

REFUGEES: THEIR POTENTIAL AS A FORCE FOR RECONCILIATION AND PEACE

Rohini Hensman

In December and October 1990 I visited four refugee camps in the Colombo area: two Tamil camps, one Sinhalese camp, and one Muslim camp. My purpose was not so much to examine the conditions in the camps (although these were quite grim, especially in the Tamil camps) as to talk to the refugees about their experiences and views of the conflict which had driven them out of their homes. My conversations left me with some disturbing questions, but also with a sense of hope: a feeling that if people who had suffered so much could retain such clear-sightedness and humanity, then surely a resolution to the conflict must be possible.

In August/September 1991 I returned to carry out further investigations into the same problem, and found that the situation had deteriorated: the number of displaced persons had increased from about one million to 1.6 million, and prospects of ultimate rehabilitation seemed to have receded despite the excellent work being done by various organisations and individuals.

My purpose in writing this is very specific. It is not to make suggestions about immediate relief or economic rehabilitation, which I feel others can do more competently than I can. But I am very much afraid that the way in which this work is being carried out may block rather than contribute to an eventual solution of the problem, by reinforcing suspicions and hostilities rather than drawing on what is best in the refugees themselves. What I would like to do here is summarise some of the conversations I had, ask some questions, and suggest why it is so important that we draw on the strengths of these people and other like them by making sure that their voices are heard.

THE TAMIL CAMPS

Something which very quickly struck me in the Tamil camps was the large number of people who could speak Sinhala, most of them from the East. Even stronger evidence for a high degree of ethnic mixing was the large number of inter-marriages. The first woman we spoke to had a Sinhalese husband, and the young man who showed us around had a Sinhalese father and Tamil mother who had both stayed in Jaffna throughout the troubles. I met another family, two sisters from Batticaloa. The elder sister was working in the Fisheries Corporation when she met her future husband, a Sinhalese fisherman. They fell in love, managed to overcome opposition from both families, and got

married. Then her younger sister and husband's younger brother also fell in love and secretly got married, much to the disgust of their families. The children of both sisters are Sinhala speaking. A third sister had also married a Sinhalese man; and on a subsequent visit to their mother, who was there with them, admitted in hushed tones (as though she had no right to be in a Tamil camp) that she herself was Sinhalese, so the ethnic mixing in fact goes back a generation further.

This sounds like a beautiful story of love surmounting ethnic barriers, but it has an unspeakably tragic sequel. When the war broke out in June, the families, fearing for the safety of the men, sent them ahead to Colombo. Some time later, the women and children followed, and at the refugee camp met someone who had been on the same bus as their husbands. Apparently it had been stopped by the Tigers, who had taken out the Sinhalese passengers and killed them: not even shot them, but hacked them to death.

"We haven't told the children what happened to their fathers; how can we explain it to them?" said the eldest sister. "But my eldest daughter is eight years old, she understand everything. I have to ask her to keep away when we talk like this, otherwise she listens and asks questions." The second daughter was in her ninth month of pregnancy; no arrangements seemed to have been made to take her to hospital for the birth of the baby. The eldest says she wants to get a job in Colombo so that all of them can stay on; "we can't go back," she says, "we will be looked on with suspicion because our children speak Sinhala. Nor can we stay in our husband's family's village in the Matara district. I stayed there for three years, but now we can't stay because they got so angry about the second marriage!"

The scene of that conversation is imprinted on my mind for ever. In the background, the crowded, dingy hall; in the foreground, the sweet faces of the young women, and the innocent, smiling children, one of whom tells me, "My father has gone to the village."

There were other tragic cases too. One grief-stricken middle-aged woman was trying to find a lawyer who would help her obtain the release of her son; the security forces had arrested and detained him on the way to Colombo. Her husband had earlier 'disappeared' and never been seen again.

