


Afghan Refugees in India: A Case Study of Bhogal

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Abstract: *The tumultuous context of unending-violence and war in Afghanistan has thrown the life of its citizens into quagmire. In search of safety, approximately half of Afghanistan's population has migrated to different countries across the globe. In the aftermath of Soviet-sponsored Saur Revolution in 1978, maximum Afghan refugees sought asylum in Pakistan followed by Iran; while India stands at 12th position in becoming home to thousands of them. All the countries who are signatory to the International Refugee Convention of 1952 and International Refugee Protocol of 1967 are obliged to treat refugees through the concept of non-refoulement. Since India is not a signatory to any of these international conventions, it do not have any explicit refugee policy and hence no clarity on the concept of non-refoulement. While on the other hand, one can see a huge chunk of refugees from Afghanistan seeking shelter in India rightly from late 1970s. Likewise, after the recent Taliban take-over of Afghanistan in 2021, Afghan refugees had flown to India in abundance after India's announcement to grant emergency e-Visas to them. Despite these efforts by India to provide support and assistance to Afghan refugees, there is a common narrative among the scholarships in India that they feel alienated, uncertain and unsafe in the country; reason being India's lack of any codified refugee policy. Given this background, the present paper aims to testify this widely-believed narrative by re-examining India's treatment towards Afghan refugees and, to analyze the life of these refugees on the ground. In doing so, the research takes a case study of Bhogal area located in South of New-Delhi, which houses thousands of Afghan refugees. Employing an ethnographic case study, the research finds that despite the lack of any codified refugee policy in India, the refugees are being aided in many possible ways. The paper, thus, concludes that Afghan refugees do live a quality life in Delhi's Bhogal.*

Keywords: Afghan-Refugees, Bhogal, ICRC, Migration, Non-Refoulement, UNHCR

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1. Introduction

No one would prefer to leave his/her country of origin. But the situation is different when it comes to Afghan refugees. The unending war placed them in a *do-or-die* situation. They preferred to leave their all belongings in search of safety, and they do not fear losing their loved ones. According to a report of International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC), Afghans have 34 percent fear of displacement, 25 percent to lose their loved ones and only 22 percent to lose the property. The history of displacement and international migration of the people of Afghanistan can be traced back to 1978 Saur Revolution followed by the 1979 Soviet invasion of the country. Since then a huge chunk of Afghans fled their country to seek asylum in different countries of the world. These refugees are being protected by the well-established *non-refoulement* principle and the measures like UN Convention against Torture. These principles restrict a country from forcing the asylum seekers to return their country of origin in which they have been repeatedly tortured or forced to flee. However, India is not a signatory to any of these principles and hence not bound to follow them. It has a free hand to deal with the refugees in that either to give them shelter or to force them back. While looking on the ground we see many refugees from Afghanistan living in India. The question therefore to ask is: Do they feel safe and secure over here? This is the central question that I address in this paper by assessing the life style of some Afghan refugees on the ground. I argue that despite India's lack of any refugee policy, it treats refugees with soft attitude by providing every-possible assistance to them. At the ground also, one can see these refugees living a quality life.

Literature Survey: There exists a plethora of writings on Afghan refugees. To name few, Matthieu Aikins *The Naked Don't Fear the Water: An Underground Journey with Afghan Refugees* (2022), N.H. Senzai's *Shooting Kabul* (2009), Bahram Rahman's *The Library Bus* (2020), and Suzanne Fisher Staples' *Under the Persimmon Tree* (2008) provide a classical account of migration crisis in Afghanistan; the struggle of the people to leave their homeland, property and belongings in search of a better life. Another work of Susanne Schmeidl, an Afghanistan scholar and practitioner, titled *Sources of Tension in Afghanistan and Pakistan: A*

