

DRAFT REPORT ON PRESERVING DOCUMENTS AND ORAL HISTORIES OF THE DISPLACED MUSLIMS OF THE NORTHERN PROVINCE OF SRI LANKA

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About this write-up

The write-up is to give information about documents on the displaced Muslims of the Northern Province that need preservation. A background notes come before that explains why those documents need preservation.

Vulnerable Communities in ethno-politicized Sri Lanka

People of different ethnic, religious and cultural groups lived together in all parts of Sri Lanka for generations. However, in recent decades escalating ethnic tensions and war have changed the multi-ethnic, religious and cultural nature of the Sri Lankan society. In addition to the reported stories of large-scale displacement of different ethnic communities, there were a number of other untold stories of individuals and groups belong to vulnerable communities who used to live amicably with the dominant community during the time of peace had also been forced to seek for refuge elsewhere due to increasing tension and mistrust in the country. Now the plight of many of those communities lived in enclaves had been forgotten. At the same time, the process of involuntary migration of weaker ethnic minorities has paved way for creating mono-ethnic regions within Sri Lanka and this in turns has contributed negatively to aggravate further ethnic tension and conflict in the country.

It is undoubtedly necessary to reverse proposes of ethno homogenization of regions and the country for a healthy multi-ethnic living of all people. Many aspects of the life of the people of the country had to be de-ethnicized. The value of pluralism has to be promoted. It is, therefore, necessary to encourage and to educate the masses about the value and richness of living together with others. Among many efforts in this respect, it is necessary to protect and preserve the documents relating to the history and cultural heritage of communities that are in process of extinct. With those objectives, the story about the displaced Muslims is presented herewith.

Muslims of the Northern Province

Muslims account about 8 per cent of the total population and they form the second largest ethno-religious community in Sri Lanka. Muslims lived in all parts of the country and shared living with Sinhalese (in the south) and with Tamils (in the north and east) of Sri Lanka. The cordiality of living that Muslim minority had with other communities (e.g., Sinhalese and Tamils) for generations is well-recorded and is a known fact.

Muslims were the major minority community and accounted about 5 per cent of total population of the Northern Province. In a few places, Muslims lived in concentrations and other places they were scattered in the north. About 100 such locations where Muslim minorities were found the Northern Province before 1990 (see Diagram 1). While Muslims had strong linguistic link with the Tamils, they maintained distinct ethno-religious and cultural heritage in the north. Ethnic relations between Muslim-Tamil were said to be excellent even during the time of heighten ethnic tension between different ethnic communities in the country.

Armed LTTE (**Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam**) cadres ordered the entire Muslims of the North to leave the north by giving 2 hours of ultimatum for the people lived in the capital of Jaffna (Jaffna Town) and 48 hours for those Muslims lived in other parts of the Northern Province. The project of driving out of Muslims from the Tamil dominant north was carried out successfully by LTTE. Though there was no bloodshed during the expulsion because Muslim minority could not resist the expulsion, they had undergone untold physical and mental suffering during and after expulsion (see Diagram 2). Tamil population while not agreeing to the expulsion of Muslims was helplessly and silently watching the influx of Muslims leaving home. LTTE did not allow fleeing Muslims to take any valuable including documents with them. The story of the expulsion of Muslims of the north is known to many and reported (see Parliamentary Speeches in early November 1990).

The incidents of the expulsion of Northern Muslims had happened in the third week of October 1990. To date, almost all Muslims of the North had continued to live as displaced far away from their homes (in southern provinces). Main concentrations of displaced Muslims are found the northwestern coastal part of Puttalam District (see Diagram 3).

Muslims were not been able to return home in the north due to various reasons that include the feeling in security of Muslims on return because LTTE has continued to control (directly and indirectly) most part of the north; prevailing war situation and non-livability in their homes and in the surrounding because of war destruction and growth of secondary forests.

Without alternatives, displaced Muslims have gradually lay root in the places of displacement. As a result, welfare centers have transformed as displaced self settlements. While limited welfare assistance given by the state has continued to be an important source of displaced income, displaced have engaged all available employment in the areas of displacement. At the same time, the younger generation of the displaced who either born or grew up in the places of refuge known only the place of displacement.

