

A Dream of Return

SHARIKA THIRANAGAMA

When I went home again for the first time, I thought, this is the soil I was born in. This is the smell of my land, the red fields, the earth as red as blood. This is what my own land looks like ... I wept. I screamed. All the memories I had as a child of every place. When we came home from school we would find the bodies of the slain. Once the helicopter came, the army, and bombed us. I remember all of this ... Now we are like tourists. If we go there, when we think of our homes we cry with our memories, we left this and came. We left our brick house and came to live in *cadjan* (thatch) huts with the rain and snakes. How we used to live there! Our house is bombed, the walls are not even there. The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) had taken everything there was.

Mumida

Mumida is a young Northern Muslim woman, from the Mannar district in the north, now living as an internally displaced person (IDP) in the Puttalam district in northwestern Sri Lanka. The home she refers to is her former natal village, shared between Tamils and Muslims. She is telling me about her first visit to her former village, 12 years after leaving it, in the brief period of grace opened up by a 2002 ceasefire between the warring Sri Lankan Government and the Tamil insurrectionary group the LTTE. That ceasefire along with the visits of Muslims to their former homes has now collapsed. The memories she has of that home are of complex and multiple cycles of violence. She recalls the deaths and destruction caused by the military campaigns of the Sri Lankan Army against the Tamil-speaking populations of the north. However, the central event that frames her memories is the ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the north and the continuing violence of displacement.

In October 1990, the LTTE expelled all the 75,000–80,000 Muslims from the five districts in the north under its control, Vavuniya, Mannar, Mullaithivu, Jaffna, and Kilinochchi. They were given 24–48 hours to leave. In Jaffna, Muslims were given only two hours to leave. The order came from the highest ranks of the LTTE and no clear explanation was offered. It was a purely military operation and the reaction from the local Tamil community was of shock and surprise—though Tamils have accommodated it since. By November, there were no more Muslims in the north. The LTTE had made the north the Tamil-only territory that they were fighting for. This ethnic cleansing is known as “the Eviction” and the community of Muslims created by this act are formally “IDPs” and refer to themselves as “Northern Muslims” and “*ahathi*” (refugees). Puttalam district houses over 65,000 Northern Muslim refugees. Through two peace processes and ceasefires, their collective right to return and an LTTE guarantee that they will not be evicted again has never been brokered. A few individual families have returned to the north but have faced harassment from the LTTE. The majority has not yet returned.

Sri Lanka’s conflict has centred on the Sinhalese majority and Sri Lankan Tamils, Sri Lanka’s largest Tamil-speaking minority. Sri Lankan Muslims have barely featured in accounts of the ethnic conflict, but their lives too have been inextricably linked to the civil war. Muslims, though Tamil-speaking, are classified as an ethno-religious minority around the categories of religion and ethnicity, while Sri Lankan Tamils, Christian and Hindu, are classed as an ethnic minority around language and ethnicity. Only the recent

The promise of return which has been embraced by Muslim refugees from Northern Sri Lanka may be ephemeral. Nonetheless, dreams of returning are vital in attempts to repair the past and the wounds of the Eviction. The author shows that through dreaming the prospect of a peaceful multi-ethnic northern Sri Lanka remains imaginable, thus allowing for at least one ray of optimism concerning the future of a deeply troubled society.

clashes between the LTTE and Eastern Muslims, and the Northern Muslim Eviction, have suddenly alerted attention to the precarious position of an ethnic minority that is a minority for both Sinhalese and Tamils. The implications of this positioning continues to leave Sri Lankan Muslims negotiating a war that is not being fought for them but is, nonetheless, consequential for their every day lives. Here I discuss

Northern Muslims’ dreams of “return” and their fragile hopes of a Tamil and Muslim north.

The historicity of loss

They were going from house to house ... I asked them [LTTE cadres], “is this the house that your father’s mother built?” You have to ask! I am asking them straight “is this the house your father’s mother built? Is this the house the leader of the Tigers built? Have you come all this way to take from us, us who built this house, this threshold, who brought these things? Now if you want to go and catch a country, you do that. Take the country. Who would come and ask from people these things?”