Regional Perspective (2014) discusses the internal and external displacements in Afghanistan in past and present, and assesses its potential in causing the future displacements. According to Schmeidl, the past displacements in Afghanistan provide an understanding of “networks and routes to follow for future migrants” and also “equip[s] people with the experience of what to do and where to go, or at least how to weigh options” (Schmeidl 2014: 32). Since the present study aims to look on Afghan refugees specifically in India, it has mainly relied on the literature related to this particular area. Again, there exists a great deal of literature highlighting the context of war-torn Afghanistan, the painful journey of Afghan refugees to travel India and their plight in the new country. Zafar Aafaq, an Indian activist, in his piece *Our Future Unknown: Afghan Nationals in India Wary of Taliban* published in *Aljazeera* in 2021 narrates the tale of some Afghan refugees who arrived in New Delhi’s Lajpat Nagar after Taliban took over Afghanistan in August 2021. Though scathing in its field study, his work, to some extent, demonstrates how these refugees or immigrants feel safer or better in India as compared to situations in Afghanistan. He talks about Fridous Muttaqi, a Kabul resident who also arrived in New Delhi in the same year, who was “happy” and found India “a free and peaceful country”. Vijayta Lalwani (2021) also narrates the sad tale of some Afghan refugees living in Delhi’s Bhogal and Jangpura area for years after Taliban violence has ravaged Afghanistan. She reflects on the anxious nature of these refugees about their future and about “their relatives back home”. Parsa and Siddique (2020) document the suffering of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus who arrived in India because of Taliban violence. They write a short story of two Afghan Sikhs, Sardar Gurbachan Singh Gazniwal and Narender Singh Khalsa, narrated by them on Radio Free Afghanistan where they said that “insecurity [in Afghanistan] is the primary driver of their exodus”. In the same vein, Radhika Iyenger (2018) stresses on the trauma of Afghan Christian refugees who, according to her, faced more challenges than any other community in Afghanistan. For Iyenger, the Christians in Afghanistan are considered “apostate” (kafir) and are thus facing more threats from Taliban. Minam Shah (2023) highlights the struggle of Afghan migrants in India to register and recognize themselves as refugees or to achieve refugee status for that matter. His main argument is that India does not treat Afghan refugees in a “humanitarian way”. Others like Shivangi Seth and Stuti Bhatnagar (2023) and Diksha Munjal (2021) also point out the anathema of Afghan refugees in getting refugee status in India. Last but not the least, Abhik Bhattacharya and Shreya Basak (2023) highlight the sufferings of women Afghan refugees and the “disproportionate effects” on them because of refugee crisis.

Research Gap: Most of the literary works critic India’s refugee policy towards Afghan migrants and some others mainly document the sad tale of these refugees in India. It is undeniable that India does not have any codified refugee policy and it is equally true that Afghan refugees have to undergo a hectic process while getting a refugee status. What, however, has been undermined are the efforts of India to provide as much support and assistance as possible to Afghan refugees from time to time. True that the Refugees had to face many challenges in the new country, while the quality life that Afghan refugees live in India is completely undetermined.

Research Objective: As given the cleavage in the research, the central objective of this paper is to unfold India’s positive approach towards Afghan refugees by examining their everyday life-experience on the ground.

Scope: India is home to thousands of refugees from several countries. This paper mainly delves into India’s treatment to Afghan refugees. While these refugees are settled in different states across India like Kolkata, Bangalore, Visakhapatnam and Hyderabad, the study is restricted to New Delhi’s Bhogal area where thousands of Afghan refugees live. Though the study provides a historical account of some displacements in Afghanistan, its exact time frame extends from 2001 to 2021, the period in which India received huge groups of Afghan migrants. Thus, the data is collected from the respondents only who arrived in India during this time period.

Hypothesis: Despite the lack of India’s refugee policy, the Afghan refugees are given much assistance and they live a quality life here.

2. Materials and Methods

The research is based on both quantitative and qualitative methods of research.

Quantitative Method: Employed in making a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature on Afghan refugees in India. In doing so, a critical framework has been done in order to move beyond the existing narratives. By this method, the research arrives at the conclusion that apart from the sufferings that Afghan refugees experience in India, there is also a sense of ‘well-being’ and ‘satisfaction’ among them by living in the democratic country like India. This method has, thus, contributed in doing a critical analysis of the existing literature and to uncover the positive attempts by India towards Afghan refugees.

