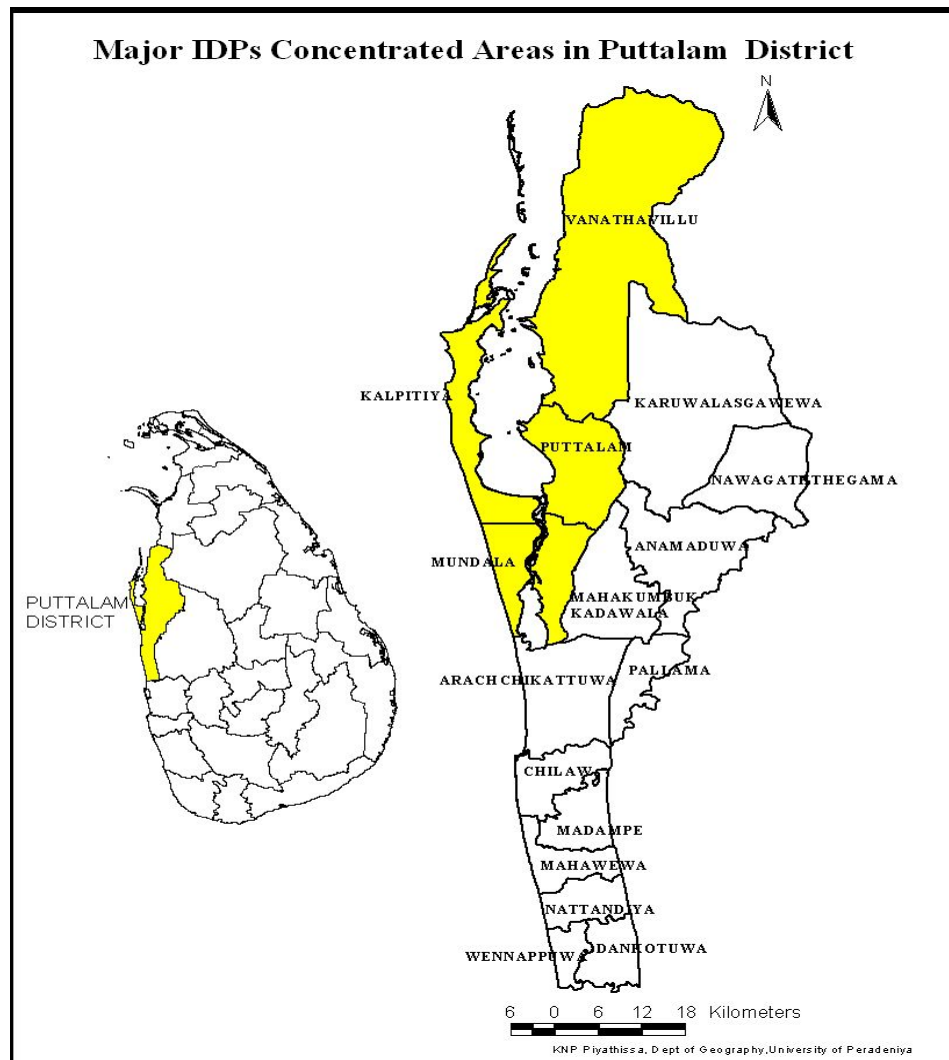


Source: Geography Department, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

## Agency responses to displaced Muslims

The Sri Lankan government did not develop any comprehensive policies or guidelines to address internal displacement until 2001. The Ministry for Rehabilitation and Disaster Relief was established in 2003. Until then, responsibility for the welfare of displaced persons was coordinated by the Ministry of Port Development, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction. The services were provided through various government departments, administrative bodies and local institutions. The situation changed gradually after the signing of the ceasefire agreement between the Tamil rebels and the government in 2002. The GOSL adopted a National Framework for Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation, popularly known as the Triple R policy . It outlines a strategy for needs assessment, humanitarian services and reconstruction of the lives of displaced persons in the country.

> Unlike the conflict situations in many other countries, the Government of Sri Lanka has, from the start, recognized its obligations to the conflict affected populations and was committed to providing humanitarian relief, essential services, rehabilitation and development support even while the conflict endured. These services were not limited to conflict affected persons living in secure areas, but through the governmental civil administration structure which continued to function in all affected areas, food and medicine being provided by government agencies free of charge to all recognized displaced persons (GOSL 2002: 5).

### National government institutions

At present (2010), state programs and activities for the displaced persons are coordinated by two ministries, the Ministry of Economic Development, which has a secretariat for displaced persons, and the Ministry of Rehabilitation and Resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons. However, the delegation of powers and responsibilities among different government agencies is ambiguous and not clear even to the top officials of the ministries. For example, when I visited Sri Lanka for my last field work, I was not able to get accurate data on displaced and resettled persons in the country after the war. The delivery of services to disaster- and conflict-affected persons had become an inter-agency dispute. On one occasion when I was in the field, two government ministers clashed with each other at a public meeting on issues of distribution of relief and housing assistance to displaced and local communities in Puttalam. However, the

overall administration of projects and specific programs for displaced persons is now under the Ministry of Economic Development, which is currently led by a powerful politician who is a brother of the president.

Government relief and humanitarian assistance for displaced Muslims in Puttalam is channelled through projects and local institutions coordinated by a special agency called the Secretariat for the Northern Displaced Muslims. A relief package called the Unified Assistance Scheme is given to all registered displaced families. Each family receives a total package valued at LKR 39,000 (AUD 400) on arrival and initial settlement in camps. Thereafter, a food package valued at LKR 1,260 (AUD 15) is given monthly to each displaced family to meet their basic needs. This is known as a Ration Card with which people can get grocery items from a local cooperative shop[67]. However, displaced families that I met are of the opinion that the monthly amount of the dry rations given to them is grossly inadequate as the cost of living has risen rapidly over the past few years.

**Table 3.2**: Items provided under the Unified Assistance Scheme

| | |
|---|---|
| Settling allowance | LKR 2000.00 |
| Product entrepreneurship | LKR 4000,00 |
| Agriculture Implements | LKR 1000,00 |
| Temporary shelter | LKR 7000,00 |
| Permanent shelter | LKR 25000,00 |
| Total | LKR 39000,00 |

Source: Secretariat for Northern Displaced Muslims

The government relief and assistance services by the above secretariat are implemented through field officers. They are designated 'camp officers', all of whom are displaced people and perform their functions in a camp where their families live. In addition to camp officers, an elderly displaced person acts as a 'camp leader' for each camp or welfare centre, whose responsibility it is to assist and coordinate the relief works along with the camp officer. As is shown in the next chapter, these two people who hold a certain amount of political power and official authority play a major role in the everyday life of camp people.

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[67] Cooperative shops are semi-government wholesale and retail shops which function in all parts of the country. Local branches of cooperative shops are managed by individuals recruited from the respective localities.

*Government civil administrative structures*

Apart from the national-level institutions, the public sector management structure also influences the displaced people by administering various activities. The government administration has four tiers: provincial, district, divisional secretary divisions and village level *grama niladhari* (GN) divisions. Provinces form the second largest administrative territories after the national level. Provincial Councils (PC) are established mainly to coordinate activities in the districts belonging to the province. Puttalam is one of the districts falls within North-Western Province.[68] PCs are rather political bodies that are governed by elected members from the people in local elections. They are headed by chief ministers with the support of provincial ministers and their staff. The district secretary**,** who is the chief government officer of the district, has the authority to make decisions on all the important issues pertaining to the residents in the district. The district secretary is also known as the 'government agent' (GA). This is a traditional official designation which was had been mostly used by British administrators. The district secretary is still considered by the public as the most powerful government officer. All the district level resources – land, water, services, projects and programs are monitored and supervised by the district secretary and the staff attached to the district secretariat.[69]

Divisional secretary divisions (DS) form a sub-regional administrative structure in which a number of DS divisions function under the district secretariats. DS divisions are headed by divisional secretaries who are, again, locally powerful state officials and popularly known as 'assistant government agent' (AGA). People most often visit the DS office for daily matters related to land disputes, relief and governmental aid. There are sixteen DS divisions under the Puttalam district secretariat and displaced northern Muslims live mainly in the four DS divisions mentioned earlier.

*Grama niladhari* divisions are the lowest government administrative units. The GN division consists of several villages and is headed by an official called *grama sewaka* (GS) or *grama niladhari* (village officer).[70] The GS is responsible for the distribution of

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[68] North-Western Province is also referred to as Wayamba in Sinhala. The other district coming under this province is Kurunegala.
[69] The Sri Lankan bureaucratic structure is largely a legacy of British colonial rule. *Kachchery* is the traditional name people use to refer to the district secretariat. That term originated from the Portuguese period and symbolized its authority.
[70] Recently (2009) a proposal was made by the trade union of *grama niladaries* to change their designation to 'village secretary' (*grama lekam*).

government relief and assistance services to families under the local administrative unit. Families living in a GN division must register with the GS to qualify for government benefits, registration on the voting list, and to obtain personal identity cards issued by the government. In the everyday life of people the GS is a powerful figure. As far as displaced people in Puttalam are concerned they have to deal with their daily issues not only with the specific camp officials mentioned above, but also with the GS of their local administrative unit. This has led to role conflicts, corruption and misuse of benefits at the local level.

### *International aid and humanitarian agencies*

A number of international and humanitarian agencies have been working with displaced people in Puttalam since their arrival in 1990s. In particular, USAID, World Vision, OXFAM and IOM, have provided relief services and livelihood assistance to displaced people. At the time of my field research, the UNHCR and the World Bank were the two leading international agencies engaged in providing humanitarian and development assistance to displaced people in Puttalam.

The UNHCR has been playing a leading role in providing humanitarian and legal assistance to the IDPs in Sri Lanka since 1985. Its main emphasis is to promote UN principles on internal displacement in general. But, during the past ten years, it has been involved not only in the mandated activities but also in coordinating other UN agencies and international relief agencies in assisting displaced people in the country. The UNHCR has conducted two important surveys in Puttalam on displaced persons, in 2004 and 2006. These surveys included data on socioeconomic conditions, problems and, more importantly, their future decisions on returning to homes in Northern Province. The government relief and international aid services today mostly follow the UNHCR database to plan and implement their programs for the displaced people in the district. The term 'camp' has become more and more established in government, local and peoples' minds because the UNCHR used displaced neighbourhoods as camps.

The World Bank is the second most influential international aid agency in the lives of displaced persons. One of the major initiatives by the Bank to assist displaced people in the past was the implementation of the North East Hosing Reconstruction Project (NEHRP), whose main objective was to provide funds (in the form of grants) to displaced families in the war-affected northern and eastern regions to rebuild their

houses in their original villages, after the signing of a ceasefire agreement between the LTTE and the government in 2002. This was in accordance with the UN guiding principle of the 'right to return' and the UNHCR has provided all legal support to implement housing assistance for displaced families.[71] The displaced northern Muslims who were living in Puttalam were not, however, able to receive these housing grants, as they were unable to return to their original places due to the political insecurity that prevailed in the north at the time.[72]

The Muslim political groups that represented the northern Muslims demanded an alternative solution for their long-term homelessness in the camps and welfare centres in Puttalam. In order to avoid political criticism and protect the 'reputational risk' as an international donor, the World Bank finally agreed to provide housing grants to those who are willing to settle in Puttalam (KI 3). At the time of my field work, these housing grants and related issues had become the main topics of discussion and dispute among the displaced and local population as well as with government officials and the politicians.

### *Local non-government organizations*

The influx of displaced people in 1990 and thereafter also paved the way for the increased presence of NGOs, social welfare and philanthropic organizations in Puttalam. At the initial period of arrival of northern Muslims, few NGOs provided services to local poor communities and children in Puttalam. However, since 1992, a number of local NGOs have been established. Some are exclusively focused on displaced persons, while a few have programs covering host communities as well. According to Puttalam district secretariat officials, there are around 40 non-profit social service organizations working in the area.[73] At the time of my field research, nineteen NGOs engaged in providing various services to displaced and local host communities (see Appendix 3).

After nearly two decades of expulsion, the memories of home and their experiences of expulsion and the journey of flight remain fresh among many displaced Muslims. The religious bonds prompted northern Muslims to arrive in Puttalam seeking refuge. Local

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[71] Personal communication with a senior World Bank official in Colombo (KI 14).
[72] It must be noted, however, that a few displaced Muslim families returned during the ceasefire agreement period between 2002 to 2004. Many returned to Puttalam with the renewal of the war in 2006.
[73] Personal communication with the district secretary of Puttalam, 18 June 2008.

Muslims welcomed them with sympathy in accordance the Islamic concept of *muhajirs* (guests). Later, however, the initially friendly social relations between displaced and local Muslims changed into conflict and competition. Most of the host community Muslims wanted all the IDPs to go back to their homes in the north as the war concluded in 2009*.* It is now a testing place of the so-called Muslim brotherhood. From the next chapter onward I discuss how displaced Muslims, from the beginning, attempted to evolve as a distinct social group by reconstructing their identity in Puttalam through re-invoking their homes in the north.

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented a range of interrelated experiences of northern Muslims from their pre-displacement social context to their arrival in Puttalam. Recollection of their places of origin and memories of belonging have been emphasised with particular focus on everyday life perspective. It has also shown the strong feelings of belonging to the places or origin in the north where Muslims shared everyday life activities with the Tamil community. After displacement, not only was the material and economic capacity destroyed, but social and cultural networks also fell apart. Several factors that led to the expulsion; among them, political factors emerged as the strongest explanation for the expulsion of Muslims by the LTTE.

Narratives of expulsion of flight and refuge among displaced people vary according to place of origin. Most people from Mannar district arrived by sea and land routes while for people from other areas, the journey of flight was a bitter experience as they faced harassment and abuse and met with frustration in the places in which they stayed before they arrived to Puttalam. These narratives show that refuge seeking behaviour, in the context of forced displacement, is not a linear process. The decisions taken by displaced people are influenced by various factors not only social and political, but also economic. The ultimate outcome was the further polarization of the Sri Lankan community along ethnic lines because people belonging to different ethnic and religious groups migrated internally towards the areas where the people of their own community lived as majorities.

At the beginning of the 1990s, when a large number of northern Muslims arrived, Puttalam was in a state of economic advance. It had the absorptive capacity to engage

the large numbers of displaced persons into the agricultural labour force where they were much needed. This situation encouraged the continuous flow of Muslims displaced from Northern Province to Puttalam. Currently, a number of government and non-government agencies are providing services to the displaced people. It becomes evident, in the following chapter, that the experiences of pre-displacement, sense of belonging to places of origin by the northern Muslims, and the agency responses to their needs after arrival in Puttalam, have had a profound impact on post-displacement life.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

## A HOME AWAY FROM HOME: REMAKING  PLACE  IN PUTTALAM

> We had a difficult time at the beginning. Sometime we had only one meal a day at that time. We [women] had to work the whole day in the onion farms to get some money. But now we feel much relieved and many of us are able to buy lands and some have even built houses of their own. We can't just leave all we earned here for the last fifteen years and go back to Mannar. Our children like this place. This is our second home.
>
> Fareeda (LI 9).

## Introduction

Fareeda lives in a newly built house in a settlement village in Kalpitiya. She and her family bought ten perches of land to become eligible for government housing assistance. Like Fareeda, displaced people often make use of the circumstances, resources and facilities available to them to overcome the difficulties they confront in new locations. For some , owning a piece of land and building their own houses is a process of re-invoking their original homes and creating a new *sondham* [ownership] in displaced localities in Puttalam. Nearly twenty years of living as displaced persons in Puttalam is a kind of 'permanent impermanency' (Brun: 2003: 423), and they invest in the current localities in attempts to find solutions to their protracted displacement. Their strong place attachment to the north changes gradually over time and their pre-displaced identity as northern Muslims becomes more of a political slogan than an embodied identity. Malkki's (1995) observations of 'de-territorialization' and Brun's (2001) idea of 're-territorialization' by forced migrant communities in new geographical locations has relevance for this research, which I will return to later.

In this chapter, I elaborate how displaced northern Muslims attempt to develop a sense of place and identity in their current localities in Puttalam while retaining their 'right to return' to the homes in the north. First, I describe the types of settlements and the social and institutional arrangements of those settlements, to show how displaced Muslims

perceive their post displacement circumstances and how they create themselves as a distinct category separate from local host Muslim communities. Second, I explain how they have attempted to reconnect their pre- and post-displacement experiences in developing a new sense of attachment to current localities in which they have settled and identify with a distinct community.

## Camps and welfare centres: Temporary settlements

Displaced Muslims originally settled in camps and other types of settlements that are not permanently established communities in the same way as villages or neighbourhoods. The shelter arrangements for the displaced people can be grouped into three categories: a) temporary camps, b) welfare centres and c) settlement (relocated/new) villages. In addition, a few displaced persons found their own accommodation and live as self-settled people in rented or owned houses (see Table 4.1). The finding of shelter by displaced people is an evolutionary process, moving from informal temporary accommodation to formal and permanent housings over the last twenty years. The two main types of temporarily established shelter arrangements for displaced persons are 'refugee camps' and 'welfare centres'. The following section discusses these.

As previously noted, the first group of northern Muslims who arrived at Puttalam were from the neighbouring district of Mannar. Most of them were 'boat people' who arrived at the shores of Kalpitiya on fishing boats hired or organized by others. They arrived during the rainy days of the last week of October 1990, desperate to find some kind of shelter where they landed. Their settlements can be best described as informal in that they were assisted not by any one organization but rather by the local host community. The members of the local churches, mosques and fishing communities were the first to help them. Displaced families were given temporary accommodation in schools, churches and mosque premises, as well as in temporary huts built on government and private farm lands.[74] Local people prepared meals by collecting rice, dhal and vegetables from shops and farm owners to serve to the arriving people from Mannar.

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[74] There are variety of camp structures such as old buildings, tent houses put up in open spaces, schools and community halls. These collective centres form a catch-all category of a variety of structures (Mooney 2009). Also see Holtzman and Nezam (2004) for a useful typology of the camp type settlements.

Local families even shared their houses, donated clothes and helped women carrying babies who were in a malnourished condition and needed health care and good food.

**Table 4.1**: Structure and characteristics of displaced peoples' shelter arrangements

| Type | Definition | Shelter type | Characteristics |
|---|---|---|---|
| Informal camps | Initial temporary shelter arrangements arranged by host community philanthropists, churches and mosques | *Cadjan* (coconut leaf) huts (single room) in open spaces, schools and public buildings converted as group shelters. | Common toilets, water supply from trucks, families have no privacy. |
| Welfare centres (displaced people's camps) | Formally established displaced people's camps by the government in private and government own lands. Temporary or transitional shelter arrangements. | Small houses built separately but together with *cadjan*, brick and asbestos of mixed building materials. | Two rooms (living & bedroom) and kitchen. Some WC families have private toilets but most have common or no toilet facilities. Water for domestic purposes obtain from public wells and pipe water. |
| Settlement villages | Established by the government and NGOs supported by donor funded projects. | There are two types of settlements: Relocated villages where IDPs of WCs are transferred to a new site. No private ownership of houses and land plots. New settlements where IDPs, with support of projects and NGOs, built their own houses and own land plots. | Houses built in separate land plots. Private toilets and water supply to the house. Most houses have three rooms (two bedrooms) Land plots ranges from 10 to 15 perches. |
| Self-settled | IDPs settled in private lands on their own. | IDP families live in their own or rented houses. | More private and located in areas which have better facilities roads, electricity and schools. |

As described by elderly displaced men and women, the most supportive social network on arrival were the local Muslim families and religious organizations such as mosques. It is clear from the narratives that faith and religious beliefs played an important role in caring for and protecting displaced persons. Local faith-based organizations (churches and mosques) reacted quickly to real and perceived needs out of compassion for fellow humans and because they are considered a cornerstone of a community when natural or

human made disaster hits.[75] The local Muslims considered the arrival of northern fellow Muslims from an Islamic perspective. As Islam requires believers to assist and protect vulnerable people (Mushab 2009: 1), local Muslims helped the northern displaced Muslims and treated them as *muhajirs* (refugees) or *musafeer* (guests or travellers in need). Local Muslims compared the hospitality and help given to displaced Muslims with that given during the seventh century in Arabia. According to Islam, helping a fellow Muslim persecuted by infidels is a religious duty of the *ansari* (the person in the receiving community). The prophet Mohamed was himself a refugee, having fled Mecca with his followers in 622 in order to escape persecution, and as a refugee was cared for by host communities (Saeid 2009: 2). Accordingly, the local Muslims provided initial network of support for newly arrived IDPs.

A key informant (KI 17) who is a teacher belong to the host community recalled helping northern Muslims who arrived in Kalpitiya during the last days of October 1990:

> People came in groups by boats from Mannar. Many were with babies and young children. Some women were pregnant or having infants with them. We all felt very sad. We helped them as much as we could. The mosque committee decided each local family had to prepare five to ten lunch packets each day to distribute to the families housed in schools and mosque lands. You know, it is our duty to help fellow Muslims as brothers and sisters. Our Prophet Mohamed was welcomed by tribal groups and others when he reached the unknown territories of the Deserts of Arabia on the way to Madeena. We, as Muslims, considered that helping guests and travellers was a meritorious act. We did the best we could for them at that time but now it is an entirely different story.

The first six months between late 1990 and early 1991 were a period of supporting and informal receiving of refugees. Some local Muslims even allowed displaced men to work on their farms and assist them with fishing to earn an income in this initial period. They looked on it as a responsibility and in accordance with the socioeconomic progression of the Islamic brotherhood or the *ummah*. This local version of the Islamic brotherhood aligns with orthodox Islamic interpretations. According to Maysam (2005:

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[75] Research on the 2004 tsunami and its impacts also suggest that local faith-based organizations were the initial support mechanisms for the people affected (Razaak & Wei 2005).

17), the poor, the weak and the alienated should be included in a clear socio-economic programme for the Islamic social order.[76]

However, as the numbers arriving increased dramatically, the local people found it difficult to help the displaced people arriving from various parts of the north. The local Muslims who also depended on agriculture and fishing for a living began to experience difficulties in helping them. As a result, responsibility for taking care of the displaced persons was slowly passed into the hands of local government officials and INGOs such as Reddbarna/Save the Children, Oxfam and CARE. With the support of government and NGOs, the temporary huts and some of the schools were transformed into collective camps (thatched houses, see Figures 10 and 11), located on government land and some of abandoned private land. NGOs and government officials assisted displaced people to settle in these collective camps, even transporting families and their by government trucks and buses. However, some of the initial displaced camp settlements were not always safe havens for the displaced. As people continued to arrive in large numbers some were settled on private land owned by local Muslims. Although local élites initially sympathized with the arriving Muslims, they later became concerned about losing their coconut farms and fertile lands. There were incidents of forceful eviction of displaced people from camps in which they were initially settled. A man (LI 7) from Mullaithivu who had been displaced for the last eighteen years explained one such incident.

> When we came to Kalptiya in March 1991, some Muslim gentlemen
> (*puththujeevigal*) helped us to settle on a coconut farm named Lanka Rani Estate
> owned by a Muslim businessman in Colombo. There were around 200 families
> from Mullaithivu and Kilinochchi. We started to put up temporary huts in the
> places where there were no coconut trees. Then, after about a month or so, the
> owner of the coconut farm came with a few people and threatened us and told us
> to leave his land immediately. We had no nowhere else to go and approached
> the GN and told of our situation. Then, the next day, the owner came again with
> some high official of the DS office. Since the officials were local people they
> took the side of the owner of the coconut farm and asked us to vacate the land.
> Since we were new and had no influence over the local people, we moved onto
> another site in Alankuda which the local officials said was government land.

[76] According to Saeid Rahaei (2009: 4) respect for refugees and asylum seekers and appreciation of those who provide refuge has a particular place in *sharia*, and Islam pays special attention to the sufferings of forced migrants.

Actually it was like a desert. There was no water for drinking. Our women walked nearly two miles to collect water in those days. We were unfortunate because many times we had to move from one place to another. There is still no solution to our problem. Some of us were able to move out of the camp site. But still some families have lived in coconut thatched houses for the last seventeen years.

There were many cases of 'multiple displacement' after people left their homes in the north. People sometimes moved together as a group and other times separately; they were compelled to start their lives in new places where the host community was not always welcoming. The people from Mannar, which is the closest district to Puttalam, were able to find better places, with access to drinking water, access roads and townships. Some of the first to arrive also had prior contacts with some of the locals. The people from other districts of the north arrived later and could not find locations with good infrastructure facilities and resources. They had to move from one place to another within Puttalam until they found a place to settle. Displacement, therefore, cannot be described as a single journey from one place to another. Uncertainties and unforeseen challenges forced people into a constant search for places in which to settle.[77] The process of searching for a place by northern displaced Muslims continued even at the time of my field research. For many families, settling in Puttalam is an experience of multiple displacements.

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[77] Burmese refugees in Thailand (Forced Migration Review 2008) faced similar experiences as they constantly moved from one camp to another in order to escape security forces and persecution but the causes of displacement were very different from those of the displaced Muslims in Sri Lanka.

**Figure 10 A**: thatched palm leaf house of initial camp in 1993



Source: Register of Office of Puttalam Housing Project

**Figure 11**: Collective camp site established originally in 1992



Source: Register of Office of Puttalam Housing Project

*Welfare centres: Formally established displaced people's camps*

In contrast to informal modes of settlements established on an ad hoc basis, welfare centres, popularly known as displaced people's camps, are the formal response to settling large numbers of new arrivals. Since 1994, many of the initial camp settlements have been transformed into welfare centres by the government. Welfare centres are defined as transitional shelter arrangements and spread along a larger land area than informal camps. In some locations, water (from wells) and sanitation facilities are provided by NGOs and the government. For the displaced people, moving from an informal camp to a welfare centre is a passage of life and a transition to better living conditions, freedom and some privacy.[78]

However, accurate assessments of the exact numbers of people living in displaced people's camps or welfare centres set up by the government and NGOs in Puttalam is lacking as displaced people are constantly on the move from one to another type of shelter arrangement. The only reliable data available are the UNHCR survey results of 2004 and 2006, which contain mostly statistics and lack information on the qualitative aspects of the lives of displaced people. Another problem with these survey results is the 'homogenising' affect that masks the social diversity among the displaced population (Harrell-Bond *et al* 1992; Hyndman 2000). For example, one of the reasons for the difficulty in finding durable solutions for the long-term displacement of Muslims in Puttalam is the categorization of all displaced persons as 'camp dwellers' by agencies. In particular, the 2006 UNHCR survey,[79] which provided the basic data for housing assistance by the World Bank, provoked considerable resentment not only among displaced people but also between displaced and host communities.

During my field stay, a survey for a beneficiary identification for housing grants by the government was conducted using a list of camp names provided by the UNHCR. This has been a key complaint about the agencies responsible for developing eligibility criteria for housing assistance. Some displaced persons who had settled outside the camps were declared not eligible for housing grants. Only those who had owned land in Puttalam and shown an interest in remaining in the present localities were selected for

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[78] There are no accurate figures on the number of IDPs living in camps today. It is estimated that about one-tenth of displaced people live in the camp type settlements while another 30 to 40 per cent were in welfare centres by the end of 2006. Personal communication with the director of ISRC (KI 1).
[79] At the time of my field work people approached me to write complaints against the UNHCR survey which they felt discriminated against them by not assessing their eligibility for housing assistance.

housing grants. Thus those who were most vulnerable, had no stable income and were unable to purchase a piece of land, could not get a grant.

> Many families living in Mullai B camp could not get housing assistance because they don't have land of their own. They are very poor and most of them are still cooli workers on onion farms. The team came to the camp to select eligible families for housing grant gave tickets [whose number indicates that they can apply for a housing grant] only to those have land (LI 27).

Among displaced Muslims, there are a number of social and economic differences that are not taken into consideration by agencies who provide assistance for the displaced. For example, displaced Muslims arrived from five different districts of Northern Province, and they have different lifestyles and livelihood practices. Displaced Muslims of Mannar district were the largest and their numerical strength has made them a powerful and prominent group among the displaced.

> We are living in this camp [welfare centre] for the last fifteen years in these *cadjan* houses. Most of us have no sufficient income to build a house or buy a piece of land by ourselves. But we were not give assistance for housing [because] we have no land of our own on which to build a house to live permanently. This is a discrimination which we see not only by officers but also by some of our own displaced people who are powerful than us.

> A man displaced from Mullaithivu sixteen years ago (LI 7).

These issues stem from serious oversights on the part of humanitarian and development agencies that categorize all displaced persons in 'camp'-based groups, ignoring the diversity among them. As argued by other researchers (Harrell-Bond 1998; Hyndman 2000; Mooney 2006), the categorization of displaced persons as 'camp dwellers' by humanitarian agencies mainly serves bureaucratic purposes This is somewhat similar to the British administrators' categorization of Sri Lankan people in 1920, which lumped different ethnic communities into regional and religious categories without no proper understanding of their cultural and linguistic differences. Some argue that this is one of the reasons for the present day ethnic conflict in the country (Wickramashinghe 2006).

The local government authorities, aid agencies and NGOs follow the UNHCR labelling of all displaced Muslims as 'refugees' or 'camp people' for the purposes of eligibility

for various forms of assistance. From the displaced people's point of view, being housed in camp-type settlements restricts their freedom of movement for fear of losing government subsidies and relief assistance if they choose to leave the welfare centres. The labelling is also a problem however, as some displaced people manipulate camp and displaced (IDP) labelling to their advantage. Nevertheless, the term IDP is widely used by officials to identify people who have no citizenship rights as locals (Brun 2008). In Tamil, the word *idampeyarntha* (displaced) is used only in official meetings and discussions by the local and displaced people. In everyday life, the term *aghadi* (refugee) is the most widely used. Even the activists of northern Muslims call them *aghadi* rather than *idmapeyarantha*. Displaced people's settlements are known as refugee camps or *muhaam* in Tamil.

Muhaams (Displaced people's camps/welfare centres) are mostly set up in lands owned by the government. Originally (in 1992) there were 214 camps in four DS divisional secretariat areas in the Puttalam district.[80] The number of camps was reduced to 143 in 2006 as most of the displaced people moved into permanent settlements or resettlement villages supported by the government within Puttalam (UNHCR 2006: 2). Some of these displaced camps are built in inhospitable, isolated and barren areas. In the camps, families are allocated small squares of land on which to build their houses. They live side by side in a straight line with houses connecting one to the other. The typical displaced camps are built as a cluster of *cadjan* houses which lack privacy (see Figure 12).[81] Each house consists of a large main living room (10' x 8') and a small kitchen. Most households have no private toilet facilities and the shared the toilets are often congested and unhygienic. Even today the people in the camps located in isolated areas of Kalpitiya have inadequate toilet facilities. Although intended as places of temporary shelter, these camps have become permanent living arrangements for the displaced people. As of 2010, some of the remaining displaced camps in Puttalam resemble the slums and shanties around Colombo city, which are overcrowded, have garbage dumped in open spaces, are noisy and lack sanitation facilities. During the rainy season (see Figure 13) camps located in low-lying areas are inundated with water, and the lack of drainage and garbage dumping facilities make people highly vulnerable to diseases.

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[80] Office of the Commissioner of Northern Displaced Muslims, Puttalam.
[81] *Cadjan* is made from coconut palm leaves which are used to cover the roof and walls of small houses and huts.

