

Impact of Social Network, Reunion, Health and Adjustment on Intention to Return: A Study of Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India

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Introduction

Migration from one area to another in search of improved livelihood is a key feature of human history. Forced migration though has the elements of migration but its causes are different. India has been receiving refugees from its neighbouring countries including Sri Lanka. The recent figure shows that in 2009, India has hosted around 456,000 refugees and asylum seekers that include 96,000 Sri Lankan refugees who are mostly Tamils (USCRI, 2009). Like many other countries, multi-ethnic phenomena had led to the rise of ethnic conflict between Sinhalese and Tamil minority group. Disagreement between Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic communities flared up when drawing up Sri Lanka's first post-independence constitution in 1948. Several instances later occurred that discriminated Tamils such as the language policy of Sri Lanka, 1956, banning of importing of Tamil media literature in 1970, change of country name, etc.

In 1983, the ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sri Lankans in its serious discord led to civil and political unrest. After this the Tamil minority group started leaving their country seeking refuge in other countries. During 2007, there were about 97,708 refugees reside in Tamil Nadu of which 74,219 refugees reside in about 117 camps (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2007). The Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu are broadly categorised into following three divisions. The study was conducted among camp refugees.

- i) Camp Refugees – those who live in camps meant for refugees;
- ii) Non-Camp Refugees – those who have personal resources in Tamil Nadu and obtain special provision for accommodation to stay in Tamil Nadu; and
- iii) Special Camp Refugees – those who found to be a part of any militant outfits.

Need for the study

Studies relating to forced migrants including refugees globally and in India are abundant. However, studies on post conflict measures are scarce. In particular, studies linking factors such as adjustment, health status, social capital and the factors influence their decision to return to the country of origin where conflict has been halted. For instance, normalcy declared in Sri Lanka in the mid 2009 after the extinct of militant group. It has initiated talks about repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees. Being developing country India has limitations to accommodate refugees from different parts of the world and thus cannot afford to provide citizenship to Sri Lankan Tamil refugees despite of their ethnic ties with India. So this acts as a push factor in the host country. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan government has ensured sustained peace for refugees and displaced. Humanitarian agencies are also taking

proactive measures in resettlement process and ensuring peace. These all acts as a pull factors in the origin.

Given this situation where the protracted refugees are in indifference between choosing their country of origin and host, it is essential to study the factors which affect their decision to return. Also, these people are expected to have well integrated with the host population which is identical in terms of culture, language, etc., it would be an opportunity to study their decision to return. Further, social relations in the host acts as a social capital in feeling the belongingness of the refugees in the host. Studies show that when refugees settle in host, they keep a close watch on the conditions in the origin and a conducive environment if they have intention to return. Also, those with adequate wealth and family members left behind in the origin would more likely to look for such opportunity to return. Given the adverse experience they had during their first phase return and the dejection caused of it would influence their decision to return. Given the experience the refugees have in the past, their decision towards return will also be rational and mindful of the situation in the origin. Thus, the study is aimed to investigate the aspects that influence the decision on return.

Objectives

1. To examine the socioeconomic relationship between individuals within the refugee population itself, and the socioeconomic relationships between the refugees and the surrounding host population;
2. To investigate the family reunification among refugees with their social connections;
3. To examine the health status among refugees;
4. To understand the adjustment pattern among refugees;
5. To examine the factors determining intention to return to origin and stay back in the host.

The study used descriptive research design using blend of quantitative and qualitative capsules of data collection. In 2007, the department published an operational manual for various Government Officials, who are associated in any way with the refugees, to lay out a clear pathway to the service of refugees. A guideline for the officials working for refugees has been brought out by Department of Rehabilitation, Government of Tamil in 2007. This provides information on the number of camps spread across in various districts of Tamil Nadu along with basic demographic information. Refugee population universe is obtained from this guideline and sample camps were selected out of it. The samples collected for quantitative data is 288 refugee households from each one individual in the adult age has been selected. For qualitative data, In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) were conducted among 17 respondents. Quantitative technique includes semi-structured questionnaire while the qualitative capsule uses in-depth interview method based on few guiding questions with necessary probing into it. Infrastructure surrounding the camp has been collected additionally. Maps, composite indicators, and statistical techniques such as univariate, bivariate with support of Chi-Square, Fisher Exact Test, binary logistic regression is used for analysis and bring out the findings.