Qualitative Method: Here, the modes of ethnographic research, semi-structured interviews and personal observations have been conducted to study the life of Afghan refugees living in New Delhi’s Bhogal area. The interviews have been conducted from the people belonging to different professions: Shopkeepers, Pharmacists, Bakers, and private Teachers. While most of these refugees are Muslims, attempts have also been made to talk to some Christian refugees in order to assess their varying opinions. This helps to understand if there is any ‘differential’ treatment from the government of India based on the parameters of ethnicity. Thus, being a central research method of this study, it facilitates to provide first-hand information of the ground-experience of the Afghan refugees living in New-Delhi.

Given the above methods, the study relies on both primary and secondary sources of data.

Secondary Data: The books, research articles, periodicals, journals and daily’s both on and off the internet written on Afghan refugees constitute the secondary information. Searching the already-existed material on Afghan refugees in India was easy, but one needs to be cautious about the personal attitude of the author of a particular work. With few exceptions, most of the works on Afghan refugees in India are biased towards the personal interest of the authors; highlighting the plight of Muslim refugees only if a Muslim author and same goes to other communities.

Primary Data: Living with these refugees, shopping from their stores, offering prayers with them, and talking to them gives the primary information required for this study. It was thus a time-consuming process to motivate these refugees for the interview. Many of them nodded in negative, when asked to give an interview. Painstaking though, the researcher has successfully collected the information required for the study.

The study has used following tools and instruments in collecting and analyzing data:

- Secondary sources both online and offline.
- Selective texts on war and violence in Afghanistan.
- Videos on the upsurges in Afghanistan.
- Living with the Afghan refugees in Bhogal, New Delhi.
- Personal observations.
- A solitary thought process after engaging with some Afghan refugees.
- In-depth interviews of the refugees.
- Discussions and debates with the scholars working on Refugee studies.
- A study of some research methods.
- The writing process.

3. Results and Discussion

The employment of aforementioned research methods led to come at numerous data and information. The paper divides and discusses it into three broad sections as follows.

3.1. Afghan Refugees and Major Host Countries

Any discussion on war and violence in Afghanistan, internal and external displacements and refugee crisis would be incomplete without starting with the Saur Revolution of 1978 followed by Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. It was the first phase of turmoil and violence in Afghanistan which produced as many as 6 million plus refugees and 2 million plus internal displacements in the following years (Schmeidl 2014).

Thus, from 1979 to 1989 more than one fifth of Afghanistan's population left their homeland as refugees.¹ The following decades witnessed both migration and return of refugees together. As between 1989 and 1993 about three million refugees returned, while over 3.6 million Afghan refugees were still residing in different countries across the world by the year 2000.² Though most of the refugees also returned after United States invasion of Afghanistan and overthrow of the Taliban regime there in 2001, the migrating-situation gained momentum again and went topsy-turvy after 2012 when about 5 million people fled Afghanistan to the neighboring countries.³ With the installment of Ghani administration in 2014, the situations appeared somewhat better but the Taliban took-over of Kabul in 2021 deteriorated situations further by throwing Afghanistan into ravaged violence once again. At present, Afghanistan stands as one of the largest refugee-producing countries in the world; as of 2021 there were about 2.7 million Afghan refugees scattered around different corners of the world which is the third largest refugee group after Syrian and Venezuelan refugees.⁴

