

SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCES OF SRI LANKAN TAMIL REFUGEES IN TRONDHEIM, NORWAY

M. Varnagulasingham¹, V. Pathmanandakumar²

¹Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts and Culture, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

²Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway

ABSTRACT

This paper is a qualitative research project that explored the perspectives of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees on their resettlement in Trondheim Norway and considered aspects of their integration into Norwegian society. Integration is a multidimensional construct dealing with complex interrelated processes pertaining to societal participation that is, the ways in which migrants become part of the social, cultural, economic, and political spheres of the country of resettlement. This study did not discuss all perspectives of resettlement and integration. In contrast, this paper focuses mainly on the social and cultural aspects of this phenomenon.

Key words: Cultural norms, Integration, Migrants, Refugees, Settlement

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a process that commences with the simple thought of moving, but it continues long after the individual arrives in her or his new home. The process is constrained by certain factors such as capital, immigration policy, and the existence of kinship networks. Individuals, who are able to overcome these constraints and decide to migrate, must overcome a new set of challenges upon arrival in the host county. These challenges include the need to adapt to a new labour market, use of a new language, and integration with the rest of society. Integration is a multidimensional construct dealing with complex interrelated processes pertaining to societal participation — that is, the ways in which migrants become part of the social, cultural, economic, and political spheres of the country of resettlement (Bloch, 1997). This paper, however, focuses primarily on the social and cultural aspects of this phenomenon.

Objective of the study

- ❖ Exploring the settlement experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Trondheim Norway and considered aspects of their integration into Norwegian society.

Research questions

- What factors influence and constrain the decision to immigrate to Norway?
- What features influence the community's resettlement in Trondheim?
- What are the restrictions that Sri Lankan refugees face in process of integration into Norwegian Society?

Theoretical frame work

Integration is frequently described in terms of continuity versus change, continuity being synonymous with socio-cultural maintenance and change with integration (Carey-Wood at el 1995). For this study I adopted a framework proposed by Berry and Sam (1997) that views continuity and change as complimentary, rather than competing, processes. This framework considers maintenance of socio-cultural identity and the associated establishment of ties with the dominant society as joint criteria for successful integration.

A variety of factors influence the integration process. One is the distance between the home and the host culture; the greater the cultural gap between the refugee and the country of relocation, the more difficult the integration process (Duke, 1996). Another determinant is generational status; "The settlement of refugees in Britain ... indicate that the first generation of adult migrants largely preserve the features of culture and lifestyle of their country of origin" (Carey-Wood at el 1995); it is the second generation that more readily accepts the norms and cultural practices of the country of resettlement. The extent of migrants' participation in mainstream culture also depends on structural factors within the society, including social and economic conditions and public policies that support their efforts in this direction (Duke, 1996).

Refugees leave their homelands under great pressure, usually as a result of war, severe political or economic upheaval, or religious or ethnic persecution. They arrive in the host country after having endured the embarrassment and horrors of flight and, for some, prolonged stays in refugee camps. Refugees are not able to plan their migration in advance; consequently, they arrive in a host country unprepared for what they may encounter there. In addition, they must cope with the strain associated with sudden separation from, or loss of, family along with the challenges of integration into the country of resettlement. The dimensions of race, gender and the forms of patriarchy in their home and host countries compound their situation.

The Tamil migration is largely made up of refugees and homeland less people. According to UNHCR, between 1980 – 1999, 256, 307 people of Sri Lankan origin applied for asylum in Europe, one of the top ten groups of asylum seekers during this period (Cheran, 2003). Large numbers of Tamils have been granted some form of residence status in their host country. Tamil migration consists of an estimated 700,000 people settled in Canada, Europe, India and Australia (Cheran, 2003) in which, some of them have migrated to Norway. Most live in Oslo, which is the capital city of Norway, and other small cities like Trondheim. It is likely therefore that one in every four Sri Lankan Tamils now lives in the migration. There is a long tradition of Tamil migration from the Jaffna peninsula. Elite and dominant groups among the Tamils of Sri Lanka have had a long history of temporary emigration for education and employment, usually to Britain and Malaysia. Sustaining a society under stress, strain and displacement has been the most important function of the Tamil Diaspora (Cheran, 2003). Almost, Sri Lankan Tamils are racial and ethnic largest second minorities in Norway (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oslo#Economy>). To a certain extent, Tamil, those who are living in Norway have been affected by the changes in social structure. These changes included distance in social kinship, different language, and social behavior and so on. These and other restrictions in day to day constitute a significant hardship for Sri Lankan Tamil families.