Anna, seventeen years old, belongs to one of the families who have become refugees for the second time within a few years. Her father points out the irony of the fact that for two years, between 1983 and 1985, they were living in the very same camps when their home in Dehiwela was attacked and all their belongings

Rohini Hensman - writer, researcher and activist - works with trade unions and women's groups. She is presently attached to the Union Research Group in Bombay.

burned. They moved to Batticaloa and painfully rebuilt their lives. Now they are back in the camps, having lost everything they possessed for the second time, reduced to destitution once again. "How can we live like this?" he asks. "We are being fed, but what sort of life is it? We can't live like this!"

Anna's mother explained what happened. "The armed forces were bombing and shelling us from the air. They were supposed to be bombing the Tigers, but of course the Tigers were nowhere to be seen. We were the ones who were getting bombed. After all, you wouldn't expect the Tigers to wait around and get killed, would you? They fire some shots or throw a bomb and then get away, vanish - they know very well how to do that. But we, we can't get away so easily, we are sitting targets when the bombers come. And after the bombs, the Muslim homeguards come on the ground, they break what is left of our houses, and loot everything - even the roofing and things like that. We had nothing but the clothes we were wearing when we came; even these few things were given to us after we came."

This mode of operation was confirmed by many others: bombing and shelling from above by the armed forces, attacks on the ground by Muslim homeguards. "The problem is that neither the armed forces or the Tigers are the least bit concerned about people, said Anna's mother. "They are fighting for their own reasons, but they are not at all concerned about what happens to ordinary people. We are the ones who are suffering because neither side takes any trouble to avoid hurting us. In Colombo, they wanted to kill us because we are Tamil, in Batticaloa they wanted to kill us because I speak Sinhala and they thought I was Sinhalese. There is no freedom anywhere in this country. What we need is peace not Eelam!"

Anna's education has been completely disrupted by the conflict. She was studying in the Sinhala medium in Colombo, when the 1983 riots broke. She picked up her schooling in Batticaloa, only to find it disrupted once again in 1987 by the Tigers; they closed down all Sinhala schools, and closed down the Sinhala medium in Anna's school in the most brutal manner possible, by hacking to death her woman teachers whom Anna described as 'very good people'. Anna says that she has never thought of people in terms of Sinhalese or Tamil, and is critical of fellow-Tamils who sometimes follow one leader and sometimes another without ever taking an independent stand of their own. She is obviously a source of strength to her family and neighbours in the refugee camp, giving help and sympathy wherever she can.

Anna points out something which I had also noticed during my earlier visit: that there is a disproportionate number of single young men in these camps. Talking to them, we find that although some of them are fleeing the security forces, most of them have fled in order to avoid being forced to join the armed struggle, often risking their lives in the flight. It is impossible to avoid the startling conclusion that the majority of them have become refugees because they don't want to fight or kill anyone.

THE MUSLIM CAMP

During the latter part of October, in one of the most bizarre episodes of the whole war, the Tigers ordered all Muslims to leave the North or face the prospect of being massacred. By the beginning of November this new wave of refugees was arriving in Colombo and I went with three friends to meet them. We talked to a group of women with children, one of whom, an A-level teacher of Tamil, did much of the talking. All the refugees in this camp were from Mannar island.

The women told us that the ultimatum for them to leave had been brought by Tigers who had come from outside. At first the local Tigers had objected saying "How can we do this to people who have been feeding and sheltering us?" But ultimately they had agreed to do it, going round the streets in a van with a loudspeaker telling the Muslim residents to leave within five days, otherwise they would be killed. We asked if they were sure these were Tigers since some Tamils in Colombo had said that it was actually the government trying to clear the Muslims out of the North for their own reasons. Most certainly they were Tigers, said the teacher; some of them were her own former pupils; there was no way she could be mistaken about that. (She had taught in a Muslim boy's school, but non-Muslim Tamil boys had also come there because the two communities were so close.) Some of the Tigers who had come from outside were very young and barely literate - they had trouble even reading out the lists of what people might and might not take with them. What they were allowed to take out was very little: a few thousand rupees, the jewellery and clothes they were wearing, and a few other things. The rest of their belongings had to be left behind, although some of the local Tigers had been fairly lenient about checking and had allowed them to take more than their 'quota'. Others, however, had already started looting the Muslim families.

