

Title of the Paper:	Delhi “<i>a home away from home</i>”
Author’s Name:	Amrita Kaur Slatch
Author’s Title:	Assistant Professor
Affiliation:	School of Planning & Architecture
Email Contact:	ar.amritaslatch@gmail.com
Co-authors Name:	Intekhab Alam

Delhi “*a home away from home*”

Amrita Kaur Slatch and Intekhab Alam

Introduction

Afghanistan and India both have a rich interconnected history that can be first traced down to the 13th century, with the establishment of the Khalji Dynasty in Northern India. The two countries played the part of both, friends and foes in the past and continue to do so till date. Afghanistan in the past few decades has been ravaged by war and many another fractions, be it local in the form of Taliban, or in the form of American troops that have made it extremely difficult for peace to be restored in the country. Due to the political, social and economic situation in Afghanistan, many have fled the country as refugees. India due to its close proximity, historical ties and relatively peaceful political environment has been a popular destination for many Afghans that have had to leave the country, beginning in 1979 with the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. Whilst India has neither signed 1951 convention on refugees nor the 1967 protocol it has generally accepted Afghan refugees without any major hassle, leading to a sizable population residing in India. According to the United Nation High Commission For Refugees (UNHCR), there are at least 11,000 Afghan Refugees living in India, mainly in New Delhi. Lajpat Nagar, which was a colony built for partition refugees from Pakistan acts as home for most of the refugees.

1. History and Cause

1.1. Background

In 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Over the next ten years, there was fierce resistance to the Soviet presence from the United States-backed Mujahadeen. During this time, approximately 60,000 Afghans sought refuge abroad. The Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989. By 1992, however, the country was embroiled yet more violence; this time a civil war between the Taliban and the ruling Najibullah regime. The civil war, lasting four years, destroyed more than 80% of the capital city, Kabul and saw yet more Afghans forced to flee the country. The Taliban came to power in 1996. Their oppressive regime was

based on the strictest interpretation of Sharia law. Under the Taliban, it was forbidden for girls or women to be educated after the age of eight, to watch television, listen to music or to clap during sporting events. Following the events of 11 September 2001, the United States and the United Kingdom, along with other NATO supporters, launched a military attack on Afghanistan. The Taliban withdrew to the Afghan-Pakistani border where they continue their protracted campaign against the new Afghan government.

1.2. Reason for Flight

There are over 9,000 recognised Afghan refugees in India and 90 percent of them belong to the Hindu or Sikh faiths; religious minorities in Afghanistan who could not openly practice their religions in their home country for fear of persecution. Most of the Afghan Sikh and Hindu refugees in India sought asylum after 1992, with the fall of the Najibullah regime. Three decades of fighting have destroyed the country's economy and infrastructure and government security bodies continue to commit human rights violations with impunity. Widespread human rights violations include: extra-judicial killing, torture, rape, violence against women and tight restrictions on freedoms of press, religion, movement and association. Between July and October 2007, it is estimated that a further 15,000 people were forcibly displaced by the conflict.

1.3. Legal Status

India has not signed the 1951 Convention on Refugees or the 1967 Protocol and the Indian government does not officially recognize the Afghan community to be refugees. Instead, they are recognised and protected under the UNHCR mandate.

The Indian government has issued most Afghan refugees with valid residence permits. This affords them a degree of legal protection, which allows them to stay in the country despite not having valid passports. Attaining residence permits has been more difficult for the newer arrivals that arrived in India between 2004 and 2007. Socio-economic conditions.

Newly recognised Afghan refugees receive a small subsistence allowance for the first six months: Rs 2,225 for the principal applicant and Rs 750 for each dependant. After six months, only the most vulnerable Afghans such as female heads of household, the disabled and the elderly, receive this sum.

Whilst most Afghan refugees live in Delhi, there are also a large number living in Faridabad, Haryana. The Afghan Hindu and Sikh community are generally well integrated into Indian society since they share religious beliefs and often speak Hindi. Since the majority of the Afghan community holds resident permits, many Afghans are able to work in the informal sector, for example, running shops and working as salespeople. Whilst there are some prosperous Afghan refugees, a large number live in poverty; sharing cramped living quarters with other families and seeking work in the informal sector. Those that are in need receive some support from their community and from various welfare societies like Khalsa Diwan Society and Gurudwaras.

The UNHCR also runs various assistance programmes through its implementing partners for the benefit of Afghan refugees. Through its implementing partners, it provides refugees with access to academic resources, including an education assistance programme in association with the Young Men's Christian Association, Delhi. Educational assistance is provided to all Afghan refugee children who are pursuing primary and secondary education.