**Figure 12**: Welfare centre in Puttalam



Source: ISRC camp profiles, Puttalam

**Figure 13**: Dilapidated condition of a camp during the rainy season, Kalpitiya



Source: ISRC Camp profiles, Puttalam

According to the World Bank Social Assessment survey (2006: 36), nearly one-third of displaced families had no toilet facilities. Young women in camps had no privacy and this greatly affected their social image. While camps were flooded and diseases spread during rainy season, fire often destroys the thatched houses in the dry season. If one thatched house catches fire, it spreads quickly to the other houses. A displaced woman (LI 17) at Mullai B camp (Alankuda) said that such incidents are common occurrences in their camp lives. She had her own experience of such an incident.

> As I remember it was in 1995 that many women of our camp were in the field working in a onion farm. We left our homes in the morning leaving the small ones with our husbands and parents at home. Around eleven in the morning we heard that there was a fire in the camp. We came and saw that about ten to twelve houses were completely burnt. One child was admitted to the hospital. People of those houses lost clothes and other valuables things because of the fire. Such incidents were common in camp life [*muham vaalkai*]. Every year there was a fire in some camps. Since dried *cadjan* easily catches fire the camp houses built close to each other caught in fire in minutes.

### Organization and management of camps

Three key people are involved in the management and administration of camps and welfare centres: camp leader, camp officer and mosque leader (*imam*). Camp leaders are the first officials appointed by the government to coordinate relief and assistance to the families belonging to the camps. All camp leaders are men and mostly come from the first generation of displaced persons; many are elderly men. No women have been appointed as camp leaders despite the fact that around twelve per cent of displaced families are headed by females (World Bank Social Assessment 2006: 42). In appointing a camp leader, families of the camp are consulted. Camp leaders guide the camp community in day-to-day issues such as dispute resolution, and coordinate relief assistance with agencies. The camp leader is often an influential person in the mosque as well if he works as a member of the board of trustees of the local mosque. Camps and welfare centres are managed by an elected committee called the camp management committee (CMC). The CMC usually consists of respected individuals representing the male heads of the households. It meets in the mosque in the respective camp/welfare centre on Friday afternoons to make decisions on the issues that affect camp dwellers. There is also a mosque committee in each camp with the office bearers being more or less the same in both CMC and mosque committees. However, the camp leader

exercises more formal power in the community as he coordinates and assists families to get daily provisions and relief packages from outside agencies. For example, in issuing and cancelling a ration card, the camp leader plays an important role. He has the power to recommend or not to recommend relief and rehabilitation assistance to a family from the government. However, the camp leader's capacity as a formal figurehead of the camps is now increasingly challenged by a new generation of camp leadership made up of camp officers appointed by the government. The camp officers are young displaced men who have grown up in the camp, often working closely with politicians, and who do not give due recognition to the camp leaders and mosque leaders.

The mosque committee is the culturally important mechanism that holds the camp community together. It is known as *palli kammitti* among the people and managed by a board of trustees elected by the families in the camp. Becoming a member of the mosque committee (*jamaath)* is essential for all the families in the camp and each family has to pay a monthly membership fee (*santha panam*) to be eligible for religious services and assistance in a situation such as a funeral in the family. Unlike the CMC, the mosque committee has greater social recognition and responsibility. It consists of respected members of the community selected by families belonging to the community. The *imam* is paid a monthly salary through funds raised from the members. The *jamaath* has the power to remove and replace a mosque leader. However, there is a great respect for and obedience towards the mosque leader by people and he is most often regarded as an honest and religious person. The mosque leader and trustee board is like a supreme council of bigger Islamic communities and they are chosen from well respected, disciplined and faithful religious members of the community. Families in the camp listen to and obey the decisions of the *imam* but they dispute with camp officials on issues that affect their lives. If a person does not follow the instructions of the mosque committee or the *imam* he or she can be excluded from the *jamaath* and the *imam* will not attend any of the religious functions of those who are excluded. The mosque, headed by the *imam* is, therefore, an institution that represents not only power and control over its *jamaath* but also has the capacity to impose sanctions. Each settlement of displaced Muslims has a mosque, often built with architecture resembling mosques at their home places.

Another important role played by the mosque as a community institution, is the coordination of external assistance by agencies to the camp families and also as a public

meeting venue. The external agencies, government and NGOs prefer to approach the mosque committee or *imam* to ensure better outcomes for their projects. The mosque, until recently, was a functional entity and most of the information about community events were disseminated through it. Meetings are usually held in the mosque premises as well.[82] However, the mosque committee does not allow women to participate in the functions and meetings held on mosque premises. In the past, when some humanitarian agencies called meetings to distribute assistance and select families for such assistance, women were often excluded from the programmes coordinated through the mosques.[83]

However, as already mentioned, the respect and social power enjoyed by the elderly and first generation of displaced persons, being members of the CMC and the mosque Committee, is now diminishing. The camp officer is becoming more powerful than the camp leader and the mosque committee the camps. Since 2009, camp officials have been directly appointed by the minister,[84] who at that time was himself a displaced Muslim and a member of parliament representing northern Muslims. In order to expand his political support base, the minister selected a group of young displaced Muslims from camp sites as camp officers to deliver the relief services. They are paid by the government a sum of LKR 7,500 (approximately AUD 75) per month. These officers have taken over the most of the authority and responsibility formerly wielded by elderly camp leaders. Camp officers speak Sinhala more fluently than their elderly camp leaders, which is an advantage in dealing with government officials. I witnessed a number of incidents in which the camp leader and the camp officer were engaged in heated arguments related to the distribution of benefits. The camp officers now play a decisive role in selecting and excluding families for the grants, cash aids and services provided through the government projects. The families tend to pay more attention to these young camp officers because they have better qualifications for the job, such as good education, ability to speak Sinhala and better relationships with external agencies and government offices. Camp officials are now part of the politicization of the post-displacement support process. This is often the cause of disputes and conflicts between families and different camp communities. During my field work, families who have not

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[82] Most of my focus group discussions, except for the women focus groups, were held in the mosque premises of the camps.
[83] Women are allowed to enter and pray in the mosque only during Ramadan.
[84] At the time of my research in 2007–8, the minister of Resettlements and Disaster Relief was a person of the northern Muslim community. Since the parliamentary elections in April 2010, a new minister has been appointed.

received housing assistance told many stories of corruption and nepotism among camp officials in the selection of families for government housing grants.

A displaced man (LI 19) who did not want to be identified by his name said:

> All camp officers are henchmen of the minister…Some people were asked to come to the minister's house and he asked whether they were for or against him. Only those who said they were supportive of the minister got all the assistance.

Sorenson (1996), who has done an empirical study on development-induced displacement (in Mahaweli) and resettlement in Sri Lanka, makes similar observations. She points out that there were disputes between new and old local leaderships in the villages that were established under the development project. She observed how a Sinhalese Buddhist temple had become the centre of the local power base in the settlement schemes that were established as part of a major irrigation development program in the country in 1980s.

Since 2005, there have been noticeable changes in the administration of services for displaced people which can be regarded as further politicization of development and humanitarian assistance. As discussed in the previous chapter, after the peace accord signed between the LTTE and the GOSL in 2002, Northern and Eastern Provinces received greater attention for rehabilitation and development. The World Bank and other development agencies began to fund infrastructure projects including housing reconstruction for the internally displaced people (Tamils and others) who were prepared to return and settle in the areas (in the north) that they had left. This has affected the displaced Muslims in Puttalam who are from Northern Province as well. As a part of the overall government policy, the displaced Muslim community was supported with grants to build houses and better basic infrastructure such as access roads and tap water supply, in a project funded by the World Bank. A new set of institutions has also been established at the camp and welfare centre level. Among these, the information centre, established by the government in 2006 to coordinate assistance to displaced people, plays a key role. Most of the activities that the mosque carried out in the past are now being implemented through the information centre (Figure 14). The mosque, as the symbolic power centre of the camp community, has been overshadowed. New buildings and halls have been constructed at camps and welfare centres to conduct meetings and trainings.

Establishment of information centres has had both positive and negative consequences. There, women can take part in development-related meetings and the decision making process. However, the symbolic role played by the mosque as an institution for nearly ten years in calling meetings and making decisions, is now played by the information centre run by the camp officer. Thus the role of *imam* has been diminished as the symbolic figurehead of the community. Leaders of the elderly first generation seem unhappy about this new developments in the camps (Figure 15). One *imam* (LI 4) described the situation vividly:

> Now we have not much control over things happening among families. Camp officers are now in control of camp affairs. They are young people who are sometimes former students in our *madrasa* or local schools. But we have no regrets. This situation has arisen in the recent past mainly because of politics. People in the camps are more divided now than before, and support politicians who are capable of providing benefits. Camp officers are the link between *aidipees* and the politicians. Only those people who are good with camp officers get most benefits now. The worrying thing is that the camp officers are becoming the spies and informants of powerful politicians.

**Figure 14**: Information centre of a camp



Source: Author's register

**Figure 15**: Elderly men are not happy with emerging new power structure in the camps



Source: Author's register

*Settlement villages of displaced people*

Since the latter part of the 1990s, the government has encouraged northern displaced Muslims to settle permanently in Puttalam. According to a UNHCR survey (2006: 1), 78 per cent of displaced families bought lands in Puttalam which is a clear indication of their search for a permanent settlement to end their long term displacement. Displaced families who preferred to resettle have been encouraged to settle through the provision of a grant of LKR 25,000 for houses in government or other lands. The aim is to ease the congestion and overcrowding in the camps and welfare centres. This was also considered as an effort by the government to end the displacement through local integration into the host community. Settlements are sometimes called 'relocated villages'. Settlement villages are spacious and have better physical environments and facilities than camps and welfare centres. Each family is assisted with a land plot of approximately 10 or 12 perches in the state-owned land either in the areas where displaced families live or the outside locations in Puttalam. A legal document called a 'permit' is issued by the *kachcheri* to the households to certify user rights to the particular plot. The district secretary has a land regularization process which identifies and demarcates land for settlements. There are also instances of families belonging to one district or neighbourhood in the original home place in Northern Province collectively purchasing a large land plot and settling with government assistance.

In settling in new locations within settlement villages, the displaced people have greater freedom to choose their plots. First the government officials allow people in welfare centres/camps to decide for themselves which land blocks they prefer to relocate to. The community then gets together and discusses how families prefer to locate in different plots. Families belonging to a kinship group or who lived together as neighbours in the original home places often settle as a 'community' in the relocation settlements. Sometimes families who lived for a long time in one camp, regardless of the place of origin, also wish to settle as a community in new settlements and continue their newly built social relatedness. Thus land plots are divided according the preferences of the people who are willing to relocate. If displaced people in camps do not achieve consensus, or have problems in choosing land plots, the government officials decide on a system of allocation of plots to the families. From the displaced Muslims point of view, relocation in a settlement village is a form of remaking of 'homes' and developing ownership to new lands (*sondham*). Families who are connected to each other by kinship, neighbourhood or *ur* are settled as a community. Often the families

who lived together in camps and welfare centres after their displacement move together, in order to maintain the social relationships developed since they arrived in Puttalam. In other words, settling in new locations is a way to strengthen community bonding, increase social capital and develop a feeling of belonging to a new territory.

The houses in the resettlement schemes are built with solid materials such as brick, roofing sheets (asbestos cement) or tiles (Figure 16). Each house is separated by a fence and has a separate access gate. The government, with the assistance of development agencies, provides water, access roads and, in the case of some settlements, electricity supply. Households are also provided with funds to construct toilets.

People in settlement villages (Figure 17) enjoy greater freedom of movement, privacy and ownership of their properties. Unlike the situation in camps and welfare centres, they feel more secure and empowered since they own land and houses. In the camps, they cannot invest or engage in productive work. Therefore, as people become economically better-off and save money, they prefer to move to settlement villages to overcome the powerlessness, dependency and poor living conditions in the camps.

> Some of our people of Mullaithivu are now looking for land so that all our
> families can move to one location and build houses. Around 40 families now
> prepared to purchase 10 perch each in a land in Thillaydy (near Puttalam town).
> We can't wait until the government or Minster provides us land. We waited for
> last fifteen years. But nobody did help us (LI 7).

Moreover, land and house are considered highly valuable assets for the family since such property is a means of dowry in addition to cash and jewellery. Thus having one's own house and land is not just an economic asset but also a social requirement for families who have daughters. This is one of the reasons that displaced Muslims in Puttalam make every effort to buy land and build houses, either by investing their earnings or by getting assistance from the government and NGOs when they are able to do so. As is shown in the next chapter, displaced women in camps even migrate to Arab Gulf countries as housemaids to earn the much needed money to purchase land and build houses as dowries for their daughters.

**Figure 16**: A new house in a resettlement village



Source: Author's register

**Figure 17**: Houses in a resettlement village of displaced people



Source: Authors' Register

However, not all displaced people in Puttalam are able to get out of the camp housing. There are still families who have been living in the original camp type housing for the last eighteen years. Some of these families are reluctant to give up the refugee 'lifestyle'

(the culture of displacement)[85] which has become a 'comfort zone' for them. Life in the camp is low risk and involves free benefits, sympathy from others, immunity from taxes,utility bills, and, more importantly, the opportunity to earn and invest in moveable assets that can be used once they get the opportunity to return to the north in the future. Getting out of the camps also involves a long process, including getting approval from the camp leader, camp Officer and GN, which some poor, displaced people who depend on daily wages, do not want to spend time doing. Thus the establishment of settlement villages to integrate displaced people into the local context has two contrasting outcomes. On the one hand, it has created avenues for the displaced to regroup, and to build new social relations or strengthen their old social relationships. On the other hand, it has excluded marginalised displaced families and made them more vulnerable as it entrenches their dependence on aid even further. Local politics, nepotism and bias in the organizations serving displaced communities are involved as well. The authorities who are politicised deem some displaced people as 'fortunate' and others 'vulnerable'. This is not to say that the humanitarian agencies working through official institutional structures are responsible for keeping the displaced people in camps, but that they lack in-depth understanding of the realities in the areas in which they are working. A displaced man from Mullaithivu (LI 27) who could not leave the camp for the last eighteen years explains:

> It is not that we wouldn't like a good life in a better location. There are many problems in moving out the camp. If we move out, we not only lose the ration cards but also we have to pay bills for water and electricity. Many of us are not able to save money to put up a house. The government is saying that grants will be given to build houses. But we haven't got such grants yet. A few of our *ur* (Mullaithivu) people sold their lands back at home and settled in Puttalam. But people like me who had no land or properties in the *ur* cannot do anything but to remain in the camp until we get a solution to our *aghadhi vaalakai* [displaced living].

## Invoking images of homes in the camps and settlements

People in situations of involuntary or forced migration bring their traditions and experiences with them, and attempt to preserve and remake them to adapt to the new

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[85] As described in Oscar Lewis' *Culture of Poverty* (1959), people living in camps and displaced environments tend to evolve a distinct lifestyle in which they feel secure and safe.. Some do not want to take risks by changing their status as IDPs.

social environments. Activities of immigrant communities replicate their memories and experience of home in the new geographical spaces they now inhabit (Cresswell 2004: 5). As discussed in Chapter One above, place becomes home only when people make it so through their occupation and use of it. This section discusses the ways in which the displaced Muslims develop attachment to the places in Puttalam. The northern displaced Muslims have, for the most part, remade their old village community structures in the localities they are settled. That the construction of familiar 'place' in Puttalam has representations of both past and present is evident through the increase in the number of new resettlements.

As one displaced woman described it, Puttalam is becoming a 'second home' or **a home away from home** for most of them. In rebuilding their lives in Puttalam, displaced Muslims attempt to reconstruct their neighbourhoods separately from the local host community villages. In this process of re-territorialization, displaced people attempt to find separate geographical locations to settle as communities (Figure 18). It is not only to preserve the sense of belonging, but also to avoid potential conflicts with host community in their everyday lives. Northern Muslims live in segregated neighbourhoods by putting fences around their welfare centres and settlements, or what Gibson (1979) called 'material layouts'.

**Figure 18**: Separated camps with fences, Walawu



Source: Author's register

When I visited the new settlements, I found that most people there are middle-aged or young families belong to the second generation of displaced persons.[86] They show a keener interest in finding a place to settle in Puttalam than the first generation of displaced people. For them, memories of home are merely an experience of flight and a blurred picture of a cluster of houses in the middle of green paddy fields. Most of these young families feel themselves to be a firmly established community and have a strong sense of belonging together in these localities. Some of those who have settled in newly built houses were uneasy when I asked about their intentions regarding returning to the ancestral homes in the north. 'What can we do there? If we go back it is another displacement. There is no point in talking about going back' (LI 2). As they have become accustomed to the social environment over the years, they tend to see Puttalam as their home. The place-making process is a human experience involving emotional attachment and social identification over time (Relph 1976), and the second generation has grown up with strong emotional attachments to Puttalam. They see it as their place, their home. Displaced Muslims living in segregated settlements feel secure and there exists a sense of intimacy between each other as a community. Tuan's (1977) distinction between space, place, and time is also relevant to understanding how displaced people perceive and experience their new settlements. He suggests that while *place* provides security and opportunity to become involved with other people, *space* offers freedom and is associated with *motion*. The ways in which people feel and think about place, and how they form attachments to home and neighbourhood are affected by the sense of time as well. The longer people live in a place, the greater their personal and social attachment to it. This is evident in the way northern displaced people have different experiences of belonging. The older generation has a sense of being rooted in the old place and their 'rootedness' hinders their 'sense of place' in new localities. The second generation, however, does not have the same sense of being rooted in the past and finds it easy to develop a sense of belonging in Puttalam.

Patterns of settlement in Puttalam also reinforce both their displaced identity and northern community social structures. For example, in finding a place to settle in Puttalam, village and urban distinctions have been kept intact. Displaced Muslims who were from village background chose more or less similar village or rural physical

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[86] The term 'generation' has confusing meanings. The first generation include the nuclear families that were displaced by the expulsion in 1990. The second generation includes both children who born in the north and fled with their parents, and people born in Puttalam.

surroundings when moving to resettlement villages. Similarly, many Muslims who lived an urban life preferred urban or semi-urban localities in Puttalam town and locations along the main road to Colombo and Puttalam.

The search for a place to settle in Puttalam by northern Muslims has become more intense over the past few years. However, this increased willingness to settle in new localities in Puttalam is not entirely because they are losing their sense of attachment to their homes in the north, but rather, because they are motivated by the circumstances of protracted displacement over the last eighteen years. Some of the main factors that attributed to this ambivalence are the fading of hopes after the breakdown of the peace process in 2006, bitter memories of the expulsions in 1990, improved living standards through various economic activities during the post displacement period in Puttalam, the building of assets for future generations, and increased assistance from external development agencies. For example, one of the criteria for eligibility for housing grants from a project funded by an international donor is 'evidence of ownership of a minimum of 10 perches of land' by a displaced household in Puttalam. Thus, displaced Muslims are creating *sondham* or belonging to  the displaced localities by owning small land plots or building houses of their own. A key informant (KI 1) explained this situation:

> For the last ten or fifteen years, our families experienced a lot of problems. This was mainly because most of us were thinking of going back to our old villages some day. But now, people are buying land, even small plots, and trying to build houses because they wanted to put a stop to their displaced living(*iinda ahadhi vaalkaikku oru mudivu vendum*). If we asked to go home one day, we can keep these assets for our kids. On the other hand, if we don't have a piece of land here [Puttalam], then the NGOs don't give us housing grants, thinking that we are not interested in settling here. Because of that, many families are buying land here. Some people sell their jewellery or lands in the home villages to buy lands in Puttalam. You know, now the land prices have gone up so high. In 1995, ten perches of land in Nurachcholai cost around 10,000 rupees. But now [2007] it has gone up to almost 50,000 rupees.

However, northern Muslims' attempts to evolve as a unique community separate from the host community is not solely built on kinship networks or neighbourhood relationships that previously existed among them. The relationships with each other

built since the displacement, collective memories of expulsion, experiences as masses in flight, settling in camps and welfare centres in Puttalam as a 'community in exile' were also influential. In this sense, Mallki's description about 'accidental communities of memory' (1997b: 91) and Carsten's idea of 'relatedness' (2000: 18) provide some conceptual insights to this research.

Malkki (1997b) argues that the communities that experience situations such as war and natural disasters together share such memories in common as 'victims or a community in suffering'. People facing such common threats or problems more often come together as 'accidental communities' and develop bonding thereafter and share certain memories together.

> The important of this accidental, shared context is that people not only carry traces in their heads. This is not just a matter of memory or simply a psychological process. These memories – even not much narrativised – can powerfully shape what comes after. Who one is, what one's principles, loyalties, desires, longings, and beliefs are, can all be sometimes powerfully formed and transformed in transitory circumstances and shared by persons who might be strangers (Malkki 1997b: 92).

Northern Muslims who have faced a forceful expulsion and are living in exile in Puttalam share memories as 'accidental communities' as described by Mallki. Such memories are not necessarily rooted in place, or territory-based identity. Rather being together as communities out of place, they come together and share things that commonly affect them. As discussed in the previous chapter, after the days of expulsion by the LTTE, people moved in various directions and met other displaced persons with whom they had had no prior connection. The sense of northern Muslim identity in Puttalam arose not just because they come from the same territory but also because of the experiences they shared together as forced migrants. The 'northern identity' has emerged from a shared felt common threat and experiences of persecution by LTTE. Together, they identify as 'evicted people' (*virattapatta makkal*). Thus, displaced people make use their shared history as a 'displaced' community in the place-making processes in exile (Brun 2008: 179). This was mentioned in focus group meetings of displaced women who formed small savings groups of five to seven women for a community-based saving (micro credit) project. These savings groups consisted of not only the former neighbours and relatives but also women in the welfare centres who had

arrived from other parts of the north. Thus, the attempt to preserve northern Muslim identity in Puttalam arises not only because they are an accidental community who faced a common expulsion, but also because they were able to build broader social alliances with other Muslims who came from various parts of the north.

Carsten (1995), in her research on a Malays in Island of Pulau Langkawi, suggests that migrant people develop new forms of *relatedness* by building ties through sharing food, eating together and other forms of exchange in everyday life. She argues that people who are forced to migrate and who experience the benefit of social relatedness make efforts to recreate the kinship ties in their place of exile (Carsten 2000: 38). She explains that small acts are symbolic in the group life of people who are in refugee and displaced situations and who were not known to each other before. By living in a 'place' that is new for people from different cultural and social backgrounds, over time, families create new kinship ties and bonds through everyday transactions.

> Both procreative ties and shared feeding create shared substance or blood in a community largely made up of migrants. Here the small act of hospitality and feeding, together with longer-term sharing of food and living spaces which fostering and marriage involve, create kinship where it did not previously exist (Carsten 2000: 18).

Such shared hospitality and relatedness is clearly evident in camps and welfare centres in Puttalam where people from different places in the north live together. Those families who were not known to each other before attempt to make new relationships by engaging in everyday activities that build trust among them. These everyday acts are often small and seemingly trivial, such as giving or sharing a meal, exchanging dishes of cooked food with the next door family, visiting a neighbour's house to watch a television program or borrowing a small amount of tea or coffee from next door when there is a visitor at home.

Over time, such everyday acts promote more complex social exchanges and relationships, such as bonds and kinship ties through marriages, or sharing religious ceremonies with other families. These are significant building blocks for new social networks that develop into a sense of a community life or *culture in exile* among the displaced people. They make use of this new social relatedness for various purposes: working together to replace coconut thatches before the monsoon rains; organizing a

*dowry* for a young woman of the neighbourhood; and, on some occasions, as a defensive and conflict-avoiding mechanism as well. One community leader (LI 21) who was instrumental in mobilizing families displaced from his district (Mullaithivu) to a new resettlement village, told the following story.

> We were compelled to find a place of our own. Families displaced from our district faced numerous difficulties after arriving. We were harassed by local Muslims (*ulloor makkal*) in the adjacent villages as well as by our fellow Muslims who came to Puttalam from other areas. After we came here, families belonging to our district moved from one camp to another camp seeking better living and social support. So far our families were moved into four to five different camps in Puttalam. We were sometimes humiliated by our own people [northern Muslims] who were politically powerful. Since we lost our connections and traditions of our home place, we were treated like gypsies [*paradesigal*]. We, around 200 families, who were from different villages of north, decided to purchase this location [Thillaydi, a new settlement village] not only because we need to live as Mullaithivu families together, but also to avoid disputes with local people.

This quote illustrates that people living in refugee and displaced situations not only attempt to reinvoke the past kinship ties but also engage in establishing new types of social bonds and relatedness to cope with their vulnerability.

There are many ways that displaced people collectively establish their shared connection to place and naming is one such strategy. The naming of camps which differentiates them from local villages is not only a pure 'act of reference' but a meaningful location (Cresswell 2004:7) for a collective political action by the community. Settlement names are purposely chosen to indicate their distinct characteristics as a community in exile. Some names refer to old villages in the north and some are Islamic or Arabic because people wished to show that they were not a part of the local host community. Sometimes it was also done to replicate the northern village atmosphere by invoking memories and images of home. They also preferred to construct houses with fences around them and a toilet separate from the house, similar to what they had in the north. Host community Muslims' houses are not always surrounded by fences and most of the houses have attached bathrooms and toilets. The project director (KI 3) of a housing project in progress during the time of my field work,

told me that displaced Muslims wanted to have houses with similar room size and building structures to those in the north in their new assisted housing in Puttalam. They did not want toilets attached to their houses and wanted to build toilets separated from the house.

> When we proposed a model house that the government used to build for the tsunami-affected people, Puttalam IDPs refused it and they wanted houses like they used to have in their places of origin. Then we developed three building layouts of houses, resembling those in the north and asked their preference in the housing verification survey.

A particularly interesting observation is the northern Muslim's tendency in the recent years to use Arabic and Islamic names for their camps and settlements. I found several reasons for this, the most popular of which was that giving their settlements Islamic names shows gratitude to Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, which provided funds to families to build houses. Also, some settlements of displaced people were named by community leaders or influential people who migrated to Middle Eastern Arabic countries for work and returned as newly-rich. They are the emerging affluent group of people among the displaced Muslims, more respected than those traditional and socially respected leaders such as *moothawars* in their places of origin. Thus these newly 'influential' people lead in naming settlements in Arabic and Islamic terms, which sometimes refer to places in Saudi Arabia. More importantly, however, as explained by an *imam* (LI 4) people wanted give names to the settlements and camps in a way that symbolizes the religion and refugee status of the migrant. For example, names such as Hijrapuram, Madeena Nagar and Karbala Nagar have Islamic and Arabic origins and are directly linked to the places where Prophet Mohammed stayed in his religious missions from Mecca to Madeena cities. Therefore, as the *imam* pointed out, Muslims should not be ashamed to live as refugees or in camp-type settlements since such places are secure and supportive of their religious faith and practices. Giving the migrant settlements Islamic names is a *sunna* or act of merit in Islam.

Yet, one key observation about place naming is that more of the names that sound Islamic have Pakistani origins than Middle Eastern or Arabic origins. There has been an influence from Pakistani Islamic clerics over that past few years in the camps and settlements of displaced Muslims in Puttalam. I was told that some of the new mosques

are funded and continuously visited by Pakistani Islamic clergy. I met a Pakistani Islamic leader who came to visit a mosque at Kalpitiya who stated that their motive for supporting displaced Muslims was not only to help poor families to overcome their vulnerable living conditions but also to promote Islamic principles and practices among the communities that belong to the global Islamic *ummah*. He sees the northern displaced Muslims as a group of unfortunate people of the *ummah (global Muslim community)*. Young displaced men in particular are now being attracted by these visiting Pakistani missionaries and clergy and are seemingly more fundamentalist than other displaced and local youth. Though invisible, and not largely known to the outside world, such Pakistani influence might also have prompted the displaced Muslims to name their settlements so as to give a strong sense of religious and cultural reference to their identity and to undermine their Tamil links in the north. Figure 19 shows the type and origins of the names of displaced camps and settlements in Puttalam.

The key point to be highlighted, however, is that by giving their new settlements names different from the local place names, displaced people are creating a sense of belonging to the places they settled in. This naming, and the segregating with physical boundaries are attempts at 'reterritorialization' of northern villages in the new places of settlement by displaced Muslims. As argued by Brun (2001: 23) 're-territorialisation is not only a process of moving from one location to another, but also to establish and expand networks and cultural practices that define new spaces for daily life…It is not so much about power and control over others, but rather control over one's own life, about safety and protection, and the maintenance and development of social networks'.

**Figure 19**: Distribution of names of camps and settlements of different origins



Islamic & Arabic place names (60%)

Hijra Puram/Mohidin Nagar/Islamabad/Madina Nagar/Mujahidin Puram

Nothern place names (30%)

Thillayadi/Moor Street/Mullai/Masoor Nagar

Local place names (10%)

Alankuda/Thigali/Ethalai
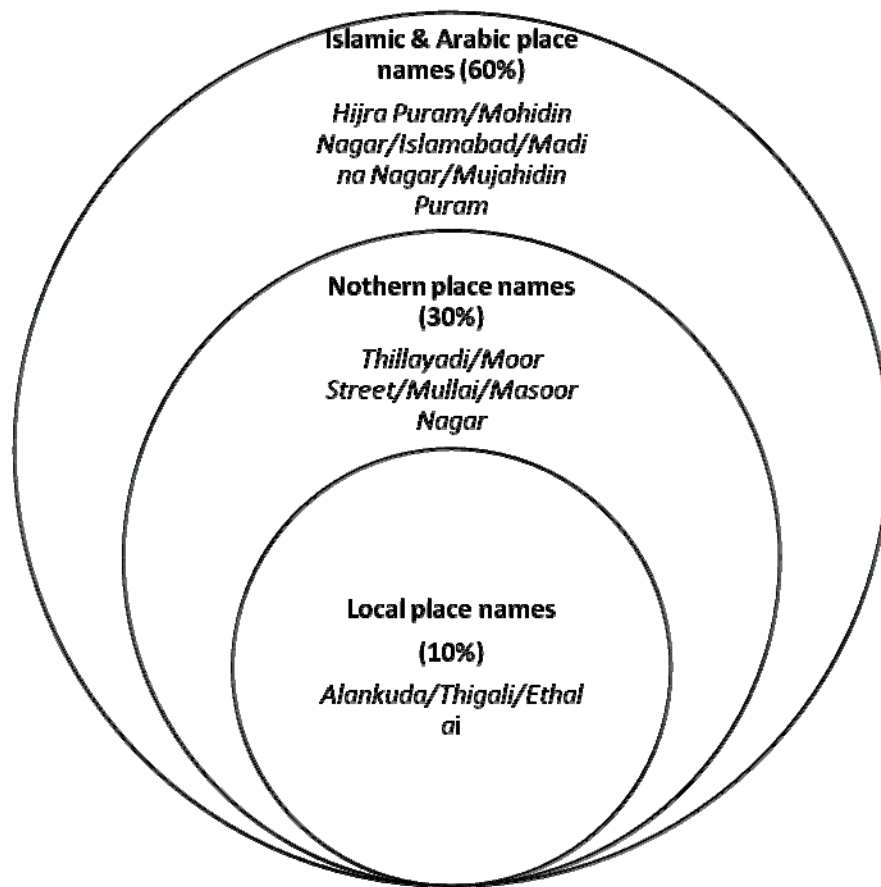
## Formation of identity in exile

Displaced Muslims are active agents in making new connections with place and thus creating new identities in Puttalam. However, their shared sense of 'northern' belonging is not the sole factor that binds and keeps them together as a community. The labelling by agencies as 'displaced persons', new forms of social relatedness, memories they share as an accidental community, livelihood activities adopted post-displacement and competition with the host community in sharing resources are some key factors that have contributed to the formation of a separate identity by displaced Muslims in Puttalam.