Role of Sri Lankan Tamil men and women in Sri Lankan Tamil's culture

Sri Lankan Tamil is a patriarchal society with its roots in Hinduism. The basis of Sri Lankan Tamil social structure is the kin-family system, which is traced through patrilineal (through fathers') descent. Social identity in Sri Lanka is tied to kin, race, religion and caste. But religious category is not part of the social meaning and everyday interactions in Sri Lankan Tamil culture.

Hinduism teachings permeate the consciousness of Sri Lankan Tamils, providing guidance in a certain aspects of daily living, including roles and expectations for men and women. Usually, men are the head of the family and who generate income for maintain the cost of living and other expenses of family. Women are generally regarded as subordinate to men and their primary role is to care for husbands, children and members of their extended families.

Sri Lankan Tamils and identity documents

When Sri Lankan Tamils fled the country, many did not take their identity documents with them because of uptight departures, and intensive fighting. Few people were able to take their documents, only to have the authenticity of these papers questioned by immigration officials. And because of conditions back in Sri Lanka, there was no longer a centralized government office from which they could request new documents or have existing ones verified.

This situation caused problems for the many Sri Lankans who sought refuge in Norway, where identity documents are normally required for refugees seeking to become landed immigrants (i.e., permanent residents). Because so many Sri Lanka refugees could not produce documents deemed satisfactory by Citizenship and Immigration Norway. Undocumented refugees from Sri Lanka have been required to wait for more than a year after refugee determination before proceeding with applications for permanent residency (UDI Norway). This means it takes long time before they become permanent residents.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, describe a qualitative research project that explored the settlement experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Trondheim Norway and considered aspects of their integration into Norwegian society. In depth and Semi-structured interviews were conducted among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees to collect data that demonstrate these different issues in detail. we have selected 50 people among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in order to collect data. In-depth interviews are the suitable method to use because they offer participants the chance to explain their experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences (Limb and Dwyer 2001, Patton, 1990). A semi-structured interview format (Hay, 2000) or what Patton (1990) refers to as the 'general interview guide approach' was used. In this style of interview a list of key questions or issues, but not an inflexible, standardized set of questions, is established in advance. This interview format enables the investigator to ensure that certain topics are addressed by all research participants, which is essential for comparison, while still maintaining the flow of spontaneous conversation, the flexibility to pursue unanticipated topics broached by the participant, the option of probing respondents for additional information, and the ability to modify questions to suit a particular individual (Patton, 1990). The interview guides is used for each individual.

Snow-ball sampling was used to recognize research participants that presented 'information-rich cases,' (Patton, 1990). Contrary to random sampling, where the researcher requests a representative sample that can be generalized to a distinct population, snow-ball sampling allows the investigator to identify those individuals that will give the richest information for the study, information that cannot be obtained as well from other potential participants (Patton, 1990).

When I began research on Sri Lankan Tamil in Trondheim, Norway, I had little knowledge about the community or the sort of information that was available. I soon found that there was scarce literature addressing immigration of this community. In order to obtain detailed information about the experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil living in Trondheim, I had to look for primary source information. I conducted two in-depth interviews which lasted half an hour (more or less), and four shorter interviews (ranging between 10-15 minutes), all of which were based on the same format. The reason I chose a combination of these three (primary literatures, in-depth and semi structured interviews) was so that I could have information on several levels. The basic format provided a sample of general information and experiences, through which I could identify patterns within the community. The short interviews allowed me to explore immigrant situations and their own perceptions in some detail. The in-depth interviews paint a more comprehensive picture of the immigrant experience, including the reasons for leaving Sri Lanka, as well as their changing experiences and attitudes throughout their resettlement in Norway. Surveys would not have been able to capture all that I wanted to find. Unfortunately, time constraints limited the number of in-depth interviews that could be conducted.

The circumstances behind their migration differ from person to person, and it requires separate analysis. I did not interview individuals who participate in the temporary worker program (for instance, student with temporary visa). The individuals who were interviewed are Sri Lankan Tamil who lived in Trondheim for more than two years. The sample included individuals aged nineteen to individuals in their sixties. Individuals who were interviewed are residents and citizens of Norway. My selection of interviewees takes Tran nationalism into consideration rather than the traditional definition of immigration. Thus respondents included individuals who planned to stay in Trondheim for several years to live, work, study, and become a part of Trondheim's social structure.

