

Switzerland: A Tamil asylum diaspora

Bollywood discovered Switzerland as an exotic place for its movies in the 1990s. At least since then well-off Indian tourists travel there on their trip to Europe.¹ But the picturesque country attracts not only tourists, but also migrants from South Asia. In fact, it has one of the highest proportions of Indians and Pakistanis per head of population in the European comparison, and the absolute number of Tamils is even higher. The former figures might be due to the restrictive naturalisation rules, which make it very difficult to obtain the Swiss citizenship, the latter are the signs of the major Tamil asylum diaspora in Europe².

Like in Germany and Austria the first South Asians to come to Switzerland were students and freedom fighters. Günther and Rehmer (1999, 54-55) refer to a Pro India Committee and a magazine "Pro India" which existed in Zürich in 1912. This early presence of Indians in Switzerland might explain that among the Indians living in the country some are older than 65 years. Most of the South Asians migrants are, however, in the working age of 20 to 39 years, and increasingly there are small children below 14 years. The single largest communities are Sri Lankans, who are predominantly Tamil Hindus³.

McDowell (1996, 227) divides the Tamils into two groups. The first smaller half is the immigrant population which arrived at the beginning of the civil war in Sri Lanka between 1983 and 1989. They successfully integrated in the economy, are no longer dependent on state transfers and are permanently settling in Switzerland. The second larger half is the asylum seeker population, which arrived after 1989 and is unable to integrate in the economy. They do not have a permanent permit of residence and live in the danger of repatriation. The immigrant population is carefully trying to keep its good reputation and distances itself from the asylum seekers.

According to McDowell (1996, 270-273) there are several reasons, which have made Switzerland a major Tamil asylum diaspora. First of all, the Tamils have a long history of migration. Furthermore, although before 1983 there was no Tamil community in Switzerland, there were Tamil students in Europe, who assisted the new migrants. Chain migration started with the eldest sons, whose travelling expenses were raised by the family. Once in employment they then accumulated Swiss Francs, which were enormous in comparison to incomes in Sri Lanka and could be used for funding the family. Starting with the first migrants transnational networks developed, which relatives and friends later on could use. They were complemented by the offers of both Sri Lankan based and European based agents to organise the passage. The Swiss policy, offering work permits and social assistance, further encouraged the migration to Switzerland.

Today, however, Switzerland tries to reduce the numbers of Tamils in the country by introducing a repatriation programme (Flück 2001).

Research Notes

McDowell gives much more details on the live of the Tamils in Switzerland. It is a major reference work of high quality. There does not seem, however, to be any research done on the Indian and Pakistani presence in the country.

¹ See newspaper note of Westfälische Rundschau (2000) for the death of some Indian tourists in Switzerland.

² McDowell (1996, 274) estimates that by the early 1990s a fifth of the total Tamil population in Europe lives in Switzerland.

³ For a short account see Baumann (1998, 116).

Tables

Table 1	Population according to citizenship				
	Total (1000)	Indians (1000)	Pakistani (1000)	Indians per 100.000 population	Pakistani per 100.000 population
	1997	1997	1997	1997	1997
Switzerland	7.081,3	4,9	1,6	69	23

source: Eurostat, own calculations

Table 2 Permanent foreign population according to citizenship, gender and age									
31. December 1998									
PETRA1999									
Citizenship	Gender			Age					
	Total	Male	Female	0-14	15-19	20-39	40-64	65-79	80+
Bangladesh	492	359	133	73	12	319	86	2	-
Bhutan	23	10	13	5	3	11	4	-	-
India	5 151	2 856	2 295	1 270	316	2 083	1 335	132	15
Maldives	14	11	3	1	-	13	-	-	-
Nepal	184	115	69	28	18	107	28	3	-
Pakistan	1 657	1 125	532	410	76	838	315	14	4
Sri Lanka	14 400	7 968	6 432	6 726	413	5 415	1 807	37	2

Table 3	Asylum Seekers according to citizenship 1995-1998			
PETRA 1999				
Citizenship	1995	1996	1997	1998
Total	75 609	80 607	81 089	93 753
Sri Lanka	18 349	19 384	20 132	19 830
Pakistan	721	790	720	624

Table 4 Recognised refugees according to citizenship 1991-1998								
PETRA 1999								
31. December	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Sri Lanka	254	261	263	297	297	319	352	382

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