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## Living in a refugee camp and making way in life through education

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## Preface

# Living in a refugee camp and making way in life through education

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I was born in a small house in a refugee camp on outskirts of industrial city Ahmedabad in Gujarat where my parents found themselves at the time. The camp was constructed of converted tin roofed barracks that had probably housed parliamentary forces before the independence of India. My maternal and paternal grandparents had to leave Sindh Province, in pre-partition India, after India was partitioned in 1947. Both my parents were toddlers at that time and settled into one of the many refugee camps set up in India for people forced to migrate or who migrated of their own free will. This narrative is a personal reflection on my educational journey and lifelong commitment to learning from the perspective of growing up in a refugee camp in post-partition India. Despite very personal experience being the basis of these reflections, I hope to make a few points that may be more broadly relevant within the context of this special issue and for academic scholars in this discipline. A further caveat to note is that my academic discipline is not refugee studies, so I hope scholarly readers will be kind enough to consider these as reflections rather than academic claims and conjectures.

A special feature of growing up in a refugee camp for me was that all refugees belonged to one community of Sindhi-speaking Hindus. It is important to highlight this as in pre-partition India, most Sindhis lived in Sindh; nearly a quarter were Hindus and the rest were Muslims. I heard stories of harmonious relations between both religious groups. They shared the Sindhi language, but more importantly, apart from religious rituals, much of their culture and views on life were similar. There were occupational differences though: most Hindu Sindhis were traders, government employees or landlords. These occupational characteristics of Sindhi refugees in India proved to be their lifeline, particularly their trading skills and regard for education. By the time I was born in the early 60s, the refugee community had set up its own schools, which taught through the medium of Sindhi. These

were schools with bare minimum facilities. The provincial government recognised them but most of the textbooks were published in the provincial language of Gujarati. Post-primary education, therefore, was made a little difficult by the fact that one had to read textbooks written in one language and write exams in another language. On reflection, I feel that linguistic identity and linguistic barriers are an important part of the educational experience in a refugee environment. Personally, I benefitted as I ended up learning more languages. There are, though, two implications of this linguistic dissonance that refugees have to overcome. One is acceptance within the local community. In our case, the majority community in the city and province spoke Gujarati, so inadvertently you experienced a sense of otherness. We would hear jokes about our behaviour as stingy or ‘money-minded’ because of the perception created that Sindhis were more concerned about making money than being culturally sophisticated. The other was that acceptance in institutions of higher learning required a good command of English, which was not easily developed in the schools to which we had access in the refugee camp. In different regions of the world, English would be replaced by French, Spanish or some other dominant language.

Overcoming these early challenges, I entered undergraduate college to study through the medium of English for the first time. I had by that time decided that education was going to be my way of making something of my life, unlike trading and the small businesses that my father and uncles had started. Committing to higher education with a cultural and family background in trading was not easy. One had to look for role models outside the community. Inspiration had to be from elsewhere rather than the physical and social milieu of the camp where we still lived. I discovered books and libraries. Perhaps this will seem an exaggeration, but I feel that had I had access to libraries in my formative years and someone to encourage me to read, the steep learning curve that I had to climb alongside my undergraduate studies to expand my intellectual horizons and awareness about the wider world would have been much less challenging. A couple of other challenges that refugees might experience are lack of confidence and self-esteem and parental expectations of growing children. The sense of being ‘different’ from the rest of the community does not help with self-confidence as one constantly doubts one’s ability. When parents are preoccupied with economic hardship and making ends meet, discussions about role model and aspirations are limited to survival and adjusting to the communities where refugees find themselves. My solution to overcoming these challenges was to promise myself always to continue learning. While I continued with formal university

undergraduate and postgraduate studies and finally completed a PhD, I never gave up the life-learning promise and have continued to learn formally (acquiring another undergraduate degree and now studying for a masters in educational leadership) and informally. On reflection, I find this has been a great boost to my self-esteem and is professionally very relevant as an academic at an online distance university which primarily attracts adult learners with full- or part-time occupations.

An important contextual factor in refugee cases is to understand the reasons for migration. Economic migrations may have some emotional legacy issues of belonging to one's native culture and communities, but these are not traumatic experiences. Forced migration because of internal or external wars and migration caused by tragic events such as ethnic, religious conflicts, as in the case of Myanmar Rohingyas or in my case Sindhi and Punjabi populations forced to move from their native places due to the partition of India, are traumatic experiences. I was second-generation affected so did not have direct experience of leaving the native land and its culture, but the scars of this affected our upbringing in a way that encouraged adaptation, tolerance and focusing on surviving. Therefore, as I see it, any theoretical claims regarding learning and educational experiences of refugees requires consideration of economic, identity, cultural and linguistic barriers. Refugees and asylum seekers probably live in two or three different mental worlds. How that affects aspiration for and participation in higher education is an interesting research question. Some of the lived experiences narrated in this issue are good illuminations and examples of the methodological variety that is needed.

I also worked in a town which was set up for Sindhi refugees in Kutch Gujarat, India. At the request of Mahatma Gandhi, the then ruler of the local princely state of Kutch which had just acceded to the union of India in 1947, gave a piece of land in a barren desert area for the settlement of refugees. There, the community had not only set up schools as at the camp where I was born, but they had also set up vocational colleges that would in future become a thriving campus for higher education. I worked on that campus for seven years. By that time, the notion of being a refugee community had given way to a sense of pride and the community had prospered. The students coming for higher education had no direct experience of being refugees and had grown up in a relatively clean and planned urban setting. This showed in their confidence and ambitions. Comparing these experiences with those of my generation, I could see the difference. We grew up in a poor squalid area with open sewage systems and no understanding of what it was to live in an area

where one had access to theatres, libraries and other cultural amenities. We of course celebrated all festivals in the camp; they were great fun and quite educational as one had to be part of several teams and community activities. As a teacher though, I could not help but notice the loss of language in this newly built town for the refugees. Within two generations, they had stopped learning their mother tongue and most Sindhi-medium schools had converted to English-medium schools.

My initial commitment to learning was instrumental in establishing myself and surviving in society, but with maturity and the depth that good learning enables I have come to believe that learning opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers need to be one of the cornerstones of policies to support normalisation of life for these groups.