At the same time, finding a durable solution to the displacement is remained to be important. When time suits, displaced (at least part of the displaced) will have to be resettled in the places of origin. One of the positive changes during the displacement of this community was the establishment of self settlements that had been organized by displaced according to the places of origin in order to live with friends, relatives and village people (see Diagram 2). In fact, such settlement pattern is an advantage when mobilizing displaced for common positive move in the future.

In those respects, the preservation of documents and oral traditions relating to displaced Muslims would value a lot and it would contribute positively to betterment of this community. With those hopes, the following section briefs the sources of information and documents about displaced Muslims.

Evidences about Northern Muslims

Though Muslims are known to be living in Sri Lanka for several centuries, historians commonly acknowledge the difficulties of reconstructing the history of Muslims of Sri Lanka because of non-availability of hard evidences about past of this community. Cultural reason such as not having sculptures and monuments in Islam may have been one of the reasons for the lack hard evidences about the historical existence of the

Muslims in Sri Lanka. At the same time, by being traders historically, Muslims of Sri Lanka were constantly moving from place to place within Sri Lanka which too would have been the reason for the loss of evidences. So far, no attempt was made to document systematically the available evidences of the history and culture of the Muslims of Sri Lanka. At the same, though it seems rich, the oral history of the history of Muslim community has not yet been explored for the purpose of documentation and analysis.

Northern Muslims were no exception to the above situations. On the other hand, Muslims of the north were unfortunate because they had to leave their homes abruptly because of the forcible expulsion and as the result of it much of the evidences about the community had been left behind in the places of origin except of those who carry the history through oral traditions. Even those people (story tellers, traditional dances, poets and others) have been disappearing because of natural deaths.

However, it is still not too late. There are documents available about the displaced Muslims which could be the beginning collection of available other evidences in order to re-construct the history and life of the displaced Muslims of the Northern Province. Documenting and preserving those materials would certainly play positive role in re-building peace and harmony in the country.

With those in mind, the following sections describe briefly the available documents about the displaced Muslims.

Family Records of the Displaced Muslims of the Northern Province

Muslim had driven out of north by LTTE through different routs. Those who were sent through land rout reached the border districts of Northern Province such as Anuradhapura and Kurunegala. Those who crossed the sea (India Ocean) from Mannar reached the north western coastal areas of Puttalam District (see Diagram 2). However, Muslim displaced of Anuradhapura and Kurunegala had gradually moved to Puttalam for various practical reasons.

In early February, an attempt was made to assess the living conditions of the Muslim displaced. Twenty-five undergraduate students, mostly from the displaced families, two university lectures from Peradeniya and a number of volunteers among the displaced people assisted in conducting the survey. I (Dr. S.H. Hasbullah) initiated and led the investigation.

This was a household survey. It was conducted three months after the eviction of the Muslims. A structured questionnaire was used in the survey.ⁱ The questions we asked were mainly about the current conditions and needs of the displaced at that time. Some of other questions asked were about family members and the economic background of displaced in the places origin and about the experiences that displace encountered during the expulsion (see Table 1 for the specific questions asked in the questionnaire).

The survey was conducted mainly in Puttalam, Anuradhapura and Kurunegala where the majority of the displaced Muslims lived at that time. The respondents were instructed to fill the questionnaire. In most cases, respondents themselves completed the questionnaire. In some cases, educated people in the camp (welfare center) assisted the uneducated respondents. During the early part of March 1991, about 7000 completed

questionnaires were collected. Subsequently, about 2000 completed questionnaires were received as late submissions.

Completed questionnaires captured the memory of respondents about places where they were from, details of family members and the assets and properties that they left behind and the experience that they undergone during the expulsion. This information was given at a time when the displaced were still vividly remembered about the information given (within three months). Displaced people reported the above-mentioned information in own words and put their signature or by thumb mark as a mark endorsing the document. Now 17 years after, more than 10,000 individual family stories of displaced stand as one of rare and important document not only to reconstruct the past but also use it for planning the future of nearly 100,000 displaced Muslims of the Northern Province.

The following section describes about other documents either they were prepared using Family Records of the Displaced Muslims or collected and compiled while processing the above records.

Original Questionnaires

Completed Household Survey is systematically organized by name of respondents, streets, division and village where they lived and the region within the district they belong.

The compiled family records (several volumes) titled as Family Information Muslim Refugees Ousted from the Northern Province, 1990. The family information is kept in the office of the Research and Action Forum for Social Development (Hereafter RAAF).