Their Tamil neighbours had been utterly devastated by what was happening; they had literally wept and begged and pleaded with the Tigers not to do this, but all in vain. All the women we spoke to were very emphatic that there had been absolutely no enmity or hostility between the two communities; the teacher said that on the contrary, they had lived in such close friendship - she demonstrated with hands clasped together - that if the family in one community was having a wedding and couldn't afford all the expenses, a neighbour in the other community would even sell jewellery in order to help out - so close were they, like brothers and sisters. When they departed, many of them had left valuables with Tamil neighbours, thinking that even if they themselves could not return, at least their friends could enjoy the use of these articles. Everything they say confirms the picture of a closely integrated community without rigid ethnic or religious barriers. The teacher says that she has her parents in Colombo with whom she could stay, but doesn't want to abandon the others; and we get the impression that they would miss her clarity, articulateness and calm dignity.

From these women and others who talked to us we discovered that the escape from Mannar island had been a nightmare. Those who

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had been residents of Mannar town had already been displaced some months earlier to villages outside, due to aerial bombardment and shelling by the Sri Lankan armed forces. Many people had been wounded, had lost arms and legs. We never found out what happened to these people during the exodus from the island; there didn't seem to be any of them in the camp, nor did it seem likely that they could have undertaken such a journey.

When the Tigers announced their ultimatum, the causeway linking Mannar island to the mainland had already been bombed, so the residents were trapped, with no alternative but to travel to the mainland by fishing boat. Many of them waited up to five days on the beach in the pouring monsoon rain, waiting for a boat to take them across. And this happened to people in all conditions: old, young, rich, pregnant. (In fact the teacher's younger sister, who was also talking to us, was eight months pregnant with her fifth child.) An old person and a small child had fallen in the water and drowned. A woman gave birth to a baby; she survived but the baby died and had to be buried when they reached a refugee camp on the mainland.

Exposure to the wind and rain had torn much of their clothing to shreds; they felt especially bad that their children had been exposed to all this while they were helpless to do anything about it. Even some of the few belongings they had managed to salvage had to be thrown away in the flight: where there was a choice between carrying people and luggage, obviously people got priority. The fishing boat owners too wanted to get what they could out of the situation, charging several thousand rupees per family to take them across. Not everyone could afford this, so others included those who couldn't afford it as part of their own 'family'. Fishing boats meant to carry five or six people were loaded with up to forty people; one of the women said that they were convinced that their last moment had come when their boat, its edge barely two inches above the water, threatened to capsize; and yet, thanks to God's protection, they had managed to reach the shore safely.

One of the women said, "When they started looting us it was bad enough, but then we thought they would leave us alone. We never expected them to do this. If they had been good to us, we would have supported them. Why did they have to do this to us? Indeed, this is a difficult question to answer. From the standpoint of the local Tamil it was a disastrous move. Another woman told us her Tamil friends had wailed, "What will happen to us once you are gone?," reckoning that the presence of the Muslims had acted as some kind of restraint on the armed forces, but that once they were gone, the remaining residents would be subjected to merciless bombardment. Ironically, the ultimatum to the Muslims sparked off an exodus of Tamil refugees too, largely to India.

What is most impressive throughout these conversations, is the refugees' firm refusal to blame the Tamils in general for their plight. They are very clear that responsibility for it lies with the Tigers alone, and their friendship for their Tamil neighbours remains unshaken.

THE SINHALESE CAMP

A small group of three women and two elderly men called out to us and started telling us about their experiences. One woman said that they had been staying in a Buddhist temple since they were attacked in 1987, till the Tigers chased them away from there too some months ago; the Tigers had removed everything from their houses, including the roofs. Another woman, who like the rest of this group is from Batticaloa, said she has been a teacher in a nursery school attached to the Methodist church. Some years ago the Tigers had closed down all the Sinhala schools and the Sinhala stream in mixed schools, including her own. Others said they had come with nothing but the clothes they were wearing; only after coming here had they been given mats, mattresses and clothes.