Respondents are from different backgrounds, states of origin in Sri Lanka, age; and entered Norway by using different policies such as asylum seekers, student visa, and family reunion and so on. They also now live in different locations throughout the Trondheim. Both men and women were interviewed. The respondents were found in part through a snow-ball sample and partly through the use of my own Sri Lankan Tamil friend's network in Trondheim.

The interviewees were assured anonymity. All interviews were conducted in Tamil. The interviews were conducted in Hindu Kovil (Temple) which is situated closed to Tiller Trondheim, coffee shop and some other places. The interviews were effective in supplying information regarding perceptions of what was necessary and difficult about resettlement in Trondheim. The lack of structure in the community, the reasons behind this situation, as well as why they chose the Trondheim.

RESULTS

Consequences of Undocumented Sri Lanka Refugee Status

In Norway, the rights and privileges of all refugees are restricted in a number of ways. The problem for undocumented Sri Lanka refugees is that the restrictions remain in place for at least more than a year. This prolonged period of limitations on rights and privileges poses serious problems. People in this study discussed four topics related to their refugee status: restrictions on family reunification and mobility access to postsecondary education, access to employment, Concerns about children's education Cultural Norms and Differences in Childrearing Practices and their perspectives on the regulations.

Restrictions on Family Reunification and Mobility

In Sri Lanka, people were adapted to living amongst their extended families. When they fled the country, however, their families were torn apart. The most of the people in this study had children, wives, and mothers and fathers living Sri Lanka and overseas. Refugees in Norway are prohibited from sponsoring family members until they have become landed immigrants. This regulation was very distressing to the refugees, because they knew they would have to wait at least five years before they could reunite with family members.

Refugees are also not eligible for Norwegian travel documents. If they leave Norway for any reason, they are not allowed to return. This means they may not visit family members living in other countries. In times of

family emergency, Norwegian Immigration sometimes makes exceptions for refugees with acceptable identity documents, but this option is not open to undocumented Sri Lanka refugees. They are not even allowed to travel overseas to visit a relative who is seriously ill or attend a funeral for a relative who has passed away. The following story was a typical one: *"The greatest problem I am facing is that three of my own children are in Sri Lanka. ... I am two years in Norway ...and for two years I haven't seen my family. ... If I could have [my landed immigrant] document I could have visited them or sponsored them so that they could have joined me. My biggest disappointment is that I cannot sponsor my family"*.

Restrictions on Access to Postsecondary Education

Refugees are guaranteed full access to elementary and secondary education by Norwegian government. But they are not eligible for educational loans and scholarships until they get permanent resident permit. Therefore, most are cut off from postsecondary education. One of the young man expressed his frustration on this restriction *"Norway has recognized us as refugees, given us food and shelter and tried her best to assist us, but at the same time she has deprived us from what we need the most — education. Our future depends on education. In addition, we have to wait for long time to continue our education since it takes time to issue permanent resident permit Therefore we loss courage to continue it further"*.

Restrictions on Access to Employment

Refugees can only get temporary work permits. This makes them ineligible for some jobs. Even when they are eligible, many employers are still reluctant to hire them because of lack of language fluency. One informant said *he was hired for a cleaning job, and excited when his employer found out he was a refugee. "The informant asked me, 'If you don't have your landed papers, how can I trust you?'"*

Refugees are not eligible for bank loans and even internet bank facility. This makes it difficult for them to start self employment. A person who had been in business in Sri Lanka explained: *"If I had the proper documents and a loan to open my own business, I could be an independent person. They [Immigration officials] told me to stay at home and wait for their subsidies. That is not what I came here for"*.

Because of the restrictions on education and work, the few people who had professional careers in Sri Lanka could not get work in their fields or upgrade their skills. One interviewer in this situation described his

frustration: *“I am a professional teacher with 7 years of work experience. Since I came to Norway, I find myself absolutely denied the opportunity to work in my profession or to go to college and continue my education”*.

Concerns about children’s education

Sri Lankan children are faced with overwhelming problems in schools in Norway. Many have had little education because of the upheaval in Sri Lanka and the time spent in refugee camps. Lack of Norwegian language proficiency is another problem. One mother explained: *“Even if the child has a good educational background, with a strong base in math and other subjects, still he wouldn’t be able to follow along in class because of the language. Language is the key factor, and it is only when the child has a strong language base that he can catch up to his or her classmates”*. This issue is complicated by the fact that many Sri Lanka parents also face the same language barrier and cannot provide the needed educational support at home.

Other difficulties were related to differences in cultural norms and expectations between Sri Lankan and Norwegian schools. Certain behaviors those are acceptable in Norwegian schools that are unacceptable in Sri Lankan schools. Likewise, behaviors that are rewarded in Sri Lankan schools may be viewed negatively here.

