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A Sociological Study Of Afghan Refugees In Delhi

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Abstract: The persistent violence in Afghanistan over the decades has caused the displacement of its people as refugees worldwide. Among them, a small community yet vibrant community as migrated to India, which has resulted in the formation of a Afghan Diaspora. Although Afghan migration to India is not a contemporary phenomenon, it is embedded within a much longer history of mobility, exchange, and regional interconnectedness. This paper aims to understand the modern Afghan refugee movement and the formation of the diasporic community in Delhi. The Afghan community in Delhi experiences life in a state of 'limbo' due to India's uncertain refugee laws. There is widespread alienation of the community; this paper captures the lived experiences of Afghan refugees settled in Delhi, looking into their everyday identity negotiation, cultural formation and structural challenges. Afghan refugees residing in Delhi form a heterogeneous group, navigating multiple identities and relationships within a transnational context. The study foregrounds their everyday struggles for survival, recognition, and integration, shedding light on how they construct a sense of belonging while grappling with legal precarity and social marginalisation.

Index Terms **- Afghan, Refugee, diaspora, identity, Delhi**

I. INTRODUCTION

Afghans have suffered from conflict for over 40 years, causing large-scale displacement and persistent violence in the region. Afghanistan is the third-largest refugee-producing country in the world. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees[1] (UNHCR), globally, nearly 10.9 million Afghans remain displaced, due to conflict, violence, and poverty in their home country of Afghanistan. Most Afghans have migrated as refugees and asylum seekers to other nations. While the majority proportion has migrated to Iran and Pakistan, a significantly smaller population of Afghan refugees exists in India.

Alessandro Monsutti (2009), in his ethnographic account, reveals that Afghan migratory movement is varied and complex since Afghans do not (always) necessarily have the traumatic significance that is often attributed to them. Historically, Afghan migration to India involved kinship networks, mutual support systems, and voluntary mobility, in this way, Monsutti's work echoes the general unsuitability of the refugee/migrant, voluntary/ involuntary migration dichotomy in capturing the reality of Afghan refugees, especially in India, where Afghan migration has historic ties through trade, the arts, religion, etc.

Although the multiplicity of Afghan migration cannot be ignored, this paper explicitly looks into the contemporary Afghan refugee migration in Delhi. Contemporary refugee movement is studied through global transnational networks moving beyond a binarised understanding of the home country and host country.

The concept of 'identity' occupies a central place in refugee studies. In recent years, scholars working within the field of transnationalism have introduced a shift in perspective, moving beyond traditional frameworks which focused on integration, assimilation, or acculturation into host societies to a more nuanced and holistic understanding of migrant identities and movements.

Transnationalism describes a social process whereby migrants operate in social fields that cross geographic, political, and cultural borders. It challenges the traditional, linear model of assimilation by presenting an alternative framework for understanding migrant settlement. Rather than being uprooted and gradually absorbed into the host society, migrants from a transnational perspective are seen as active agents who simultaneously participate in and contribute to both their countries of origin and countries of settlement. Afghan refugees operate within a transnational framework, as there is not only a sense of pride associated with their Afghan heritage, but they are still rooted in Afghan sociocultural traditions. Afghans who have migrated long ago and in some cases have been able to get citizenship are still connected in transnational networks by their choice of food or language. Afghan refugees do not operate in isolation within host countries' geographical boundaries; rather, their interactions and functions

[1] UNHCR is a United Nations agency mandated to aid and protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities, and stateless people, and to assist in their voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement to a third country.

extend beyond them. Afghan refugees in India have family back home and also relatives who have migrated to the West. Interactions and, in some cases, remittances are sent and received across the boundaries of the Nation State.

The concept of Social Fields was introduced by Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) in migration studies. Social fields refer to networks of interlocking social relationships across which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organised, and transformed. These fields are multi-dimensional, encompassing structured interactions of varying forms, depth, and geographical reach. While national social fields are contained within state boundaries, transnational social fields link individuals and communities across borders, allowing migrants, including refugees, to maintain ties to multiple locations simultaneously. The concept of Social fields captures the socio-cultural complexity that characterises migrant life. It is within such transnational social fields that diasporas emerge.