Findings

The study included five refugee camps in Tamil Nadu. Information on camp infrastructure was collected during the survey. Out of the 17 variables collected on infrastructure, seven variables dropped while 10 variables given in table 3.5 were used to arrive at the indicator. All the variables used in the formation of index were standardized with units such as kilometre, per person, minutes, binary coding and five point scales. Further, five of the selected variables denoted negative relations with infrastructure while the rest five showed positive relation. The “negative relation” denotes that the lesser the data value, the better is the camp in terms of infrastructure availability. This is vice versa in the case of variables with “positive relation”. The ranking of camps based on the infrastructure index shows that the camp in Salem district has the finest infrastructure compared with other selected camps followed by the camps in Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri and Thiruvanamalai districts.

The background information collected from the refugee respondents include place of origin, year of arrival in India, demographic characteristics such as age, sex, family size, education, language proficiency, marital status, religion, ethnicity and occupation. Nearly two-fifths of the respondents arrived during the first phase (1983-87) and fourth phase (2006 onwards). More than half of the respondents arrived during the second phase (1989-91), while only seven per cent arrived during third phase (1996-05). Average family size of the surveyed refugee households is 4, ranging from the smallest of single member households to a largest of 9 members. The classification of respondents by gender shows that three-fifths of them are male while the remaining are female. Average age of the respondents is 39 years while the youngest respondent is 18 years, while the oldest respondent is 72 years. One-tenth of the respondents are illiterates.

“Social connections” are most common among human beings. In particular, irrespective of type of migration, the migrants try and build social connections in the host so as to have good adjustment and integration with their living environment. This relationship does not only restrict to the host, but it also extends to their origin to have lasting network with their home. On the other hand, social network is defined as the frequency of contacts with social connections (Cheung and Phillimore, 2013). The associations and informal networks growing out of this unity can be used as a resource to solve the problems faced by the refugees in their new country of settlement (Wahlbeck, 1996; Bousquet, 1991; Gold, 1992; Steen, 1992). One of the objectives of the study is to examine the socio-economic relationship between individuals within the refugee population itself, and the socio-economic relationships between the refugees and the surrounding host population.

The result of logistic regression shows that the phase of arrival in India (duration of stay) has significantly affected the strength of network among refugees. As compared with those who arrived in the recent phases, i.e., third-fourth phases (1996 onwards), those who arrived in the first phase (1983-87) are three times more likely to have network with their social connections (OR: 3.283 at 95% significance level). Further, household size has significantly affected the strength of network among refugees. As compared with those in small families, refugees who have four-five family members are twice more likely to have network with their social connections. On the other hand, compared with younger refugees aged 18-29 years, those in the age group of 30-49 years are less likely to have social network.

Separation with family and loved ones can be pervasively seen among forced migrants. Reasons were explored in case any one cannot connect back to his loved ones. Almost two-fourths of the respondents lost connection with their loved ones due to conflict while they moved away from their country.

"I lost my daughters. I wrote many letters. But no response from them. I don't know whether they are alive or not. I should not say and think like that though (Male, age 59)".

"My husband tried to contact them several times. We never got them back. After my husband's demise, I never thought of contacting anyone. Now I am alone and old. I will end my life like this (Female, age 65)".

Result shows that nearly three-fourths of the respondents reported that have felt to a great extent that their future is uncertain. Further, two-fifth of the refugees reported to have had feeling to a great extent that they are refugees. Only around one-fifth of refugees have felt to a great extent sad, depressed and fear in the recent past. A strong association is found among those who have felt sadness, depression, fear with the thoughts about uncertain future. Result shows that as compared with those who were sad, depressed and had fear are four times likely to have thoughts about uncertain future. Social network among refugees has no association with all three mental and social health variables, namely, sadness/depression/fear, uncertain future and refugee feeling. These findings helps us to reject the hypothesis that refugees with better social network would have good health status.

Adjustment is seen as a complex and multi-faceted process. It is one of the important processes that the refugees undergo in the host communities. Barry (1981) points out that the studies on their adjustment process fall into two groups of which the first group of studies focus on their mental health, occupational adjustment, language, residence and community patterns, culture and identity problems, health, reactions to stress, relationships with natives, problems of women and children, and various measures of their progress and adjustment. Tamil Nadu is a friendly border to Sri Lankan refugees as they have their ethnic kins who have similar characteristics such as ethnicity, language, culture, etc.