The construction of identity in the post-displacement context takes place at both collective and individual levels. In the process of identity making, the categorization and identification of northern Muslims as 'people out of place' or 'people who do not

belong to Puttalam' by the host population and government institutions plays a major role. The host community refers to northern Muslims as *agadigal* (displaced), or *idampeyarntha* (out of place) while calling themselves *ur-makkal* (native/village people). In many cases, displaced Muslims are treated as outsiders or temporary residents by local government institutions.[87] For example, the local postmaster of Pallivasalthurai, who is a member of the host community, does not consider displaced Muslims in the camps as 'local citizens'. He says it is difficult to employ a postman to deliver mail to displaced families living in camps as they change their place of living from one camp to another. For him, northern Muslims are temporary residents in the locality and therefore the post office has no legal responsibility to assign numbers to the houses or to deliver mail to the displaced Muslim households in person. Instead, in the post office, each camp is designated a mail box. The postmaster sorts all the mail that has camp addresses to corresponding mailboxes. The camp officers visit the post office around 4 pm each day to collect the mail and deliver it to the addressee in the camp. If there is any urgent mail such as telegrams, the postmaster calls the camp officer's mobile phone or another person whom he knows in the camp site.

> I think people in the camps [*muhaam*] are not like the local people. They stay in this area for some time and then move into some other camp which I don't know of. They are not reliable. As a postmaster I am not responsible for the delivery of mails to the families in the camps. If there is a telegram for a person in our local community I sometimes personally visit the house and deliver it. But I don't do the same for camp people. If there is a telegram or urgent mail, I usually give a call to the camp officer. If he is not available, I pass the information through someone from that camp who comes to the post office (KI 16).

The way to deal with this, from the northern Muslim's point of view, is to move away from temporary camps and rebuild their lives as a distinct community of their own in new settlement schemes. As explained by some households in camps I visited, their houses have no numbers. Letters are usually addressed to the camp names (Alankuda B, Mullai Camp, Mohideen Nagar, and so on). A teacher (LI 17) who used to come to meet me in the evenings said that this is a type of discrimination against them by local officials:

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[87] Brun (2008: 148–54) discusses how displaced people use various strategies to negotiate their local citizenship rights.

From the beginning to today [2008], for the last eighteen years, we get letters through the camp officer. He collects all the letters from the post office and delivers them or gives a phone call to collect letters from him. It is sometimes problematic too. If a camp officer is not good with a household in the camp, he usually doesn't bring letters for that family or he might put them into a dustbin or throw them away. You can see how much we, as displaced people, have lost our privacy and are discriminated against by local officials.

The process of the formation of an identity separate from the host community has intensified, especially as the second generation of displaced men and women have become economically and socially empowered over the past years (discussed further in Chapter Five). Not only through establishing a firm economic foundation but also through their collective initiatives, often with the support of their own politicians, displaced northern Muslims have been building community resources. Mosques, playgrounds and cemeteries are being constructed as symbols of their strength and identity. In most of the new settlements, mosques are being constructed using northern architecture traditions (Figure 20). Also, new mosques are being built close to the host community mosques, with a distinctly different structures. This is a process of rebuilding the northern culture or reterritorializing place. As Malkki (1995) argues, people uprooted by war and natural disasters do not necessarily lose their culture and traditions with such tragedies. Instead, circumstances created by such disasters and tragedies influence the constructions of new images and identities based on the past. Northern Muslims today have gradually evolved a 'displaced culture' of their own and are constructing an identity that is different from their past. It becomes evident as they give their settlements unique names and build cultural institutions separate them from host community villages. When I asked why they want to build a separate mosque as the host community has a mosque, a school teacher of displaced background replied in a diplomatic manner that the motive is clearly one of establishing their distinct identity.

Now the population [*sanath thohai*] in this area has grown very much. So the local people's mosque [*oor makkal pallivaasal*] has not enough space for the people to pray. On some Fridays, some of our people pray outside and in the grounds. It is hard during rainy days. Therefore we decided to build a mosque. Actually we wanted to build our own mosque some years ago but we didn't have money at that time. Although we all [host and displaced] are Muslims [one *jammath*], sometimes the local Muslims dislike our presence on Fridays. When

we entered mosques some spaces inside were reserved for them. So we have to sit and pray in the last row or outside the mosque. So we decided to build our own mosque. You can see our mosque is different and has more space than theirs.

Also, in Aalankuda, a large playground has been built and I was invited to participate in the inaugural ceremony, attended by their lead politician. A school which was closed because of complaints by the host community that it was overcrowded by the children of displaced Muslims, had been reopened with teachers of displaced background and more facilities. These all symbolize the increased capacity of northern Muslims to establish a strong visibility and identity in a re-territorialized social context in Puttalam.

**Figure 20**: A new mosque built by northern Muslims settled in Alankuda



Source: Author's register

When it comes to individual identity formation, second-generation men and women are forming an identity that reflects local (Puttalam) characteristics. As I observed, their sense of identity has been influenced by various factors, including their education and peer social networks developed within and outside their displaced settlements. To these young people, the characteristics of northern culture and traditions have little relevance. 'Northern-ness' or the perception of being a northern Muslim for them is largely an imagined and constructed one through nostalgia and history learned from their parents. Even their language has changed to suit the local context and needs. They speak Sinhala better than their parents. They speak Tamil like local Puttalam Muslims and hardly have any northern accent like their parents. They are not serious about identifying themselves

with the north compared with their parents and older siblings who were born in the north and spent their childhood there. Youth and young adults of the northern Muslims who participated in the focus groups wanted to identify themselves as a 'new generation' (*pudiya thalaimurai*) of 'people in-between'. Their priorities are different because they were exposed to a social context that required skills and strategies different from those required in the northern environments.

As they are now growing in number, second-generation displaced men and women are in search of innovative livelihood activities and better educational prospects in Puttalam For example, some young educated men are opening communication centres and computer training classes. There is a local radio station in Kalpitiya town run by a group of displaced youth. They collect money from the business centres, hotels and other trade stalls in this small town, and advertise the goods and services through a local radio channel. The majority of displaced young men and women know how to use computers and the internet and some use expensive brands of mobile phones and iPods.

To a certain extent, religious identity also assumes a particular significance for the second-generation men who cannot identify with their parents' connections to a distant home. Even if they are not religious, many young displaced men and women identify with Islam as a transnational identity that is not tied to a particular 'northern', 'local' or 'nation-state' link as noted by Seidler (2010) elsewhere. They are politically ambitious and radical compared with their parents. Many young men engage in party politics and wanted to be identified with politicians. Young women, unlike their mothers and elder sisters, are exposed to a wider society and prefer government and salaried jobs rather than working in farms or staying at home.

In general, the identity formation of the second generation of displaced Muslims, at least in the present context, has been influenced by four different contexts or processes (see Figure 21). First, their family environment or the households into which they were born; second, they have been influenced by interactions with networks of peers of their own (displaced) community who live within or outside the settlements, welfare centres and camps; third, and most important, they develop social networks with local youth in the host community through sport, education and social and religious activities. A 17 year-old man expressed such feelings clearly.

I don't care about who I am. When I go to a mosque or play cricket I am friendly with all…some of my best friends [*koottali*] are local [host community] boys. I haven't come across any hateful or insulting incidents so far…We used to eat and share things together…We like being here because we have lived almost all of our life here.

Finally, there is an interaction beyond the local context. Displaced youth who study or work in Colombo, Kandy and sometimes overseas form a transnational identity. They are well versed in modern communication technologies (that is, facebook, email, skype so on) and have social connections with people outside the country as well. Therefore, compared with their parents, the 'identity' of the second generation is moulded by a larger 'social space' which is making them a group of people with 'multiple' identities. These complex patterns of social connections and multiple identities have influenced the second generation of displaced people greatly in their decisions to return (or not) to the north after the war ended.
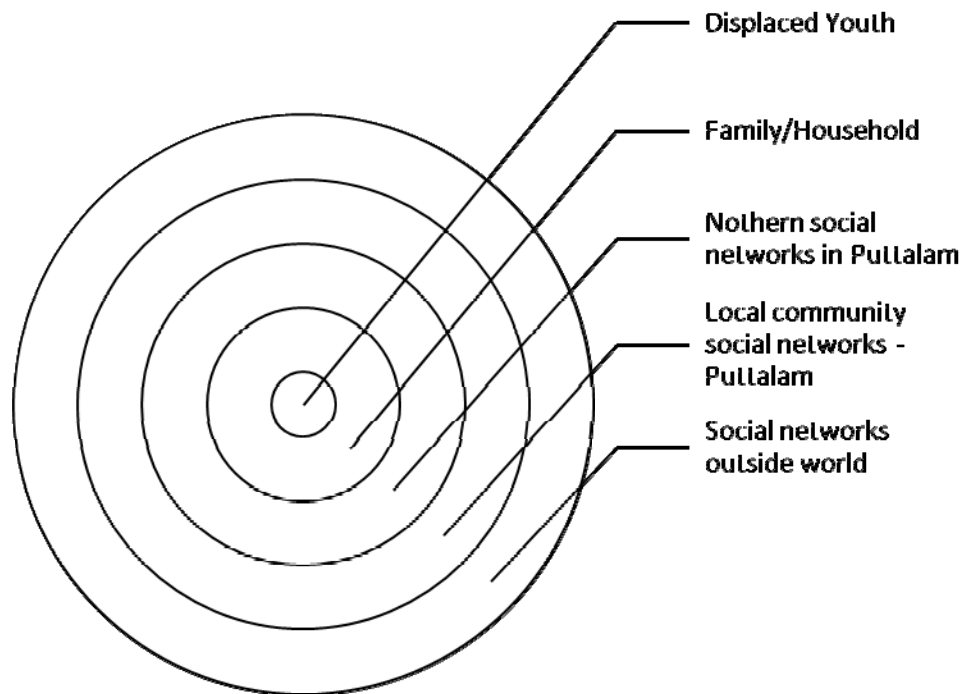
**Figure 21**: Social networks affecting identity formation of young generation of IDPs

Identity formation in exile is a key theme in Malkki's work *Purity and Exile* (1995b). She compares Hutu refugees settled in camps with those living dispersed in towns in Tanzania. She make some important observations and comparisons about how Hutu 'refugees in camps' and 'refugees in town' perceive and reconstruct their identities. The camp refugees attempt to refine their ethnic consciousness and boundaries by relating their history as a group of people persecuted and forced to leave their homes. They continuously resist any form of integration and refuse to interact with local host communities. The town refugees on the other hand, see local integration as a better option and therefore construct multiple identities which have both Hutu and refugee connotations (Malkki 1995b: 21). For the camp refugees who have a deep sense of historical roots with their ethnicity, living in exile is a period of political empowerment and return is the highly preferred solution to their refugee status (1995b: 230).

Mallki's comparison of 'town' and 'camp' refugees has some similarities and the difference between first and second generation displaced Muslims. The first generation of displaced persons are more like Hutu camp refugees. They have a deeply rooted sense of belonging to the north and have a strong desire to go back to their places of origin there. The political solution to their displacement is developing a northern Muslim identity to secure their rights. The second generation on the other hand, is more like the Hutu town refugees who have been more exposed to the local culture and modern lifestyle and want to remain settled in Puttalam. A return to their parents' homes is not an attractive option for them and it is seen as a backward step in life. They want to construct an identity that combines being a northern person and being a person raised or born in Puttalam. They have come to see themselves as modern, ready to face challenges, and as catalysts of change through their living in exile. Their political project is to develop a broader regional Muslim (ethno-religious) identity as opposed to a return to a northern (Tamil-speaking) identity. A key informant (KI 1) who is a second-generation displaced person made this point.

> I don't think all Muslims came from the north will go back to their places even when the war ends. It is hard for us go back because it would be starting our life again from scratch. This place [Nurachcholai] only became developed after we came. When we came [he was a 14 year-old], Nurachcholai had only ten to fifteen shops. Now there are more than 200 shops and lots of people. We changed this place from a village to a town. If the government opens the Mannar–Puttalam main road, this area one day will become a Muslim majority region like Ampara.[88]

In Malkki's work, the Hutu refugees had two options. One was to refine an identity through cultivating a difference from the host community and preparing for return (camp refugees). The second was to minimize differences from the host community, integrate with local people and become citizens (town refugees). However, in Puttalam as I observed there is, a third possible path: to construct an identity in which displaced people share religion but have a territorial affiliation. Identity is constructed that is both shared with and distinct from the host community. Thus, construction of distinct identity in Puttalam is seen by northern Muslims as not only a way to build a collective present and future but also as an adaptive strategy.

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[88] Ampara is a district of Eastern Province which is the only Muslim majority (41 per cent) region in the country. During the war, the main road linking the Northern district of Mannar and Puttalam was closed. Even after the war ended in 2009, the road remain closed to the public.

## Conclusion

The process of the formation of an identity that includes both their place of origin and place of settlement has been influenced by a range of social, political and cultural factors. The camps and welfare centres where a large number of northern Muslims settled originally are now transformed into permanent settlements. New settlements, supported by the government or self-initiated by the displaced Muslims, are on the increase. However, the bureaucratic approach and host community responses have still not changed to accommodate northern Muslims as local citizens or partners of everyday life in Puttalam.

In order to respond to the host community and bureaucratic challenges, northern Muslims adopted a place-making process by reterritorializing their settlements in Puttalam, thus differentiating them from the host community village boundaries. They established settlements through collective purchase of land or in the state provided lands and settled as communities of shared memories as people of the north. Local integration as a solution to the displacement is complex and has a significant impact on both the hosts and displaced Muslims. Though the government is making efforts to integrate displaced Muslims with local communities through housing assistance, such support often perpetuates segregation and resentment among displaced persons rather than inclusion of them in the host community.

Naming new settlements by reference to the original home villages in the north and Islamic terms is another strategy that displaced people adopt in establishing their unique presence in Puttalam. The increased influence of Islamic culture by migration of displaced Muslims to Middle Eastern countries for work and the donation from rich oil-producing countries of Arab world to build housing schemes for northern Muslims prompted many to give their camps and settlements Islamic names. The names, however, not only reflect the increased tendency to develop new homes and bonding in Puttalam but also developing religious attachments with outside world.

The formation of new forms of identity among displaced northern Muslims is a complex phenomenon and is in constant flux. There is a clear difference in the identities

and aspirations between the first and second generations of displaced people. The identity of the first generation is still largely influenced by their strong attachment to the homes and habitats in the north. However, the second generation who were born in and grew up in Puttalam, present a hybrid identity that has both northern and local characteristics. The self-identity of young displaced Muslims is somewhat similar to what Malkki found among the town refugees in Tanzania, who want to be a modern and a new generation of migrant (displaced) people. Thus, the identity formation of young displaced Muslims is often ambiguous and is constructed through various internal and external social networks. The extent to which being displaced is part of the second generation's identity is questionable.

Displaced Muslims, like other migrant communities, are not 'people out of place' nor have they simply lost their identities because they were forced to leave their original habitats. Displaced Muslims attempt to reinvoke their homes and form new identities to adapt to the existing social circumstances. Today, for most of them, Puttalam is a 'home away from home'. The next chapter describes the strategies which they adopted to strengthen their social position as a distinct community and rebuild their lives after displacement.

**CHAPTER FIVE**

## LIVING DISPLACED: POST-DISPLACEMENT LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES

> I came with my parents when I was around ten years old. I saw my *umma* [mother] and *waapa* [father] struggling to feed us in those days…I remember, when I was in Mannar, one of my uncles used to go deep-sea [*kadal*] fishing and he was a good diver…After my A-level studies I went to Saudi [Arabia]. I worked on a farm and learned diving. I came back after two years and started deep-sea fishing to catch sea leeches. One of my friends in Saudi gave me contacts for a few foreign [Germany] tourist hotels where there is a good demand for sea leeches. I made contact with some of them. I started catching sea leeches with two other friends. Now I get requests from foreign countries to export sea leeches. It is a hard business but it is good money. It is also considered illegal. Since the local police people are good with me I have no problem yet. But many local fishermen are unhappy about my business.
>
> Rasool, 30 year-old man (LI 6), displaced from Mannar 17 years ago

## Introduction

Rasool, one of the entrepreneurial young displaced men I met at his *vaadiya*[89] in the Kalpitiya beach area, is now a wealthy businessman. He invested the money he earned from two years of work in Saudi Arabia in a deep-sea fishing business. Now he employs three male relatives as divers to catch sea leeches, using fibreglass motor boats and expensive diving equipment. He receives orders from foreign tourist hotels via email. All transactions are carried out through online banking which few local fishermen are aware of. Rasool's case illustrates the ways in which some displaced northern Muslims have made a transition from dependence on aid to an autonomous and a dynamic lifestyle. Many are laboriously attempting to build new lives in their displaced localities, which involves the accumulation of assets and economic bonding (*sondham*) with the new place.

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[89] A *vaadiya* is a hut/small tent that fishermen build on the shores to spend time in when they are fishing during the monsoon off-season.

In this chapter, I argue that living as a displaced person does not always mean living in limbo. Displacement as being 'out of place' does not necessarily mean that people pass their time without trying to change their circumstances. Many are not passive recipients of aid and assistance but are actively making life meaningful even under difficult circumstances. There is always some type of local economy that develops in a situation of long-term displacement. In Puttalam, people who have lived in camps and settlements over a protracted period tend to find various sources of livelihood to cope with the economic challenges. The making of livelihoods while living between the past and future is common among the displaced (see Loizos 2008; Zetter 1994). As is discussed in the following sections, like Rasool, many displaced Muslims draw on their past to reinvent their lives in the once dry and uninhabited lands in Puttalam. Thus, for many, a life 'in between' is not necessarily a barren one nor one spent waiting for return.

This chapter discusses how displaced people in Puttalam overcame the initial difficulties of life in exile and developed strategies to cope with the challenges in the new physical and social environment. It further explores how their post-displacement livelihood strategies and economic practices have affected pre-displacement gender roles and intra-familial relationships. Finally, the chapter identifies some of the emerging patterns of social stratification among displaced northern Muslims as a result of changes in their socioeconomic status during the post-displacement period.

## Post-displacement livelihood strategies

Displaced Muslims not only lost their homes and properties in the north but also their livelihoods, job opportunities and freedom. Economic losses were disastrous because they owned livestock and some of the most fertile agricultural lands, and were prominent in farming, fishing and trade. But, as a community, they are gradually overcoming the difficulties, moving from living 'in limbo' to being catalysts of social and economic change in the places where they currently live. In spite of the damaging losses and psychological trauma, displaced Muslims' economic recovery during the past fifteen years has been impressive. As reported by the district secretary (KI 13), in four divisional secretariat divisions in Puttalam with large majorities of displaced Muslims, there have been pockets of economic growth over the past ten years that can be

attributed to displaced Muslims. They constitute more than one-third of the labour force in these divisions. In one division (Kalpitiya), displaced Muslims are the majority in both the agricultural labour force and non-farm occupations.[90]

### *Working as wage labourers: The main survival strategy*

The years 1991–95 were a watershed for displaced Muslims, and they were able to capitalize on the demand for wage labour created by the rapid economic growth in the district at the time of their arrival. In both of my field sites, displaced Muslims made agriculture and fishing their main sources of livelihood. However, many had never thought of working as farm labourers in the sandy and hot conditions of Puttalam. As noted in the previous chapter, nearly half of the northern Muslims owned land in their places of origin and engaged in rice faming or other crop cultivation prior to their displacement (World Bank Social Assessment Report 2006). Those who had owned farm land and fishing boats, and had established livelihoods in the north suffered greatly in adjusting to the local conditions and became very vulnerable, as has been the case among people among other displaced people (Loizos 2008;Zetter1999). In Puttalam, agriculture is not as viable a way to make a living as it was where they lived prior to displacement. Instead, livelihoods have become centred around wage-earning, commercialized activity. Thus, while working on onion and chilli farms is not a new economic practice for most of the displaced people, what is new and socially degrading is that they must work as wage labourers for others.

Most displaced families came to Puttalam without any assets or savings, and thus were not in a position to buy land for farming. They had no alternative but to work for wages in the occupations most similar to their previous experiences at home. Since displaced people have no economic and social capital in new and unfamiliar environments they are forced to accept the harsh realities of new economic strategies (Holtzman & Nezam 2004). The consequences of forced displacement are severe and lead to a decline in individual and household assets (Cernea 1997: 1572). The impoverishment and economic recovery processes and coping strategies that displaced people adopt to overcome such vulnerability are well captured by Cernea (1997, 2000) and Muggah (2000) in their analyses of development-induced displacement and conflict-induced

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[90] Key informant interview with district secretary, Puttalam.

displacement. They have developed models for understanding these situations and have applied them to a range of displacement contexts.

Among the means used by displaced Muslims to overcome initial uncertainties and challenges, coolie work (*kooli velai*), working as casual wage labourers in onion and chilli gardens owned by local farmers, is one of the main livelihood strategies. Although local people, faith-based and philanthropic organizations, and a few international NGOs gave food aid and initially helped displaced people to find temporary settlements, such help did not continue and was not enough to meet their needs after a few months. A man (LI 1) with three children who had owned a five-acre rice farm in Mannar recounted his experiences finding a living in the initial stage of his displaced life:

> I went out every morning in search of work. Some days I helped local fishermen to take the fish from their boats when they arrived on shore around 10 or 11 in the morning. On such days they give me two or three fish and 100 rupees. However, such work was not always available. As many of our people were competing with each other, only a few got such work. After a few months of support from people and NGOs, we had to struggle for survival [*vaalrathukku valy-illai*]. Although my wife had not worked as a coolie before, she had the experience of working on our own farm in Mannar. So she started to go with other women who worked on the onion farms. On those days I looked after the kids at home.

As discussed previously, Puttalam, especially the Kalpitiya area, was undergoing significant economic transition at the time the displaced people arrived. The changes took place mostly after the escalation of the war in the north, in the mid-1980s. Prior to the war, coconut farming formed the main crop cultivation in Puttalam and the district was considered the main supplier of coconuts to Northern Province (Shanmugaratnam 2000: 16). Jaffna, Vavunia and Kilinochchi in Northern Province produced onion, chilli and tobacco for the markets in Colombo and southern parts of the country. With the beginning of the war, there was a dramatic shift in agricultural commodity production in Puttalam as well as in the northern region. The war had a severe impact on the commercial crop production in Jaffna and other parts of the north.[91] The intensification of the armed conflict disrupted agricultural production and vast areas of farm lands were

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[91] See Gunasinghe (1988) for a detailed analysis of the economy and agriculture in the northern region prior to the war.

abandoned by farmers. At the same time, border districts and main cities such as Anuradhapura, Dambulla, Puttalam and Polonnaruwa (Kaduruwela) became the main centres of agriculture production and marketing where there were comparative economic advantages. In particular, the Puttalam district experienced significant agricultural development because of its geographical location, suitable climatic conditions for some of the crops grown in the north (onion and chilli) and the availability of ground water for pump irrigation required for intensive farming (Shanmugratnam 2000: 17). Also, the disruption to the coconut trade between Puttalam and Northern Province compelled coconut farmers to invest in commercial crop cultivation on their lands. A Sinhalese local businessman (LI 15) described the changes to the agricultural economy of Puttalam in the early 1990s:

> Many of our coconut farmers experienced losses because they couldn't continue the coconut trade with the northern area [*uthuru palathe*] due to road blocks and the war in the late 1980s. Lots of coconut lands were left unattended. Then some converted their farms to onion and chilli cultivation and made good profits. When IDPs came from Mannar in large numbers, many coconut farms were converted to cultivation of onion and other crops. Since they [displaced Muslims] were ready to work for low wages, some large land owners [coconut farms] got huge profits by employing them. Some others divided their coconut lands and leased them out to others [of the local host community] to engage in onion and chilli cultivation [contract farming].

Agriculture in most parts of the Sri Lanka is a labour-intensive activity. Coolie or casual labour is required for land preparation, planting, weeding, watering and harvesting of onion, chilli and vegetables on a large scale. Starting from the late 1980s, land that was not productively used before were brought under cultivation for such crops with ground water pumped by local land owners. Prior to the arrival of displaced people from the north, the casual labour was supplied by local poor Muslims and Sinhalese from the surrounding villages. However, the demand for casual labour increased with the growing number of local host community land owners beginning to invest in onion and vegetable crops through contract (tenant) farming arrangements with displaced Muslims who had prior experience in farming. As a result, the local labour market was overwhelmed by the displaced Muslims by the mid-1990s. As illustrated in the above quote, farm owners found that employing displaced people was more profitable than hiring local people. It was exploitation of labour on the one hand and the provision of a

means of livelihood for people who were struggling, on the other hand (see Shanmugaratnam: 2000).

The arrival of large numbers of displaced Muslims and an increased demand for wage labour also had a significant impact on gender roles. Prior to displacement, women were confined to their home environments or worked only on their own farms in the north. However, the vulnerability and marginalization created by the sudden, forced displacement led many of them to leave their traditional gender roles and find work in Puttalam. As one elderly displaced woman said, it was difficult for displaced men to find work as there was stiff competition from local men and local famers were prepared to hire women as their wages were significantly lower than men's. Many Muslim women who had not done outside work before, started working on farms as coolies and became the chief earners for their families.

During planting and harvesting seasons, the demand for coolie labour increased. Some displaced men earned money by acting as brokers or contacts, collecting people for a particular farm owner. Some displaced men visited houses in the settlement camps in the evening and chose women for the next day of farm work. Displaced women who engage in coolie work started at 7 am and come home after sunset (7 pm). While working in the fields, women are given breakfast (slices of locally made white bread with *sambols* – coconut and chilli salads). Some take lunch from home, but most coolie workers get some food from farm owners. Coolie work involves around 10 to 12 hours in extremely sunny and hot conditions (see Figure 22), so women cover their heads with cloths or head scarves *(mukkadu)*.

> We have no time to rest or relax while working in the farm fields. We are allowed to have 15 to 30 minutes break for the morning tea and lunch. The farm owner stays in the field with us until we finish the work in the evening. We are sometimes warned against talking to each other while working in the field. Therefore, we do not talk much because we all afraid of losing the coolie work. We are paid after the work on the same day and it is the only money to buy the home needs at the end of the day (LI 17).

**Figure 22**: Women coolie workers harvesting green chilli peppers in Kalpitiya



Source: Authors' register

Women are paid around LKR 90 to 125 (ca. AUD 2) per day. Initially, there was no fixed wage for coolie work. Since the displaced people had little bargaining power, they were forced to accept whatever wages were given at the end of the day. However, such exploitative labour practices have been brought to the attention of some NGOs and at present women are earning around 150 rupees while men earn 200 rupees per day as coolie workers.

Over the years, women have become accustomed to working hard in the harsh conditions on onion and chilli farms. When I asked some women whom I met on a chilli farm about problems they faced being exposed to life outside their homes, none of them replied. But I have been told by other research participants that there has been verbal abuse of women by farm owners. Women are also adversely affected by exposure to the harsh conditions of continuous work in open fields during planting and harvesting seasons. One woman (LI 36) from Mannar, who now stays at home because she lost the vision in her left eye, spoke of the exhausting and difficult nature of the work on such farms:

> There are seven in the family. All my children were young when we arrived here and my husband could not find work. Then women in the camp started going to work in the onion farms so I joined them. In the morning we were taken by tractors to some places far from the camps. Then we started work in the farms in

extremely hot weather [*uchcha veil*]. Dry winds blew sand very hard into our faces. We had to cover our faces and heads to protect ourselves. But when we came home our eyes got red because of the heat and the dust…I lost the vision in my left eye about a year ago. The doctor said it was unlikely that he could help me to get my vision back because it is damaged. Now I don't work. My elder son is now 30 years old. He is now taking care of our family. I am taking care of his children and household chores.

As competition for labour increased, coolie work was not always available for the displaced women. Casual labour also requires a certain amount of social networking. There are middlemen and brokers to arrange such work. It is necessary to have good social relations with those middlemen in order to get work. Some women worked continuously with the local farmers. Also there were seasons where there were good harvests and at other times, bad seasons, when the crops were destroyed by disease or drought. In a good harvest, land owners want more coolie workers and women sometimes took their family members with them. Women commonly work in groups on these farms. Older women, who have had to take coolie work on onion farms for the last fifteen years, talk about feeling satisfied as their hard work is an investment in rebuilding their lost lives. They want to see their sons and daughters through school. Some of them were in tears as they described to me their experiences and hardships.

> I don't regret it now because I somehow managed to educate my children. I was worried about them when we came here. We had nothing. My husband was worried and could not find any job to enable him to buy clothes or books for children to send them to school. I worked for more than ten years as a coolie. Now, *masha Allah* [with God's help] my children are grown up and they are in good positions (LI 17).

Coolie work, like other occupations, has become very competitive. With the increase in population, many people seek this casual work. Because of the limitations of land and water resources, the increased population and the shift of crop cultivation to other parts of the country, the local economy has not been fully equipped to provide a good living for both locals and the displaced. It is not only the displaced men and women who depend on casual wage employment or coolie work on farms and have found it difficult to cope with a drop in income and lack of livelihood opportunities in the area, but also the poorer local people. This has produced tensions and some local men were angry

when asked about what they feel about displaced Muslims, explaining that they now face many problems because of displaced people around their villages. Today, many local poor families see displaced people as a threat to their future. A participant in a focus group discussion of host community men said, 'We are the poor and displaced now. IDPs are now getting rich and living better than us. Our jobs are grabbed by them. Our lands are taken by them.'

A local community member who participated in focus group discussions told me that local poor families do not get substantial government support (except Shamudhi food stamps).[92] The displaced families get monthly food rations, grants to replace roof materials and other relief packages from NGOs. Working on farms for low wages provides additional income for them. For locals, however, it is the sole income source. Currently, among the locals (both Sinhalese and Muslims), there is a widespread feeling of being overpowered by the displaced people and many of them want to see Muslims from the north sent back by the government:

> Our people [*oor-vasikhal*] are angry with some NGOs and projects because they all are helping only displaced people. But our people can't do much because we don't have strong political leaders like theirs. They also have NGOs of their own. But our people have not yet realized the future danger as they are now getting an upper hand in everything here. We hope that they will return after the war.

> Focus group meeting with local community men.

### Fishing in troubled waters in Kalpitiya

In Kalpitiya lagoon and on the coastal belt that stretches from Chilaw to Mannar bay (see Map 13) there are settlements of fishing communities comprising mostly Sinhalese Christians and Tamils. Before the displaced people arrived in the 1990s, fishing in the area was dominated by migrant fishermen and very few local Muslims and Sinhalese Buddhists were engaged in fishing (Ranaweera Banda 2003: 5). With the beginning of the civil war in the 1980s, the number of migrant fishermen has increased because of security restrictions in fishing in certain areas on the north-western coast. Hundreds of

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[92] Shamurdhi is monthly government food aid given to all households below the national poverty line (that is, with a monthly income of less than LKR 2500).

fishermen from the border of the Mannar district and Chilaw migrated and temporarily settled mainly in the Kalpitya coastal area.

**Map13**: North-western coast of Sri Lanka



Source: Google.maps.ownersdirect.com.uk

When the displaced Muslims arrived, local people in Puttalam engaged in three types of fishing: lagoon fishing, deep-sea fishing and prawn farming. Most fishermen in the area had been engaged in lagoon fishing for many years. But prawn farming was introduced in the late 1980s mostly as export-oriented business ventures owned by either local politicians or businessmen from Colombo. At the time displaced people began to arrive in Puttalam, prawn farming was at a peak and was a lucrative business. However, due to the ecological effects on the coastal environment and the decline of the export market, it has been abandoned by most who started it (Dayaratne *et al* 1995). Lagoon fishing was the most prevalent type of fishing in Kalpitiya area. It is relatively safe – fishermen walk just a few metres into the lagoon to catch fish (Figure 23). In the early morning, one can see fishermen using nets (*valai)* and hooks to catch fish. They also use small canoes (*vallam*) or other wooden boats called *theppam.* High-powered motor boats are rarely used but some fishermen who engage in deep-sea fishing use such boats in the lagoon when they cannot go fishing in deep seas during the monsoon season.