Diasporas refer to dispersed populations that maintain collective memories, cultural practices, and political or emotional ties to a homeland, even while adapting to life in new locales. Rather than viewing refugee identity solely through the lens of displacement or loss, the concept of diaspora highlights continuity, hybridity, and resilience. For Afghan refugees, this means their identity is not static or singular but is shaped by a plurality of experiences, cultural traditions, and translocal connections.

II. AFGHAN REFUGEES IN INDIA

India is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, holding a controversial stand that international laws on refugees are highly Eurocentric and do not hold relevance in a large refugee-producing area like South Asia. India has no unified and codified laws determining refugee rights and status; however, it is obligated to follow the principle of 'non-refoulement, which is the practice of not sending back refugees to the places where their life or freedom is in danger. Afghan refugees have historically sought asylum in India, but are rarely recognised as 'refugees' by the government of India. They are bureaucratically treated like any other foreigners residing in India, required to obtain relevant visas for stays and register their presence with the Foreigner Regional Registration Offices[2] (FRRO). Hence, refugees are subjected to similar rights as any foreigner in India, which are limited to those contained in Article 21 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to life and liberty and the right to education for children aged six to fourteen. India does not recognise any additional provisions for the vulnerable group of refugees and Asylum seekers. Those seeking asylum who do not receive direct protection from the Indian government must apply for refugee status with the UNHCR. In practice, the Indian government accepts UNHCR refugee certificates, creating a de facto refugee protection scheme in the country.

The term 'Refugee' in India remains the root of a lot of conflict, confusion, and controversies. Refugee is an ad hoc term in the context of India, as it is conflated with the public discourse of 'refugees' being synonymous with 'illegal migrants.' Due to India's lack of refugee law, popular public discourse seems to be the standardised understanding of the status of refugees. 'Refugee' may be Economic, Social, or, in some cases, a religious category.

Public discourse often simplifies refugee identity, tying it narrowly to the boundaries of the nation-state. In the case of Afghan refugees, the identity of 'Afghan' is frequently understood as a fixed label denoting

origin. However, through my interactions with diverse groups of Afghan refugees, I came to recognise the complexity embedded in the term 'Afghan' and how its meaning shifts among individuals and contexts. Their identities are products of multilayered experiences, shaped by years of cultural exchange, social interaction, and historical memory. For Afghan refugees in India, the term 'Afghan' can carry a sense of pride, creating emotional and cultural bridges between India and Afghanistan. At the same time, these identities are often marked by nostalgia, rooted in memories of a homeland lost to war and political instability. Diasporas are identities that encompass beyond both tangible links and intangible exchanges, including material ties and symbolic flows that foster interconnectedness between the country of origin and residence.

Regardless of legal discrepancies, a vibrant Afghan refugee community flourishes in India. Afghans are mostly concentrated in Delhi-NCR. Although dispersed across the city, the community mainly resides in Lajpat Nagar, Bhogal, Malviya Nagar, Tilak Nagar, and Faridabad. This research aims to capture the social relationship and cultural formation of Afghans residing in Delhi and how they negotiate their cultural identities away from their homeland into a foreign land in a state of 'limbo' due to a lack of a legal framework. An understanding of the concept of social fields can give a deeper understanding of the social reality in which refugees live, away from limiting notions of nation-state boundaries. As a result, the social conditions and realities of the Afghan diaspora are no longer limited to or confined to the boundaries of a nation-state; these identities tend to permeate across boundaries.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study involves Qualitative methodology. Qualitative data is collected through primary and secondary sources, including books, journals, publications, articles, newspapers, and other existing literature; primary data collection involves Fieldwork, case study, interviews and observation methods. A qualitative methodology is chosen as it will give a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Afghan refugee groups in India. The case of Afghan refugees is different from any other refugee group in India, as Afghan refugees have not migrated in large numbers as compared to other persecuted groups; the migrated population is mainly concentrated in Delhi, making them roughly 20,000 in number. Afghan refugees are a heterogeneous ethnic and religious group; hence, quantitative analysis alone is insufficient to understand the diversity of the experience of this group. A thick description of data will mainly be collected through the observation method, along with interviews.