The background variables such as age and sex are significantly associated with adjustment of refugees. As compared with males, the adjustment among female respondents is low. Also, the refugees in older age group are likely to have low adjustment levels as compared with the younger ones in the age group 18-29 years. As compared with unmarried refugees, the adjustment level of widowed/deserted refugees is low. Refugee feeling is significantly associated with the adjustment levels of respondents. As compared with the respondents who do not have the refugee feeling, those with the latter are less likely to have adjustment in the host country. The respondents have better adjustment if their family members are married to the Indian citizens. The adjustment levels of the respondents are two times higher when their family members are married to native persons. Strength of social network gives an edge to adjustment levels of respondents in both the models. This helps in answering the hypothesis that refugees with strong social network have better adjustment.

Three-fifths of the respondents wanted to settle in India, while the remaining preferred to return to Sri Lanka. Among different background characteristics, education, marital status, income, proficiency in Tamil, duration of stay, number of movement as refugees, and feeling of sadness/depression/fear have a significant relation with the refugees' intention to return to Sri Lanka or stay back in India. Binomial logistic regression has been used to investigate the factors that determine the decision to return. The dependent variable is dichotomous where '0' stands for stay back in India, while '1' stands for return to Sri Lanka. Mutual communication with social connections in Sri Lanka, poor mental health, possession of land in Sri Lanka and number of movements as refugees determine the refugees' intention to return. Psycho-social and mental health plays an important role in deciding the return to Sri Lanka. Respondents who recently had symptoms like sadness/depression/fear are thrice more likely to return to Sri Lanka as compared with those without these symptoms. Though the odds of returning to Sri Lanka are high among those with feeling of uncertain future, the result is not statistically significant. Refugees with low adjustment in host population are twice more likely to return to Sri Lanka as compared with those with high adjustment. The result is statistically significant.

The respondents reported almost the same opinion about their returning to Sri Lanka. While eagerness to see family members and relatives are reported by most of them, there is also expectation that they will have better lifestyle and their children will have better education and employment there. The refugees who intended to remain in India were asked the reasons why they want to stay back. While Lee's theory (1966) explains the push and pull factors of migration, in this study the reasons that lead to refugees' decision to stay back in India are termed as "halt factors" which could be applied to the context of refugees and other forced migrants. The key reasons stated by refugees for staying back in India are analysed from the qualitative data. They are broadly categorised as safety and insecurity, absence of resources in the country of origin, social support and expectation of citizenship and uncertainty in the country of origin.

Some of the research questions investigated in the study suggests strong association between duration of stay and social network; social network and adjustment; and adjustment with host population and lower intention to return. It is interesting to note the role of social network on adjustment which is one of the processes that indicates the pathway of assimilation. Though association was found between few variables, there are other research questions where the association could not be established such as more number of movements (as refugees) and social network; social network and health status; and duration of stay in the host country and adjustment.

Extensive measures have been taken by Sri Lankan Government and UNHCR in the resettlement of refugees and IDPs. The most challenging task is the resettlement of IDPs rather than of refugees. Over time, it could be possible that the uncertainty would wean-off and the situation will improve, bringing in conducive environment for both of them to resettle in their own land. While a good number of refugees want to stay in India, this becomes a policy concern as their repatriation cannot be forced. Given this, the question arises whether the country would be able to continue supporting and providing aid to the

refugees who stay back? Also, what is the solution in the long term? Important alternatives are given below.

1. There is a strong desire among refugees for settling in India. Providing citizenship to the most desired population could be a durable solution for them.
2. There is a huge population which does not know about its parental origin as it born in India or has spent its whole life growing in India. Indian foreign policy should be reviewed to accommodate this population to provide it citizenship.
3. There are refugees who have close links with India and Indian citizens. Providing citizenship to them could be a viable solution.
4. There are discussions at international level about shifting in refugee protection by UNHCR and integrating refugees to national development plans so as to develop livelihood opportunities and promote self-reliance among them, capitalizing on their skills and utilize their potential to contribute to the local economy. The Government can think about these matters when the time is ripe for necessary action.
5. For the refugees who want to live in India, the Government can continue providing aid to them and can periodically assess their interest in returning to Sri Lanka. Thus, it can gradually initiate the repatriation process as and when the people are interested to return.

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