COMMUNITY IN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

An Ethnographic Exploration of Bhutanese Refugees in Manchester (UK)

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Abstract

After being expelled from Bhutan in the 1980s and 1990s, more than 100,000 Bhutanese refugees were forced to reside in refugee camps in Nepal. Twenty years later, in 2006, a global resettlement programme was initiated to relocate them in eight different nations: the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Denmark, The Netherlands, and the UK. Since 2010, about 350 Bhutanese refugees have been resettled in Greater Manchester through the Gateway Protection Programme. This thesis is based on 14 months of ethnographic research with members of this community.

This thesis analyses the complex relationship between forced migrants, social networks, and ruling, organisational entities, which facilitate refugee resettlement. This qualitative study looks at the structure, role and everyday utility of social networks amongst a small refugee community, and emphasizes that the creation of similarity and difference is an inherent part of community development. The research calls into question the assumptions of UK policy makers, service providers and academics alike, which hold that refugees are removed from their ‘original’ cultures through forced displacement, and thereafter strive to return to a state of ‘normalcy’ or ‘originality’, re-creating and re-inventing singular ‘traditions’, identities and communities. In response to these assumptions, policy makers and service providers in refugee camps and in the UK adopt a Community Development Approach (CDA).

However, I argue that there is no fixed and bounded community amongst Bhutanese refugees, but that they actively reshape and adapt their interpretations, meanings and actions through their experiences of forced migration, and thus create novel communities out of old and new social networks. In the process, I juxtapose my informants’ emic understandings of community as samaj, with bureaucratized refugee community organisations (RCOs).

This research shows that rather than a creating singular, formalized RCO to serve the ‘good of all’, the Bhutanese refugee community in Manchester is rife with divisions based on personal animosities and events stretching back to the refugee camps in Nepal. I conclude that RCOs may not be equipped to effectively deal with the divisive issues that arise due to refugee resettlement.

The thesis is situated at the centre of anthropological investigations of forced migration, community, and policy, and uses interdisciplinary sources (such as policy documents, historical accounts) to highlight the complexities of forced migration and refugee resettlement. This critical research is also a response to the call to make qualitative, ethnographic research more relevant for policy makers and service provision, which is all the more important in this ‘century of the refugee’.

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