Refugees from Sri Lanka

What is the issue?

Two batches of Sri Lankan Tamils arrived on the Rameswaram coast trying to escape a dire situation in Sri Lanka, which is reeling under a severe economic crisis.

Why is Tamil Nadu a preferred destination for refugees?

- **Geographical factor**- Barely 30 km away across the shallow Palk Strait, Tamil Nadu is within reach, especially to people in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka.
- **Ethnic factor**- Ethnic affinity has made Tamil Nadu inviting as asylum or point of transit to the West, where a large and influential Tamil diaspora has gathered over the decades of war and political turbulence in Sri Lanka.
- **Cultural factor**- People and political parties in Tamil Nadu have been traditionally welcoming of Sri Lankan refugees with similar ethnic and cultural roots.

What is the history of Sri Lankan refugees?

> *The Indo Sri Lanka Agreement was signed by Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lanka President, J.R.Jayawardene in 1987 that was entered into behind the backs of the Tamil resistance movement.*

- Tamil-origin refugees from Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka had been arriving in India from long before the 1980s.
- The flow of refugees increased significantly after 1983, when ethnic clashes began on the island between the majority Sinhala Buddhist ruling class and the Indian-armed Tamil Tigers.
- **First wave**- The first wave was between 1983 and 1987, when 1.34 lakh Sri Lankan Tamils reached India, pushed by anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka and pulled by the India-Sri Lanka Accord.
- **Second wave**- The second wave of arrivals began after the war flared up in 1990.
- This was also the period in which Sri Lankan Tamils faced pressures in Tamil Nadu after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.
- **Third wave-** The arrivals began in 1995 and continued until 2002, a period that witnessed intense fighting in Northern Sri Lanka.
- The exodus turned into a flood in 2008-09, the final years of the war.

What about the life of refugees in Tamil Nadu?

- Despite continuous discussions on the Sri Lankan Tamil issue in Tamil Nadu politics for decades the quality of life in the refugee camps was poor.
- Most camps are open prisons with families crammed into one or two rooms that they received in the 1980s or 1990s.

- Many refugees are watched by the Q-branch, the state intelligence and investigative unit tracking terrorists and other radicalised individuals.
- The refugees have benefitted from the general social welfare schemes in the state, be it the free rice or periodic festival incentives and "kits".
- The head of each refugee family gets a monthly allowance of at least Rs 1,000, and monthly assistance for spouses and children below age 12.
- The government has announced a scheme to build 3,510 houses for Sri Lankan refugees, renovate 7,469, and provide financial assistance to refugee students for higher education.

How is the current economic crisis different from the previous inflows?

India is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.

- The present inflow of refugees into India is a result of economic crisis in Sri Lanka unlike the previous situations of war and political instability.
- The collapse of tourism following the Easter attacks of 2019 and the Covid-19 pandemic has wrecked the Sri Lankan economy.
- The country is
    - heavily import-dependent
    - crashing foreign exchange reserves
    - devaluation of currency
    - acute shortages of food items, fuel, and other essentials
    - soaring inflation
    - unaffordability of staples

Immigration comes under the Union list and the state government will have no say when it comes to formulating policies dealing with the new wave of economic migrants from Sri Lanka.

Reference

1. https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/tamil-nadu-sri-lankan-refugees-economic-crisis-explained-7834849/

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