Nearly one-third of the displaced families that came from Mannar, Mulliathivu and Kilinochci districts had experience in fishing for their livelihood. Some of them owned

boats and were very skilled. Many of them came to Puttalam with hopes of engaging in their old profession. Once they arrived they saw that they could take advantage of what they considered to be the poor fishing practices of the local fishermen. They first joined with local fishermen as helpers, pulling fishing nets and going out with them in boats. In return, they got fish for family consumption.

Gradually, many of those who were experienced fishermen prior to displacement started to expand their fishing activities. They saw that fishing was done in common waters and there was no immediate opposition from local fishermen. The local fishermen allowed the newcomers to fish in certain areas, and were sympathetic and friendly towards them as they struggled to make a living. As the number of displaced people increased over the years combined with scarcity of other income sources such as coolie work, even displaced persons who did not have any pre-displacement experience started fishing. The capital required was relatively small. As a result, the initial goodwill of local fishermen towards displaced Muslims declined. As displaced people began to fish in large numbers, overfishing occurred, diminishing the income derived from the lagoon. This has made the local fishermen feel threatened and they have sought a number of solutions to stop the displaced people fishing in the 'local territory' (in the lagoon and on the shores). Since 2000, fishing in Kalipitya lagoon has created much tension between the host and displaced communities of Aalankuda. There have been serious confrontations between local and displaced fishermen over the sharing of resources such as lagoon and other fishing locations (Ranaweera Banda 2003: 21 Shanmugaratnam 2000: 28;).

The arrival of northern Muslims has affected lagoon and deep-sea fishing because of the increased number of people who want to share the limited resources in the area. In 1996, displaced Muslim fishermen in Aalankuda formed their own organizations with the help of NGOs. But such organizations existed only at an informal level since the members of the fishermen societies were displaced persons and not considered residents by government officials (Shamugratnam 2000: 30). The host community also formed fishermen associations and lodged complaints with government authorities, demanding that only local fishermen be allowed to fish in the lagoon. They went onto demarcate separate fishing territories for local families living along the lagoon side in order to restrict 'illegal' fishing by displaced fishermen. This action was aimed at reducing confrontations but also marked a significant change in the ownership of fishing

resources. Such demarcation of territories by local fishermen and the formation of fisheries societies changed the status of the lagoon from 'common property' to 'private property' (Shanmugaratnam 2000: 31). As a result, the number of displaced fishermen engaged in lagoon fishing has declined. When I asked host community members why local fishermen had been so harsh towards displaced fishermen, one (KI 17) replied that they had not expected that the northern Muslims would stay for such a long time in their villages:

> When they came to our area we felt sorry and let them catch fish in the lagoon. We thought they would leave in few months for their home places. Later, our people [local fishermen] realized that the displaced people were destroying all the lagoon resources. So our people decided to stop [them] engaging in lagoon fishing without our permission.

Even at the time of my field work (2007–8), among the many issues between displaced people and the locals, the pressure and competition created by displaced people in fishing was one of the core disputes between the displaced people and the locals. The 'Muslim brotherhood' and the reception extended by local Muslims towards northern displaced Muslims at the time of their arrival did not last. A local man expressed his feelings at one of the focus groups saying: 'We as Muslims like to share resources and protect fellow Muslims. But we don't need people in our villages challenging our rights and grabbing our resources.'

Unlike lagoon fishing, deep-sea fishing requires skills, modern equipment and a courage to face rough conditions. Not many host community fishermen engaged in such fishing at the time the displaced people arrived in Puttalam. Displaced Muslims from Mannar and Mullaithivu, however, had prior experience in it and were looking for an opportunity to restart making their living in Puttalam. Some of them were good divers and were skilled at catching rare fish varieties, using modern equipment. This gave the displaced fishermen an advantage over the local fishermen who had little experience in the use of modern equipment. However, displaced fishermen were initially only able to work for the wealthy fishermen and local boat owners because they had lost their own boats and equipment in the expulsion. Big boat owners took advantage of the situation and hired displaced fishermen as skilled labourers. However, with support from NGOs and money sent by relatives from abroad, several displaced fishermen started deep-sea fishing on their own. As a result of the increased number of persons involved in the

fishing, disputes between local and displaced fishermen have also been reported over 'landing' locations and the use of heavy motor boats. As of 2008, most such situations have been brought under control by government fisheries authorities and displaced fishermen are allowed to engage in deep-sea fishing under certain conditions.

Deep-sea fishing in the Mannar Bay area of the Arabian Sea (between southern India and the north-west coast of Sri Lanka) by fishermen in Puttalam is considered one of the dynamic sectors of the local economy (Figure 24). As mentioned in the opening to this chapter, displaced fishermen like Rasool made the local fishing industry more diverse and dynamic, by using their entrepreneurial skills and experience to cope with trends and challenges. Though displaced people have no fishing rights on the beaches and lagoon areas of Puttalam, they continue their fishing and negotiate a fair trade with the locals. Their abilities and skills are now proven in their role as the experts in deep-sea fishing. A host community member in a focus group meeting disputed his fellow members' negative opinions of the displaced Muslims, saying: 'If they leave Kalpitya this area will go back to the old situation. This area is more active today because of displaced people.' The dynamic role play by displaced Muslims in Puttalam is also an example of how forced migrants can transform themselves into economic migrants who make opportunities for improved livelihood and income. While these people face challenges and economic hardships, they also find alternative livelihood strategies.

**Figure 23**: Lagoon fishing, Puttalam



Source: http://farm4.static.flickr.com

**Figure 24**: Returning after deep-sea fishing, Kalpitiya



Source: Author's register

*Government relief and subsidies: Uses and abuses of ration cards*

Government relief plays a major role in the displaced people's economy. As a result of expulsion, displaced Muslims have become a liability to the government – a category of people in need and 'people out of place' (*idam peyarntha makkal*). State subsidies and relief packages, which are institutionalized for this IDP category in the local context, help the displaced to gain an uninterrupted living as 'rightful aid recipients.'(Brun 2008). Among the forms of assistance[93] provided by the government, monthly food subsidies through ration cards have both symbolic and economic value to the displaced families. The value of rations varies according to the size of the household; the maximum value of the monthly rations paid to a family of five or more is LKR 1,200. The rations include rice, dhal, coconut oil and sugar which are considered as essential food items (Table 5.1).

**Table 5.1**: Food items and values of ration card provision for displaced households

| Food items included in the ration card | Value of ration provisions |
|---|---|
| Rice 12 kg | For family of five or more, LKR 1200 |
| Dhal 1.5 kg | Family of four, LKR 1008 |
| Sugar 6 kg | Family of three, LKR 840 |
| Coconut oil 750ml | Family of two, LKR 616 |
| | Single person, LKR 336 |

Source: Secretariat for the Northern Displaced Muslims; Shanmugaratnam (2000: 9)

Symbolically, the ration card is like an identity card or a social security card that provides a family with a number of labels such as 'temporary residents', 'dependents of government food aid', 'poor and needy person'. The cards are issued by the government through village officers (*grama niladhari*, GN) and are considered valuable documents that can be used as proof of belonging to the camp and of eligibility for assistance. For example, when I was doing field work in 2007, a selection criterion of 'duration of stay in Puttalam' for housing grants provided through a World Bank project was challenged by those households who did not receive them. One of the measures that the project officers used to remedy the mistakes in selection was to check whether the families had ration cards to prove their length of stay in Puttalam.

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[93] Displaced families receive various allowances from the government, including assistance to construct temporary houses, assistance with roof materials and a marriage allowance if someone in the family is to wed. There is also a settlement allowance of LKR 2,000 (Secretariat for the Northern Displaced Muslims, Puttalam).

The ration card is the most reliable source of livelihood for displaced people. Although government and relief agencies had planned to withdraw the ration card benefits from those who had found employment, this plan was not implemented until 2008 and many displaced households continue to depend on ration cards for a living. The card is used in several ways by displaced Muslims. It is a tool of trade in local economy. As told by both local and displaced members, the cards are not used for the sole purpose of getting food from the cooperative shops. They are also used as assets that can be traded as collateral to get money for urgent needs and to fulfil other non-food family requirements. Families can pawn or sell the card to someone else for money. This is known as 'ration card business'. Both local and displaced people are aware of how the cards are being used. The most popular trading of ration cards takes place within the camp or settlement itself. Although the GN who issues the cards is aware of such misuse, he overlooks it, as it is now well established. He might even be a part of the trade that involves camp leaders, middlemen and shop owners. The shop owners in local townships and Puttalam town are aware of the timing of the distribution of food items to the displaced and of the quality of the food items available with ration cards. I have been told by close partners in the field that trading involves bribery and commissions to those taking part in the business. The GN is mostly invisible in this process though he plays a major role in the transactions. He takes commissions through camp leaders or brokers and middlemen who are members of displaced families in a settlement or camp.

Ration card business takes place in many different ways. Pawning is the most common method. Cards are pawned to the local trader for a price negotiated through the middlemen (most often a leader or well known person of the camp). The price given for the card is lower than its total monetary value. For example, a card that has a value of LKR 1200 can be pawned for a maximum of LKR 800 for one or two years (see Figure 25). It means that the displaced family that owns the card cannot use it for the period that has been pawned and the trader who purchased it can get subsidies on the card or even can sell it outright to another shopkeeper. The money a displaced person gets (LKR 800 x 24 months) by pawning the ration card is used for variety of purposes, including buying a TV, constructing or renovating a house, purchasing a piece of land or providing a daughter's dowry.

**Figure 25**: Sample of ration card issued to a displaced household



Source: Secretariat for the Northern Displaced Muslims, Puttalam

The second method is to sell the card to a local trader (a shop keeper in the neighbourhood or township) and purchase other items of less value from him. The local trader then gets the food items in bulk, using the ration card, from the cooperative shop in the evening or night without the seller knowing that this is an illegal transaction. Selling of the ration cards is done mostly in urgent situations, such as to obtain medicine for children, or pay children's tuition fees. At the beginning, traders and middlemen came to the camps after the day of food distribution to purchase food from the displaced families. However, later, the middlemen role was taken over by the camp leader or another person in the settlement. The local cooperative shop manager plays a central role in this ration card business. For example, if good quality rice and food items are received by the government to distribute to displaced households, the co-op manager informs local traders about it. Then local traders send their assistants and middlemen to collect ration cards, paying a better price in this case, or they encourage people to sell the rice at a lower price.

However, there have been times when families received low quality food from the cooperative shops. In these situations, some displaced people objected and complained about the poor quality of their rations. Many kept silent, however, because nothing much can be done against the powerful co-op shop manager and his ration card racket. According to informants, at the beginning some displaced people used to resell low quality food items at a lower price to either local poor families or to traders who are willing to buy. Local poor families, who have no permanent incomes, are aware of the dates of rations issued to the displaced and they keep money to purchase dahl, rice and sugar from them at a lower price. As of 2008, the transactions have become very organized, though families do not engage in selling or pawning ration cards publicly. It is done covertly; all transactions are done through mobile phones, and the ration card owner gets the money from the middleman. Sometimes the ration card owner does not know who is keeping his or her card. A host community social worker (KI 17) explained:

> As I know, most of the camp people [*muhaam aatkal*] mortgage their ration cards for money. There was a time that they did it because they were in a desperate situation. This 'racket' is a popular secret [*ellorukkum therindha vidayam*]. But no one wants to make it public as there are many involved in the business. GN, co-op shop managers and camp leaders all are involved so no one wants to get their attention by mentioning this publicly. Even the politicians know about this.

The ration card is misused even by better-off displaced families. They still receive government rations although they can afford to cover their own expenses. They do not go to the local cooperative shop to collect their rations. The camp leader or co-op owner informs the better-off displaced household when they get quality food items to distribute. They all are known to each other. They are sometimes well connected through politics. Sometimes a third person delivers the food items to the doorstep of a family home during the night. (Not all better-off families use their ration cards; nevertheless, they keep them to prove their displaced identity.) Use of the ration card is a complex business, involving meticulous planning and coordination between different partners. It has also created a culture of dependence among some of the displaced people as they feel that they are entitled to such rations even though they can earn an income for their families.

Cheating and abuse of government benefits is not unique to Puttalam. The misuse of aid and relief assistance has been identified as common among refugees and displaced persons; such cheating is a way to maximize benefits ( Kibreab 2004; Kumsa 2006). Refugees and displaced people can behave in this manner under two different 'moral systems', depending on the type of institutions they interact with. They cheat only external institutions or agencies with which they have an 'impersonal' relationship, but do not behave unethically or cheat their fellow community members because of complex and close informal interactions among them as a community (Kumsa 2006: 249). However, in Puttalam, among displaced Muslims, the cheating is a 'known secret' to most, including politicians and bureaucrats. The ration card business involves host community shop keepers as well. Mosque leaders are aware of the practice and while they believe it is cheating, unethical and anti-Islamic, they ignore it because the process involves not only trade but also politics. Cheating involving ration cards is an institutionalized transaction in the local context.

### *Working as maids in Arab countries: Gains and losses*

Living as a displaced person for a prolonged period means a struggle for economic and social security, both for oneself and for one's family. Northern Muslims, after losing all their fixed assets in the sudden forceful eviction, strive to ensure that the younger generation is safe and able to live respectably. They have looked for diverse sources of income for the family as an investment in the future. Migration to to the Arab Middle East is one of the strategies that displaced people have used to overcome financial difficulties and revive themselves. It is considered a means by which to get a relatively large amount of money within a year or two in order to buy a piece of land or renovate or build a house. Some displaced women have migrated to work as maids in gulf countries for specific purposes such as to save enough money for dowries for their daughters.

Unlike in the pre-displacement situation, women are encouraged by men to go out and find work because so many displaced men can not find employment locally, because of discrimination and competition from the host community. Furthermore, the demand for Muslim maids in Arab countries is greater than for men and women of other ethnic groups (Deshingkar and Aheeyar 2006: 9), so Muslim Sri Lankan women have an advantage in that labour market. Women also have an advantage over men there because the agencies that find jobs in Arab countries charge less for unskilled labour

than for the skilled labour preferred by men.[94] Moreover, if men remain in Sri Lanka they are able to keep their entitlements for government aid and assistance. Men are also concerned about leaving their children and families alone if they migrate for work. 'It is difficult for me to get a job in the middle-east. If I go then my children and my wife have to be alone. This is a new place, not like our village. We can't leave our family alone in this new place' (LI 5).

According to the profiles of the Puttalam camps and settlements,[95] two to five families in each camp have a member who has worked or is currently working in a Middle Eastern country. Some women have spent two or more years abroad before returning. Compared with local Muslims, displaced Muslims are eager to have their women work in the Middle East. Sending women for work is not encouraged by local Muslims, though it has become a practice among some poor local Muslim families recently. In particular, elite host community Muslims and religious leaders have expressed serious concern about growing anti-Islamic behaviour among displaced Muslims, including the migration of women. Elite local Muslims believe that displaced Muslims are becoming anti-social and a threat to the local Muslim culture. A local community leader (KI 6) commented:

> Going to the Middle East has become popular in this area now because lots of IDP women migrate for work. Although some of our people [i.e., among the host community] also are now sending their womenfolk to the Middle East we generally don't like this. Not only [that], some of their young women work at night in some garment factories. This is totally unacceptable. Now somehow we are able to control this and their [displaced Muslim] mosque leaders are instructed to ban night-shift work for women. *Muhaam* [camp] people are money-minded. They are always looking at ways of getting money quickly. This is a totally new trend. Our culture and traditions have been ruined because of IDPs.

As for other poor Sri Lankan women, for displaced Muslim women, migration to Arab countries is a popular strategy for escaping poverty and vulnerability. People borrow

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[94] There are nearly 5,000 private employment agencies brokering job opportunities in Gulf countries. The government-run Foreign Employment Bureau oversees these agencies. For a maid's job LKR 25,000–30,000 must be paid to the agency, whereas the fee for a skilled job such as driver, carpenter, or electrical mechanic is LKR 60,000 or more.
[95] In 2005, under a World Bank project, social profiles were prepared for each displaced camp and settlement, which contain rich information on the socioeconomic status of displaced households.

money from relatives, pawn their ration cards or mortgage whatever jewellery the family has, in order to pay to agents to help them secure a job in the Middle East. Others have relatives working in the region, and through these networks they are able to find work as maids. The foreign exchange sent as remittances by migrant workers was a major source of national income for Sri Lanka in 2009 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2010). It is estimated that the annual labour outflow of Sri Lankan women is four times larger than for men, numbering nearly 163,000 women (Asian Migration Center1999: 12).

Migration for work is not, however, an option that all can afford. A minimum of LKR 20,000–30,000 is required to send a woman abroad to work as a maid. Thus, only those confident of getting this money back through earnings send women to work abroad. In other words, the destitute and poor people who depend solely on rations and wage labour for family income do not take such a risk; and only those who can already afford to, or who can borrow money from relatives, send women overseas for work.

Migration for work by displaced women has several social and economic consequences for the family as well as for the image of the woman. (Brun 2008: 207). According to the families who have members working in the Middle East, they were able to purchase a small land plot or to construct a permanent house to replace the temporary *cadjan* huts in welfare centres. The benefit also depends on how the household, or the husband of the woman abroad, manages the remittances. Some men invest the hard-earned money productively, building a new house, buying land, a boat for fishing or a three-wheel taxi. Others, however, spend the money on smoking, gambling and recreational tours with friends. In many situations, the children of a family whose mother has migrated for work abroad are negatively affected when the father does not maintain the household. In such families, the daughters of the family, sometimes at the age of twelve, start doing household chores. They are thus physically and psychologically affected by the absence of the mother.

Women often go to work abroad as maids more than once. The first visit, usually a two-year contract arranged by the employment agent, does not bring much economic gain to the family because of the costs of travel and agent fees. Once the women become familiar with the Arabic traditions, they qualify for a second and third chance to serve the same 'master' (employer), or another. Often the original master (*baaba* in Arabic)

pays the cost of the ticket for the subsequent journeys. Also, women who had migrated earlier help their relatives to obtain visas, and provide references for relatives at home (Deshingkar and Aheeyar 2006: 10). A woman who participated in a focus group said that 'women who worked in Saudi Arabia before like to go again because it is a kind of freedom from home. For some of them it was difficult to adjust to family circumstances after they had spent a few years abroad and enjoyed a different lifestyle.'

When the women migrate, they work without hindrance and are able to buy clothes and jewellery as they wish while abroad. They are able to dress like Arabic women (black gowns and head covered with *hijabs*, see Figure 26*)* and once they return they are respected by men and family members because of their economic dominance. It is hard, however, for women who return from working abroad, to endure the restricted freedom, the household work load and economic deprivation of life back at home. These social and economic factors influence some displaced women to go abroad more than once. It not only allows the households to strengthen their economic situation, but also enables women to become more empowered, independent and respected at home.

**Figure 26**: Muslim women in Islamic dress codes



Source: ISRC office, Puttalam

*Miniatures: Small businesses and local employment*

As locally available work opportunities and resources have shrunk over the years, displaced people have gradually explored self-employment opportunities in the camps, settlements and nearby townships, construction sites and with other organizations. Self-employment is becoming more prevalent and people assess emerging competition and risks continuously.

The younger generation of displaced people, in particular, who have completed university and technical college courses, are mostly successful and become school teachers, or are able to get salaried government or NGO jobs. Those who have not had a good education work as shop assistants, three-wheel taxi drivers and other similar jobs. As for self-employment, many people have started small businesses of one kind or another in their camps and settlements. There are small grocery stores and tea shops (food stalls) on every corner of the camps and welfare centres. During the day, the owners sell tea, sugar, and other essential daily needs. Cooked foods such as *roties, patties, wadai*,[96] and boiled sweet potatoes and cassava (*manchokka)* make the tea shop a busy place in the evening. Tea and coffee with cooked foods attract many people to stop for a while before going home. These tea shops are one of the many meeting points for displaced people in the camps. Some elderly women who are unable to find coolie work or work abroad rear poultry and goats on their small home plots. Although traditional agricultural practices in Puttalam are not viable for many displaced Muslims because they do not own lands, livestock farming, especially goat rearing, is becoming more important as the demand from outside traders increases. Some people have also transformed their small plots into home gardens, growing fruit such as guava, papaya and banana which are in demand locally. A guava farmer said 'every week I send about 200 guavas to Colombo. Now I have some people coming to collect guava in middle of the week. It is good money'.

As a result of these diverse economic activities, and the entrepreneurial abilities of displaced Muslims, some members of the host community have begun to acknowledge and praise them as a group who have changed the sleepy town of Norachcholai (Kalpitiya) into a 24-hour business hub:

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[96] These are local fast foods made from wheat flour and mixed vegetables.

After they [displaced people] came here everything had a money value. They are really good at business. For example, before they came nobody spent money for firewood. People collected firewood from the nearby forests. Today, however, many people buy firewood. Firewood selling is a good business. Before they came we did not do much business with clothes and grocery items. We had a turnover of about 3,000 rupees per day maximum. Now, we have an average turnover exceeding 10,000 rupees per day. This is because of the increased number of people in the town. I wonder what will happen if they all leave after the war.

From focus group discussion with local host community men.

After gaining control of their situation by initial hard work, many displaced Muslims are attempting to diversify their sources of income. However, as discussed, the recovery and rebuilding of the devastated lives of northern Muslims in Puttalam has not occurred suddenly, but through self-denial, enterprise, thrift and hard work in a conducive economic climate in the region over the fifteen years. The changing scenarios of displaced Muslims' economic and social status in Puttalam suggest that displaced people and refugees, like other migrants, can make a contribution to local socioeconomic structures to the extent that there are resources and opportunities on which to capitalize. But the social and economic progress of displaced Muslims is not equal and upward social mobility has not been even. As is shown in the next section, after nearly two decades of displacement, social and economic progress has also generated gender role changes, social divisions, dissent and disputes among northern Muslims.

## Gender and displacement: Changing roles

Displacement affects men and women differently. This is evident from the considerable efforts by researchers to include a gender perspective in 'forced migration' studies in the last two decades (Brun 2001; Gururaja 2000; Giles et al 2003; Mehta 2002; Turner 2000). When people are forced to leave their homes suddenly, former social support networks often break down in new and unfamiliar environments. Men and women adopt new roles and enter into new social relationships. In the pre-displacement social context, northern Muslim women worked with their husbands on the family farms and most were economically secure (Wanasundera 2006: 13). They played a supportive role

in farming to increase income by providing labour, but were largely confined to household chores and, because of religious traditions, were not much exposed to the outside world.

### *Displaced women: Pioneers of change*

With forced displacement, women have assumed new roles in sharp contrast to the notions of femininity and the traditional gender roles and values of the Muslim community. They have more responsibility as main income earners in their households. In the harvesting season, women who work as coolies on the onion and chilli farms lead more independent lives and are exposed to social networks other than their households, including male farm workers, farm owners or sub contractors. Displaced Muslim women are now free to converse with men in social environments that they were not acquainted with before. Men, on the other hand, usually do some of the household chores that women did at home. Preparing children for school and going to shops to collect rations are tasks undertaken by men. Other than that, many men spend most of their time without making much of a productive contribution to the household. Most household chores remain in the hands of women. Women farm workers must cook before they leave home in the morning for work. This has led to a heavy work load for women, especially those with young children. One displaced woman (LI 36) pointed out:

> Since we came to Puttalam, we have not had a single day to rest. In our former homes, we had three to four hours for meeting and talking. But now we have to do everything. Not only do we find work and earn some money for the family but we also look after the things at home as we did before. But in a way I am happy that I feel I am more useful and important to my family than before.

She indicates here that working women have gained economic empowerment by earning an income, and that work gives them some self-confidence. Over the years the locally available work in agricultural fields and the social circumstances of post-displacement living have prompted displaced women to play a proactive role in safeguarding their families. Nevertheless, the increased visibility of displaced women in the social and economic spheres has become a subject of dispute and argument between local and displaced people in those localities where the groups live in close proximity. As mentioned earlier, some local Muslims openly criticize displaced women as uncultured or un-Islamic as they travel and work in the same way as men:

> Our women never go out without our consent or without being accompanied by someone. However, some displaced Muslim women even go out at night and work with men on farms. This is so troubling to us. They are actually ruining our [local] culture (KI 17).

Apart from local wage-earning, the migration of displaced women to the Middle East has also changed the role of women at the intra-familial and community levels. Since displaced families have accumulated money through hard work over the past several years, they are now in a better position to pay private agents to get work as a maid. According to local men, displaced men are sending their wives abroad so that they will not need to work and will have the social and economic space to act independently. 'Some men do not hesitate to send their wives for any work. You can see many them in the town [Norachcolai] idling all the day.'

Women who migrate to Arab countries see migration also a way of rejuvanting Islamic ideologies and practices. As mentioned before, women who migrated to Arab countries adopt 'Arabic' dress codes and imported cosmetics to distinguish them from other women. I observed that displaced Muslim women who have been exposed to Middle Eastern lifestyles differ from those who had not – in how they approach visitors and present themselves in social situations such as meetings and discussions. For these women, acting and dressing differently is a kind of 'class' representation rather than a religious one. It affects traditional community bonds as well. Such an Islamic outlook, together with economic strength as the main income earner of the household, has empowered many such displaced women. Their migration has transformed gender relations and led to reconfigurations of everyday practices within a unified pan-Islamic code of conduct (Senanayake 2006).

NGOs and international relief agencies have also encouraged women to be more active socially by targeting them as recipients of aid and services such as micro finance, group savings, income generation and various training courses. As noted earlier, the 2006 World Bank Survey reported that about eleven per cent of the total displaced households in Puttalam were headed by women, who as a vulnerable group were targeted for housing and infrastructure support services (World Bank 2006: 42). According to Wanasundera (2006: 17), some NGOs consciously incorporate women into project activities mainly because of donor priorities. They provide women with

skills development, income generation and micro credit. This emphasis on women by NGOs has prompted displaced men in Puttalam to allow their wives and adult daughters to get involved in social and community projects. In focus groups, displaced young men expressed dissatisfaction about some of the NGO activities that target women. But married men were not opposed as such activities contribute to their household income and social security. As a result of the priority given to women in post-displacement humanitarian assistance by many INGOs, some displaced men have experienced a kind of 'moral breakdown' that they attribute to changes in gender relations (Turner 2000: 9).

These observations in Puttalam, and other research work in Sri Lanka (Brun 2008;Senanayake 1999; Wanasundera 2006) suggest that the decades-long conflict and resultant displacement opened new opportunities for women to overcome traditional conservatism, to achieve greater mobility and to participate in the public sphere. They have become symbols of both continuity *and* change (Brun 2008: 208). However, it is difficult to predict whether in future displaced Muslim women will continue their upward mobility in their social status in the household in the post-conflict context. The end of the civil war may reverse this situation and displaced Muslim women may be pushed back into their traditional roles in the household economy after they are resettled back to their places of origin (this is discussed further in Chapter Six). Alternatively, the role reversals might strengthen in the future as the men have lost their previous economic status and assets because of the displacement. In any case, Muslim women will continue to find it difficult to reach their full potential in the household because of the patriarchal social organization of Muslim society, which still considers men to be the key decision makers of the household.

### *Displaced youth: Catalysts of change*

Displaced youth, the second generation of unmarried men and women, represent a unique group of people having hopes and seeking recognition from their households as well as from outside society. As discussed in the previous chapter, they regard Puttalam as home. They generally mingle with the local youth, have a good education and have high hopes and aspirations. They have also introduced innovations such as deep-sea fishing and new businesses in the local townships. They are active in politics and religious activities. Most of them see Puttalam as a 'land of opportunity', a place to get a good education and have access to urban business and income opportunities.

However, this young generation of displaced Muslims is struggling to find its place in the post-displacement context. At the household level they have not been given due social respect until recently and are considered by their parents as 'immature'. Many unmarried men live with their parents and sleep in the open spaces (*thinnai*, a covered entrance or porch) of the house. Those who were young when they came to Puttalam faced more problems than those who were born and grew up there. The following remarks made by second-generation men in a FGD illustrate their past and present status in their homes and also their intra-familial relationships.

> We felt very worried about our sisters when they were young. They didn't have a proper place to sleep. In the camp houses we all slept together. Sometime we stayed up the whole night talking and doing things. Some of us used to go to the beach. In the morning we came home to sleep. By that time other family members had gone away from home or were doing their daily work such as cleaning, collecting firewood, going around to find some work for money etc….We should say things have changed a lot for the better now. We have more privacy at our homes. At least we have two rooms and toilets. We have mosques in every camp. Sometime we can sleep in the mosque if we have visitors at home who stay overnight.

Most second-generation men who have married live in their father-in-law's house. A married woman, on the other hand, lives with her partner in the parental home. Parents with a young married daughter give their only bedroom to the couple and sleep in the front (living) room. Sometimes, parents allow the young couple to build a small hut adjoining the old house so they can live separately while maintaining extended family ties.

As I found from the focus group meetings, among the displaced Muslims, the youth are the most stressed people. Their parents exert much pressure on them to earn money for the household. This is because the family wants to achieve more, in terms of finding money for the daughters' marriages, buying land or building houses. When educated young men in the neighbourhood carry brief cases and wear clean shirts and slacks, parents of young men who are unemployed become unhappy with their own sons. It is the view of older men that young men must work hard in order to rebuild the lives of the families. It is their duty and responsibility. The now-elderly first generation saw that

they could not achieve much in Puttalam but their sons have the opportunity to get the maximum benefits from the opportunities available locally. The first generation of displaced men believe that if young men work hard there would be no need for their wives and daughters to go to work on the onion and chilli farms. Because of this pressure from elderly parents, many young men are forced to find alternative ways to earn money. The focus group discussions I had with young men and women aged between 15 and 35 years reveal that they are now under pressure to take on household responsibilities as their parents either find it difficult to obtain work (because they are old) or to accumulate money for their future.

> We try our best to help our parents. We do odd jobs like loading and unloading fish into trucks, collecting and selling firewood, working as labourers and assistants for housing and building contractors and so on. However, these are not going to be enough for us.

The domestic social pressure on young men to find work has had several negative consequences. Those who have trouble finding work are frustrated and stressed, and are becoming vulnerable to the attractions of political and religious groups, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Some of the young men have been given free mobile phones and asked to work for the powerful politicians who represent northern displaced Muslims at their camp and settlement level. They are also asked to work as political party mobilizers, become secret informants about rival political activities and are sometimes encouraged by politicians to put up posters and banners for their propaganda work.

> One day, when we were playing soccer, a group of supporters of our minister [leading politician of the displaced Muslims] asked some of us to come immediately. None of us knew why. Then we were asked to get into a lorry. Some of the boys jumped into the lorry. We were told that there was work to be done and each one of us can get 500 rupees [AUD 5] each and a lunch packet [rice and curry]. After that we were dropped at Palavi junction [a small township located on the Puttalam–Colombo main road] and forced to participate in a demonstration against another, opposition, politician. There was a big crowd there that day. We also shouted slogans with others. These demonstrations sometimes happen in our area. But we are not aware of why and how it affects us. In such situations we are helpless.

> From focus groups discussions with young displaced men.

