Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India

What is the issue?

- The Citizenship Amendment Act was recently passed in India, in regards with offering citizenship to illegal migrants.
- In this connection, here is a look at the issue of the Sri Lankan Tamils, as they are excluded from the provisions of the Act.

When did the refugees from Sri Lanka arrive in India?

- Tamils who came from Sri Lanka can be separated into those who came before 1983 and those who came after.
- The latter was when the separatist movement in Sri Lanka took a violent turn followed by a series of anti-Tamil riots.
- Most of the 1 lakh documented Sri Lankan illegal immigrants in India today are those who fled this ethnic conflict.
- Those who reached India before 1983 were mostly Indian-origin Tamils whose forefathers migrated to Sri Lanka a century previously.
- This was mainly on account of working in the tea plantations there.
- In 1964, Prime Ministers Lal Bahadur Shastri (India) and Sirimavo Bandaranaike (SL) signed an agreement.
- This was to allow some 9,75,000 people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka, who had citizenship of neither country, to become citizens of the country of their choice.
- Many of those who arrived in India until 1982 got legal accommodation.
- However, the process was not comprehensive, and was ultimately not completed.
- Some 4.6 lakh repatriations from Sri Lanka have been officially recorded so far.
- This is besides the thousands of Tamils of Sri Lankan origin who sought asylum in India.

What is the present scenario?

- Some of those who arrived from Sri Lanka managed to travel onward to countries of Europe.
- Some others married Indians and resolved their identity issues.
- At present, about 1 lakh Tamils from Sri Lanka live in India.

- These include some 60,000 in camps across Tamil Nadu.
- These refugees are mostly Hindu, and are of both Sri Lankan and Indian origin.
- Technically, those who arrived by boat and other informal, illegal channels during the war in Sri Lanka are considered illegal immigrants.
- They are not considered as refugees.
- Most of these "illegal immigrants" reached Tamil Nadu in the 1980s and 1990s.
- Thereafter, a few hundreds came over the years.
- The arrivals increased rapidly during the last years of the war.
- [The war ended with the final defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009.]
- At least 20% of these refugees claim an Indian origin on the basis of Sri Lankan birth certificates that identify them as "Indian Tamil".
- Documents issued by Indian authorities that trace their links to Indian grandparents or other ancestors also provide evidence.

What are the conditions in the Tamil Nadu camps?

- About 19,000 Sri Lankan families, comprising 60,000 individuals, live in 107 camps in Tamil Nadu.
- Some 10,000 of these inmates are children below the age of 8 years.
- Dwellings here are in most cases a single room that was allotted to a family when it reached India in 1983 or later.
- They continue to live there ever since. Most of these camps are in a shambles.
- No rent is charged from the residents, and they get rice for 57 paise a kilo.
- Each member of a family aged eight and older is eligible for 12 kg of rice every month.
- The head of the family gets an allowance of Rs 1,000 every month.
- The spouse gets Rs 750, and children below the age of 12, Rs 400 each.
- Besides the 60,000 in the camps, about 30,000 Sri Lankan Tamils live on their own.
- They are required to periodically report to the nearest police station.
- However, they have greater freedom of movement than those who live in the camps.
- The camps have a system of attendance.
- The inmates of camps cannot go outside Tamil Nadu, and require permission to even travel out of the district.
- A VIP visit in the vicinity of the camps almost always brings interrogation and inquiries from the Q-Branch of the police and central intelligence agencies.

- The relatively free atmosphere in the refugee camps changed permanently after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.

What do the refugees expect from the government?

- The refugees expect citizenship of India.
- Most of those in the camps have nothing left in Sri Lanka, no property or community to go back to.
- They fear persecution and violence at the hands of the Colombo government and Sinhala Buddhist majority if they return to Sri Lanka.
- They are also unable to go anywhere else (such as to a European country).
- Also, most of the Indian-origin Tamils have ancestral roots, relatives, and property in India.
- Many could have got Indian citizenship under the Shastri-Bandaranaike Pact if they had chosen to come to India before the ethnic riots broke out in Sri Lanka.

Is there a scope for them to get Indian citizenship?

- There is no process in India to give citizenship to the Tamil refugees.
- The refugee camps were built only as a temporary arrangement for people in distress.
- They were meant to make them feel safe until such time as they could return to Sri Lanka after normalcy was restored.
- The European model of giving asylum and citizenship to refugees works on individual cases.
- That is impossible in India, as there are thousands of Tamil refugees.

Source: Indian Express

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