[2] The Foreigners Registration Office (FRO) is an Indian government agency responsible for administering foreigner registration and immigration related functions for visitors to India

IV. EVERYDAY REALITIES AND COMMUNITY SPACES

Belongingness in the Afghan Diaspora

The transborder movements of human beings have been a recurrent phenomenon in the history of human civilisation. These movements also give birth to the communities of immigrants living away from their homeland, which are known as diasporas (Bhandari, 2021). Robin Cohen (1997) categorises diasporas into five distinct types: Victim Diaspora, Labour Diaspora, Cultural Diaspora, Trade Diaspora, and Imperial Diaspora. While these classifications offer a foundational framework, scholars such as Monsutti caution against rigid compartmentalisation of refugee migration and diasporic experience. Particularly in the case of Afghan refugees, a more nuanced understanding is necessary.

Without falling into the trap of generalising, we can loosely categorise the Afghan refugee diaspora as the classic phase of diaspora called 'the Victimhood diaspora' and the Labour diaspora. Victimhood diaspora refers to the people who have been forcefully sent out of their native country. This is associated with a traumatic cause of dispersion; on the other hand, labour diaspora comprises those people who have migrated for better economic and job opportunities. Monsutti (2025) understands the Afghan movement in terms of its plurality. According to him, Afghans give different and usually plural reasons for their decision to migrate: perhaps about break of fighting, the danger of bombing or compulsory conscription, or a threat from a personal enemy; perhaps the search for work or opportunities to trade, the need for medical treatment, or the undertaking of a pilgrimage. However, Afghan migration to India is not only restricted due to one reason; there are a multiplicity of reasons for migration, particularly to India takes place in some cases; however, the refugees do not have a choice for their preferred destination. However, with the data collected from multiple

interviewees, India is not a final destination for most Afghan refugees settled in India. India is often used as a buffer state to further migrate to Western nations. Afghan refugees in Bhogal explain how the circumstances of refugees in India are not very friendly; a refugee legally in India is characterised as a foreigner, which is a challenging process for a person who has migrated under persecution to India.

V. THE AFGHAN SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE

There are no official reports on the number of Afghan Refugees in India. The figures are largely missing due to a lack of a formal legal framework to determine the refugee status in the country. According to an informal estimate, there are about 20,000 Afghan refugees in India. Aside from the legal discrepancies, Afghan refugees at the surface level seem well-fitted into the socio-cultural fabric of Delhi; however, they face discrimination and constant 'othering' from Indians. Afghan socialisation takes place mostly within their own community. Socialisation itself is highly gendered, as men and women outside of the kinship network rarely interact. According to a 20-year-old woman respondent, she is not allowed to interact with men, even from her own community; her interaction must be limited to women and in some cases, she is allowed to engage with her female peers at university. However, Menfolk do engage outside of their community, mostly for economic activities; on the contrary, the socialisation of women, especially homemakers, is limited within their community.

As one exits the Ashram metro and takes an auto to Samman Bazaar, Bhogal, it feels like we have stepped into another place altogether. We observe rows of dry fruit shops selling imported products, sign boards hanging in front of shops, written in Pashto and Farsi, Afghan naan shops, and Afghan restaurants that serve Afghan delicacies. People roaming in the market dressed in traditional 'Afghani' fits. Tucked in a quaint corner in Samman Bazaar is the heart and soul of the Afghan diaspora in Bhogal, the Afghan Solidarity Committee (ASC). The ASC is the only surviving Afghan welfare centre in Bhogal after the 2021 Taliban invasion. Most Afghan centres were compelled to close post-2021, as the funding from the Afghan embassy came to an abrupt halt. The centre is located in a small basement, often missed by passersby, and it is tucked behind a local food stall in the market. When I first came looking for the centre, I couldn't find it. Eventually, I arrived at the front door. I was hesitant to step in; it was a dark, dingy place that lacked any kind of ventilation. However, I was invited inside with smiling faces. I stepped inside,and the first thing that I noticed was a reception area, followed by two rooms, one of which was a classroom with a capacity of around 40 students. Even though the classroom was small and stuffy, it had good tables, chairs and a big whiteboard in front. Adjacent to the classroom was the office of the community and centre head, his office, which was often used as a place for important discussions. During my multiple visits, I always observed a long line of people waiting outside the room, clinging to their United Nations-issued refugee cards, some holding their passports, while some carried papers that seemed important. ASC acted as an important centre for social, cultural and legal life for Afghan refugees; it was a community for the people who had been living in a foreign land without a community; it was their place of refuge. During my fieldwork, I was closely associated with the centre, hanging out on the premises in the hope of interacting with people.

