

The confines of a cool place

The need of psychosocial intervention for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India

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Introduction

- New refugee arrivals, as SL conflict worsens
- Agony, disruptions, stress - past, present and future
- Data based on interviews, discussions done for advocacy purposes *not* research



Concepts

- Cool place - Sanctuary from heat of conflict, persecution
- Refugee: “owing to a **well-founded fear of being persecuted** for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, **is outside the country of his nationality**, and is **unable** to or, owing to such fear is, **unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...**” (UN, 1951).

Background

- About 70,000 refugees in 118 camps in TN
- 20,000 new arrivals
- Camps in existence for 16 years
- Perceived ‘security threat’ from refugees – causing severe restrictions

Concepts

PSYCHOSOCIAL

Psychological – the mind, thinking, emotions, feelings, behaviour

Social – the social world that creates the context through the environment, culture, economics, traditions, spirituality, interpersonal relationships with family, community and friends, and life tasks. (Baron, 2002)

The Past



Burden of memories

- Survivors of war trauma caused by **witnessing killings**, dead bodies and by the sheer stress of having to **flee** under very **risky circumstances**. Many of them have suffered multiple losses such as **death of** parents, siblings, husband, separation from children and **family members** – and in all cases **loss of homeland**.
- Feelings guilty – of having survived

Surviving brutality

- Arbitrary killings, disappearances, arrests, torture, aerial bombing, constant displacement and targeted ethnic attacks
- Baptised by fire – scared of Diwali
- Former fighters, torture victims still suffer

Women's woes

- War widows – loneliness, risk of exploitation
- Fear of sexual abuse
- Early marriages

The Present



Confined to camps

- Camps in existence for 16 years – Village, Dam and Warehouse camps
- Under official control
- No control over 'time and space'
- Families sometimes separated in different camps

Privacy

- 8 x 8 feet cubicles in warehouse camps, divided by a cloth
- Problems in maintaining relationships
- Early, unwise relationships

Under surveillance

- Questioning by multiple authorities on arrival
- Security agencies keep a watch
- Sense of helplessness, persecution complex

Negative representation

- Tag of security threat
- Reaffirmation of 'the other' image – in schools, work places
- Scant, skewed media attention – stories of risk, security, crime based on police briefs

The Future



Uncertainties, resilience

- Multiple displacement, repeatedly seeking asylum, prolonged conflict
- Still people are resilient – they save, keep ties with home and diaspora
- Culture is kept alive
- Camps have a sense community, multi-religious activities and leadership

Future prospects

- Limited education avenues – better now
- Rampant unemployment/
underemployment
- Cannot be part of ‘mainstream’ job market due to restrictions, ‘security’ concerns, discrimination by local people

Impact on mind

- Social scientists often find the refugee mind is in constant confusion
- Life is oppressively monotonous and under the control of officials

Conclusion

- A scientific study of the camp refugees is urgently needed
- Initiate action at policy level and on ground
- Uphold the refugees' right to life and protection



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