I observed that in the Tamil camps there were many Tamil people from Batticaloa who had also come with nothing but the clothes they were wearing. The first woman denied that Tamil people had anything to fear or had left Batticaloa; according to her, they were all living happily there in comfort. I assured her that there were in fact many more Tamil refugees in refugee camps. My companion told her about the tens of thousands of Tamil refugees in Tirukkovil, living in dreadful conditions and great fear because even the security guards appointed to protect them say that on the slightest pretext they would be ready to kill these people, that even new born babies are Tiger cubs and ought to be killed. "But it's true," said the first woman, with the apparent agreement of the others, "they teach them to be Tigers from the time they are small!"

We both protested strongly at the idea that babies could be Tigers, or that all Tamil people should be held responsible for the atrocities of a few. "But you can't trust the Tigers," said one of the old men, "you can't believe anything they say."

I agreed that they couldn't be trusted, but repeated that all Tamils were not Tigers, many had in fact been killed by them, and that many Tamil refugees were in Colombo as much to get away from the Tigers as from fear of the security forces. I told them about the Tamil women whose Sinhalese husbands had been killed by the Tigers, and asked if there were any Sinhalese people in this camp who were married to Tamils. The first woman flatly denied that there were any such people, but the other elderly man, who turned out to be her brother, pointed out a fair, thin, elderly woman, and murmured something about her being Tamil. However, his sister said she must be a Burgher, and reiterated her opinion that Tamils had nothing to be afraid of, hadn't suffered etc. In some desperation I told her I know that Tamils have been suffering for along time, since my own family was attacked in 1958 because my father is a Tamil and we too had to leave our home, that the same thing happened to many other families in Colombo in 1958 and 1983, and that there were refugees in the Tamil camps who had fled to Batticaloa after the 1983 riots, only to be chased back again in 1990.

I had hesitated to reveal my Tamil parentage for fear of attracting to myself their apparent hostility, but after initially being rather taken aback, they reacted positively. The teacher was eager to

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agree that there were many Tamils who were not like the Tigers, for example the Tamil priest in charge of the Church to which her school was attached, a good and courageous man. She said that after the Tigers had closed down the Sinhala medium she had continued to teach in English and Tamil, and assured us that they all knew Tamil well, except for the third woman who had somehow never managed to pick it up. She explained that the reason why people felt so bitter was that they had trusted the Tigers, they had really believed the war was over and they could get back to their normal lives, everyone had put away their arms, even the policemen were unarmed when the Tigers attacked. I agreed that was a very wrong thing to do, but repeated that they should not therefore blame all Tamils. "No, no, there's no such feeling here," said the first woman's brother hastily. "Look," - indicating the woman he had said was Tamil - "she was our neighbour and now she's living here, that's not a problem, there's nothing like that. Why don't you talk to her?"

He called her over and she came willingly. She told us, in the same confidential tone that the Sinhalese women in the Tamil camp had used, that her parents were Tamil Brahmins of Indian origin and that she was married to a Sinhalese. When the Tigers attacked Sinhalese people in 1987 and all the others moved into the refugee camp at the Buddhist temple, she and her husband had moved into a police bungalow. They had been staying there when the recent fighting broke out, and armed Tigers had come and knocked on the window at night, wanting, she said, to take her husband away. Instead she had gone out and talked to them, and apparently succeeded in persuading them to allow her and her husband to go.

The first woman, being a neighbour, must have known all this, which makes it all the more strange that she should have denied so strenuously the presence of any Tamils in the camp, or of any Sinhalese who were married to Tamils. However, she gave me a big smile when we took our leave - impressed, perhaps, that I had come with a Sinhalese friend, or had been willing to condemn the misdeeds of the Tigers despite being a Tamil.