Given the history of Afghanistan as one of the largest refugee producing country in the world, the important question, therefore, to ask is: where do these refugees go or who hosts them? As according to Sussane Schmeidl (2014), about three in four Afghans have gone through internal and external displacement in their life, which implies their might have been an initial planning among each refugee group of where to go and to save the life amidst the threat in Afghanistan. Among other countries across the globe, the major host countries of Afghan refugees have remained Pakistan, Iran and India respectively. According to recent figures, the number of registered refugees and asylum seekers in Pakistan is approximately 1,438,432 living under the care and protection of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).⁵ Similarly, as of October 2020, 780, 000 registered Afghan refugees and Asylum seekers were temporarily residing in Iran.⁶ And, India received about 60, 000 Afghan refugees between 1970s and 1990s (Alexander and Singh 2022), and as of early 2021 hosted approximately 15, 816 Afghan refugees living under the care and protection of UNHCR.⁷ However, according to some figures the number of Afghan refugees currently in India stands at 19, 338 (Seth and Bhatnagar 2023), while others state that as of June 2023, there are 11, 530 Afghan refugees in India registered with UNHCR out of which 2,520 are asylum seekers (Bhattacharya and Basak 2023). Within India, the regions with significant Afghan refugees are Kolkata, Bangalore, Visakhapatnam and Hyderabad. While the nation's capital Delhi is at the top for housing most Afghan refugees residing in its neighboring areas of Bhogal, Lajpat Nagar, Wazirabad and Malviya Nagar (Zafar 2021). The well stated reason of why most of the Afghan refugees prefer to stay in Delhi is because the UNCHR refugee agency is located here (Iyenger 2018). And within Delhi, the areas with huge chunk of Afghan population are Bhogal and Lajpat Nagar, situated in the southeast of Delhi.

3.2. India's Approach towards Afghan Refugees

India's position as not being signatory to any of the International Conventions on Refugees has always remained questionable and has stirred many debates among scholarships across the country. A widely-believed narrative is that because of its lack of any codified refugee policy, the refugees in the country are feeling uncertain about their future.⁸ What is being mostly criticized is the current Hindu Nationalist government in India by allegedly not being open to receive refugees from different countries across the world. This criticism mainly emanates from the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 passed by the government. The act "promise[d] protection to persecuted minorities fleeing India's neighboring countries,

¹ "Refugees From Afghanistan: The world's largest single refugee group". Available at: <https://refworld.org/pdfid/3ae6a9d110.pdf>. Accessed on: 22 December 2023.

² "USCR country report Afghanistan: Statistics on refugees and other uprooted people, June 2001". Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/Afghanistan/uscr-country/-report-afghanistan-statistics-refugees-and-other-uprooted-people-Jun> Accessed on 22 Decemeber 2023.

³ "How has life changed in Afghanistan in 20 years?". Available at: <https://bbc.com/news/world-asia-57767067>, BBC News, 16 August 2021. Accessed on 25 December 2023.

⁴ "108.4 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced". Available at: <https://unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-glance>, Accessed on 25 December 2023.

⁵ "Afghan Refugees". Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghan-refugees#cite-ref-UN-praises-Pakistan-for-carrying-out-Registration-of-1.4m-Afghan-refugees-27-0>. Accessed on 26 December 2023.

⁶ "Afghans in Iran". Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghans-in-Iran>. Accessed on 26 December 2023.

⁷ "Afghans in India". Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghans-in-India>. Accessed on December 2023.

⁸ For instance, Abhik Bhattacharya and Shreya Basak in their Piece published in *Outlook* on 24 July 2023 argue that the absence of refugee policy in India makes the life of Afghan refugees "harder" and are "uncertain [about their] future".

to the exclusion of Muslim minorities” (Seth and Bhatnagar 2023). Seeing things through this spectrum, it appears that India guarantees protection to those Afghan refugees that are in minority that is Hindus, Sikhs and Christians (Singh and Raj 2021). But that is not the case, on the ground we see more Afghan Muslim refugees living in India safe and secure. From this perspective, there is neither any “calculated kindness” or “Strategic ambiguity” to any refugee group in India as argued by Professor Chimni (2003), nor is there any “differential treatment” to Afghan refugees as said by Hamsa Vijayaraghavan, former UNHCR lawyer and the chief operating officer of the migration and asylum project, in an interview to *News Laundry* (Munjal 2021).