Political interference in the everyday life of people has increased in the past few years, and most camps and settlements are under the close surveillance of political leaders and their supporters. I personally experienced such a harassment by a politically influential person at one camp site (Alankuda). While I was talking with a group of young men at the mosque one evening, a man came on a motorbike and stood in front of the group and asked why we had gathered and what we were talking about. He wanted to know why I was collecting information about displaced people. He was not aware of my background or my research. Once I explained and told him that there was nothing for anybody to worry about in my research, he left. Later the *imam* told me that he was a relative of a powerful politician for displaced Muslims in the area.

The mosque, as an Islamic socialization agent, also plays an important role in structuring displaced young men's lives. As mentioned before, in some settlements, the *imams* of the local mosques who teach fundamentalist versions of Islam exhort young men to be strict worshippers and encourage them to participate in religious missions for three days to three months. On such occasions, elderly parents cannot do much. They are not powerful enough to oppose the politicians or the religious leaders. Situations such as these, as well as young people being put under great stress to earn money, have caused inter-generational conflict as well.

The gender roles of young men are also shaped by their social networks beyond the household and camps. Despite occasional conflicts and disputes between local and displaced youth in sharing resources and opportunities, young displaced men maintain fairly good contact with their local counterparts. They travel and play sport (soccer and cricket) outside their camps and settlements. On occasion, they play as a team together in local soccer and cricket matches. They meet in the streets, taxi parking places and mosques to share problems of their private lives that can not be dealt with in the home or camp environment. Such networks of local and displaced men are also a means of reaching out to people with whom their parents have not had contact. For example, a dispute between a displaced and local family over a love affair involving a local boy and a displaced girl was resolved peacefully by a group of both local and displaced young men. Even in the mosques, particularly during Ramadan, local and displaced youth engage in social work such as distributing food to people coming to the mosques. This provides displaced youth with a new outlook and identity in the eyes of other people. As a result, as noted before, young displaced men, who are active and have

better outside relationships are recognized and influential. This does not mean, however, that there is no conflict or dispute between local and displaced people. Sometime a small incident sparks violent confrontations:

> We don't have play grounds in our camp areas. We used to go to school or other common playgrounds nearby. Sometimes there are problems in sharing the play grounds with local boys. On some occasions, when we are playing, they [local youth] come and ask us to leave the ground. Most times we leave the ground when they come to the playground. Sometimes, however, there were confrontations because our boys don't like their calling us camp or displaced people [*muham-podiangal* or *aghadhi*]. There have been fights between local boys and our boys as well.

> From focus groups discussion with young displaced men.

Despite the visibility and prominence of youth in the everyday life of the displaced, there has been limited focus on displaced/resettled youth in forced migration studies (Brun 2000). Also, international and local agencies have not yet recognized the gender role and social position of displaced youth in finding solutions to protracted displacement (Turner 2000). The external assistance benefit to the displaced community is mostly channelled to first-generation displaced men and women. For example, for the past fifteen years, the government and NGOs in Puttalam have not made any serious attempt to approach displaced youth to find out their problems and issues despite the prominent role they play in the post-displacement context:

> Sometimes we feel frustrated and ignored. It is good if somebody helps us by giving training in vocations like carpentry or other skills to make a living. When we don't have any productive work we feel pressure from our parents. There are some of our boys getting addicted to alcohol and smoking with local boys. These are bad habits. Some of our boys have joined *killi* [gangs] groups although most of us keep our distance from those *killi* groups. We need somebody to help us to make our lives better.

> From focus groups discussions with young displaced men.

Durable solutions to long-term displacement require proper understanding of the gender roles and the social position of youth. Also, return decisions and successful post-conflict

social reconciliation is contingent on the aspirations of youth. This becomes evident in the next chapter.

## Not all displaced people are poor: Social differentiation

In general, humanitarian agencies view displaced people as an undifferentiated mass, and believe that their problems and needs are common (Shanmugaratnam 2000; Porter and Haslam 2005). Stereotypical notions of displaced people as helpless, dependent on aid and assistance, obscure the social divisions that exist among them. Displaced people may be ethnically or religiously homogenous but are often differentiated in terms of place of origin, political connections, pre-displacement class and social status. Apart from gender and age related social differentiations, other hierarchical relationships emerge among displaced Muslims with the changes to their socioeconomic status in the post-displacement context. In particular, the first field site (Alankuda) is a microcosm of emerging social differentiations, political conflict and change. It has the largest concentration of displaced Muslims in Puttalam. Some of the social differentiations are described in the following section.

### *Social divisions based on place of origin*

The most visible social differentiation among displaced Muslims is based on their place of origin. As noted before, more than 70 per cent of displaced Muslims are from the neighbouring district of Mannar. Although the people of this district are diverse in occupation and rural–urban distinctions, their numbers make them the dominant community among displaced people in Puttalam. They were able to occupy better and more fertile lands in Puttalam because they arrived early. Other displaced people, from Mullaitivu, Jaffna and Kilinochchi districts, arrived much later and had to find temporary settlements in resource-scarce localities. As soon as the Mannar people arrived they started to exploit the opportunities created by the 'onion boom' and other economic growth at the time. Some of them became middlemen and brokers in the land or labour markets. The most deprived group of displaced people were those from the Mulliathivu district. They were small in number (only about six per cent of the total) and most of them still live in camps and welfare centres established by the government at the beginning of the arrival of northern Muslims. Many of those living in displaced camps in Alankuda told me that they are discriminated against in terms of benefit distribution and resettlement projects by the newly rich displaced Muslims and the

politicians of Mannar. A school teacher (LI 7) belonging to the displaced Muslims from Mullaithivu described his community's present marginalization at the hands of the displaced Muslims of Mannar.

> We have been living in these *cadjan* houses [*oalai veedu*] in the camp for the last fifteen years. Most of the people have no land of their own. This is government land. For the last five years, we have been asking the government to regularize our land plots so that we can apply for housing grant, but the District Secretariat (Kachcheri) officials have not taken any action so far. Many NGOs, including the World Bank people, have visited our camp many times and promised that they would help us to get better housing and facilities. About a year ago, Minister _____ came here with a rich Arabic man and some foreign embassy people to show our camp so as to get funds from them. Then he promised that very soon all of these camp people will be settled in new houses but still it doesn't happen. We are now becoming a 'show piece' for politicians and government to get foreign funds. Once they get funds nobody wants to implement projects for us. Mannar politicians and NGOs support their people. We [of Mullaithivu] don't have our politicians or educated people to fight against such injustices.

As these remarks show, there are several reasons for the preponderance of displaced Muslims from poor, rural and marginalized localities of the north in the remaining camps and welfare centres. First, they are able to leave the camps only when the state provides land through its land distribution programs. Even in such a situation, the marginalized and poor have no political network through which to pressure state officials to implement the land distribution programs so as to include them. Second, people from rural and farming backgrounds do not have enough social networks outside their own communities. This restricts their capacity to move out of the camps, where they are dependent on government subsidies and on the earnings from coolie work. Most of them do not have enough resources to purchase land or build separate shelters on their own. Therefore, rather than taking risks, and because of social security and mutual support mechanisms, people prefer to live together as kinship or neighbourhood communities in the camps and welfare centres in which they originally settled.

*Social divisions based on political affiliations*

Although the politics of displacement at the macro (state) level have been the subject of a great deal of discussion by researchers (Muggah 2000), the micro (community) level political discourses of displacement are less well studied. In Puttalam, displaced Muslims are affiliated with different political parties. In Sri Lanka, in order to benefit from government and other external assistance, political affiliations and networks are important prerequisites (Perera 1985). As discussed earlier, politics play an important role in the appointment of camp officials, and the distribution of resettlement and rehabilitation benefits are some of the manifestations of the politics of displacement in Puttalam.

Displaced Muslims are divided into three main political factions. The most influential and politically powerful group of displaced Muslims belongs to the All Ceylon Muslim Congress (ACMC), a break-away party of the Sri Lanka Muslims Congress (SLMC). It is now headed by a politician representing the displaced people of Mannar. This politician became the minister of rehabilitation and resettlement (2005–10) and he favours displaced Muslims of this district in the channelling of government assistance and projects intended for displaced persons. In a way, this strengthens the ACMC support base of his constituency. The second political group of displaced Muslims is the SLMC, established by Ashrof who, as described in Chapter Three above, died in a helicopter crash in 2001. ACMC and SLMC are exclusively Muslim political parties and represent 'Muslim politics' as opposed to 'Tamil politics' or Tamil nationalism.[97] During election periods the ACMC and SLMC are the main rivals at camp level. In the presidential election of December 2009, there were a number of violent clashes between these two factions. A noteworthy development was that displaced persons from Mulliathivu were strong supporters of the SLMC and opposed the dominancy of the Mannar Muslim politicians of the ACMC. A school teacher (LI 7) who is one of my informants supported a politician of the SLMC contested in the 2010 election for the following reason:[98]

> For the last fifteen years our people have suffered at the hands of Mannar
> politicians. They have never done anything for poor displaced people still living

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[97] The term 'Muslim politics' came into existence after the SLMC started a separate political party for Muslims as an offshoot from Tamil political parties in the late 1980s. It seeks separate representation for Muslims in the Tamil-majority north and eastern provinces for a political settlement of the ethnic conflict. See Ameerdeen (2006) for more detail.

[98] I learned that this informant was assaulted by Mannar Muslims and later remanded by the police for a few days, which indicates the intensity of political rivalries between displaced Muslims in Puttalam.

in the camps. We have seen what is happening for the last few years. Houses
and roads are built in the areas where Mannar people live. Jobs are given to their
people. Nothing can be done without political support. We want a politician of
our own.

The third political faction among displaced Muslims is largely comprised of people
displaced from the Jaffna district who seek political patronage from Tamil politicians to
get assistance and benefits from the government. Jaffna Muslims see that they are not
supported by either of the other two groups and their politicians. They found a Tamil
politician who was also a member of parliament and a minister, capable of addressing
their grievances. For example, the Tamil politician helped some of the displaced
families get land from the government to resettle in Puttalam.

In these circumstances, affiliation with political parties is an important dimension in the
social hierarchy among displaced Muslims. A person who has a close connection with
political leaders may become influential in the camps. For example, displaced people
from Mannar district have a powerful politician, as one of them is a government
minister, in a position to manipulate government and donor-funded programs in favour
of his community. As mentioned in the previous chapter, camp officers appointed by
politicians are being instructed to mobilize people for political gains. Today these
politically appointed camp officials are influential in selecting the beneficiaries for
rehabilitation, resettlement and humanitarian assistance provided by the government
and external agencies. Thus, displaced persons who dislike the dominant political group
or put forward opposing political views are often penalized by being excluded from the
benefits. During my stay in the field, two groups in a camp confronted each other over
the selection of beneficiaries for the government supported housing project. Some of
these confrontations between political factions are violent, obliging the police to
intervene. At present there are visible cleavages among displaced Muslims in Puttalam
along the lines of political party affiliations and it is hindering the local integration as a
durable solution.

*Emerging class stratification*[99]

The political affiliations and regional groupings of displaced Muslims are now gradually evolving into a class-based hierarchical structure. As noted, those Muslims displaced from Mannar have a comparative advantage for wielding political power. In particular, displaced Muslims from a place called Erukkalampitty[100] in Mannar are more entrepreneurial and better educated than their fellow members. Some of them started small shops in Nurachcholai town and other less capital-intensive businesses, such as firewood stalls and fast-food outlets. Educated members of this community formed non-profit organizations and private educational institutions, and started to work as agents of foreign employment companies to send men and women abroad for work. This small business community has grown fast during the last decade as they were able to accumulate capital from various trade activities such buying and selling of lands, construction materials such as sand, hardware, bricks and, taxi operations in local townships, and even making the ration card business an organized venture. In 2008, in Norachcholai town, more than 90 shops out of about 150 were operated, owned or shared by displaced persons from Mannar. In particular, most of the vegetable stalls, textile and tailor shops, hardware stores and tea shops are owned by the displaced business community. Their economic advancement has been strengthened further as their political leaders obtained prominent positions in the national government. One displaced man (LI 2) told me that politicians and businessmen of their community make a profit by buying large pieces of land, dividing them and then distributing them to poor and landless displaced families under the pretence that they are concerned by the plight of fellow displaced people.

> We are all, one way or another, now controlled by our politicians and elites [*puttujeevigal*]. Politicians and wealthy people purchase five or ten acres of land and then distribute ten perch each for a family. They keep the title of the entire block of land in their names. Poor displaced families were asked to pay the value of the land plot in instalments and were given a document signed by a lawyer.

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[99] The term class is used here in a generic and descriptive sense only to denote the different socioeconomic positions of individuals in a hierarchal structure linking their work, employment and political linkages. It is not a comprehensive assessment of class and individual relations in the theoretical sense.
[100] People who lived in this particular locality in Mannar are considered to be in a rich and better-off community.

This practice of politicians and businessmen has increased during the last few years as many displaced people wanted to have land so that they could get housing assistance from donors and the government, but had no financial capital of their own. Today, as a result of these combined factors, there is clear evidence of an emergence of a class hierarchy among displaced Muslims in Puttalam. This hierarchy contains five groups and there are some distinct characteristics of each based on their occupations, political affiliations and place of origin (see Table 5.3).

**Table 5.3**: Class categories and characteristics of displaced Muslims

| Class/ socioeconomic category | Approx. percentage of displaced persons | Characteristics |
|---|---|---|
| **Rich and affluent (upper class)** | 1–5% | Live in private houses on large blocks of land; concrete fences around houses. Own trade stalls, vehicles including commuter buses. Some engage in business in Colombo and some are key political figures of displaced community. Children study abroad, Colombo or in international schools. Live in Puttalam town, along Colombo–Puttalam main road and Norachcholai town. |
| **Better-off (upper middle class)** | 15–20% | Live in self-built permanent houses in relocated villages, town areas of Puttalam and Kalpitiya, own lands and vehicles such as three-wheel taxis. Children study in schools in towns, engage in retail trades, government and private sector jobs. |
| **Moderate (middle class)** | 15–20% | Live in partly built or permanent houses in settlements and relocated villages. Own land (small plots), engage in small-scale trade, farming and government jobs, mainly teaching in schools. |
| **Poor (lower middle class)** | 20–25% | Live in camps and Welfare centres. Few own small land plots, Engage in wage labour work, fishing, jobs such as taxi drivers, and some women worked/working in Arab countries as maids. |
| **Destitute poor (lower class)** | 25–30% | Living mainly in *cadjan* huts in displaced camps and partly built houses in welfare centres. No land or assets. Coolie workers in farms, depend mainly on rations and subsidies from the government. Relatively more number of female headed households. |

Sources: World Bank Social Assessments Survey 2006; UNCHR IDP Survey 2006; Northern Muslim Secretariat, Puttalam; Key Informant Interviews

The hierarchical social structure of the displaced community affects the families in different ways. The powerful and able groups use their advantageous positions to strengthen the status quo and their dominance over the less fortunate and vulnerable, by manipulating resources and opportunities provided by outside agencies. These patterns of exclusion and discrimination also indicate the greater vulnerability of the underprivileged groups living in protracted displaced situations.

## Conclusion

The central argument of this chapter is that the displaced Muslims in Puttalam are similar to other migrant communities: they use their skills and experience to try to overcome the obstacles they face. In order to survive in an unknown social space, they adopt different strategies, depending on the conditions at their places of refuge. Though many began their new lives in Puttalam as wage labourers, using existing skills and experience, they have gradually moved into specific and innovative occupations.

Cheating and misuse of relief and other external support is one of the mechanisms used to improve the conditions of everyday life in a situation of displacement. Such actions are accommodated and accepted by displaced people, local people and even officials. This is because such actions do not harm everyday social relationships; indeed, such transactions reinforce the mutual understanding and dependency in the community. Women are prominent contributors to displaced people's livelihoods and households. They are not only recognized for their contribution to the family as breadwinners but also as respected members of the households. Migration to Middle Eastern countries for work has strengthened their positions. Young displaced men, despite their innovative skills and capabilities, however, find it difficult to be a visible presence in households and the social space. They are often excluded and viewed as secondary to the elderly men and women. This has made them socially isolated and subject to exploitation by political and religious interest groups. Finally, the discussion of the social divisions among displaced Muslims indicates the complex hierarchical structures which have emerged in protracted displaced situations.

Displaced people should not be seen as passive recipients of aid and assistance, nor as a single homogenous group. They, like refugees and other economic migrants, often transform their lives from a dependent subordinate community to a dominant, catalytic

group in the environment in which they live**.** Therefore, humanitarian regimes and government agencies must deal with displaced persons as dynamic social agents rather than as a 'problem' (Muggah 2000: 160). As a result of their increased social, economic and political capacities, returning to the north after the war is becoming a difficult choice for many of the displaced Muslims. This is discussed in the next chapter.

**CHAPTER SIX**

**Return or Not: Perceptions of Return under Post-Conflict Context**

## Introduction

**Case 1**

> I am so happy to go back to our own soil [*Enakku Michcham sandosam ippa engada Sonda mannukku thirumbi pohalam*] after a lot of suffering in this place [Puttalam]. Now we do not need to be afraid to go back because the LTTE is not in our areas [Mannar] anymore. Since the army has opened the roads to our home town in the North [from Puttalam] many people, including me, visited our old villages. When I first visited my home village in 2003, when there was a ceasefire between the government and the LTTE, our lands looked like a jungle. I could not even recognize the roads that I used to travel a lot in those days. But this time the government assured us that it would help returning people. I had already made two visits and started to clean my farm land and repair my old house. One NGO assisted me by providing 20,000 rupees for a toilet. So I am seriously thinking of settling down in my old house soon. However, my daughters don't want to come with me because they feel it is very hard for them to adjust to the situation back home. I am going with my wife and leaving my daughters with my son and his family here.

**Case 2**

> We like being here because we have lived almost all of our life here. We feel like this is our home. I go to the mosque and talk to all my friends. Some of them are local youth. We were friends from school days; we used to eat and share things together. What is the point of going back home where we may face a lot of other problems? Who knows whether the Tamils living there now are going to treat us the same as before? Even if we go we have to start things from the beginning…We should stay here because we have freedom here. We can go anywhere and find jobs if we look for them. Here we have lots of things to do…I think now we have changed. Our parents are making efforts to go back to the villages. But most of us may not like it because it is hard for us to go and settle there.

These two cases form the third part of my last field work, after the end of the civil war. After nearly 20 years of living in exile, northern Muslims have an opportunity to realize their dreams of returning home and experiencing what is referred to as 'end of refugee cycle' (Allen and Morsink 1994;Black & Koser 1999; Zetter 1999). On 18 August 2009, the government made an announcement through the media to all those who had been displaced by the conflict, requesting them to return and resettle in their homes (and to notify the relevant authorities of their intentions) (see figure 27). With this fundamental change in circumstance, many displaced Muslims in Puttalam had to decide what returning to their homes in the north would actually mean for them and their families. Until the defeat of Tamil rebels, they had not seriously discussed, at the household level, their future return. However, after the war, the main point of discussions, arguments and debates among members of households, as well as community groups, was whether to return or not?

Case 1 is a part of the life story of Hameed, a 62 year-old displaced man from Mannar. He was a farmer before being displaced and arriving in Puttalam in 1990. Now he lives with his married son and two daughters in a house close to Nurachcholai town. His son is 32 years old and married to a woman who is also from a displaced family known to Hameed. Hameed's two unmarried daughters (19 and 23 years old) live with their brother who built a house of his own with the support of an NGO. But Hameed does not like staying in his son's new house, where he feels a stranger who is not well-respected by his family. Hameed is unhappy about the attitude of local Muslims. He is firm in his decision to go back to his home in Mannar even though his daughters are reluctant go with him.

Case 2 is an extract from notes of focus group meetings with second-generation men who expressed a strong desire to remain in Puttalam. The younger ones kept silent in households discussions about return when there was no serious hope that the war would end. Now, however, there is a great deal of interest, conflicting views have emerged and young members are participate actively in family decision-making about possible return. Such a decision is not a matter for individuals but is a collective and household-centred one.

**Figure 27**: Government announcement about return of IDPs after the war



Source: Daily News Paper (Sri Lanka) 18 August 2009

As mentioned earlier, according to the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, there are three durable solutions to end the internal displacement of people affected by civil wars: local integration, relocation; and return to places of origin (UNOCHA 2004). In this chapter, I critically examine the suitability of the option of 'return' as a durable solution to the long-term displacement of northern Muslims now that the war has ended. Repatriation research in refugee studies has questioned whether

the end of war is an end to living in exile among people who had been forced, by war, to leave their homes (Black & Koser 1999; Chimini 2004). Whether refugees and internally displaced persons return to their homelands after the end of conflicts is a key debate among researchers in refugee studies (Al-Rashid 1994;Blackwell 2000; Gale 2008; Hardgrove 2009; Mooney 2003; Zetter1999), as is the question of what factors affect the return decisions of refugees (Deniz 2008; Gerrit 2006: Muggeridge & Dona 2006). In these studies, however, the main focus has been on refugees rather than internally displaced persons. Also, most of these return migration studies have a heavy emphasis on political dimensions such as safety and security in the home country, thus masking the social realties and complexities of the return migration and decision making (Black & Koser 1999: 4; Hammond 1999: 227). Except for a few studies (;Loizos 2008; Malkki 1995b; Zetter 1994), protracted exile and its effect on return decisions, and the notions of identity and place, have not been well addressed.

In this chapter I examine not only the political dimensions of return, but also the post-displacement experience and changing notions of place and identity among northern Muslims in their return decision-making process. It brings new light to the debate on whether refugees and displaced persons would return home if conditions changed at their place of origin (Gale 2008; Muggeridge & Dona 2006: 415). As Black and Koser (1999) suggest, the popular belief in repatriation and return to places of origin as the end of displacement or living in exile should also be questioned.

At the beginning of my research, the people I met had strong intentions to return to their homes once the conflict had come to an end. For them, the move back north was seen as a gateway to a new beginning. For some others who were able to rebuild their lives and had a sense of belonging to their new homes in the resettlement villages, returning to the north was seen as a backward journey and a restart of the old lifestyle.

This section is based mainly on a series of interviews with families and focus group discussions with second-generation members of displaced northern Muslims, in early 2010. Among those I interviewed, some had already made visits to their old homes and properties in the north during the ceasefire period (2002–5), and a few had made first visits after the end of the war (December 2009) or were taking actions to resettle in their homes in the north. Those who made a first return visit to the north saw it as a symbolic visit and a kind of risk assessment trip. They went either as individuals or in groups of

five to ten people. Individual action played an important role in making the first visit for some of those from Mannar, a neighbouring district of Puttalam. Displaced persons from distant locations such as Mullathivu and Kilinochchi visited as groups, hiring private vehicles or using public transport.

The experiences of these first visits back had a profound influence on the idea of their 'permanent return' to the place of origin. Such experiences not only influenced other displaced persons in their return decision-making but also allowed a comparison between the 'imagined' and the 'real' situation at home (Muggeridge & Dona 2006:420). For some, these first visits were the catalyst for a decision to make a permanent return to their homes in the North. For others, the visits prompted a decision to make their stay in Puttalam more permanent or to make Puttalam their new home. In these visits, the displaced persons wanted to find out the existing security and political situation, and whether or not normality had returned before making a permanent return.

A noteworthy aspect of these first visits after the war was how seriously they were taken. For the first generation of elderly men, the visit was an important part of 'informed decision making' about a permanent return to their homes in the future. They attempted find out all possible information and made personal observations on the everyday life situations of others settled in their places of origin. For young members of the displaced community, however, those who made group tours to their parents' homes, found it more a tour of enjoyment. For them, visits to their parental homes were not as nostalgic as for their parents. Most of the time it was a kind of an excursion or pleasure trip to a new land to experience the novelty. For example, when I made a visit to the north in early 2010, I stopped at a place called Karadikuli (a former village of northern Muslims) located between Puttalam and the Mannar main road. There were 50 to 60 men, mostly young displaced men from Puttalam, who had put up tents for a camp. Some were making lunch for the group and others were playing soccer on nearby flat land.

On the other hand, those who are 'taking actions' to return have made more than one visit to old home villages. They have checked out the conditions for return and made plans for future return, including the cleaning of the original lands and the repairing of old houses in the traditional villages. Some also have met officials to find available

assistance for resettlement and started to construct basic facilities such as toilets and drinking-water sources by, for example, digging wells.

In the first part of the chapter, I discuss the various factors that affect displaced persons' return decision making at the household level. I then analyse the influence of post-displacement experiences taking into account the effect of gender, notion of place, identity and belonging on the return decisions.

## The dilemma of return: Displaced perspectives

Both push and pull factors are involved in displaced Muslims' decisions to remain or to return to their places of origin (see figure 28). There are families who believe that the situation in the north has improved sufficiently to make the move towards their original homes. These pull factors include the improved security situation, property ownership, perceived social bonding, abundance of natural resources and the perceived ability to revive their lost livelihoods. Then there are families and individuals who view their situation in Puttalam as displaced persons from the north as sufficiently negative (push factors) to encourage the movement towards 'home'. These factors include discrimination against them as *aghadigal*, children moving away from northern Muslim traditions, harsh climatic conditions, isolation and marginalization by fellow displaced persons, and so on.

**Figure 28**: Push and pull factors affecting the return decisions of displaced Muslims

**Pull Factors**
- Property ownership (land)
- Better physical environment
- Feelings at home/sense of belonging (*ur*)
- Comfortable with cultural norms/language
- Living with known people/bonding

**NORTH**

**Push factors**
- Political insecurity (could be volatile again)
- Poor quality education Rough life for some time
- Difficulty of accessing transport/roads/ electricity
- Lack of modern work opportunities
- Potential ethnic discrimination
- Women may have limited freedom (more religious)/male dominant social structure
- Potential threats, eg land mines

**Push Factors**
- Feeling of alienation
- Derogatory image being IDP
- Declining income
- avenues
- Pressure on resource use (fishing, water etc)
- Congestion in the camp-type settlements
- Harsh climatic/ geographical conditions

**PUTTALAM**

**Pull Factors**
- Physical security
- Better services
- Facilities: health, education
- Modern lifestyle
- More opportunity Freedom of movement
- No ethnic discrimination
- Islamic environment

There are those who have improved or rebuilt their lives during the post-displacement period and have a relatively settled status in their current localities. They have been attracted by newly emerging livelihood opportunities, a modern lifestyle and relatively peaceful and better social infrastructure facilities in current localities – these act as reasons for remaining in Puttalam. On the other hand, their perceptions of conditions back home, as influenced by stories told by those who made visits for 'reality checks' and information gathered from other media, have impacted negatively on some people as reasons not to return or to postpone return migration to the North . There is, however, no single factor or group of factors which are key or core concerns in making the decisions to return or to remain. Return decisions are influenced by an array of pull and

push factors that vary according to age, gender and place of origin, and experience of protracted displaced living in Puttalam.

### *Property rights and economic prospects*

First-generation elderly displaced men are interested in economic stability and in securing their lost properties, so access to land and the assurance of property rights are strong motivating factors in the decision whether to return. As found in other displaced (refugee) situations such as in Bosnia and Cyprus, return decisions are largely made by taking into consideration the property rights at the home place (Deniz 2008: 147; Zetter 1994). Consequently, the decisions of displaced Muslims to return to the north also depend on the extent to which the government assures their rights to land and property so that they can revive their lives after the return.

Reclaiming lost properties in the north has been affected by several factors. As discussed in Chapter Two, 'land' or 'territorial' rights has been one of the core issues for the ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese since independence. At the micro level, property in Sri Lanka, especially land ownership, has traditionally been 'a key determinant of social status and differentiation', and the social class position of people in rural areas was largely decided in terms of their land holdings (Perera 1985). Thus, like all other Sri Lankans, displaced northern Muslims do not see land and property back at home simply as an economic tool or an asset to be used for agricultural production. Land is also a symbol of status and people have social and cultural bonding towards their ancestral lands. Loss of land, therefore, takes an additional psychological toll on displaced Muslims for it also represents a loss of status. In particular, for the first generation of displaced Muslims who enjoyed social respect and dignity by owning a large amount of land in their homelands, it was a significant setback to become a displaced person and live as a 'landless' person in a refugee settlement in Puttalam. Thus, the elderly men who owned large land plots in the north prior to the displacement see the reclaiming of lost properties on their return as a step towards regaining lost social status. A displaced man (LI 35) who has made his first visit and is taking action to return to his place of origin in Mannar illustrates this situation.

> I had nearly five acres of rice ( paddy) and highland and also owned a rice mill and a boutique in Koolan Kulam [his home village, Mannar]. I had to leave all these properties when we were evicted in 1990. I did not have a chance to go back to the village to check what happened to my properties after I came here. I made a visit last month [December 2009] and I heard that after we left our home, my shop was looted by some people and my tractor taken by the army. I

am living with my son in this house. I have nothing to do here. People who respected me in those days are living in this camp as well but they do not respect me now. I feel I am a loser. I heard that the Puttalam–Mannar road is going to reopen soon. If so, we can move into our village quickly. One of my sons has already started cleaning our land so we may be able to settle there in a few months.

For all those with property back home, a positive experience of their first visit does not necessarily translate into a decision to return permanently. Legal constraints and the limitations of land ownership rights make their decision a difficult one. According to existing law, any land that the occupant did not use productively for a period of ten years is considered ' abandoned' property. Also, the Agrarian Services Act 2001 has a provision which allows the government to take over any land that was considered 'agriculturally productive' but was not being used or cultivated for a period of more than two years by the occupant. Similarly, any person occupying a 'land plot' either belonging to the government or a private owner for more than ten years, has the right to claim the ownership to the land. This situation has led many who lived in the heartland of the Tamils in Vanni[101] to sell their lands while they were living in exile in Puttalam. In particular, some Muslims from Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi districts sold their lands to Tamils to get the cash needed to purchase a land plot in Puttalam or to build a house. Also there are situations where Tamils who were the former neighbours of displaced Muslims, occupied their lands after they left. Some of those who owned land in their places of origin, therefore, have no clear idea about what they face in the event of a return to their homes in the future.

> Although my husband had about nine acres of land, including some rice fields, we are unable to get back these lands now. My son visited a few weeks ago and found that some portion of the rice fields is now cultivated by Tamils. Also, it is hard to resettle there and develop those lands again. My son might go back if he can get back my husband's land again. I decided to stay back here with my daughters. I am now used to the life here

> (LI 30, 62 year-old widow displaced from Mannar fifteen years ago).

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[101] The swathe of land called Vanni includes the districts of Mulliativu, Kilinochchi and some parts of Vavuniya and Mannar districts.

The naming by the security forces of some of the lands liberated from the Tamil rebels as High Security Zones or restricted areas is also making return a distant hope for those who are willing to resettle in their places of origin. This was considered a major obstacle not only for Muslims but also for the Tamils who have lived in a protracted displaced situation in the north (Sivakanthan 2009). A group of displaced persons from Mulliativu and Kilinochchi who made visits after the war found that some of their properties are now occupied by security forces. These properties included agricultural farms, houses and public buildings such as schools and mosques. A displaced man related the following story of his experience in reclaiming his lands in Mullaitivu when he visited there in early 2010.

> We made a trip to Mullathivu after the government announced the opening of A-9 road. We wanted to find out the situation there so we can take our families later but the security forces did not allow us to go to our old village [Neeravipitti]. We saw that our mosque was completely damaged and looked like jungle. We asked permission to at least clean the mosque land but security forces said that they couldn't allow us to enter the village because it was still not declared open to public access (LI 7).