These documents are idling in shelves of RAAF office and soon the quality of information will degrade because of inability of proper maintenance.

Therefore, the document needs to be protected by micro-filming and made available for wider use.

Reports on Losses of Assets and Properties of displaced Muslims

Initially not many (state and humanitarian agencies) were keen to use the immediate needs information of displaced collected through this survey for their relief and rehabilitation activities.

Because of that, I have taken step to extract assets and property information asked in section 12 of the questionnaire (see the questionnaire given in the appendix) to document economic losses of displaced Muslims as a result of the expulsion. The best available methodology and computer technology were used to compile the assets and property information of the displaced. Seven volume reports that included 9025 family assets of the displaced of the Northern Province were prepared through this exercise. The report prepared is titled as Report on the Loss of Movable and Immovable Assets of Muslims Evicted from the Northern Province in October 1990. Individual volumes named with sub-title as *Jaffna District, Mullaitivu District, Mannar Island, Musali Region, Manthai and Nanaddan Regions and Vanni Region*. One of the pages of this report is given in the appendix of this report.

Due to financial constraints, limited copies (10) of the seven volume reports were reproduced. Copies of the reports were given to UNHCR, Colombo office, the government of Sri Lanka and a couple of organizations representing rights of the displaced Muslims to take necessary action. But nothing had happened because priorities of those organizations were different.

Those valuable information need to be protected and given for wider use.

Collection of Oral Traditions of Displaced Muslims

While preparing Seven Volume Reports of the Loss of Assets and Properties, an attempt was made to collect oral histories of the Muslims of different areas of the Northern Province in order to strengthen the evidences of ownership of loss assets and properties and to reconstruct the history of the displaced Muslims.

Though it was not much, collected oral histories had been compiled by village and regions of origin of the displaced Muslims. The description about the nature of oral tradition has been written in language of displaced people (in Tamil) for the purpose of educating them about the rich culture that they left behind in their places of origin.

These documents need to be updated by collecting available other oral histories through a specific project.

Collection of Mental maps of Original Places

While collecting the oral traditions, mental maps of the places of origin by village and regions were also drawn. The collections of those maps were valuable though they are in state of decay.

Updates of Refugee Statistics

We have been updating refugee (displaced Muslims in particular) statistics time to time for the purpose to contractively contribute to the relief and rehabilitation activities of humanitarian agencies and the state. They are all compiled systematically and are being kept in RAAF Office. This information also needs to be protected and the history of displacement of this community could be constructed using this information.

Project to tracing the whereabouts of the displaced

Displaced have almost lost identity of their origin because of the long duration of displacement. It is necessary to identify them individually and collectively in order for them to relate them with past and to feel their dignity.

A project is proposed herewith to trace the whereabouts of displaced people whom have been reported in the family records of the displaced. 17 years ago, family records identified reported displaced families. During the last 17 years, there were a lot of changes of the families reported in the survey. Displaced were moving from temporary, welfare centers (refugee camps) to self settlements and some might even have disappeared by deaths.

The project is to locate the original respondents and trace changes of those during the last 17 years. It is planned to do only selected villages of the original places in order to trace history as well as identify the changes that had taken place during those 17 years and to recommend about the possible future.

I would be happy to elaborate the propose project in details if requested.

Some suggestions for action

I suggest that the following action may be necessary to protect, preserve and make good of the available documents and information on the displaced Muslims.

- Micro-filming of family records, mental maps and selected poems and oral traditions.
- Collection and compilation of available oral traditions
- Re-production and wiser use of the reports of loss of assets and properties.
- Support for the project on tracing the displaced.

Support that could be extended by us

As the chairman of the Research and Action Forum for Social Development as well as on a personal capacity, I would want to state that we would do our best to support IISH's initiative of protecting, preserving and making use of the documents about the displaced Muslims. The following are some of specific commitments that we can state at this moment in this regard.

- Consultation assistance – I and other academics of the University of Peradeniya would extend our assistance voluntarily to the project.
- Field research assistance – junior staffs and students could be used with minimal cost
- Place of preservation of documents – A building could be separately set up to preserve the documents collected through a project.

Conclusion

I provided some information about the nature of documents about displaced Muslims that needs preservation, transferring into electronic/micro filming and translating them into English for wider use. At the same time, I also suggested that protects can be initiated to collect oral history about the displaced and also tracing displaced who have identify in 1991 survey.