Cultural Norms and Differences in Childrearing Practices

Some parents raised issues about the negative influences of contemporary culture of their children. They were uncomfortable with some of the behaviors that their children had developed since their arrival in Norway. One mother gave this example: *“Our children use some words, for example, and sometimes they make bad signals. These are bad things that are accepted here, but according to our culture, they are considered to be avoided”*.

Cultural differences in disciplinary practices formed another major topic of discussion. Sri Lankan strongly believes that children need discipline to learn respect, good manners, and good behavior. The parents in my study were aware that some common methods of discipline in Sri Lankan culture, such as pristine, are not acceptable in Norway.

In school, children are instructed to call police if they believe they are being verbally or physically abused. This threat of calling to police has become a weapon for Sri Lankan children to hold over their parents.

Some women said that their children were becoming proud and disrespectful because of this. They also worried that the Children's Aid Society might take their children away (they pointed out a very good example that has happened recently). The parents were concerned about their teenage children, who had graduated from high school, but waiting for jobs. Without school or work to keep them occupied, many spent their days in local interact, and their mothers worried that they might be drawn to drug and alcohol use. Finally, the women recognized that their roles and influence as parents were changing, as their children became more a part of Norwegian culture. They worried that some children might abandon their Sri Lankan culture heritage altogether.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The people said they were grateful to the Norwegian government for accepting them as refugees. They were pleased to have left behind a culture of war for food, shelter, and safety. Nevertheless, everyday life was very stressful for them at the beginning, and feelings of anxiety, depression, and extreme nervousness were common.

Some of them were still feeling the effects of stress due to the disturbance of the war in Sri Lanka, their flight out of the country, and their detention in refugee camps before their arrival in Norway. Many were sorrowful over the break up of their families and their inability to reunite with them. The stress of being in Norway while husbands or wife, children, parents were still overseas was a difficult burden for them to bear. Abbott (1997) points out that "separation in the family unit of involuntary migrants greatly disturbs the most basic relationship network" (Abbott, 1997). Results of other studies indicate that prolonged waits for family reunification, such as the men in my study were experiencing, are unfavorable to the integration process (Bloch, 2000).

Another factor that weighed on the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees was the loss of their homes, culture, country, lifestyle, friends, and family, and their need to mourn these losses. Beside with this grieving process were the stresses of learning a new language and adapting to a culture with values that were, in some instances, in indirect conflict with traditional Hinduism values, attitudes and norms. The refugees' difficulties in reconciling these contradictions demonstrate the importance of the distance between the home and host cultures as a determinant of successful or unsuccessful integration (Bloch 1997).

Difficulties with Norske and problems with intercultural communication disadvantaged the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in their dealings with government officials, teachers, and landlords and so on. Problems such as unemployment and constant worries about the well being of their families were other significant factors. Yet, poor Norske proficiency, the obstacles on secondary and postsecondary education and limited employment opportunities made it hard for the refugees to get jobs and integrate into the economic sphere.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Reducing waiting period of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees to get permanent resident permit
2. Developing educational programs and services to meet the needs of Sri Lankan students and their families.
3. Crating some job opportunities for refuges to get jobs easily
4. The Sri Lankan community have to establish separate schools where Sri Lankan Tamil children would be taught the Hinduism religion, and traditional behavior and cultural practices in addition to their regular academic program (actually, there is a Tamil school in Trondheim to teach Tamil culture and Religion).

APPENDIXES

Reflection

At the beginning of this study, I thought of having snowball sampling technique to collect date and I used it too. But what was happened is that person whom I interviewed initially was my friend and who has come to Norway in the form of student in late 1980s. When I used snowball sampling technique from this interviewer, who, unfortunately directed me to another one, who was also used the same way to migrate to Norway. At that point I faced some difficulties in using this snowball technique. What I realized is that if I ask this second person (interviewer) to direct me to another one, probably, he will direct me to another person like them. Therefore, I asked that interviewer directly to direct another one who came to Norway in the form of asylum seeker. Because, otherwise, if I have all interviews from the migrant who came to Norway in the name of student, then, sometimes, my research may only be the reflection of one side settlement experiences. This is because, as I observed in the field, there are some different settlement experiences between asylum seekers and the people who came as students. What my point is here that when we use snowball technique in an unknown

situation, sometimes, it will lead to problem that means our research will not be neutral one.