Lack of land for second-generation married people in their parental villages also hinders possible return and resettlement. As revealed by the UNHCR survey in 2006, the number of displaced families has increased three fold since 1990 as the older children of the first generation have married and share the same house in Puttalam with other family members. The report states:

> The fact of landlessness in their district of origin is a significant problem for the potential return of the majority of these IDPs who do not possess land in their place of origin. Of those wishing to return to their place of origin, only 68% possess land. Even fewer possess land documentation to prove their land ownership, further complicating their potential return (UNHCR 2006: V).

Despite this, there are no concrete plans by the government to find land for these second-generation displaced Muslims or sufficient resettlement facilities for those who want to return.[102] A man (LI 19) displaced fifteen years ago from Kilinochchi

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[102] At the time of writing this chapter (November 2010), a group of scholars presented a memorandum on behalf of northern Muslims, citing their problems related to permanent return to places of origin in the north, to the committee appointed to investigate the causes of the conflict and the lessons to be learned for post-conflict ethnic reconciliation. See www.sundayleader.com November 7, 2010.

who intended to return explained the problem.

> We were ready to go. But there was not enough land for all family members to settle back at home. When we came here [to Puttalam] there were about 250 or 260 families from Kilinochchi. Now the number of families has increased to nearly 800. So who is going to provide lands for our young families? The government says it is going to distribute lands for the landless displaced people but we doubt that. So far, only about 100 to 150 families who came with us in 1991 went back to their homes. Some of them returned to the camps and said it was hard for them because there were no basic facilities. No toilets or drinking water are provided to those who are now resettled. Local officials provide water through trucks twice a day. People who went and started putting up huts to resettle receive only 20, 000 rupees. There are still no government offices to visit and ask for help. If the situation improves we may think of moving back to our home. At this stage we are not prepared to go.

The issue of livelihood and employment prospects has been raised as an important issue for displaced persons living in protracted exile in deciding whether to return or to remain (Blackwell 2000; Hammond 1999; Kibreab 1996). As shown in Chapter Three above, the majority of first-generation displaced men was successful in their economic activities in the north prior to displacement and was engaged in fishing, rice and cash crop cultivation and in various occupations such as barbering, tailoring, carpentry and masonry. For these men, returning to their place of origin means the revival of their old livelihood activities. In particular, for those who were fishermen at their places of origin, the personal difficulties they had to face in Puttalam were a push factor in the decision to return. As discussed in Chapter Five, displaced fishermen faced harassment when they fished in some areas of Puttalam. Such fishermen have a strong desire to return as they think that they can revive their lost livelihoods at their original place. In reality, however, there are other concerns that delay their return journey. For example, some of the fishermen, after making a first visit, found that the security forces restrict fishing in certain coastal areas (Mullaithivu) where they had established their livelihoods before. This is making them reconsider the return journey. The following account of a displaced fisherman highlights the situation.

> I am a fisherman and I had a motor boat and all the equipment back in the *ur* [Mullathivu].I came here thinking that I could engage in fishing here. However, the local fishermen did not allow it and often harassed us when

we tried to fish [Kalpitiya]. I am so tired of living in this place. The government gave us 10 perches of land here but my family owned nearly three acres of land in our *ur*. However, going back to our *ur* is hard. I have four children who are all studying here. Anyway we can't live here because I have not been able to look after my family well for the last fifteen years. We are like street people (*oorwasal illada makkal*). All the time we have to go behind officers and ask for assistance. The subsidy given by the government is not enough. I think most families like mine are having a difficult time here. They have all gone back. Some people may stay because they have managed to make a better life here but we are waiting because the navy in our home villages has still not given full permission to do fishing' (Niyas, LI 27).

For some people whom I visited in their places of origin (Mannar) where they are in the process of rebuilding temporary houses for permanent return, the return was mostly an effort by the father or an 'individual act' of the male head of the originally displaced family. Most of these individuals belong to the Mannar district and it is only a three-hour bus drive from the current locality in Puttalam. But, for displaced Muslims from distant locations (Mullaithivu and Kilinochchi), return is a collective negotiation with authorities and security establishments to ensure that their permanent return does not involve any unanticipated shocks and disruptions to their livelihood such as fishing. A member (LI 7) of a group of displaced Muslims who visited Mullathivu after the war explained:

> We met the GA and asked her to give a date for us to come and collect documents for our lands and resettlement packages. Unless we are given assurance of housing, and are allowed to engage in fishing as we did before, we may not return.[103]

Voluntary return is not always possible. Only those with some resources and who are confident enough to rebuild their lives, appear to be preparing to return. Others who are vulnerable, like Niyas, face a dilemma – they are unable to leave their settlements and camps without post-war resettlement assistance. For them, return is economically unfeasible as has been found for other cases of people living in protracted exile (Hardgrove 2009: 491).

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[103] At the time of the research, GA of Mullaithivu was a female public servant. She is now serving as the GA of Jaffna district.

Displaced Muslims who have negotiated the rights for resource utilization with the local host community and thrived economically during the protracted exile by engaging in trade, business and livelihood activities, see Puttalam as economically advantageous. For them, economic opportunities in the north are traditional, less attractive, bleak and unpredictable, and they see return as a setback rather than an economic advancement in their lives. This is especially so for those who were able to capitalize on local conditions which favoured their skills, and were able to acquire new capabilities while in exile (Hardgrove 2009;Patterson 2002). For example, the young displaced men who engage in deep-sea fishing, fruit cultivation for the Colombo market and service sector self-employment such as three-wheel taxis, and those who found salaried jobs in the non-government or government sectors, see more economic prospects in Puttalam.

> What we can do there [in parental home villages]? Here, we can find some work. If we don't have money we can go to the sea side and help fishermen to pull the nets and boats. We can clean fish and load them into trucks. We can do something here to live. But we can't imagine what sort of work we can do there or whether there is any opportunity for us to be free there like this
>
> Focus group meeting with young displaced men.

In other words, for second generation members especially, the north has changed and it was not as their parents portrayed it, a 'land of green paddy fields and freedom of movement'. The ruined houses, degrading roads and diminished economic and business prospects in their places of origin had a negative impact, that is, were a push factor in a decision not to return. What was central to such a conclusion was their inability to perceive of a stable economic situation for them and their families for survival after the return. It is not only the fact that the revival of livelihood activities such as farming and fishing takes time because of security restrictions, but also because there will be new competitors and threats to their skilled occupations as well. Some of them see that the economic prospects emerging in the north with the cessation of hostilities have now been grabbed by people of the majority ethnic group (Sinhalese) from the southern part of the country. Those who visited their home villages to see the 'possibilities of permanent return' or perform 'reality checks' as described by Muggeridge and Dona (2006) found that migrant Sinhalese workers have now been brought into their traditional home areas for various reconstruction and development activities of the government.

I don't think there are enough opportunities to earn an income for all us. Also
we have some other concerns too. Some of our people went to Kilinochchi and
Mullaithivu last month. The Tamil people were now friendlier than before.
They treated our people well and told us that they would like to see us again as
their neighbours. But some of us can't go back to our old businesses and trade
such as dealing in hardware and building material. These are now been taken
over by Sinhalese people. They opened hardware stores, supply construction
materials, and are getting business contracts for road reconstruction and other
activities. The army has brought in Sinhalese labourers from the south for
work. Contractors don't hire Tamils or Muslims in the area. They listen to the
army. This also worried many of us in making the decision to return (LI 7).

Apart from the above, the living conditions of resettled displaced people after the war in
certain locations in the north have also affected return decisions. Some of those who
made a first visit were disturbed emotionally and discouraged by the problems faced by
their Tamil neighbours in the old villages. Most of the Tamils who had been displaced
during the last years of the war (2007–9) and housed in the welfare centres and camps
established by the government in Vavuniya, returned to their homes only after the war
concluded in May 2009. These displaced Tamil families were given basic relief
assistance by the UNHCR and the government to resettle in their villages (Figure 29). A
man (LI 13) who visited his village in Mannar explains why he is reluctant to return
home:

When we visited some of our old Tamil neighbours in Arippu [Mannar] they
looked so worried and said they had to face lot of hardships during the war after
we left in 1990. They also became displaced in 2006. But their situation is worse
than ours. They get oil, rice, lentils, flour and sugar as rations, but do not have
money to buy vegetables. The only vegetable available is *murunga*
[moringa/drumsticks]. We are really afraid of going back home because we have
to begin our lives from scratch.

**Figure 29**: Tamil family resettled in their home village in north



Source: Author's register

The people whom I interviewed, irrespective of their decisions to return or to remain in Puttalam, are not solely influenced by the economic prospects, property-related issues, or fear of facing hardships back at home after return. Their safety and security issues and the unsettled political conditions in the north are paramount concerns.

*Safety and security*

As in many other protracted exile situations (see Black & Koser 1999: 17; Deniz 2008: 9; Hardgrove 2009: 496), assurances of security and safety are considered by displaced Muslims as prerequisites for permanent return to the north. Theoretically, the notion of security has both social and human aspects. The social dimension involves a feeling of being protected within the neighbourhood or community, and a feeling of social bonding among members (social capital). People tend to find secure social environments in which to live where they feel that they are not threatened, humiliated or insulted, but are respectful and trustful towards each other, even if they have differences of opinion on matters of substance (Putnam 1993: 89, Uslaner 1999: 121). Human security, on the other hand, emphasizes the individual's safety, freedom of movement and assurance of basic physical needs such as water, shelter and other personal needs for survival (Amouyel 2006:13; Paris 2001: 90). Some recent studies (Deniz 2008: 195; Gerrit 2006;), however, attempt to expand the concept of human security to include property rights, and reconciliation and reintegration of refugee and displaced persons.

In the case of the northern Muslims in Puttalam, safety and security at their places of origin has been of paramount importance in making decisions to return. In 2004,

according to the UNHCR (2004: 4), more than 59 per cent of displaced Muslims in Puttalam stated that they would return home if the security in their places of origin was ensured. But, in 2006, when the same survey was carried out, the percentage of households which responded that their preferred solution was return to the north had declined drastically (to just six per cent). The overwhelming majority (94 per cent) stated that they would like to find alternative solutions to their displacement (UNHCR: 2006: 5). Although other factors influenced this decline in the preference to return, such as increased assistance to build houses in Puttalam by the government and external agencies, and provision of basic facilities by foreign-funded projects in Puttalam, deteriorating human and social security in the north has been cited as the key reason for either not returning or for a change of mind towards staying in the current localities in Puttalam. The situation has become yet more complicated since the end of the war, when, quite unexpectedly, return to the places of origin became a reality and was found, at the beginning of 2010, to be the preferred option of one-third of displaced Muslims households. Others who wanted to remain in Puttalam said that security and safety in their places of origin was not conducive to return; this was one of the three main factors in the decision not to return even after the war ended.[104]

According to my interviews, the notion of safety and security as understood by displaced Muslims also has both social and human aspects. It is partly 'human security' that people want in order to move freely, the assurance of basic needs to live and also social security, that is, where their culture and traditions are not threatened by other ethnic groups, militants or government forces once they return home.

For the last three decades, people in the north, including those who were forcibly displaced, faced threats to their lives from Tamil militants and the Sri Lankan security forces. Although the government has declared that it has eliminated the Tamil militant threat, many northern Muslims doubt that normality will return so quickly. Since the government has not yet implemented any serious reconciliation or resettlement programs to ensure safety and security after the return, those who were traumatized and persecuted by Tamil militants in 1990 were reluctant to make a return decision soon after the war ended in 2009. As stated by an activist (KI 15) of displaced northern

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[104] During my final phase of field work, the Ministry of Resettlement and Rehabilitation carried out a survey among displaced northern Muslims in Puttalam. Although the final results were still not available, the above information was revealed in a personal communication with the project director of the Puttalam housing project.

Muslims,

> The government is keen to resettle people who were displaced during the last
> stage of the civil war [after 2006] and not the long-term displaced persons, such
> as northern Muslims in Puttalam or Tamils affected by the establishment of
> High Security Zones in Jaffna.

He further explains that the assistance and support by the civil authorities for northern
Muslims is not sufficient, and many of them who made first visits to their home places
had difficulty reclaiming their properties, and their access to home villages was
restricted by the government forces stationed there.

This criticism has some merit because the Sri Lankan government has been questioned
by the international human rights agencies about the decline in media freedom and
human rights of the civilians in the recent past. On the other hand, most of the people
who live in the government liberated areas in the north have still not recovered from the
destruction of thirty years of war, and 'democracy' is an elusive concept for most
people.[105] For example, only 22 per cent of people voted in the election of local
government bodies in Jaffna in August 2009 and there was only a 23 per cent turnout in
the parliamentary elections of April 2010 – one of the lowest in Sri Lanka's post-
independence history. This indicates the loss of confidence of the people in democracy
and public safety.[106]. Problems due to the micro political climate and security situation
were experienced by a social activist (LI 7) of displaced Muslims who made a visit with
a group of others to his former home in the north. He found that the increased military
presence and the resultant interference in the everyday life of people was a serious
concern in their return decision making.

> When some of us visited to see our homes in Nachchikuda [Mullaithivu]
> recently [January 2010], we had problems with the security forces. There was
> an incident with an army soldier who stopped us when we started to search for
> our lands and houses in our *ur*. The area still looks like a jungle. The soldier
> asked 'Why did you come here?' We replied saying 'to see our lands' Then the

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[105] See Strategic Analysis Paper from FDI's Indian Ocean Research Programme: Tamil Perspectives on
Post-war Sri Lanka, the LTTE and the Future. FDI website at
http://www.futuredirections.org.au/publications.php

[106] News Report by 'Transcurrent' an E Journal of Sri Lankan Affairs 2009 September and IPS -Inter
Press Services ( Italy) 13/04/2010 http://www.ips.org

army person replied in a warning tone to our people, 'This is not your land. Lots of our Sinhalese soldiers [*hamudave Sinhala kollo*] died here. You and your people [Muslims] did nothing to fight against the LTTE. How can you claim this land is yours? You cannot come now. We will tell you when the time comes. Go and meet GA. Until we inform you, don't come again'. We did not say anything. We just decided that we have to wait and see. Earlier the LTTE occupied our lands. Now the Sri Lankan Army occupies it. No difference.

Though there are a few Tamils who are former neighbours, for many northern Muslims, 'home' in the north and their neighbourhood have changed since they left. There were concerns about social insecurity among some who visited and saw that all the Tamils currently living in their former villages are not former neighbours, that properties are occupied by faces not known to them previously. These displaced Muslims have safety concerns for a permanent return because the north is still a Tamil majority area and threats from Tamils in the future, like the expulsion of Muslims in 1990, cannot be ignored completely. The memories of forceful eviction from their homes are still alive for some and they feel that Tamil rebels may gain ground to get back their lost power in the future. Therefore, the potential for ethnic humiliation from Tamil extremist forces in the future cannot be excluded. Those who expressed such a feeling say they are socially safe and secure in Puttalam because it is now largely a Muslim area. Though there are disputes and disagreements among fellow displaced and host community Muslims, a sense of social safety or bonding social capital exists in Puttalam. Thus, the return to their homes in the north is, for some displaced Muslims, not the preferred solution to their displacement. For them, staying in the current settlements in Puttalam in relative peace, and in an Islamic environment, is better rather than return.

> Although the government declared that the Tamil rebels had been defeated and there is no threat for people, some Tamils whom we met had a strong sense of confidence in their movement [*iyakkam*] and believed they will gain power in the future. Therefore some people decided not to take chance to return at this moment because we are well settled here and have no major problems in living as a Muslim community. We have built our own mosques. We have good schools. Not all local Muslims are making trouble for us. Rather than returning to places where we would have a constant fear of humiliation from the Tamils, it would be better to remain in Puttalam with our people [Muslims]. (LI 21).

Deniz's (2008: 36) research in Bosnia and Cyprus challenges this notion, stating that refugees (displaced) may return to their homes when people have access to their properties, even if there are atrocities and crimes against civilians in the place of return, but the evidence in Puttalam does not support his conclusion. Northern displaced Muslims, despite the ending of the war and the elimination of the military capacity of Tamil rebels, have a greater concern for their security and are vigilant about the political and security conditions at their places of origin. There are two possible explanations for this concern. First, their bitter experiences and memories of the forced expulsion by the LTTE in 1990 still play a part in their decision whether to return or to remain. Women in particular, who were severely traumatized by the expulsion feel apprehensive about returning, suspecting that the Tamil militants may come back. Second, some of them who made visits to the north after the war encountered more restrictions to freedom of movement and in everyday life under the increased presence of government security forces in their homelands. This prompted them to think that the time for a permanent return has not yet come.

### *Education opportunities*

As described in the previous chapter, among other things, the social mobilization and economic advancement of displaced Muslims has been greatly influenced by the skills and capabilities they gained while they were in exile. Education opportunities in Puttalam were cleverly manipulated by parents and the young generation, and became one of the foremost priorities in their lives. It is remarkable that almost all parents and members of the young generation cited 'concern for education' as one of the prime motives for remaining and reconsidering the return to the north despite the government's call to repatriate. This applied in particular to those who achieved better salaried jobs after completing their formal education, and middle-aged parents having serious concerns regarding the education of the younger generation in the event of their return. There are number of reasons for displaced Muslims to see existing education facilities and opportunities as a strong pull factor in remaining rather than returning to the north.

First, there are the perceived better education facilities including laboratories, English and science learning, well equipped classrooms, opportunities for extra education support such as tuition, qualified teachers and easy access to schools from the camps and settlements. Second, some displaced Muslims think that sending their children to

local schools is a good adaptive strategy and presents an opportunity for local integration, which allows their younger generation to be friendlier with the host community. They are well aware that education is a human right for all children, regardless of their 'displaced' residency status. Third, unlike host community members, displaced Muslims lack an established social network with government officials in Puttalam and their lack of residency status means that they cannot send their children to schools outside their areas. Host community families that are rich, and those do not want to mix their children with displaced families, often send their children to schools outside the area or in town.[107] Only poor host families and those living adjacent to displaced settlements send their children to local schools. According to the existing first year school enrolment law in the country, in order to be admitted to a school, the parents must reside for at least five years within a two-kilometer radius of the school. Using their political leadership, displaced Muslims managed to develop local schools at their current places on a par with the so-called best schools in town, outside their settlements. Apart from politicians, social activists and educated members of the northern Muslim community played a key role in getting various NGOs and international agencies to support their community, using their 'displaced' status. Thus, there has developed a sense of belonging to local schools among displaced Muslims and they want to continue having their children studying in these schools. One school teacher (LI 20) of displaced background describes the changes among his community as an 'educational revivalism' (*kaliviyil oru puratchchi*) in Puttalam since their arrival.

In Kalpitiya DS division, there are six schools at junior and high school level. In most of these local schools displaced children form the majority. For example, the Norachcolai Muslim school, which teaches up to the last year of high school, had 1,137 pupils in 2008. The total teaching staff including contract, volunteer and full-time, qualified teachers was 48. Students of displaced background comprised nearly 60 per cent of the student population and 17 teachers were northern displaced Muslims who had obtained their teaching qualifications after arriving in Puttalam.[108] Another school, which is overcrowded with displaced students in the DS division, is the Alankuda Muslim school. In the recent past, sharing education resources in this school became a

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[107] In Sri Lanka the formal education system has several institutional arrangements. Primary schools, secondary schools up to year 12, central colleges based in a district or province and with improved facilities, and national schools, which are considered the best schools since they have qualified teachers, residential facilities for the students and so on. National schools in Sri Lanka are limited and are located largely in major townships.
[108] Information obtained through personal communication with the school teachers.

serious issue that sparked disputes between the host and displaced community. During my second phase of field research this school was closed for one month due to lack of classrooms and teachers. In order to resolve this problem a leading politician of displaced Muslims attempted to appoint teachers from his community. The host community objected to the appointments and demanded that the school accommodate more local students and teachers.

Both parents and the youth were more positive about the quality of the education in schools and facilities in Puttalam than those in their places of origin in Northern Province. Young children studying for important examinations (O levels) and GCE (A levels) have the opportunity of extra school tuition classes in Puttalam town. Some of these classes are organized by the graduates and teachers of the displaced community, who want to encourage their younger generation to get a better education. I met a group of educated displaced Muslims who have established a local NGO called Organization for Grassroots Development, the main purpose of which is to provide after-school science and mathematics tuition for displaced Muslim children who are preparing for the national competitive examinations.

The future of the education of their children in the event of a return is a special concern among second-generation women (who were born in the north but have spent most of their lives in Puttalam). Like Tamil and Sinhala families, Muslim mothers are keener than fathers to educate their children (Butterfield 2009: 54). They believe that the quality of education in their places of origin is not comparable with that in the schools in Puttalam.[109]. A teacher (LI 20) of displaced background at a local school described his intentions regarding return.

> I have three children, who were born in Puttalam. They do not know anything about our village and the culture I was born into and grew up in. I wanted to take them to Mannar to show them our life before the displacement. On the other hand I do not want to take the risk of settling in Mannar because of their education.

Unlike their parents and grandparents, young adults, mostly teenagers of displaced Muslim families, see education as a way of gaining social mobility and better job

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[109] It must be noted that the quality of education in schools in Jaffna was rated very highly even during the war. Schools in Mannar, Mullaithivu and Kilinochchi however, where the largest number of displaced Muslims came from, did not have standards like the schools in Jaffna.

prospects. As explained before, unlike Tamils and Sinhalese, Muslims in general did not pay much attention to education until the middle of the 1970s. They were largely a group that used trading, business and other traditional means for social advancement (Ali 2004: 372). But this has changed during the last three decades and Muslims in the northern and eastern provinces in particular, mobilized socially and politically by getting education in local universities and overseas (Nuhuman 2006). This was a result of the challenge they faced from the Tamil community who often took leadership in the political representation of Muslims as members of the broader Tamil-speaking people of the country. The formation of a Muslim political party, as explained in Chapter Two, was the outcome of the political mobilization of educated Muslims from the Eastern province (Ameerdeen 2006). Today, a similar trend is emerging in Puttalam where displaced Muslim parents and the young generation have much interest in getting admission to national universities. They have established their own NGOs to assist children to get a good education, and an institution called the Northern Muslims Peace Secretariat was formed to address the human rights of displaced Muslims. Most young men and women want to get an education in Peradeniya (Kandy) and Colombo universities, which are recognized as institutions providing a higher quality of degree than those of the regional universities. Those two universities are also easily accessible from Puttalam: 'I was able to get into Peradeniya University because I studied in Puttalam. If I was in Mannar, I might have not have got such an opportunity' (LI 2).

Parents, despite the hardship and challenges they face in spending extra money for their children's education, feel that it is a worthy investment. 'For us education is very important. As displaced people we lost everything. If we want to get out of this situation we must educate our younger generation' (LI 29). This is similar to what Hardgrove (2009: 494) found in Ghana, where many Liberian living as refugees see that education is the one resource that can not be looted. The interest of parents and young displaced Muslims in education is evident in the three-fold increase in the number of students of displaced background entering university from Puttalam district has increased during the last ten years. A principal (LI 28) of a local school of the second field site (Pallivasllthurai) who is a displaced Muslim explained why displaced Muslims give priority for education:

> As a principal of a school, I should say that this is the best place for the
> education of our children. Our children get a good education here even though
> some parents struggle to find a better living. They keep on educating their

children because they want to see a secure future for them. According to Islam, education is given the highest importance. Prophet Mohammed once mentioned to his followers in a sermon that, in order to get knowledge, one should not hesitate to leave their families, even to go to China. I am proud to say that each year the number of our [displaced] children getting university entrance is increasing. Last year [2007] eight of our students got university admission. We heard that only one or two students of the local community entered into university last year. Parents who want to educate their children will not go back to the north. They will stay somehow even if they have to face hardship as displaced people in this place [Puttalam]. My children were born here. I am also thinking of staying back because my children are young and I want them do well in education.

The better education prospects and the resultant economic and social mobilization of displaced Muslims in Puttalam is influencing many second-generation parents and young adults to remain in Puttalam rather than return to the north.

## Gender and return: Displaced women's perspectives

Return to the north is seen differently by men and women. For displaced women in Puttalam, as elsewhere, the impact of the forced expulsion and their post-displacement experience has been significant. However, only a few studies (Giles et al 2003; Hewamanne 2009) have focused on women's experiences in their exile and how such experiences affect their return decisions. To what extent the changes in the gender roles in the domestic and social sphere in protracted exile affect this decision for women, and what will happen to the new images of women after their return are examined in this section.

Elderly women, unlike their counterparts, because of the traumatic experience of expulsion and the loss of social protection from husbands and relatives after the displacement, are reluctant to return to the north. Although some of these first-generation elderly displaced women have ancestral lands, they often do not have ownership of those properties. Since the ownership titles are in the names of their husbands, the women, some of whom are now widows, find it difficult to reclaim their lands and have to fight to get back land from the local officials. Under the local customary law system, the ownership

of property, including lands inherited for generations, is in the hands of men. Usually, property ownership transfers from father to eldest son. Since they only had, at most, a days notice to leave, most of the displaced families were unable take any legal documents or titles of the ancestral land, or land they had bought. This situation is less favorable for women because if their husbands or elderly male family members die, they are unable to claim those properties. In such cases it is only the married son who wants to go back home and attempt to collect the details of his father's land. An elderly woman who lost her husband explains how she perceived her future under the present circumstances:

> I won't go back unless somebody forcefully takes me there. I am a widow. We had lands in the village. My husband died about ten years ago after he came here. I have three daughters and two sons. Except for the youngest, all the others got married and live here. My sons might have an interest in going back. Now I am selling beetles, bread and a few other things to the people here [running a small boutique in her house in the camp]. My youngest daughter helps me to run this boutique. We are getting an income that is sufficient to live on with the rations provided by the government. I heard that a lot of people in this camp are talking about going back to their homes. I am a little bit scared that I will be left alone. I hope somebody will remain here. Not all displaced families are going to go back. For me, there is no point in going back there.

> LI 30, 62 year-old widow, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago.

At another level, NGOs and humanitarian assistance have reinforced the inclination of many displaced women to remain in current localities where they now feel empowered and more socially elevated than their male counterparts (Butterfield 2009; Hewamannne 2009). Displaced women especially, widows and those who head displaced households, are categorized as 'vulnerable' by humanitarian agencies and are therefore at the forefront for relief and assistance from local and international NGOs. Various assistance programs for displaced households, including housing and other property development assistance, encourage the joint ownership of properties where the male and female heads of the households have joint ownership, to entitle them to assistance.[110] This was

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[110] A World Bank funded housing project encouraged joint ownership of houses between the head of the household and that person's partner (husband or wife).

done in line with the UN Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons,[111] which affirm the entitlement of displaced women to housing, land and property restitution. These are all areas in which women and girls have traditionally been disadvantaged. For displaced married women who have benefited from housing assistance from the international agencies supported by the UNHCR, as well as those who earned money and invested in land, a return to the former villages means losing wealth and properties accumulated while in exile.

The freedom, social respect and status at the household level earned after coming to Puttalam has also influenced some displaced women not to return. Since they took on extra burdens and became the breadwinners in the families, they gained a new recognition in their households. In particular, displaced women who have been influenced by Middle Eastern Arab culture through their employment as maids tend to dress in a more Islamic fashion than they did before. Such women feel they have more freedom and social respect in their families now. Going back to their old homes where they would be dominated by men and there are no ownership rights for women, means embracing the old patriarchal norms and secondary status within the families. Therefore, although state relief and aid will cease for displaced families if they do not return, their newly accumulated wealth and social status, and the unlikelihood of getting a better living when they return to the north, have prompted many elderly and married women to believe that life in Puttalam is more secure and that there are few benefits in returning.

> I think we can't live in our old place like here. There, it will be more difficult for women to get to gether and do what we are doing now [community work]. There our men do not allow us go to meetings. I don't think that our young women want to go back because [here] they [have been] exposed to a new culture [*pudiya vaalkai-murai*] (LI-9).

Not all married and elderly women, however, take this attitude to returning. Age and class differences affect their return decisions as well. As Hewamanne (2009:

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[111] UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, *Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons*, 28 June 2005, E/CN.4/Sub.2/2005/17. Available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/41640c874.html

169) notes, there are emerging class distinctions among displaced women and for that reason, there are also different perceptions of empowerment during exile. Women who have gained leadership skills and social empowerment by engaging in NGO and community development activities believe that they can retain such status by remaining in Puttalam. Others, who have been unable to overcome poverty and are tired of working as wage labourers, find the prospect of returning to the north with their male kin a relief, and they have new hopes for the future.

On the other hand, young women, who are mostly unmarried and belong to the second generation, see their future as brighter and more likely to be improved if they stay in the current locality. They are better educated than their mothers and older sisters. For example, in 2007, five out of eight displaced students living in Puttalam who gained admission to the local universities were girls. Unlike their parents, they are interested in finding skilled occupations in the public or private sector. Most of the teachers in local schools in Kalpitiya are young women of displaced background. Young displaced women, unlike their mothers, are prepared to go out and work even in Colombo (Hewamanne 2009). The lifestyle they have adopted in Puttalam has made them more 'modern' and 'Islamic' in their outlook than northern village traditional women.

So, exposure to better education, the influence of their working mothers who were active economically and socially, and the challenge, sometime in the future, of getting married without a dowry, has prompted many young women to be proactive in everyday life. There was opposition from the host community and religious groups to the growing social exposure of young displaced women, as they were seen as being anti-religious or going against Islamic culture. However, unlike the elderly women, many young women find it comfortable to work equally with men in offices and schools. They follow Islamic dress codes and wear the hijab, but it is more like a fashion than an expression of religiosity. I noticed girls with hijabs going to tuition classes in public transport buses, sitting close to young men and sometimes even having 'love' affairs and conversations in the buses. Education and their experiences in exile have led them to think differently, or in a more modern way, from their parents. Many of these young women do not see a permanent return to their homes as a wise solution. A young woman who is currently studying for an undergraduate degree at a local university responded to the question of return after

the war as follows:

> We are now getting used to this place. Even if we are forced to leave, we are not going to abandon our connection to this place [Puttalam]. There will be two homes, one here and one there [in the north].

Overall, except for a few women, regardless of age and generational gaps, return is perceived as a role reversal and a re-entering into the traditional, patriarchal norms of northern Muslim society. For most displaced Muslim women, as described by Zarzosa (1998: 195) in her Chilean case study, the gender solidarity they experienced while in exile might be non-existent after return. Ruwanpura's (2006) findings among war-affected women in eastern Sri Lanka support some of my observations to a certain extent. She argues that, despite the fact that the number of women headed households increased, and the social and economic capacities of women have improved because they were breadwinners for their households during the conflict, women still operate within the patriarchal social structure and cannot be considered as empowered.

## Influence of senses of place, home and identity in return decisions

The central argument of this study has been that we need to understand displaced people's own perceptions of sense of place and identity over space and time (prior to, during displacement and in the post-war context). In the previous chapters, it has been explained how northern displaced Muslims' pre-displacement sense of belonging to the north and their identity has gradually altered and been reconstructed in the context of living in exile. In this section, I examine, among other factors described above, how northern Muslims' perceived sense of place attachments (the north vs. Puttalam) and newly-embraced identities in exile have affected their decision making about return.