On our way out, an elderly woman in traditional cloth and jacket stopped us and spoke to us. She too had come from Batticaloa, but was originally from the Matara district; her husband had moved to Batticaloa forty-five years ago, and she herself had gone there after getting married. Most of the people here, she said, had been from the Galle and Matara districts, and had gone to Batticaloa in search of work. Some of her children were grown up and settled in Bibile; the two youngest, who were still at school, she had now also sent to Bibile, and her husband was there too, because he had fallen ill. So she was alone in the camp. She used to run a small business in Batticaloa, making sweets and supplying them to shops.

She said that earlier Sinhalese migrants to Batticaloa had been accepted without any trouble by the predominantly Tamil residents; there had been peace and friendship. But all that had begun to change around 1957/58 with the government's new policies; there had been attacks on Sinhalese settlers. "On Sinhalese?" I asked. "I know there were attacks on Tamils in Colombo."

"Yes," she said, "here they were attacking Tamils, there they were attacking Sinhalese. It was the government policies which started it all. Now everyone is suffering; we have fled, all the Tamils have fled, so many people have been killed, the whole country is being destroyed."

"I hope you will talk to the other people in the camp and tell them all this," I said. "Some of them seem to think that Tamils haven't suffered at all and that all Tamils are Tigers or Tiger supporters."

"Ah!" she said, "I can explain why they think like that. Some of the Tamil families have managed to escape or send their young people away, but not all of them. So the Tigers come to the Tamil families and forcibly recruit a young person from each of them. They do it by force, but even then the whole family comes to be known as Tiger supporters. They are trapped - even though they didn't want to give their son to the Tigers, even though he was taken by force, still they become identified as 'Tigers'."

And now look at all these people here. They are asking for a plot of land and assistance to build a house over here. But supposing they get what they want ... will that solve the problem? No. Because they will always feel: it is because of those Tamils that we were driven out of our homes. So the hostility and resentment will remain. And the same with the Tamil refugees. Even if they are given a piece of land or a house somewhere, they will still feel, it was because of those Sinhalese or Muslims or whatever that we were driven out of our homes. And they too will feel hatred and hostility. Hatred will lead to violence, and violence will lead to more violence, and so it will go on until the whole country is destroyed. So is that the solution? How else can we solve our problems?

Look at the situation of all those families where mixed marriages have taken place? Can a husband leave his wife? Or can a woman leave her husband? Can the parents leave their children? No, they can't. And yet it has become very difficult for them to live together. Both communities look on them with suspicion. They can't find any place to live together in peace. There is no freedom in this country anywhere. And what about the Tamil families who are Sinhala-speaking? They too face the same problem. Tamils look on them with suspicion because they are Sinhala-speaking, Sinhalese look on them with suspicion because they are Tamil. Where can they go?

Think of all the houses which have been destroyed. How will they ever be rebuilt again? Look at me? I am 57 years old. I've been working hard all my life, building up my house, thinking that I'll leave it to my children. Now, at my age, will I have the time to do this all over again? No, of course not. The same thing has happened to thousands of others. And what about the fields which have been bombed, the crops which have been destroyed? Our area was one of the most fertile in the country; it supplied rice to the whole of Batticaloa town, and not only to Batticaloa but also to Colombo. Now who is going to feed all those people? Who is going to provide them with rice? Our whole country is being devastated.

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Have you noticed it is always the poor who suffer? The rich people somehow manage to escape and get away, they don't have to suffer the consequences of all the devastation. It is the poor people of all communities who have lost everything they had. Look at us now, completely destitute, no better than beggars.

And yet, after all, we are the lucky ones: we have escaped with our lives and our limbs. With a bit of help, we can manage to survive. But what about those who have lost their arms and legs? Who is going to give them back their limbs? And what about those who have been killed? Who is going to bring them back to life? Tell me, who is going to bring them back to life?"

I have not done justice to this wise woman with the eyes of a prophet or sage, because I haven't remembered everything she said. Both of us were dumbstruck at the depth of her insight, the poetic beauty of the way she expresses herself. I was wishing we had tape-recorders and television cameras with us, so that we could broadcast her impromptu speech to the nation. But these are the faces we never see on the screens, the voices we never hear, the people who are never present at the negotiating table.

