

Refugee Resettlement and Its Discontents: The Bhutanese Refugee Experiences

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Abstract

In the early 1990s, tens of thousands of ethnic Nepalis/Lhotsampas were subjectively denied their Bhutanese citizenship. Some were then expelled from Bhutan, whereas others fled the country to escape from a campaign of arbitrary arrest and detainment coordinated against the ethnic Nepalis. For more than a decade these Bhutanese refugees have languished in seven refugee camps in Nepal with no resolution to their plight until the third-country resettlement started and many left the camps to resettle in third countries. The third-country resettlement process raised hope for Bhutanese refugees, but at the same time it generated tensions and dilemmas for them. The lack of proper information prior to resettlement increased the vulnerability of Bhutanese refugees towards social exclusion in the host society of the destination country. Post-resettlement challenges like language barriers, financial austerity, healthcare problems, lack of access to basic resources, separation from family, unemployment, and discrimination, and in recent years, a scandal involving fraudulent Bhutanese refugees and the deportation of resettled Bhutanese refugees from the U.S. have raised concerns about the credibility of resettlement as a “durable solution.” This article probes how the resettlement journey of this particular community has had an adverse effect on their welfare as much as on their existence and identity as a collective entity. It will also try to bring to light the narrative of how the Lhotsampas have struggled vis-a-vis the brutal exodus from Bhutan to resettle and rehabilitate elsewhere.

Keywords

Bhutanese Refugees/Lhotsampas, UNHCR, Refugee Camps, Refugee Resettlement, Identity Crisis.