First-generation men, regardless of their family members' strong desire to 'remain in Puttalam for a while until things get better', are keen to make plans to return and *take actions* for permanent return. First-generation men have found that, even after nearly two decades of exile, not much positive change had been brought to their lives. Rather they feel that they have become dependent, and their social position within and outside their families has been challenged since displacement. They

perceive the return as a spiritual journey towards their past memories. It is also seen as not only a way to reconstruct their lost social image as the head of their households but also as a reconnection with their original homes and places. Their sentiments are most often expressed as a nostalgic remembrance of places they were attached to and a sense of being a northern Muslim. 'In this place [Puttalam] everything is new. I have no connection to this place. I do not want to just die here as an "outclassed" or *aghadi*. I want to go home and spend the rest of my life with dignity and respect' (LI 35). They conceive 'home' in the north both physically and symbolically. Like Greek Cypriots, home is also the spatial setting (Zetter 1999: 11): the paddy fields, farmlands (*chenai*) and the ancestral houses they owned.[112]. Zetter also notes that elderly Greek Cypriot refugee men tend to see the current situation as a temporality and resist integration. They maintain the stigma of the 'displaced (refugee) image' strongly to emphasize the current disorientation and to convey the wish to return (Zetter 1994: 311). Similar views are expressed by elderly men of the northern displaced Muslim community: 'We are treated like second class citizens here [Puttalam]. In our village, life is simple. We can sleep even with a glass of water. I want to go and settle in my ancestral home' (LI 1).

The stigma attached to the displaced identity or *aghadi* in local terms is found to be a factor not only for elderly men but also for some second-generation men who have been isolated in the social sphere, which has influenced them to consider 'return' as the preferred solution to their perceived lowly status in Puttalam. Although there is now an increased tendency by northern Muslims to identify themselves as 'internally displaced' (*idampeyrantha*) rather than refugee or *aghadi*, the former having political significance, denoting them as *a group of people forcibly evicted and having rights to return to their original lands*, local Muslims and officials still call them refugees or camp (*muham*) people. For young men who have established a good rapport with the local host community youth, being referred to as *aghahi* is derogatory, an insult. Calling a displaced person *aghadi* is similar to calling them low caste or uncivilized, dependent, destitute or seeking charity from others. It is like young Oromos who have adapted to life in Canada and do not want to be called refugees or Oromos by others (Kumsa 2006: 243). Such a connotation of inferiority implies that displaced youth are trouble makers or notorious, although they often challenge it and it matters only in the relational

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[112] Balckwell's (2000: 265) study of Angolan refugees in Zambia found that the perception of abundance of natural resources in the home country strongly influenced some refugees to return.

context of localization. However, the experience of the insult and humiliation of being called *aghadi* by locals has prompted some of them to endorse their parents' decisions to return despite the perceived difficulties and uncertainties in their home villages in the North.

> I don't like always being called *aghadi*. We get no respect wherever we go. In hospitals, government offices and schools we are called *aghadi* or camp boys [*muham podiangal*]. We are like estate Tamils. They live as an isolated people in the tea estates, confined to small houses or line rooms[113]. Sinhalese don't respect them much. We are also like them and confined in the camps and welfare centres. We don't get much respect or rights like the locals. Even when we go to the police for a small complaint we are looked down on and treated like criminals by police officials. It is better to go back and live in our parent's homes with respect.
>
> From focus group discussion with young displaced men.

Conflicts and disputes between host and displaced community also contribute to sensitize the *aghadi* (refugee)identity and put some displaced men in a 'rejected' or 'unwelcome' category in the local social context. As shown in the previous chapter, displaced Muslims have now become a burden rather than 'brothers in Islam' for some of the host community Muslims. Thus it is the perception of some sections of the displaced Muslims that living in Puttalam is a continuous struggle and they have developed an attitude that 'this place is not ours'. Although they are respectful towards the host community, they are often subject to humiliation over small matters in everyday life. A school teacher (LI 20) of displaced background who built a house in Puttalam to make it his future 'home' has now changed his mind as he was seriously disturbed by a dispute that took place in his neighbourhood.

> Last month [December 2009], we had a terrible problem with local people living adjacent to our settlement. It was about a small thing but finally ended up with the stabbing of one of our boys by a local youth. As you know, our people used to rear goats as a livelihood activity. Goats usually roam around and occasionally enter into farms or home premises of local people. There was a situation in which two well-grown goats belonging to one of our people were missing in the night. Next morning, our boys went searching and found that the

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[113] Tamil plantation workers of Indian origin in the central part of the country living in the old housing arrangements of attached houses or 'line houses' in the Tea estates with limited basic facilities

goats had been captured by a local family which had tied them to a tree in their home garden. The boys didn't carry anything to harm anyone or intend to fight with the local family. The local man started insulting the boys calling them *aghthi naikhal*. 'Get out of our place'. The boys did not respond with anything harsh and decided to go back. But suddenly the local man, with some of his relatives and a few other local youth, started bashing our boys and one of them was stabbed in the back with a knife. It caused a big problem in the night. Many of our youths gathered and started thinking about retaliating. But, somehow, one of our politicians managed to stop the confrontation and the boy was admitted to the local hospital. We never know how and when things will go bad. We always feel insecure and live in constant fear of attack by locals. After this incident I realized this place does not belong to us. We should live with dignity in our home land in the north.

However, the section of the displaced community that shares the view about not belonging to Puttalam is relatively small. According to recent estimates (June 2010),[114] for a large majority of northern displaced families, return is an unrealistic goal. Not only the poorest and vulnerable groups, but also many of those who have improved their socioeconomic conditions while in exile, perceive Puttalam as their second home. In order to remain as a unique community separate from the host, northern Muslims built their own houses on small plots they bought themselves or were provided by the government. They established community structures such as mosques, and arranged marriages largely within their kin groups or fellow displaced people who were known to them or had lived with them in the camps and welfare centres since they arrived. The camps, welfare centres, and the settlement villages they lived in have become a 'permanent impermanency' (Brun 2008) in re-territorialized localities as 'unique settlement' structures separated by fences. All these are expressions of a strong sense of 'home' and 'belonging' to Puttalam and the maintenance of an *ambiguous identity*, as Zetter (1994) puts it. Although such a continuing display of separateness from the hosts cannot be viewed as a clear commitment to remain in Puttalam, the sense of belonging to these new private and community structures is certainly a factor that influences many northern Muslims to reconsider their return decision and generates debate about whether 'return' is a durable solution or end to their living in exile.

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[114] Personal communication with a local NGO leader and the project director of the Puttalam Housing project. Around 65 per cent of 15,840 displaced households, which includes both first and second generation families, preferred to remain in their current places of residence in Puttalam.

'We are almost settled here. This is our home now. We can't just leave all this and go back' (LI 9).

As in the case of Greek Cypriots (Zetter 1999), conflicting government policies and programs are also partly responsible for the current dilemma faced by displaced Muslims on whether or not to return. The 2005 government rehousing program for northern displaced Muslims, aimed at locally integrating them, has contributed to some of them making their current places of living in Puttalam into 'home'. In particular, the government issued property titles, which encouraged them to buy land in order to become eligible for transit housing in Puttalam.

Although some sections of the northern Muslims opposed the housing project because acceptance of housing grants or property titles would mean permanency and jeopardize their right to return, the majority accepted and currently own houses provided by the government. Since property rights play an important cultural role (Zetter 1994: 313), the government policies themselves became contradictory and created confusion among displaced persons. For example, in October 2010, one of my informants from Puttalam called me stating that a newly-appointed government minister had requested that all those families who had obtained housing grants hand the government-provided houses over to the authorities and return to their places of origin. Otherwise they would lose the properties they owned in the north.

Displaced Muslims, however, having lived in a contested cultural and political context for two decades, seem confident about facing any challenges and were not bothered by the minister's claim. I understand that some of them have approached legal and human rights agencies seeking support in response to his remarks.[115] Also, many do not seem bothered even by the government stopping assistance such as ration cards, food aid and allowances if they refuse to return. Since they are now 'well settled' in local spaces in Puttalam most see their future status as people having 'dual residency' – one in Puttalam and the other in their place of origin in the north. A community leader (KI 1)

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[115] UN Guiding principle No 10, Stabilization and Reconstruction, clause 10.7; Necessary Condition: Return and Resettlement of Refugees and Internally Displaced Populations, stresses the right of IDPs to a voluntary, safe and dignified return to their homes or resettlement. Human rights groups representing the northern Muslims informed me that they are ready to take action against the minister if the government make it as a policy.

of northern Muslims states:

> We know that many of us will lose government assistance if we don't go. Now most of us are planning to keep the houses in Puttalam either by renting them or keeping one family member here. I think everybody who has land and property in their home villages might go one day. But it is only to not lose our rights to the properties in the North. Many of those people moving to their old homes will eventually come back to Puttalam after some time. For example, Jaffna people do business in Colombo and live there. Some of them own houses in Colombo. They all have local residence status in such places. They go to Jaffna only during election times to cast their votes. In the same way, we will also stay here as local residents, but when there is a need we can visit our homes in the north. As far as I can see there is no big issue.

To what extent does the second generation of displaced Muslims actually perceive return as a journey towards 'home'? As already stated, most young men and women who have absorbed a modern lifestyle are less motivated than their parents to return and resettle in the places of origin. One common element of such disinclination is their strong sense of belonging to Puttalam. Since most of them were born and grew up there, they are accustomed to a culture that is different from their parents' and the sense of home is perceived differently from their parents. They see the 'northern' social and cultural environments in their current places of settlement through various artifacts, names and in mosques. They understand the old traditions and customs only from their parents' experience and stories of 'home'. In the meantime, they have absorbed some of the characteristics, social norms and traditions of the local social context of Puttaalm. They feel that living in Puttalam is 'almost at home'.

For most of the second generation of displaced members, Puttalam is their 'private homeland'. According to Ossowski (1967)[116] there exist two types of relations between an individual and their place of origin (homeland) – private and ideological (imagined). 'Private homeland' constitutes the physical space, or geographical territory with which an individual has established direct personal ties as a result of spending a considerable amount of time there, or a formative life stage such as childhood years (Górny and Osipovič 2006 :17). In contrast, 'ideological or imagined homeland' is a homeland in

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[116] The original text of Ossowski (1967) is in Polish. An English translation is not available in print. His writings have been translated into English and  some of his ideas are extracted from   Górny and Osipovič (2006)

which an individual has no personal relationship with the physical space, but develops a sense of belonging, or internalizes the concept of home of their ancestors or parents through stories and artefacts. Since most of the second-generation displaced Muslims were born in Puttalam or spent a considerable part of their childhood in displaced localities, they could not build a personal attachment to their parental 'place' as a homeland. They do not have an intimate tie or attachment with physical space in the north. Instead, they have developed the second type of relation distinguished by Ossowski – a strong sense of attachment to the north as an imagined or ideological homeland. The return to the north for the elderly who were born and spent most of their lives there, has a private and personal value than for the second generation. Return to the north for the second generation has no personal value but would be a sentimental journey to an imagined homeland.

Young men often refer to their parents' home as a 'village' (that is, inferior) and Puttalam as a 'town' culture. As in the case of 'town refugees' in Tanzania (Malkki 1995b), for young men who adopt a lifestyle different from their home environment, a return to the north means losing their modern lifestyle. Green rice fields, large houses, wearing white caps and going to the village mosque five times every day for prayers is somewhat outdated. For those who came from village communities in Mannar, Mullaitivu and Kilinochchci, going to the old family environment limits freedom to a close circle of people at the home villages.

> I think now we have changed. Here, it is almost like our home. I don't think that there is a point in going back to Mannar. Even if we go we have to start things from the beginning/We are more exposed to this place now. In our village our parents didn't go to the town very often. After coming to Puttalam, we found that going to Colombo is a not a big thing. In the past, our parents prepared for several days before they visited Colombo, but it is not like that now. It takes only three hours by intercity [luxury] bus. Some of us used to go to Colombo to buy shirts for festivals [*perunal*]./I think growing up here is a new experience for us. We boys are now looking more 'modern' - no beard and we all wear shirts and trousers. In the north young men used to wear sarongs. We are not *naattan* [village people] anymore'.

> From focus group discussions with young displaced men.

Thus the younger generation, born and educated in Puttalam, find that their northern identity and belonging has a distant quality. They do not have a nostalgic longing like their parents for homes in the north. This suggests that home is a concept which only becomes real when one distances oneself from a place of origin in terms of social experiences more than time and space (Zarzosa 1998: 196). Hewamanne's recent visit to Puttalam also supports my findings, where a displaced woman responded to her question about return by saying 'Today's girls and boys are used to Colombo ways of living. Even if we take them to Mannar, they will run back here. We made these barren lands into beautiful villages. Our children should be able to inherit this land' (Hewamanne 2009: 169). Hence, the sense of home and belonging is not static, it is rather a notion that changes constantly, depending on the experience of the social world that an individual encounters throughout his or her life.

Moreover, the increased sense of belonging to Puttalam by the young generation is a product of the social networks with which they have been associated. As discussed in Chapter Four, they have extended social networks and exposure beyond their individual families or parents' social relationships with the local community. They speak Sinhala better than their parents, actively engage in business transactions, politics, sports and leisure activities, and feel comfortable living in Puttalam. Because of this, they are more amenable to local integration than to return.

> I don't care about who I am. I go to the mosque and talk to all my friends. Some are local youth. We used to eat and share things together. We all lived here…We like being here because we have lived almost all of our life here…Our parents want to go because they are mentally living there [in the north]. But we won't go. We may find places somewhere here to stay.

> From focus group discussions with young displaced men.

Return is not seen, then, by the majority of second-generation displaced Muslims as an end to their displaced living, which is the way it is seen by their parents. Rather it is seen as a *beginning of another displacement*, as it involves re-uprooting the social structures which they have developed and adapted to in exile, as Zetter notes is the case among Greek Cypriots (1999: 2).

In this research, it has been clearly observed that the meaning of being a 'northern Muslim' varies for individuals at different times and in different places: in this case, in pre-displacement villages in the north and post-displacement living in exile in Puttalam. As a point of illustration, I prefer to distinguish individual identity from social or collective identity. Individual identity, as Jenkins argues, is a profoundly social phenomenon and has no meaning in isolation from the social world of other people. However individuals, as social beings and through their interactions, define and redefine themselves and others throughout their lives (Jenkins 2008: 21). Such a self–identity, as it has evolved in a social world over a period of time may influence the 'other' when it comes to matter of choice or survival. In this case, displaced Muslim adults who spent most of their lives in exile and the younger generation born in Puttalam, see their self-identity differently and the latter want their voices to be heard in the return decision making of their parents. In other words, while the elderly first generation men and women have a sense of self that is framed by 'northern' belonging, the self-identity of the younger generation has been influenced and moulded by their experiences and social networks in Puttalam.

While it is acknowledged that identity formation is not an easy task in a foreign social context (Appadurai 1996), I found that most second-generation youth have been able to evolve a 'hybrid self-identity' or what some call a 'double consciousness'. They have been able to negotiate their position in their households and in the local context successfully over the last fifteen years. Since the post-conflict return decision is largely a household one and not an individual act of the father (elderly men) as it was before (in the initial stages of the displacement), there is a conflict between these self-identities about whether to return or not. In this context, young members and working women in families seem more influential and are forcing their elderly men to remain with them in Puttalam or *at least to postpone the return journey to a later date*. This is evident in the case of Hameed (see the opening quote to this chapter), who made a decision to return to Mannar with his wife while leaving his daughters with his son in Puttalam. Decisions like these are also due partly to the declining influence of the father as the key decision maker in the family in the context of post-displacement, where women and second-generation members have become influential economic contributors. The central message, however, is that the self-identity of the displaced youth that was nurtured in the conditions of their protracted exile in Puttalam, is stronger than their parents' nostalgic ideals and felt 'northern' identity when it comes to crucial decision making

such as whether to return.

## Conclusion

Return (repatriation) after the end of wars as the 'durable solution' for displaced/refugee crises (Harrell-Bond 1989) have been s challenged by several researchers of return migration and forced displacement (Black & Koser 1999; Gale 2008; Zetter 1994). My main emphasis in this chapter, as well as a central argument of the thesis, is on highlighting the need to understand the expectations and priorities of displaced persons in exile, and home, identity and the changing notions of sense of place that are quite different from what the policy makers assume. The discussion in this chapter suggests that the motivation to return or not by displaced persons must be assessed by taking into account the changes that have occurred through living in exile. It also endorses the view that return is not the only solution for the crises of displacement, nor is a return to the places of origin (repatriation) a means to end the displacement cycle.

At the time of my last field visit (first quarter of 2010), many displaced people were making individual and group visits to their home villages in the north to assess whether the situation was getting better or not. In such uncertainty, there are two emerging scenarios of return by northern Muslims in the immediate aftermath of the war: individual voluntary repatriation and negotiated collective return. Displaced northern Muslims who are more likely to voluntarily settle in their places of origin are those who find such return less risky and have better access to their former places of origin.

The narratives further illustrate a situation in which no one opinion or individual agency has influenced the decision to return or not at household level. There is a clear division of opinion among displaced Muslims about whether to return or to remain. Memories and nostalgia or longing for their homes in the north, humiliation from the local community and social isolation from the family while they were in exile are the factors that strongly motivate first-generation members of displaced communities to see return positively. However, those hoping to return are not solely motivated by the idea of resurrecting their lost northern identity but, as part of the return process they want to connect with present and future, and combine the two by way of their experiences and the lifestyle they adapted to while living as displaced people. Other factors that have significantly influenced some elderly first-generation men to return are the ownership of

properties, a sense of belonging, better environment, more resources and a perception of a potential for employment and a better life in their home places. Moreover, for displaced families who are not well integrated socially and economically into their local context of Puttalam, return is the preferred option. This group includes those who have been unable to reap many benefits from government and non government support systems, who have lost property and become poor and socially disrespected, and those who are politically isolated among newly influential displaced members of the community.

Those most likely to remain in the displaced localities are drawn from highly disparate groups, including those who are fully or partially integrated into the host societies; those who have found employment; those who did not have land/property in the areas they fled from; those who have bought land/property after their displacement; those who have younger families who have settled into a modern life; those who value education; and those who have been traumatized as victims of 'ethnic cleansing' practices. Also, a sense of belonging to places in Puttalam among the second generation is a clear factor influencing them not to return to the north and to force their parents and other elderly family members to remain in Puttalam. Thus, the expressions and representations of self-identity by displaced Muslims of different ages, genders and social categories illuminate the complex web of cultural continuity and changes during every stage – flight, exile and post-conflict return decision making.

Under the percent circumstances, displaced Muslims see two homes, two belongings and a kind of 'liminal' experience in their lives after the war. What may be concluded, and remains true at least for the immediate future, is that most Muslims displaced during the war and living in protracted exile may not return to their homes in the north. Most of them will continue to migrate between their new, second home in Puttalam and their traditional home back in the native villages of northern Sri Lanka. The disinclination to return, even under the best of conditions that state-sponsored resettlement and reconciliation programs offer, is an important dimension to be further investigated with a particular focus on the impact of a protracted period of displacement. As Zetter (1994) found in the Greek Cypriot situation in Cyprus, the mass return of displaced Muslims from Puttalam to the north is open to question. It raises the question as to whether the end of war transforms mass displacement into mass replacement, as post-conflict social realities are complex and entail a number of concerns for the people

and agencies involved.

One of the major problems that displaced Muslims face today is the provision of land in their places of origin. The number of Muslim families has increased due to marriages of their children during the twenty years they spent outside the north, and some had lost possession of their deeds and were in a quandary. There are other problems, such as lack of infrastructure and inadequate livelihood programmes for the families that were resettled. On the other hand, some families prefer to stay in Puttalam because of better living conditions and educational facilities. Six schools have been opened for IDPs and a large number of them have received housing through various projects. Some are staying back in Puttalam in the belief that they cannot survive without the rations given by the government and the UNHCR. They do not want to lose their voting rights in the north but are fearful that they will face serious economic hardships by resettling without adequate resources and facilities back at their homes.

Commissioner, Secretariat for the Northern Displaced Muslims, Puttalam
December 2010

This quote highlights the complexities surrounding the resettlement of long-term displaced Muslims after the conclusion of the war. The aspirations of displaced Muslims who have lived so long away their homes in the north have now changed and they face the question whether to return or not. This ethnographic study has explored the experience of forced expulsion of northern Muslims from their homes and their experiences living as displaced people. The stories, experiences and discussions of these people provided an in-depth understanding of the social contexts they inhabited after their displacement and how these contexts are shifting in the light of the government's request for them to return to their places of origin since the end of the war against the Tamil rebels.

'What are you going to do after collecting information from us? You may write a good report or book about us. But how it is going help us?' These are questions that I was often asked by young men, women and social activists with whom I had lengthy

discussions during my field work in Puttalam. It is not an unreasonable question, because displaced Muslims have been interviewed by researchers, and reports describing their situation have been published by the mass media, and various national and international reports have been written, without much benefit to them. They see outsiders make news stories about them, but then do nothing but make money by publishing on the plight of displaced people. In writing the conclusion for this research, I considered deeply how I could provide some justice to those people who shared with me their problems and grievances as well as their meals and life stories. Since this is an academic exercise I may not be able to explain their genuine grievances to the government of Sri Lanka, but I promised them I would write a separate research monograph about their issues and disseminate this to the relevant authorities and policy makers.

Though I found it difficult to answer people's questions about the benefits of my research and was troubled in a number of ways while conducting this ethnographic inquiry, I did my best to keep a balance between an 'objective' assessment and a 'subjective' interpretation of the phenomena in front of me. This is one of the dilemmas of ethnographic research. Ultimately, the narratives, stories and my field observations became rich sources of information and I found ethnographic research in my home country to be challenging but the best way of presenting the lived experience of the community. Rather than responding to a statistical survey, the people with whom I interacted participated with their own spoken words and feelings.

I must acknowledge, however, that the research is not a complete ethnographic encounter as such. I used other methods and secondary materials as supplementary evidence. Also, some aspects of the protracted displacement of Muslims were not covered comprehensively by the field research. For example, I interviewed and interacted more with displaced northern Muslims than with local (host) Muslims. The voices of local Muslims and their discourses were not given the same emphasis in the text as that of the displaced northern Muslims. Similarly, I did not have much interaction with Sinhalese locals who were living apart from the displaced Muslim community. Although disputes between host and displaced communities is an important aspect of most displaced/refugee studies, my research has not shed much light on this issue, though I made some reference to a few incidents and provided some examples of how displaced people perceive the local community and vice versa.

Over the past two decades, there has been growing interest in studying displacement scenarios in Sri Lanka because of the unique opportunity provided for important insights into different types of displacement – conflict-induced, development-induced and displacement due to natural disasters. However, except for a few, most studies of conflict-induced displacement in Sri Lanka focus on the trauma, psycho-social issues, dire socioeconomic conditions and livelihood-related problems confronting displaced persons. In this research, an attempt is made to highlight, through the study of local perspectives as evidenced by narratives obtained from men and women, the complexities involved in the protracted displacement of Muslims affected by the civil war in Sri Lanka.

In the following section I discuss some of the key findings of this research and how these findings differ from previous research on displacement, and what are the key lessons to be learned in relation to theory, policy and the everyday lives of displaced people. Here, I first review two previous studies on conflict-induced displacement in Sri Lanka which warrant careful examination in locating this research in the academic and policy perspective: Catherine Brun's *Finding a Place: Local Integration and protracted displacement in Sri Lanka* ( 2008) and Robert Muggah's *Relocation Failures in Sri Lanka: A short History of Internal Displacement and Resettlement* (2008).

Brun, a human geographer, conducted her research among displaced Muslims in Puttalam in 2000 in the context of an on-going conflict situation. Her methodological approach included a survey among selected displaced households and interviews with people in different displaced people's settlements in Puttalam. Though my research was also carried out in the same area (Puttalam), the field sites, time period and methodological approach differ significantly from Brun's study. First, my research covers three different social contexts (time zones) of displaced Muslims: pre and post-displacement as well as the post-conflict situation. Most importantly, this is the first study that examines the experience of displaced Muslims in the post-conflict context. Second, the two field sites chosen for this study were different from Brun's field sites and represent rural, urban and diverse social backgrounds of displaced Muslims. Finally, this is a qualitative research study relying on ethnographic data and following a mixed method approach.

As far as the findings and observations are concerned, the research shares a number of aspects with Brun's study. Both studies discuss displaced persons' shelter arrangements, gender relations, host–displaced disputes, economic recovery of displaced persons, and more importantly their place-making process in the post-displacement lives in Puttalam.

As my research has shown, the shelter arrangements of displaced Muslims after their arrival in Puttalam underwent an evolutionary change from temporary camps supported by philanthropic and faith-based organizations to more formally established welfare centres and settlement villages organized by the government. In analysing these settlement arrangements, Brun focuses her observations on welfare centres and resettlement villages formally established after 1994 by the government, as she wanted to examine 'local integration' as a solution to the displacement (2008: 159–64). Although she describes how local people and community groups assisted displaced Muslims at the initial stage (2008: 132–3), little emphasis is placed on informally established temporary camps by local community organizations on the arrival of Muslims in 1990. My research, however, provides a descriptive, firsthand account of the experiences of both host and displaced Muslims in providing temporary shelters. It also illustrates the civility and humanitarian qualities of people at the time of the arrival of the thousands of displaced Muslims. The religious values and social bonds expressed by local people in providing assistance and sharing their resources was an important dimension of humanitarian assistance, as this research has illustrated through narratives.

Brun also makes similar observations to mine on the administration of displaced people's settlements in Puttalam and she discusses the important role of mosque and camp leaders as prominent figures in displaced settlements (2008: 164). However, she does not provide much discussion on power relations, changing leadership and generational conflicts in the management of displaced people's camps/welfare centres and settlements. Since her study was conducted in 2000, developments such as the new leadership of camp officers, who are the second-generation men appointed by the government, and the challenge they pose to the existing elderly leadership of mosque committees are not covered in her study. In this regard, the present study provides more understanding of the gradual politicization of displaced people's lives in the context of protracted displacement through increased support by the government, and the establishment of new local institutional mechanisms such as information centres in displaced people's camps and settlements.

Brun's main purpose was to analyse the local integration process of displaced Muslims in the context of growing tensions between hosts and displaced in sharing resources for livelihood. She looks in particular at the category of IDP or 'displaced' identity which has benefited and affected both displaced and host community in the negotiation of their rights. An important contribution of her study is the critical evaluation of 'local integration' as a solution to the displacement. She argues that though the government, through settlement schemes and various infrastructure assistance, wanted to integrate displaced Muslims into local culture and social structures, many displaced people lived as segregated communities distancing themselves from local community (2088: 177). My research discusses how displaced people use the IDP or *agathi* labelling by the host community and agency officials to reconstruct a separate identity for themselves. It shows that displaced Muslims have clearly manipulated their IDP status to develop a separate identity while making use of government benefits and humanitarian aid.

The other key aspect that the studies share is discussion of the changing gender roles of displaced women and youth in the post-displacement context. Brun makes a strong case for displaced women having become empowered economically despite their prior inferior social status within the Muslim society. She argues that the displaced woman is the *symbol of change* in the post-displaced context (2008: 208). As discussed in Chapter Five above, the economic role played by women as wage labourers and overseas workers has made them valuable household members and given them a new social status, which Brun also illustrates in her study. Her discussion of displaced women, however, is largely in the context of the post-displacement period. She has not assessed how the empowered social position of women changes in the post-war context. My research highlights how women respond to the government call to return to their homes in the north. The findings show that their voices have become stronger within the households and male counterparts no longer have the control of household affairs that they enjoyed in the pre-displaced village community structure. In addition, Brun engages in a lengthy discussion of the role and position of young displaced men in Puttalam. She argues that they are an important social category to be recognized and shows how they become prominent by developing relationships with the local host community youth (2008: 217–9). She points out, however, that regardless of their social relationship with the local community, many young displaced men are struggling within their households and community to make their voices heard in protracted exile living.

As elderly men hold a strong authority over them in the households, young men are viewed as secondary or immature members. My study, however, found that young men and women are now becoming strong members of their households and community. In particular, young men's contribution to the local economy and their households is more significant today than was observed by Brun in her field research in 2000.

Though conflict between host and displaced communities is at the forefront of Brun's study, she argues that it is a way of negotiating the rights to use resources. Though this was evident at the height of rebuilding their lives in Puttalam, many displaced Muslims wanted to engage with the local community and share livelihood activities like fishing and agriculture with host community members. Over the years, however, displaced Muslims realized the need to find alternative livelihood options that would not trigger conflict and disputes, and that would lead to them becoming unique economic partners in the local economy. For example, small boutiques and communication centres have been set up and business partnerships involving internet banking and contracts with overseas companies have been formed in the past few years. They gradually moved away from the traditional and locally popular livelihood activities related to fishing and agriculture. In particular, second-generation displaced people developed agro-enterprises, commercial crop cultivation and deep-sea fishing, which are less competitive but required skills and entrepreneurship. Brun, however, focused only on fishing and agriculture wage labouring as key livelihood activities which were popular in 2000 but not attractive for many young displaced men and women in 2009.

Brun has, however, introduced two key ideas to the forced migration literature based on her research in Sri Lanka: 'permanent impermanency' and the 'citizenship' issues of displaced persons. She refers to the long-term displacement in the context of protracted civil conflict in the country as 'permanent impermanency' because living as displaced persons has become a livelihood strategy. Displaced Muslims, because of their fading hopes of return in the protracted conflict situation began to buy land and build permanent houses with or without support from the government and NGOs. In doing so, they were attempting to recreate their northern social environments and Brun refers to this as local integration through 're-territorialisation'. The key theme in her research however, is 'citizenship', which refers to displaced Muslims being marginalized from local agencies and people as outsiders or non-residents, and the denial of rights to livelihood resources by displaced Muslims for fishing and agriculture. She states that

'citizenship' is basically an issue of finding 'place' or 'locality' (2008: 149). This study has examined her observations critically and found that these ideas are useful in understanding the post-displacement social context. Her argument of permanent impermanency is to suggest that displaced Muslims attempt to settle in formal village-type shelter arrangements as a way of local integration. Brun elaborates this process as negotiating a right to place to settle by displaced Muslims or the 'creation of space for interaction' while protecting their rights to return to the north. In other words, she describes how displaced and host communities engage in negotiating rights to use of 'spatial boundaries' that the communities share. However, the process of place searching by displaced Muslims is not only the negotiation of rights. As my research highlights, it is also a strategy for reconstructing identity by creating new bonding (*sontham*) to the localities in which they are 'settled'.

Robert Muggah's (2008) work on internal displacement in Sri Lanka is a broader, systematic and comprehensive account of why resettlement efforts have not been successful over the past few decades. He introduces extended models of three different resettlement regimes: development-induced displacement and resettlement (DIDR), conflict-induced displacement and resettlement (CIDR), and natural disaster induced displacement and resettlement (NDIDR) through evidence-based research. Muggah critically analyses the three types of displacements and resettlement processes adopted by successive governments of Sri Lanka since independence.

Analysing the DIDR scenario, he highlights how the resettlement of Sinhalese people from villages in the southern part of the country altered the demographic profile of the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka where a large number of ethnic minorities (Muslims and Tamils) lived (2008: 74–92). Muggah's historical analysis supports most of the aspects that this thesis has elaborated in Chapter Two on the civil conflict and displacement in Sri Lanka since independence. In particular, as shown in this research, the resettlement of Sinhalese people by establishing agriculture colonization schemes by successive governments since independence in1948 has created a sense of insecurity and alienation among ethnic minorities, which was one of the core issues of dissent among the Tamil-speaking minority in the north and east.