That India does not have any refugee policy is true. It is, however, pertinent to note that India was one of the great supporters and sponsors of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) endorsed officially by the United Nations on 17 December 2018 (Alexander and Singh 2022). Although, nonbinding and voluntary in nature, the compact “provides a framework to improve the worldwide response to the need of refugees” (Root 2019). In addition, the Supreme Court of India has always worked in giving shield to all the migrants in the country and has actively stressed and served the principle of *non-refoulement* (Alexander and Singh 2022). Samaddar (2003) is, though right, in pointing out that India does not have clarity even on the concept of *non-refoulement*, but doing a thorough investigation, one can find its provisions in the constitution of India itself that provides some Fundamental Rights to all persons irrespective of Nationality. For instance, according to Professor B.S. Chimni (1994), an eminent scholar and jurist, article 21 of India constitution is indirectly related to refugees that restrict the state to deport, imprison or deprive any foreign national of his life or personal liberty. Thus, if the concept of *non-refoulement* is not explicitly mentioned in the India constitution, its provisions has always been upheld by both Indian legislature and judiciary.

It is equally true that India’s approach to refugees vary according to their country of origin and ethnicity. That is, however, something which falls in its national interest; India’s national interest in this approach is probably to safeguard itself from the influx of terrorism which it believes springs mostly from the Muslim countries. Thus among other things, this might be one of the sole reasons why Rohingya refugees were not given much support and assistance as was given to the refugees from Tibet and Srilanka. But, when it comes to the refugees from Afghanistan India has always provided active support and possible assistance. This becomes evident from the mutual relations that Afghanistan and India has from the past and, “between 2002 and 2021, India was an active stakeholder in Afghanistan’s reconstruction, committing financial resources, public good and services” (Seth and Bhatnagar 2023). While during the onset of Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, India announced to grant an ‘e-emergency X-Misc visas’ for Afghan nationals.⁹

It is, however, undeniable that the procedure of getting a refugee status is extremely difficult and time consuming in India. As an asylum seeker is first given a Blue Paper by UNHCR’s refugee agency which is an Under Consideration Card (UCC). Once settled temporarily, he is required to give an interview in which he is supposed to prove that he has been persecuted in his own country and that is why he wants a refugee status. This second process is called Refugee Status Determination (RSD). Those who pass the interview are accorded with the refugee status and those whole fail are required to present their case again. Hectic undoubtedly, this process is, nevertheless, necessary for all the refugees and hence Afghan refugees are no exception. Furthermore, the refugees in India are being treated in two ways: a refugee has to register himself directly in any of the government of India’s institutions if he is from any of its neighboring country, and if not from the neighboring country he has to go to UNHCR’s refugee office based in Delhi. Since Afghanistan does not shares it borders with India, Indian government has no direct role in determining the status of its refugees in literal sense.

Thus, despite India’s lack of refugee policy, many refugees from different countries prefer to seek asylum in its territory. And, if not a signatory to any of the International convention on Refugees, India has always been on the frontline to give aid and accommodation to the refugees (Noor 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that because of India’s positive approach towards Afghan refugees, they are not seen as, what Sara Ahmed (2004) quotes from the British National Front, “illegal immigrants and bogus asylum seekers, [who] threaten to overwhelm and swamp the nation [in which they arrive]” (Ahmed 2004). Rather they have contributed to

⁹ “India gave 200 emergency e-visas to Afghan citizens, Rajya Sabha told”. *The Indian EXPRESS* 1 December 2021. Online web: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-emergency-e-visas-afghan-citizens-rajya-sabha-parliament-7651226/>, Accessed on 15 December 2023.

makeshift in India's foreign policy towards Afghanistan that is a policy of mutual friendship. With all this, Afghan refugees have occupied a good and positive space in Indo-Afghan relations (Bentz 2013). While on the ground, Afghan refugees live a quality life in India as would be discussed in the following section.

