Take it for granted or take it differently?

Sri Lankan immigrants’ political integration in New Zealand

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Abstract

Asian immigrants’ political integration in host countries such as UK, USA, Canada and New Zealand is reported to be among the lowest. This “low” participation is interpreted by some host countries as immigrants’ taken-for-grantedness of the governing process of the host country, because they do “not” love or belong to the host society. This paper attempts to interrogate the logic of taken-for-grantedness by inquiring the immigrants’ perspectives on political integration and belongingness. Investigating the case of Sri Lankan immigrants in New Zealand, the data are gathered through thirty semi-structured interviews with Sri Lankan immigrants from different ethnic, gender and age groups from two main cities in New Zealand: Auckland and Wellington. The findings of the study suggest that Sri Lankan immigrants’ “low” political integration in New Zealand is not a result of their lack of belonginess to the host society, but because political participation means something different to them. For many participants, politics of the host country is an institution that provides them with necessary socio-economic rights and privileges. Until they are satisfied with what they receive, many Sri Lankan immigrants do not see any need to engage in politics at all. In this case, Sri Lankan immigrants’ “low” political integration in New Zealand does not mean their poor belongingness but ironically their satisfaction and trust on the existing systems. The study finds that such views and beliefs are constructed through their pre-migratory, home country experiences. Therefore, the study suggests that it is incomplete to understand immigrants’ realities, i.e. political integration in the host country, from a lens that is being articulated only from the host country perspective. Instead, the study proposes the need to consider immigrants’ contextual realities, i.e., their pre-migratory experiences, in understanding their actions and decisions.

Key words: Sri Lankan immigrants, political integration, sense of belonging