In understanding the issues of displacement, resettlement and durable solutions, his detailed description of various conceptual definitions and theoretical underpinnings are

insightful. Muggah provides a clear and comprehensive analysis of different humanitarian regimes including definitions related to the shelter arrangements of displaced persons (2008: 32–42). In particular, his description of the shelter arrangements during the resettlement of displaced persons is relevant to this study. He explains various shelter arrangements on a continuum, beginning from an emergency phase, through a self-support and transitional phase to an integrated settlement phase (2008: 31). This kind of linear model of transition in shelter arrangements has been described in this study. For example, a large number of displaced Muslims who arrived from the north were housed in informal camps in the early 1990s, moved into welfare centres established by the government and finally moved to settlement villages.

The lack of reliable institutional data on displaced and resettled persons is a significant constraint for forced migration research in Sri Lanka. For example, as illustrated in the Chapter Two above, the lack of accurate data on post-conflict resettlement and official disinclination to make such data available to the public was a serious constraint for my research. Existing government policies related to land and property regulations also hinder durable solutions for displacement. For example, the post-conflict return decisions by Muslims are hindered by the lack of land for second-generation displaced persons as well as by the occupation of their land by others and the restriction by the government to access to ancestral lands. Muggah also stresses these as key reasons for the failures of Sri Lankan governments to adhere to any comprehensive resettlement and alternative durable solutions for the displaced. He finds that most of the legislation associated with land acquisition, ownership, tenure and expropriation in the country was outdated and has been progressively politicized since independence (2008 :217). He suggests that the meaningful resettlement of displaced persons requires changes and concrete efforts by government authorities. This has been clearly demonstrated in my research through the experiences of displaced Muslims who visited their places of origin after the war.

The other aspect that this study shares with Muggah is the importance of conflicting institutional arrangements and a lack of conceptual understanding among various government organizations dealing with displacement and resettlement in the country. For example, government ministries and departments dealing with displacement and resettlement often changed over the past years and they contradicted each other in setting conditions for the return of northern Muslims to their places of origin after the

war. One minister requested that displaced Muslims in Puttalam who had obtained houses from the projects hand them over and return to their homes or face the consequences of losing government assistance and their properties in the north. This was not only a clear violation of the UN guiding principles of safe return and the right to find alternative solutions for displacement, but also a threat to the human security of the lives of displaced people. Overall, the return decision making and experience of displaced Muslims is marred by disappointment, lack of official clarification and uncoordinated and ill-planned post-conflict resettlement processes by the government, which Muggah also observed in his research.

In order to highlight the outcome of government and humanitarian efforts at resettlement at local level, Muggah studied two resettlement villages in Eastern Province (Trincomalee and Batticaloa). He focuses largely on the role played by the government, but especially the influence of security forces and the LTTE, on the displaced people in deciding resettlement options (2008: 165–77) In these case studies, he attempts to understand the problems, changes, success stories and failures of resettlement at local level. He does not, however, discuss some important aspects such as *duration* and *multiple* displacement scenarios and makes no serious reference to the protracted displacement of Muslims except some references related to the long-term displaced Tamils by establishing High Security Zones. He has, therefore, overlooked a number of dimensions and unique situations of protracted displacement that this research has discussed. Nevertheless, his work is a comprehensive review of regimes, processes and policies and problems related to internal displacement and restatement of Sri Lanka caused by conflict, development and natural disasters. His contribution is a major one to the internal displacement and resettlement literature of forced migration studies. I agree with his call for a interdisciplinary approach to the vast assortment of principles, norms, rules and decision making procedures established by states, international agencies and NGOs for different categories of internal displacement and resettlement to find meaningful solutions to end displacement (2008: 227).

The present study is different from Brun's and Muggah's studies in several respects. First this is an ethnographic case study of a protracted displaced situation. While Brun approached the issue of protracted displacement from a human geographic perspective, Muggah examined multiple forms of displacement and resettlement processes from an international relations perspective. Second, this research is about a group of Muslims

who were forcefully evicted though not directly involved in the conflict as were Tamils and Sinhalese. This poses a dilemma for them when they look for a durable solution to their displacement even after the end of war. Third, neither of the other two studies examines how people's experience of displacement developed over three phases: pre-displacement, post-displacement and the post-conflict. Finally, and more important, this research was mainly undertaken to understand the importance of 'place' and the felt sense of 'identity' of forced migrants in the context of the conflict and post-conflict situation. It argues that the complexities of finding durable solutions to protracted displacement do not lie solely in what policies and programmes are offered to displaced people. Rather displaced peoples' lived experiences, the newly-generated social realties and the changes in their senses of 'home' and 'identity' during life in exile greatly influence the ending of the displacement cycle. Some of the key findings and contributions of this research in relation to forced migration studies in general and the long-term displacement of Muslims in Sri Lanka in particular are discussed in the following section.

The two concepts that I used to contextualize this research were 'place' and 'identity'– concepts that have been central to debate in global migration and refugee studies for some time. Throughout this research, place and identity have been used to comprehend the social experiences of northern Muslims during pre-displaced, post-displaced and post-conflict/return stages. What happens to people's sense of place and identity once they are forcibly uprooted from their ancestral lands? In the case of displaced Muslims, the forceful eviction from their homes in 1990 was not only a dislocation of their established lives in the north, but also a dislocation of their history in the habitats in which their sense of belonging and identity are firmly rooted. The personal experience of displacement by northern Muslims is not only expressed as the loss of a source of income but also as a feeling of having lost a way of life and a sense of identity. Thus, the social, economic and genealogical bonding with the place they lived in prior to displacement has created a feeling of loss even though they were provided with alternative habitats.

Immediately after arrival, displaced Muslims experienced great hardship in resuming their lives and gaining control over the places in which they had settled temporarily. Competition for resources meant that they faced opposition from local communities about engaging in their pre-displaced livelihood activities such as agriculture and

fishing. In order to avoid conflicts with locals, displaced Muslims found alternative strategies to make a living. While the agencies and local host communities treated northern Muslims as *aghadi* or non-residents, the displaced Muslims began to evolve as a community in-between. They reterritorialized the localities in Puttalam, and developed a new sense of place attachment (*sondham*) and unique identity in their situation of protracted exile. Northern village environments were created by building and naming cultural artifacts and images to link the past with the present. These findings suggest that although people constantly move from one place to another by force or choice, they attempt to create and recreate a sense of place and identity in the localities, by linking their past with the present (Malkki 1995). Thus it is safe to conclude that the importance of place in personal and collective identity formation does not diminish in the event of migration. Rather, the increased movement of people internally and internationally strengthens the importance of place attachments to localities they inhabit and the creation of new identities.

Like Greek Cypriots (Zetter 1999:4), northern Muslims have adapted a sense of permanency as well as developing a fluid identity associated with the label of 'displaced' while in exile. Such new senses of place attachment and identity ultimately affected their decisions about whether to return after the war. It does not mean, however, that those who are prepared to return are hoping to return solely so as to resurrect their lost northern identity. As part of the return process they also want to connect present and future, with a combination of traditions, the experiences they had and the lifestyles they adopted in Puttalam.

When a place (locality) provides substance and livelihood it makes sense for people to have an attachment to it. Displaced Muslims, though initially confronting difficulties in finding a livelihood because of opposition from the host community, gradually moved into various income-earning activities to feed their families. Kibreab (1999) endorses this view and argues that the importance of 'place' remains as an important element of people's everyday experience regardless of where they live. Thus, place attachment is not fixed and may change over time. Displaced people who live in camps and settlements for a protracted period develop new identities based on their memories and also on the experiences, new bonding and social interactions with others while in exile. Malkki (1995b:72) found something similar in her research among Hutu refugees. She stresses the importance of recognizing the multiplicity of attachments that people form

to places through living in, remembering and imagining them, rather than arguing that 'places of birth' are the most spiritual and revered aspect of identity in migrant social contexts.

Several factors influence people who are forced to leave their homes under circumstances such as civil war to seek refuge in specific places. In the case of northern Muslims, the social capital, geographical proximity and affordable access played an important role in finding a place of refuge. Unlike their Tamil counterparts, Muslims did not migrate to south India because it was largely a non-Muslim Tamil-Hindu region. They preferred to find refuge in Muslim-dominated Puttalam in which they believed they be afforded social protection by their fellow ethno-religious community. This pattern of refuge-seeking behaviour is common among not only Muslims but also Tamils and Sinhalese as well. During the conflict period, people of one ethnic group who feared persecution and humiliation from rival ethnic groups migrated to locations where their co-ethnic (religious) group lived as the majority community. Thus conflict-induced displacement has increased the bonding social capital among members of similar ethnicities while polarizing the larger Sri Lankan society into different ethnic groups (Hasbullah 2005; Krof & Silva 2003).

Compared with Tamils, Muslims did not seek asylum in Western countries, for two main reasons: first, there was no established diaspora overseas – as there is of Tamils – to help them to escape the conflict. Second, they feared the loss of Islamic values and the influence of Western culture on their younger generations. Wealthy displaced Muslims, however, were able to find better locations within the country, such as Kandy and Colombo, because they had money (bank savings) and social networks through business and trade prior to the displacement. Although this argument has disturbing implications, because it means that those who can afford it and have better social networks can find better refuge elsewhere (Van Hear 2004: 28), we cannot exclude the role of money and social capital in migration decision making. Even in return decision making of northern Muslims after the war, those who have made visits and taken actions to return are largely those who had earned enough money to afford the cost of travel and have savings with which to start again in the north. Those who are poor, dependent on government rations, find that returning is more risky than remaining. Thus those who are most vulnerable are the most disadvantaged when it comes to finding better places to settle. Those who have resources and networks are the fortunate ones

who choose better options for migration, as in the case of Liberian refugees (Hardgrove 2009: 491).

Another contribution of this research is the micro analysis that shows the capacities and skills of people who have been mostly identified and treated as victims of war by humanitarian agencies. It endorses the criticisms (Chimini 2004; Harrell-Bond 1992; Leopold 1992; Malkki 1997; Zetter 1994) about the labelling of refugees and displaced people as passive recipients of relief, without taking into account their actual needs and capacities. Even though the majority of displaced northern Muslims were farmers and fishermen with the least status in the new society, they strove to rebuild their lives in displaced localities by various coping strategies. They manipulated resources as well as opportunities to maximize gains. Displacement, therefore, does not always have negative connotations but might prompt people in exile to find new social worlds and experiences (Turton 2005).

For the past twenty years, displaced Muslims have been catalysts of change in Puttalam. They not only rebuilt their lives in dynamic and entrepreneurial ways, but also contributed to a vibrant local economy which attracted outsiders to an area that was largely an isolated salt-making place prior to their arrival in 1990. Thus, as this research as well as others (Zetter 1999) suggests, unless the government and humanitarian regimes acknowledge such realties, capabilities and skills of displaced persons, their investments in the displaced community and attempts to end displacement will lead to inappropriate and wasteful assistance programmes (Leopold 1992: 81).

The Sri Lankan government, assisted by donors and humanitarian agencies, invested in re-housing and infrastructure development for the displaced Muslims in Puttalam to integrate them locally in the context of a seemingly unending war. They generally saw local integration in economic and bureaucratic terms, especially the provision of land and basic settlement assistance. It did not entail any broader social integration aspects or wider processes to address the impoverishment and marginalization of displaced persons. Rather it was targeted mostly at providing solutions to the 'living in limbo' situation. As a result, resentment and disputes began to surface not only among displaced Muslims, but also between the local and the displaced communities. At the end of war, such local integration efforts, because of lack of emphasis on social

integration aspects, challenged the efforts of government and humanitarian agencies to send displaced people back to their places of origin.

Conflict-induced displacement, especially protracted displacement, is perceived differently by different age groups. Generation gaps and conflicting aspirations between elderly and young displaced persons in their everyday life interactions in camps and post-conflict decision making, call for more attention to be paid to the perceptions and aspirations of different age cohorts of displaced persons. As argued by (Loizos 2007) time, like place, is an important dimension in forced migration studies because, for people in flight, their life-courses change both before and after displacement. When hopes of return are shattered and temporality becomes permanency, generation gaps appear in life aspirations. It is therefore important to clarify what is meant by 'generation' in the context of protracted displaced situations. Though first and second generation is generally defined as originally displaced persons (families) and their children respectively, the term 'generation' does not reflect the actual age related differences of displaced persons (Loizios 2007: 204).

As far as displaced Muslims are concerned, like Greek Cypriots, they have lived in exile for almost two decades. There are three different age cohorts among them: *Elderly, first-generation displaced persons* who migrated as middle-aged families and had children born in the north; *middle aged parents*, who were displaced as young adults (born in the north and migrated with parents) and married after the displacement in Puttalam, and *young people*, born to the second group and now between fifteen and twenty years old, and their children. Experiences of displacement vary between these age cohorts according to their social relations and the surroundings they inhabit. Although this study did not look at the implications of generation differences in depth, it has highlighted the conflict between generations in understanding the experience of displaced persons who have spent considerable time in exile. In this regard, Lioizos (2007: 208) must be acknowledged. He highlighted this issue in forced migration studies for the first time and argued that the term 'generation' requires some conceptual rigour in empirical research, especially in studying patterns of adaptation in protracted exile situations.

In protracted exile, not only the capabilities and skills of the individuals, but also the power relations (political affiliation and linkages), resource endowments and pre-

displaced social status are important determinants in positioning them in the society. As shown in the discussion, an affluent class, a new layer in the community of displaced Muslims, is visible in Puttalam today. This class became powerful politically as well as socially because it was able to manipulate external assistance and locally available resources for its social and economic mobilization. Though I did not analyse extensively the role played by 'class' in protracted displaced living and return decision making, it appears that class is an important dimension in forced migration studies that needs to be investigated further.

The culmination of this research however is the issue of the *return* of displaced Muslims and what would be the best solution to protracted living in exile. Of the three durable solutions to displaced situations – local integration, relocation and return to the places of origin – the UNHCR asserts that voluntary return (repatriation) is the most appropriate and sustainable (Harrell-Bond 1989: 41). The Sri Lankan government and international agencies have tried the options of relocation (resettlement) and local integration of displaced Muslims. Complete defeat of the Tamil rebels has, however, made the permanent return of displaced Muslims a viable option as the government has promised to assist those willing to return. This has created a dilemma among displaced Muslims.

There are two assumptions underlying the voluntary return option favoured by both the government and humanitarian agencies. The first assumption generalizes the notion that displacement is felt as a loss. This prompted the UNHCR and the government to push voluntary return as the best option (Chimini 2004). Government and humanitarian agencies often fail to take into account the experiences of displaced people in exile when considering post-conflict return and the planning of durable solutions and overlook the fact that return, for many, may bring a second loss. The second assumption, which is closely related, was made by agencies attempting to analyse displaced people's reactions to their statistical surveys and assessments. They assumed that all displaced people have a 'constructed notion' of home as physical territory, space and symbolism which is described as a 'myth of return' (Al-Rashid 1999: 7). Thus they continue their efforts to promote displaced people returning to their places of origin, rather than looking into alternative durable solutions.

One of the key questions been raised in this research is, what makes some people 'not return' or reconsider their return to the north, to which they have a strong sense of belonging, even though there were guarantees for their safety? A number of social, political and cultural factors affect decision to return. As shown in the discussion, the decision to return or to remain is not motivated solely by economic factors. Safety and security is of paramount importance. This is not brought about simply by the end of the war. There must be an end to hostility and the return of peace and safety. As perceived by northern Muslims, safety and social security have many dimensions, and they compare and contrast future scenarios with their past and present. Regardless of generational gaps, socioeconomic divisions and the origins of displaced persons, the greatest concern among all displaced Muslims after the war is *what a return might entail*. Unlike other voluntary return (repatriation) situations, after nearly two decades of exile, there are no remnants of social networks (co-villagers, old neighbours) or social infrastructures in their places of origin. Many have not had the opportunity, until recently, to find out what happened to the economic, cultural and social infrastructure that existed prior to the displacement. It is, therefore, a formidable challenge for them to rebuild the past. This situation prompted the question '*where is our home?*'.

In addition, although I did not go into a deep analysis, two strategies of return by northern Muslims were evident in the immediate aftermath of the war: *Individual voluntary return* and *negotiated collective return*. For the Muslims displaced from the districts of the north (Mannar) neighbouring their current localities (Puttalam), voluntary and individual return seems to be viable. It does not, at any rate, lead those displaced Muslims to abandon totally the lives they built in Puttalam over the last two decades. They have already started to move from their current displaced localities to their places of origin. For the others, however, who were displaced from distant localities of the north (Mullaithivu, Kilinochchi and Jaffna), and who have lost their properties and livelihood resources, voluntary individual return seems impossible. They prefer a collective return in the context of changes in the post-conflict situation where there are threats to safety, security and pre-displaced livelihood resources. Thus, the return of northern Muslims will not be viable unless a secure political environment is created for them, with necessary property rights and compensation. In this context, it is necessary to re-assess return possibilities in both policy and practical terms. Reforms to the structures of political governance, social infrastructure that promotes cross–cultural

(inter-ethnic) harmony, to accommodate the needs and aspirations of displaced persons (Tamils and Muslims) has become of paramount importance.

Among other factors, gender also plays a role in return decision making. Though there are studies focussed on gender in involuntary migration (Mehta 2002;Pedraza 1991), the ways in which gender affects return decisions has not been given much emphasis in research on displaced/refugee studies. As this research and some other studies (Zakariya & Shanmugaratnam 2002) show, since women become empowered socially and economically after the displacement, they are able to influence return decision making at the household level. Paying attention to women's social position in the post-displacement context will help to fill the gap in our knowledge of women as forced migrants, and promote greater understanding of their aspirations for the future in the post-conflict context.

This research also supports the views of others (Chimini 2004; Zetter 1999) who question voluntary return/repatriation as a preferred solution to the problems of displacement. Northern Muslims who have made first visits and have experienced the post-conflict resettlement situation in their former places have witnessed broken promises and challenges posed by newly emerged political and economic scenarios. Therefore, return, though possibly the ideal durable solution, should not be imposed on displaced people who would only go back to situations similar to those from which they fled in the first place (Chimini 1994). Though it seems reasonable to assume that repatriation or reintegration into one's home community environment after return is more likely to yield results than relocation or integration into a community of strangers (Harrell-Bond 1989: 63), such an assumption must be critically examined. This research stresses that the *return of northern Muslims should not be another displacement* where their life, safety, and liberty would be at risk. This is a principle that is also clearly identified in the UNOCHA (2004) Guiding Principle 15(d).

This study is only a snap-shot of the complexities of conflict-induced protracted displacement and post-conflict return/repatriation. In practical terms, the displaced Muslims, during their protracted living in exile, seem to have learned how to deal with agency and state politics. Thus, regardless of the government's call for total return, only a partial return of the displaced Muslims on a permanent basis seems probable. As suggested, there will be continuous circular migration between the original homes in the

north and homes built in Puttalam. It is possible also that some displaced Muslims, particularly second-generation families who adopted modern lifestyles, developed multiple identities and established social networks in Puttalam, may become *residuals* in the event of the closure of welfare centres and termination of government relief assistance, as has been the case for Boreah refugee camps in Guinea (Gale 2008: 550). The majority, however, will maintain a *dual residency* status in the long run and will migrate between Puttalam and the north of Sri Lanka.

In this thesis, the lived experiences and transformative nature of identity and belonging of people in a protracted displaced situation have been highlighted through the case study of northern Muslims living in Puttalam, Sri Lanka. The central message of this research is clear and has both policy and theoretical significance: the experiences of people, who live in a protracted exile situation, their sense of place and identity, and the social dynamics generated after the conclusion of war, need to be considered in order to find durable solutions to long-term conflict induced displacement. Informed policy making of governments and humanitarian regimes will require a critical understanding of the complexities of displacement and repatriation in protracted displacement situations, and through this it is possible to improve the lives of displaced persons who are active partners in post-conflict nation-building efforts.

## Appendix 1

## Social profile of research participants

| Serial No | Research ID | Pseudonym | Gender /Age | Place/ Location | Profile/Affiliation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | **Key Informant Interviews (KI)** | | |
| 1 | KI 1 | Museen | M/34 | Nurachoalai (Kalpitiya) | Social activist of displaced Muslims, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago. Director of local NGO |
| 2 | KI 2 | | M/42 | Colombo/ Puttalam | Lead politician of northern Muslims, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago. Former minister of Resettlement and Disaster Relief |
| 3 | KI 3 | | M/47 | Puttalam town | Director of an INGO-funded project; displaced from Jaffna 14 years ago |
| 4 | KI 4 | | M/63 | Colombo | Social and human rights activist for displaced Muslims |
| 5 | KI 5 | Irfan | M/48 | Puttalam Town | Politician/activist/religious leader of northern Muslims, displaced from Jaffna 15 years ago |
| 6 | KI 6 | Muhis | M/47 | Puttalam town | Host community school teacher/religious leader |
| 7 | KI 7 | Alim | M/52 | Puttalam town | Arabic/Islamic school principal of host community |
| 8 | KI 8 | | M/54 | Puttalam/ Kandy | Host community scholar |
| 9 | KI 9 | | M/56 | Kalpitiya/ Kandy | Scholar, social activist of northern Muslims, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago |
| 10 | KI 10 | | M/62 | Kandy/Jaffna | Muslim scholar/writer University professor |
| 11 | KI 11 | | M/60 | Kandy/ Colombo | Malay Muslim community leader |
| 12 | KI 12 | | M/46 | Kandy/ Batticaloa | Muslim scholar/political analyst |
| 13 | KI 13 | | M/57 | Puttalam | District secretary/GA Puttalam (2005–8) |
| 14 | KI 14 | | M/42 | Colombo | Donor agency official in charge (2004–9) for projects for IDPs |
| 15 | KI 15 | Rayees | M/32 | Colombo/ Puttalam | Social activist/graduate, displaced from Mannar |
| 16 | KI 16 | | M/48 | Kalpitiya/ | Post office master/ |

| | | | | Puttalam | host community member |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 17 | KI 17 | Marzuck | M/47 | Kalpitiya/ Puttalam | Host community social activist/teacher |
| 18 | KI 18 | | M/49 | Ampara (Eastern Province) | Political scientist, South-Eastern University |
| 19 | K 19 | | M/51 | Ampara (Eastern Province) | Vice chancellor, South-Eastern University |
| 20 | K 20 | | M/56 | Ampara (Eastern Province) | Muslim political leader, Eastern Province |
| **Long Interviews (LI)** | | | | | |
| 21 | LI 1 | Hameed | M/62 | Kalpitiya | Farmer, displaced from Mannar 16 years ago |
| 22 | LI 2 | Sukri | M/27 | Kalpitiya | School teacher, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago |
| 23 | LI 3 | Rameem | M/38 | Kalpitiya | School teacher, displaced from Mullaithivu 14 years ago |
| 24 | LI 4 | Ameer | M/54 | Kalpitiya | Imam of Thigahli/Pallivasalthurai |
| 25 | LI 5 | Kareem | M/49 | Kalpitiya | Politician/businessman, displaced from Mannar 16 years ago |
| 26 | LI 6 | Rasool | M/30 | Kalpitiya | In deep-sea fishing and export business, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago |
| 27 | LI 7 | Najab | M/37 | Kalpitiya | Social activist/school teacher, displaced from Mullathivu 15 years ago |
| 28 | LI 8 | Nadjma | F/36 | Kalpitiya | School teacher , displaced from Mannar 15 years ago |
| 29 | LI 9 | Fareeda | F/49 | Kalpitya | Community savings group leader, displaced from Mannar 16 years ago |
| 30 | LI 10 | Shaheed | M/46 | Kalpitiya | Government official, displaced from Jaffna 14 years |
| 31 | LI 11 | Razeed | M/43 | Puttalam Town | Host community social activist/teacher |
| 32 | LI 12 | Lukman | M/28 | Kalpitiya (Thigali) | Islamic fundamentalist youth, mosque leader |
| 33 | LI 13 | Farook | M/54 | Kalpitiya | Camp leader, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago |
| 34 | LI 14 | Haja | M/48 | Kalpitiya | *Gram niladhari*/village official of Alanakuda GN division |
| 35 | LI 15 | Anton | M/50 | Kalpitiya | Local Sinhalese shop owner |
| 36 | LI 16 | Mufeel | M/38 | Thillaydy-Puttalam | Camp officer, displaced from Jaffna 15 years ago |
| 37 | LI 17 | Jameela | F/54 | Kalpitiya- | Wage/farm labourer, displaced from |

| | | | | | Mullathivu 15 years ago |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 38 | LI 18 | Sujath | M/36 | Kalpitiya | Camp officer, displaced from Mullaithivu 15 years ago |
| 39 | LI 19 | Masoor | M/43 | Kalpitiya | Fisherman, displaced from Kilinochci 15 years ago |
| 40 | LI 20 | Raseed | M/38 | -Kaplitiya | News reporter/school teacher, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago |
| 41 | LI 21 | Rafeek | M/47 | Puttalam | Shop owner, displaced from Mullaithivu 14 years ago |
| 42 | LI 22 | Sahul | M/48 | Kalpitiya | Mobile vendor, displaced from Jaffna 14 years ago |
| 43 | LI 23 | Hasan | M/37 | Kalpitiya | Casual farm labourer, displaced from Jaffna 14 years ago |
| 44 | LI 24 | Manaf | M/46 | Puttalam | Boutique owner, displaced from Kilinochchi 14 years ago |
| 45 | LI 25 | Hajara | F/58 | Kalpitiya | Unemployed widow, displaced from Mannar |
| 46 | LI 26 | Usman | M/48 | Kalpitiya | Fisherman, displaced from Kilinochchi 16 years ago |
| 47 | LI 27 | Niyas | M/39 | Kalpitiya | Fisherman, displaced from Mullaithivu 14 years ago |
| 48 | LI 28 | Halideen | M/54 | Kalpitiya | School principal, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago |
| 49 | LI 29 | Rayees | M/46 | Kalpitiya | School teacher, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago |
| 50 | LI 30 | Havva Umma | F/62 | Kalpitya | Small boutique owner, widow, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago |
| 51 | LI 31 | Rizvi | M/35 | Kalpitiya | Taxi driver, displaced from Mannar 14 years ago |
| 52 | LI 32 | Lamika | F/48 | Puttalam Town | Self-employed cloth-maker, displaced from Jaffna 15 years ago |
| 53 | LI 33 | Junaid | M/37 | Kalpitiya | Former driver in Saudi Arabia, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago |
| 54 | LI 34 | Hamath | M/46 | Kalpitiya | Farmer, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago |
| 55 | LI 35 | Ibrahim | M/65 | Kalpitya | Former community leader, sick and unemployed, displaced from Mannar 16 years ago |
| 56 | LI 36 | Jennath | F/57 | Kalpitiya | Unemployed, former wage labourer, displaced from Mannar 15years ago |
| 57 | LI 37 | Razeek | M/37 | Kalpitiya | Casual wage labourer, displaced from Mannar 15 years ago |

Appendix 2

## National level key informant interview guide

**Theme 1** *Identity and origin of the Muslims*

Q. First I will ask few questions on the origin and identity of Sri Lankan Muslims. Actually, how do you describe the historical origins of Sri Lankan Muslims? There are conflicting views on this for a long time. Are they Arab descendents or Tamil converts to Islam?

Q. It is argued that unlike Sinhalese and Tamils, the Muslims have no separate ethnic identity. Do you agree with this idea?

Q. There are other groups such as Malays, Bora, Persians and Mukkuwars who follow Islam.[117] How do majority Muslims consider these groups? Do they think they are part of the Muslims community or such groups have been excluded form the overall "Muslim" community (in relation to issues of ethnic identity)?

Q. As you know, unlike Sinhalese and Tamils, Muslims have no distinct language or live in a specific geographical location. How these situations affect our community maintaining a separate minority identity?

Q. Why do you think the majority of Muslims speak Tamil as their mother tongue and not Arabic or Sinhalese?

**Theme 2** *Ethnic relations between Muslims and other ethnic groups*

Q. How would you describe the Muslims' relationship with Tamils and Sinhalese in the past?

Q. In your view, what are the most challenging issues of Muslims in Sri Lanka today (in the broad areas of economics, culture, and politics)? Why?

Q. I have been told that some of the Sinhalese think of Muslims as a 'threat'? What is your opinion or reaction to this?

Q. As you know many Tamils believe that the Muslims are "part of Tamil Speaking community" and support their separatist struggle. What is your view?

**Theme 3** *Social and political mobilization of Muslims*

Q. It has been suggested that after independence Sinhalese and Tamils were able to revive their cultural and social status but not Muslims. Do you agree? Please explain.

Q. Do you think that formation of Muslim Political party in late 1980 is an important step in the political mobilization of Muslims in the country?

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[117] Mukkuwar is a tribe/clan living in eastern Sri Lanka.

Q. Are Muslims in Sri Lanka a homogenous social group or do they have divisions among them?

Q. Some amongst the majority ethnic groups (Tamils and Sinhalese) believe that Muslims are a rich and wealthy compared to them. Do you think this is an accurate statement?

**Theme 4** *Access to Resources and services*

Q. Do you think that Muslims have the same access to resources and services of the state as Sinhalese and Tamils?

Q. Muslims are mostly bilingual. What are the consequences of this in relation to their socio-economic situation?

**Theme 5** *Ethnic Conflict and Muslims*

Q. What is the situation of Muslims in relation to the ongoing conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils?

Q. Do you think that Muslims engage or refrain in taking part in the current conflict?

Q. Do you think that the problems of Sri Lankan Muslim have been ignored or less recognized by pan–Islamic religious movements within the contemporary global society?

Q. Do you think there is any possibility or likelihood of Muslim secessionist claims in the East, similar to the move for Tamil separatism in future?

# Appendix 3

## Local NGOs in Puttalam and their activities

| Name of the NGO | Type of activities/ services provided |
|---|---|
| Centre for Social Assessment (CSA) | Conducting need assessments of IDPs and providing information for external agencies |
| Child Vision | Counseling, pre-school education, personality development programs for children |
| Community Development Organization | Social harmony activities through cultural activities, educational, health and community asset development |
| Community Trust Fund (CTF) | Assist in development of local roads, water supply, health and sanitation facilities |
| Development Association for Integrated Community (DAIC) | Social harmony projects among host and displaced, as well as different ethnic communities through educational and psycho-social programs |
| Displaced Muslim Development Unit (DMDU) | Political lobby; assists poor IDP families to develop their housing and livelihood activities |
| Humanitarian Brotherhood Foundation (HBF) | Inter-racial and religious organization funded by external agencies providing economic assistance for children, needy families |
| Integrated Health and Environment Organization (IHO) | Community health education and training for women and children, and promotion of and environmental protection |
| Islamic Relief Committee (ISRC) | Provide community water supply, sanitation, temporary housing, education support for children and micro finance practices among women |
| Organization for Grassroot Development (OGD) | Local community organization engaged in education programs, local roads and land development activities |
| Puttlam People's Forum (PPF) | Education programs and lobby for rights of local host communities |
| Research and Action Forum for Social Development (RAAF) | Conducts surveys, research and develops socioeconomic database to support development and rehabilitions of displaced people |
| Seva Lanka Foundation | National NGO assists in providing roads, water supply and income generation activities for poor families |
| Vanni Cultural Foundation (VCF) | Cultural events and programs to improve ethnic and social harmony among people |
| Rural Development Foundation (RDF) | National NGO assists in providing roads, water supply and income generation activities |
| Socio Economic Educational Development Foundation (SEEDAF) | Supports displaced children to improve their education and provide livelihood income generation for women |
| Sarvodaya | National NGO assist in providing roads, water supply and income generation activities and cultural programs |
| Vinivida (Transparent) Coalition | Promotes social and cultural relationships between Sinhalese and Muslims, including IDPs |

# Appendix 4

## Field Notes Samples

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