3.3. The Life of Afghan Refugees Living in Delhi's Bhogal

Bhogal is located in Nizam-ud-Din District of New-Delhi. Being a multicultural area, it houses thousands of Afghan refugees. Over the years, these refugees have managed to find the sources for their livelihood. Though painstaking, most of them have got the refugee card from UNHCR's refugee branch which is located in New-Delhi itself. Most of these refugees are daily-earners mainly engaged with restaurants, pharmacies and baking. Afghan *naan* (bread) has fame in Bhogal. The Afghan bakers do also enjoy working in a free and crowded environment. While talking to one of them here in India from 2010, it came to forth that he gets love of every being in the locality. While preferring to remain anonymous, he said "I don't feel any strangeness here". "I can do my work without any restrictions and that is enough for me", he added. Another refugee, almost 70, revealed his story of 19 years that he had spent in Delhi. "I feel at home" he said. He owns a restaurant and employs almost ten other Afghan refugees in it. The seats of the restaurant seem always booked while making a planned or unplanned entry in it. "Alhamdulillah, I can feed numerous many needy people a day", he said in jubilation. Besides, he serves food in charity in the nearby *Shahi Masjid* (Mosque) to all the prayers once in every year. He himself comes to offer five-times prayer in the Masjid in his own *Duster* car.

An analysis of the life of some women refugees has also been drawn. One can see many of them engaged in shopping and other works while moving from the *Kashmiri Park* road to *Saman Bazar*. They never come out without makeup. Their dressing reveals the very fact that they must belong to a wealthy family. While talking to a 23 year old refugee-girl, who works as lab-assistant in a private pharmacy located in Bhogal itself, it became known that women's are given much opportunity to work in the public places. "I earn my own livelihood and help my family very easily", she said. Expressing her desperation on the prevailing situation in Afghanistan, she did not want to go back. "I would prefer to stay here instead", she answered when asked do you want to go back to your homeland? Many of them are going to gym which is far from reality for some Indian women even now. What is interesting is their liberal attitude in the sense talking freely without any hesitation which clearly reveals their free space in the country.

Some of them have become water-suppliers to the original residents of the Bhogal. They happily do this job with getting a good amount of money along with respect. One refugee, also preferred to remain anonymous, runs a furniture shop in *Saman Bazar* lane. While drinking Afghan *Kehwa* (a form of tea), he expressed much satisfaction for earning his livelihood. "I do wear good clothes, take good food, feed my family, give education to my children, I am happy in it", he said. They do not lag behind when it comes to educate their children. They have opened many private *Madrassa's* (schools) to enlighten their children with both western and Islamic education. They are found in the front *Safa's* (Row's) during the prayer in Bhogal's *Shahi Masjid*. The bakers, particularly, awake in the early morning to rush to their shops and serve the hot bread to the local residents. *Kashmiri Park* can be seen filled with many Afghan childrens playing cricket, *kho-kho*, and other games. Many men and women do come in the morning and evening for 'walk'. These beautiful people add to the beauty of Bhogal with their skills and talents.

Many other observations and face to face interviews have been made. On that basis, I will sum up and generalize the current status of the Afghan refugees living in Delhi's Bhogal under following points:

- All the refugees are employed in some or other work from which they earn their livelihood.
- They enjoy freedom to work, move, and of prayer like the ordinary citizens.
- There is a very little dissatisfaction on the lack of India's refugee policy among some educated Afghan refugees.
- The women refugees don't face any kind of restriction to move outside the house. They can work in the public spaces also.
- The Childrens are being given a free space for education.

4. Conclusion

The central objective of this paper was to lay bare the approach of India towards Afghan refugees and to examine the life-style of these refugees on the ground. From some secondary sources available, it became evident that despite lacking any refugee policy, India aided the Afghan refugees from time to time, like granting them emergency e-Visas amidst the quagmire in Afghanistan back in 2021. An empirical method has been employed in assessing the life-style of some Afghan refugees living in Bhogal area of New-Delhi. Through ethnographic case studies, it has been found that the refugees are satisfied with the life they live here. Most of them have seen engaged with their daily-work, while many others are the owners of restaurants, pharmacies, furniture and baking shops. The condition of women and child refugees has also been analyzed and discussed at greater length. They also have been found living happily. What is more interesting is the boost to the market economy which these refugees give particularly in Bhogal area. But at the same, some of the refugees (mostly educated) express dissatisfaction over India's lack of any codified refugee policy. India should, therefore, make its borders soft and welcome more refugees in its democratic and peaceful territory.

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