Nachiya’s story of the Eviction in Jaffna

Muslims from the north, in contrast to the politically and numerically strong East Coast Muslims and the historically dominant Southern Muslims, were a politically and numerically vulnerable community. In 1990, Muslims from the north of Sri Lanka became “Northern Muslims”—a community created around (1) common origins in the northern districts of Sri Lanka; (2) a shared collective experience of “the Eviction”; and (3) collective internal displacement. Before the Eviction Muslims identified themselves through districts e.g. Jaffna Muslims, Mannar Muslims. The term “Northern Muslim” came into currency only after the Eviction and it denoted a community traumatically born through eviction, it gave them an origin in a place, a region, after they had lost it. The strength of this collective identification and the density of stories of the Eviction in Puttalam cannot be underestimated. Refugees were living, as Nazleen put it to me once, “side by side with their sorrows.” Diverse families, individuals, and villages found that even though their pasts were dissimilar and multiple, in 1990 the LTTE ensured that their futures would be intertwined. This loss continues to structure Northern Muslim identity, through its concretisation in the everyday residential spaces that Northern Muslims inhabit and recreate.

In 2003, I first went to Puttalam. Thirteen years after the Eviction, Northern Muslims continued to construct their identities around their former homes; new settlements and residence in camps were structured around former natal villages from the north. Children were still growing up in Jaffna or Erukalampidy (Mannar) though actually in Puttalam. Refugees continued to make social and moral distinctions between “local” and *ahathi* (refugee) Muslims. While Puttalam has historically a strong and influential Muslim minority, they were also seen as different from refugees—despite their shared ethnicity and language—on the basis of villages of regional origin. Differentiation between local and refugee on basis of regional origin, also worked to allow internal differentiation between Northern Muslims from different districts and villages. Refugees argued that different “homes” made different kinds of persons, drawing on former villages from the north—physically absent but still culturally nourishing. Houses in Puttalam clustered around the social relations of their absent former homes enfolding these as productive absences. Moreover, the idiom of home and natal villages which Northern Muslims still draw upon was consciously multi-ethnic; homes were shared between Tamils and Muslims and the idiom of shared homes and neighbourliness was frequently stressed as a counterpoint to the dominant narrative of a Tamil only north. Common loss was creating a shared everyday future.

“Now we are like tourists ... we left our brick house and came to live ... with the rain and snakes.”



PHOTO BY LAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI / © AFP, 2006

Dreaming of return

Here I return to Mumida, who, like many of the younger generation of refugees does not imagine actual return to the north, still a war-zone. The key debate that drew together multiple stories, opinions, dreams, and divisions was the question of "return." "Return" in Puttalam, as it is indeed for many populations (e.g. Palestinians) displaced by political violence, is more than compensation or even physical relocation. It is a profound social and emotional question about one's place in the world, about recognition of injustice; it opens a horizon of expectations and dreams whose longings can never be fully satisfied. In Puttalam, return plaited together two different kinds of conversations, one about the actual possibility of relocation and the renewal of actual neighbourhoods, and the second, about the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of return.

However, this profoundly divided generations of Northern Muslims as refugees settled down and children married in Puttalam. Relationships to former homes were formed directly for the older generation but, people asked, what of their children? Were these children, children actually of this home, Puttalam? And if so, did that make them different persons from their parents even though they were kin? Sometimes people even wondered if their children had a home. Conversations about "return" opened up the impossibility of a future in which the consequences of the Eviction could be erased, and one in which different generations occupied different emotional landscapes. The older generation strongly desired return to the north, even as they acknowledged its impossibility. An intermediate generation, who came, struggled and raised children in the camps, spoke of their memories of their former villages and their longings for that life. However, they saw themselves tied to their children who had settled in Puttalam; not least many were frightened of undergoing another eviction again. The younger generation, like Mumida, saw themselves very clearly as Northern Muslim but as Razika told me in 2007, "who wants to go back and die?" They were in fact Northern Muslims proper, their identities firmly rooted, not in their former homes as with their parents, but in a common history of displacement and eviction.