Where do we go from here?

However pessimistic we are about the current situation, we must hope and work for a long-term solution to the massive problem of displaced people in our country. We must make sure that the way in which immediate relief is organised does not place obstacles in the way of a more lasting rehabilitation. Whether the displaced people are resettled or go back to the places from which they have come, the fact is that they have to make their homes within a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. It is crucial to build up in them a sense of security among neighbours of different communities.

Yet the very opposite seems to be happening. Quite apart from justifiable fear of and hostility towards those who have committed atrocities, there seems to be a growing mistrust of people from other communities in general. This is not surprising, given that displaced people are segregated in refugee camps organised along communal lines, and have no idea of what is happening to victims of other communities. But isn't it possible to do something to counteract this tendency?

For example, with a few exceptions (the Suriya Women's Development Centre is one), there are only Tamil relief workers working with Tamil refugees, Sinhalese with Sinhalese refugees and Muslims with Muslim refugees. Surely this reinforces the tendencies which have split them apart rather than the real potential for reconciliation which the refugees carry within themselves? In many cases, I got the impression that they had at one time been part of well-integrated multi ethnic multi-religious communities, and the process of dismembering these communities had been as painful and violent as the process of tearing apart a human being limb from limb. I did not encounter hostility in the Tamil camps because I spoke Sinhala, nor in the Muslim camp because I was

a Christian; not even in the Sinhalese camps because I was a Tamil. There seemed, on the contrary, a widespread longing for a lost paradise of wholeness and friendship, which I think was reinforced by the fact that I went to the Muslim camp with Muslim friends, to the Sinhalese camp with a Sinhalese friend, etc. I think that a multi-ethnic, multi-religious group working for refugee relief and rehabilitation would, by concretely demonstrating solidarity, friendship and the ability to work together of people of different communities, reinforce what is best rather than what is worst in the experience of these refugees.

Another advantage of a multi-ethnic group working in all the camps collectively is that it can disseminate information about the experience of different groups of refugees between camps. It was clear from the conversations that all communities have suffered from the violence; it was also clear (and the 1991 Amnesty report on Sri Lanka says this too) that people from all communities have been the perpetrators of atrocities. It is important that all refugees should know this, so that they feel sympathy and solidarity with victims from other communities rather than with aggressors from their own community.

The group could also disseminate information among other sections of the population, and invite their participation in the work of relief and rehabilitation; apparently the CMU has collected voluntary contributions for refugee relief from the majority of its members, and similar action could be taken on a much wider scale. However, amongst large sections of the population there seems to be appalling ignorance about what is happening to their less fortunate neighbours; many of them comfortably go about their day-to-day lives and some even engage in irresponsible talk which endangers the lives of others and exacerbates the refugee problem, for example by suggesting that all Tamils support the Tigers, thus on the one hand justifying atrocities committed against Tamil civilians by the armed forces and Muslim homeguards, and at the same time encouraging the Tigers to commit more atrocities against people of all communities.

Concretely, I'd like to suggest that a multi-ethnic group which is concerned about the problem of displaced people could bring out and distribute something like a refugee newsletter, putting together experiences and views of refugees from different camps. This will enable the refugees to see their own experiences in the context of the problem as a whole, and help to draw them into participating in finding a solution to it. It can also be used to educate the public in general about what is happening and about their responsibility both to repudiate the atrocities committed by people of their own community, and to participate in rehabilitating the survivors. ■

I would like to thank Sister Angela and Sister Martha for helping to organise my visits to the camps; Sister Antonita, Sister Jayanthi and Lenita for taking me to the Tamil camps; Anberia, Faizun and Yasmine for taking me to the Muslim camp; and Sister Scholastica for taking me to the Sinhalese camp. I would also like to thank all the refugees who spoke to me for their hospitality, friendship, and generosity with their time.