ASC conducted regular classes for the children of Afghan Refugees and asylum seekers. Students from grades 3 to 12 regularly attend classes in the basement school in Bhogal. With only one teacher running classes for around 50-60 students, Mr Mansoor (Pseudo name used), is a tall, slick man of about 50 years. Mr Mansoor was one of the few people with english education in the centre, with good proficiency in English, Hindi, Urdu, Dari and Pashto, Mr Mansoor was a teacher back home in Afghanistan, and he did not like to engage in conversation about his home or life in Afghanistan, rather he happily, talks about the students in Bhogal. Mr Mansoor was a kind and extremely hard-working man who, in his capacity, did everything to keep the centre running. He informed me that most of the students did not attend formal education, either due to a lack of financial resources or language constraints. ASC for such children is more than just a safe haven; it is their only hope in attaining education. Before the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, multiple schools for Afghan refugee children ran in Delhi, through funding from the Afghanistan Embassy in India; however, in October 2021, the Afghanistan Embassy ceased its operations in India, leading to a collapse in funding for local Afghan organisations.

I was fortunate enough to hold a Republic Day event for the children at ASC, on that day the centre was filled with 20 students, and most of them had no idea about Republic Day or why they were gathered there, all they had been taught was their love for India and Afghanistan which they had not only learned from their schools but also through their parents. As I started interacting with students, I realised that most of them spoke to me in Hindi, with little to no proficiency in English. They played games in Hindi and talked about their love for Bollywood. However, Rehman, an 11-year-old boy, had an American accent, which I noticed. When I asked him if he knew Hindi, Rehman got offended and prompted to say that he wasn't an Indian, "Why should I know Hindi, if I'm not Indian?" he said. He claimed to be an American and wished to go back to

America. Upon asking him about his Afghan roots, he said his brother was killed off in an attack, and he did not wish to relate to that place anymore. A moment of silence lingered, and I started placing things into perspective on how diasporas and associations with identity work in multiple ways.

VI. SPATIAL SEGREGATION AND EVERYDAY LIFE OF AFGHAN REFUGEES IN DELHI

My fieldwork was conducted in three key Afghan refugee-concentrated localities in Delhi: Lajpat Nagar, Bhogal, and Malviya Nagar. Afghan Refugees in Delhi can be characterised as 'urban refugees' as most refugees reside in urban areas rather than in traditional refugee camps. However, Urban refugee settlements, ultimately, take the form of urban refugee camps, by spatially distinguishing refugees from non-refugees. These communities frequently exist in the peripheries of urban life, either in underdeveloped colonies or tightly packed neighbourhoods that blur the line between inclusion and marginalisation.

Even though Afghan refugees live in urban areas, a fictitious spatial demarcation can be clearly observed in the residential boundaries of Afghans and Indians. Sanyal (2015) highlights that the spatial segregation of refugees and citizens within urban spaces would minimise conflict over scarce resources. These urban refugee camps help the government to strictly control the refugee population by turning these camps into spaces of incomplete development that seem frozen in time. This spatial segregation subtly maintains social boundaries and minimises potential conflict, though it reinforces the refugees' marginal status. Refugees are often seen as suspicious 'intruders' in the demography of urban spaces; they pose a threat to the aesthetics and the cosmopolitan life of the city, hence they are tucked away in the deep crevices of the city where their voices cannot be heard and they are invisible. For example, in Bhogal, Samaan Bazar is the area where the majority of the Afghan population resides. It serves not just as a residential zone but as a vibrant hub of socio-economic and cultural activity. Afghan-run shops, eateries, and religious centres dominate the area. However, as one moves further towards Jangpura, a clear demarcation of boundaries can be observed; the open, communal atmosphere of Samaan Bazar gives way to the gated, planned colony of Jangpura, where Afghan presence visibly declines. This spatial contrast reflects the silent mechanisms of exclusion. A similar pattern exists in Lajpat Nagar, where a designated refugee colony is tucked away from the main commercial centre. Here, refugees from various backgrounds live in narrow lanes with houses in close proximity. In Malviya Nagar, Afghan refugees are largely confined to the Khirki Extension, another densely packed area marked by congested homes and alleyways distinct from the more affluent parts of the neighbourhood.