While the impossibility of return constantly reminded people of their inability to return to a time before the Eviction, the impossibility of actual return could not exhaust the promise of return. It seemed sometimes that only the promise of return could bring back the ability

to repair the past and the wounds of the Eviction and Tamil/Muslim relations. I heard the interplay of these conversations in many houses and stories, in relation to children, land, Tamil neighbours, and to me. I make this distinction between the return *as promise* and the return *as practical possibility* because the symbolism of return is a story about belonging that is written into the making of Northern Muslim communities. Whether Muslims can physically return or not, which is becoming less likely as time passes, the emotional landscape of possible "return" remains central. Even the young, who do not intend to return, are rooted in the experience of displacement and the story of a terrible injustice. Retelling Eviction stories beckoned to the necessity of insisting on the political legitimacy of return. For Northern Muslims a guarantee of return would be the acknowledgement of injustice and the repair of Tamil and Muslim relations. "Return" as such is a horizon of expectations, dreams, and fantasies; conversations about it speak to "a time before" Eviction and "a time after."

Tamils and Muslim futures?

One of the themes common to all Eviction stories was Northern Muslim insistence that it had been the LTTE rather than Tamils who had evicted them, and the description of their Tamil neighbours as passive weeping observers. This insistence located ethnic cleansing as coming from the outside, refusing to poison intimate village relations which continued thus to be infused with love and longing. This is also not untrue, Muslim eviction was unpopular among northern Tamils and there is no evidence of civilian collusion. However, this insistence is as much ideological as factual, and it relates to Northern Muslim attempts to imagine a multi-ethnic north.

Muslim conversations about former homes drew on the people that these places were shared with. Shafiq's memories of Jaffna were all about her childhood relationship with a Hindu Tamil man from whom she and her brother were inseparable. In 2002 after the ceasefire a letter came carried by many hands to Shafiq's family from the old Tamil man. The letter told of his own displacement and his return to Jaffna. He too was now an IDP living in a cajan hut, the Muslim family should, he wrote, come home to where they belonged so they could be neighbours again. Shafiq, married with a child in Puttalam, cannot return and her despair as she told me about this letter testifies to how "return" also promises the repair of social relations between Tamils and Muslims someday in the future. Despite the tightlipped silence of Tamils on Muslim eviction, some Northern Tamils did visit their former neighbours in camps, continuing intimacies that both sides treasured. However, largely, Tamils remain silent. Many Tamils I interviewed refused to approve but also condemn the eviction of Northern Muslims.

Presently, despite the much more violent and interpersonal breakdown of communal relations between eastern Tamils and Muslims, the Kattankudy Muslim associations have undertaken to raise money and feed thousands of Tamil refugees displaced by recent fighting.¹ They have persisted despite the opposition of the two factions of the LTTE (now fighting against each other). D.B.S. Jeyaraj, a Tamil journalist muses in his writing whether such actions indicate possibilities of a peaceful Sri Lanka.² He points out that in the Tsunami, briefly Tamils, Muslims, and Sinhalese helped each other. Such narratives, in which the continuing intimacy of Tamils and Muslims is highlighted despite the war time atrocities, indicate a local need to cling onto an utopian story of peace in Sri Lanka, one that attempts to make Tamil and Muslim relations the fragile loom upon which a new future can be woven.

Will this weaving of the past with the present prove to be too fragile? Is it fair that it is Northern Muslims, rather than Northern Tamils, who are being forced to demonstrate Tamil and Muslim kinship? At the moment there are no answers. As the war continues to unfold in Sri Lanka, I am grateful that one community at least has maintained a multi-ethnic imagination of Sri Lanka, thereby stressing the necessity of continuing communication and intimacy.

Notes

1. Communal relations in the east are more tense than in the north.
2. D.B.S. Jeyaraj, "Kattankudi Muslims help Tamil IDPs in Araiampathy," *Transcurrents.com*, 20 March 2007 at, <http://transcurrents.com/tamiliana/archives/302>.

Sharika Thiraganama is a research consultant at the Open University (UK) and the University of Amsterdam.

Email: sharikat@hotmail.com

Sri Lankan Muslim refugees returning home