What I understood is that when we want to use snowball technique, then we should have at least two or three sample interviews. It doesn't mean that to have long interview. But it is just to find out the direction of our research. If it goes in the direction that we want, then we can continue. Otherwise, we should be in the stage of thinking of having another sampling technique for instance, random sampling. Random sampling could sometimes be faire and neutral one. So far, from this experience, I will use snowball technique in my master thesis research. But if I know that, the research goes in the biased direction in the sample interviews then, I will use random sampling.

Another experience that I can point out here is that initially I explained about my research to the interviewer before I started it. But, after that, interviewer was reluctant to give fruitful information on my questions. Actually, I think that the questionnaire guide that I used in the interview does not have that much of sensitive questions. Any way, Interviewer was so much unhappy when interviewer found that this information that he gives during the interview is going to be used in another place. Even he is my friend; he did not give rich information. What I did in the next time, I did not have any papers or interview guide line. Just friendly, I had long conversation with interviewers regarding their settlement experiences. That time, the people that I did interviews shared lot of valuable information with me. This is because they don't know that I am going to write some thing about it.

What I learned here is that, sometimes, people don't like to participate in the research even they are friend of the researcher. Therefore, in certain cases, if we want to have studies like people perceptions, believes and behaviors and so on, then we should have to have interviews with out guidelines in the hand. In fact, the researcher has to overcome some of the research ethics in the above mentioned situation in order to get more details or information on the research topic. But on the other hand, I can't say that I did not use interviews guide lines at all. I sued it to three persons out of six that I interviewed in which; I was unable to follow all questions that I had in the interview guide. I had to skip some of those questions during the interview. But, since my interview guide had several sub division, it was quite easy to skip some of the questions and also there were, to a certain extent, correlation between questions in the each sub division.

When I read some articles about conducting interviews, it seemed very easy. But in practice, when I tried to apply it, I encountered lot of complicated practical problems. What I understood here is that, we can propose something in the text whatever we want to achieve but in the practice, sometimes, that may be unsuitable. Let me say frankly, from my own experiences, if we want to produce a productive qualitative research, then we should be flexible to alter our pre-plan according to the situation that we face in the field for instance, altering sample technique, and changing interview guidelines and so on.

To sum up, any way, I have done well this research as much as possible and this short field work offered me a good experience regarding conducting interviews. In addition to that, I learned how our pre-plan would be altered in the practical situation and how I should be flexible in the field. Hence, ultimately, this sort research was a path to have certain field experiences in qualitative methodology particularly in interviews. I really enjoyed this research.

Interview guideline

Background information

1. Your age?
2. Your religion?
3. What is your birth place in Sri Lanka?
4. Are you married?
5. When did you leave Sri Lanka?
6. Where are you living now in Trondheim?
7. Do you have children?

Experiences

About getting permanent resident permit

8. How did you come to Norway? In which way, for example, as a student, asylum seeker etc.
9. When did you arrive to Norway?
10. When did you apply for Visa here?
11. How long it takes to issue visa?
12. What was the requirement to apply for visa in Norway?

13. Have you ever been rejected visa by UDI Norway?
14. Could you please tell me what are the difficulties that you faced during the visa processing period?
15. What was the factor that motivated you to leave Sri Lanka?

Family reunion

16. Where is your family now?
17. What kind of procedures you did to bring them to Norway?
18. How long it takes to bring families here? Approximately?
19. How long you had to wait to apply for family reunion?

Education

20. What was your education level in Sri Lanka? For instance primary, secondary etc
21. What was your children education in Sri Lanka?
22. Are you doing any professional courses here?
23. What about your children's education here?
24. Do you feel any difference between Norwegian and Sri Lankan education system?
25. Do you think that your children face some hardship in receiving education here?
26. What were some of the issues that you had with settling your children into Norwegian school?
27. Have any of your children had difficulties with class-work?

Employment

28. What was your occupation in Sri Lanka?
29. Are you working now?
30. What are the problems that you face in getting job here?

Language

31. What language do you mostly speak at home?
32. How comfortable are you with speaking and understanding Norsk?

Child caring

1. What are the issues that you have faced in raising your children in Norway?
2. What would have made it easier for you to raise your children in Norway?

Culture and norms

35. Could you manage to go with Norwegian culture?
36. Do you like to keep Sri Lankan Tamil culture?
37. What about your children, which culture they like to follow mostly?
38. Do you feel that any differences between yours and your children's behavior?
39. What sort of difficulties that you faced or face in integration in to the Norwegian society?
40. What are you're most happy or worries about living in Norway?

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