1.4. Specific Protection issues

Afghan refugees who do not possess residence permits often struggle to support themselves and their families. A large proportion of the Afghan community are widows and single mothers. Workers in the informal sector work very long hours and often find it difficult to get time off work. They are at risk of exploitation and harassment at work and it is reported that Muslim Afghan women are particularly discriminated against. The employment of Afghan refugees who do not possess valid resident permits is illegal and extortion and harassment by the police is an ever-present threat.

Whilst education is open to all Afghan refugee children, most Afghan boys only study up to primary level before starting work to support their families. The dropout rate among Afghan girls is also high in the primary level for a variety of reasons: to take care of ill relatives, because they get engaged and for financial reasons.

1.5. Naturalisation

The majority of Afghan refugees are Hindus and Sikhs who arrived in India in the early 1990s after the Taliban came to power. A large number of them have shown interest in becoming naturalised Indian citizens. The eligibility requirement is that a refugee must have lived in India for 12 years or have been married to an Indian for seven years. In addition to these groups India also hosts small numbers of refugees from Sudan, Iraq, Iran, Ethiopia and Eritrea amongst others.

2. Urban Character & Settlement Pattern

India's Capital city has witnessed, over the past six decades, a constant transfiguration of citizen culture and character through a blend of inhabitants from cities all over India and different Nationalities. The city hosts about 30,000 registered refugees all together, struggling to find their place in the conjunction. The crowded conditions lead to morbidity and stress. However collective consciousness and contextual opportunities may prove to be critical for planning refugee settlements in the concerned metropolis. Both Lajpat Nagar and Bhogal have a sizeable population of Afghans, many of whom had migrated to India after the bloodshed and civil war in Afghanistan.

Afghan refugees living in this region have integrated into the fabric of the colony, simultaneously maintaining parts of their culture and heritage. There are many departmental stores in the area that, apart from the usual products, try and cater to the Afghan community by storing items like Khajoor (an Afghani dessert) and Chilgoza (a local pine nut found in Afghanistan). These bustling areas are witness to men in Pathani Salwar Kurtas and women in Abayas that have now integrated

into the social fabric of the community, creating their own Afghanistan in a foreign land. The Afghan community that resides here is also an important economic part of these areas which can be inferred by just the sheer number of shops in that have signs in English and In Dari (the official language used in Afghanistan). These stores range from Money exchange shops, Chemists and even local Afghan Eating joints that provide traditional Afghan food like Kabuli Pulao, Chapli Kebab, Ghosht Dopiazza and many other local delicacies.

While Afghan Refugees have found safety and respite in the India, they still face a large number of issues. Most of these can be traced back to India not formally being a signing member of any refugee convention that makes the treatment of refugees extremely arbitrary and to the whims and fancies of the government; like the issue of “statelessness”, that many refugees are privy to. Despite living in India for many years like in the case of immigrants who have been living in India since the Soviet invasion back in 1979, they enjoy little to no rights due to their lack of identity as citizens and no proper procedure in place to tackle it. This statelessness makes it very difficult for Afghan refugees to witness any form of upward social mobility considering the limited options that they have without any sort of proper paper work, making entry into the formal sector extremely difficult and leaving only menial underpaying jobs for them.



Figure 1: Children playing in the neighbourhood park.
Source: (Author 2019)



Figure 2: Pharmacy and Restaurant
Source: (Author 2019)



Figure 3: Property dealers
Source: (Author 2019)



Figure 5: Mapping of the various utilities that the refugees depend on.
Source: (Author 2019)

Conclusion

Despite the large number of hardships that the refugees from Afghanistan have had endure, they have found a new home in India, providing them with basic safety and a chance at a better tomorrow; irrespective of how their lives are affected by the lack of recognition. Some refugees are optimistic about returning to their homeland once again when peace returns to the country, while some plan to migrate to more developed countries with the help of organizations like the UNHCR. However, until

then, India is home to these refuges and they play an important role in the communities they are part of. The question we wish to pose by this research paper is can such spaces or neighborhoods be termed as intangible cultural heritage. These streets of Lajpat Nagar for the longest time has been associated with the afghan community and has come to be known as “the afghan gali” to get their dose of chota Kabul.

Acknowledgment

Would like to thank the afghan residents to enthusiastic answering our questions. Special thank you to Mr. Abdul Basir from Mazari Sharif, Afghanistan.

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