Even though there is a systematic spatial segregation of the refugees, the Afghan refugees have made this space in an already overpopulated city of Delhi, midst of urban pressures and overpopulation, as one walks in the Lanes of Saman Bazaar, Khirki Colony and Lajpat Nagar, the air is filled with the smell of Afghani naan being made in front of dedicated shops for naan. In Lajpat Nagar, the lanes are packed with multiple Afghani restaurants, there is a huge population of Afghans who set up informal stalls on the roadsides, and these hawkers are known as Kharachiwans who sell vegetables, Afghani naan amongst various other delicacies.

During my field visit, I visited a popular Afghan eating joint in Bhogal. 'Pakeezah restaurant' is a popular hangout spot for Afghan youth in Bhogal. As I entered, I drew curious stares from the staff, understandable, given that the restaurant rarely receives non-Afghan visitors, as I later learned. I was guided to a sitting booth, where I was eventually guided to a booth by two young boys who appeared to be in their early teens. They happily talked to me and recommended food, followed by a complimentary baklava. Although they were excited to recommend food and drinks, and seemed warm and hospitable, they were reluctant to discuss their personal lives. However, eventually, when I met them at the Afghan Solidarity Committee centre in Bhogal, months later, they revealed they do not attend formal school; instead, they have work to support their families in an expensive city like Delhi. Zaid is only 15 years old; however, his father lacks a work permit, which only makes him ineligible to work in the formal sector. Although his father was previously a government official before the Taliban regime, now he does odd jobs through community networks to sustain his family, with seven more siblings. Zaid is coerced to help out his father. The restaurant was packed with customers even during a working day in the middle of January. I could see all kinds of Afghan people around, such as families, groups of men and children; however, I failed to see a group of women in the place. Women were mostly accompanied by their male counterparts.

VII. VULNERABILITY AND CHALLENGES

On a surface level, the struggles and social realities of Afghan Refugees in Delhi seem similar to any other disadvantaged and marginalised group; however, Afghan refugees especially occupy a vulnerable position in Delhi as they do not have access to basic rights that an Indian citizen enjoys. Although not always economically vulnerable, some of the Afghans in Delhi struggle with 'identity' and 'Belongingness'. In the case of a 20-year-old Afghan university student who had migrated to India with his family in 2009 as a young child constantly juggles between two identities. He often feels disconnected from both his Afghan heritage and his Indian surroundings, never quite feeling 'Indian enough,' yet increasingly distant from his Afghan roots."

There is a widespread problem of unemployment and underemployment in the Afghan community in Delhi. Due to a lack of official work permits, refugees are coerced to take up jobs in the informal sector, mainly procured through their social networks. It was rather rare to find an Afghan refugee who was employed in the formal sector. Most employers deny employment opportunities on the grounds of a lack of official work permits, or if they can produce all the necessary documents, they are denied employment on undetermined grounds. Informally, Afghan refugees are employed in shops as workers, they are hawkers or employed at Afghani restaurants. Due to their vulnerable status, they are usually paid lower wages in comparison to other employees, and hence face further exploitation.

Respondents reported cases of indifference and islamophobia living in Delhi; there were also cases of ostracisation of Afghan refugees in Delhi. Contrary to such reports, respondents also reported deep mutual affection and affiliations between Afghan and Indian communities, a relationship built on coexistence and mutual respect. Language barrier is another persistent problem that came up during my engagement, which makes day-to-day activities difficult for the Afghans who need to interact with the Indians. Language proficiency is also directly linked to educational opportunities amongst Afghan children, as a language barrier is one of the reasons that admission is denied in educational institutions, forcing them to continue with an informal education from Afghan teaching centres. There is a deep sense of belonging to the homeland amongst the diasporic community, as most people from the older generation wish to migrate back to Afghanistan, the younger generation seems to dream of migrating to the West. India, due to its stringent and ambiguous mechanisms, is not a preferred location for anyone

VIII. CONCLUSION

Although most Afghan refugees acknowledged the fact that the Afghan refugee situation in India is better than in Iran and Pakistan, the lack of formal refugee frameworks in India often stops them from living a fulfilled and holistic life. The next generation often grapples with an identity crisis and stands at the crossroads of belongingness and alienation. Employment, education and access to healthcare remain other challenges within the group. While one can say that the community has been well integrated in Delhi, there always seems to be a sense of marginalisation due to legal and social non-recognition.

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