

## **RELIGION AND REFUGE: AFGHAN AND ROHINGYA MUSLIM REFUGEES IN INDIA**

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### **Introduction**

Unity in diversity- a notion we would all like to believe in. However, is it really achievable? Despite centuries of human struggle against cultural discrimination, the fact remains that multiple ethnic groups are prone to oppression- merely because of differences in religion, beliefs, and social standing. These are people who feel unsafe in their own home countries- people whom we have come to know as refugees. The 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees defines refugees as persons who have “a well-founded fear of persecution” (Young 1982, p.40). This persecution or oppression of these people rises out of political circumstances, and not just “purely economic calculus imposing hardships randomly on individuals” (Young 1982, p.40). Conflicts within national borders have increased significantly in the last few decades. This has led to a rapid growth of statelessness and movement of refugee populations. Two such populations are those of Afghanistan and Myanmar. Individuals from these two neighboring countries of India have fled widespread war and violence and migrated to India in order to live a safer and more secure life, and finally obtain a sense of belonging.

This essay seeks to provide a comparative analysis of the status of Afghan and Rohingya Muslim refugees in India today- linking the Afghans to cultural assimilation into the Indian Society and the Rohingya Muslims to unfair treatment as the “dangerous other” who is a threat to Indian national interest and security. It will argue that the commonalities of Afghan and Indian cultures and religions play a role in their integration into our society today. On the other hand, the fact that Rohingyas are “citizens of nowhere” (Yusuf 2019) and predominantly Muslim, leads them to be persecuted indiscriminately and threatened to be sent back.

Overall, this paper aims to examine the differential treatment of these two refugee populations with the larger backdrop of religion in India at a time when the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) anti-Muslim stance and right- wing populism is rising in the country.

The refugee crisis and its response can be viewed through the lens of J. David Singer’s Levels of

Analysis. Singer speaks of International relations operating at two levels- the state (sub systemic) and the international (systemic). However, it is also necessary to look at the individual level while thinking of this issue in the international arena. As Singer explains, the international level encompasses “the totality of interactions which take place within the system and its environment” (Singer 1961, p.80). India’s response to refugees, hence, can be linked to its relationships and interactions with the refugees’ origin countries. Furthermore, India’s acceptance of refugees can be viewed as an attempt to build its image as a hospitable and welcoming nation. Individual responses to the refugee crisis are prone to manipulation by the media and political propaganda. Individuals can view refugees as one of two things - harmless and helpless people who deserve their home as a safe haven (this could be related to commonalities that Indians have with the refugee populations), or hostile, dangerous “others” who pose a threat to their security, employment, and encroach on limited resources (which links to the Hobbesian view of the individual being inherently selfish). These individuals could also include politicians from the BJP or any other political party whose actions towards refugee populations could be determined by their personal motivations or ideologies. Finally, the state response to refugee crises reflects the rise of biased views on the basis of religion and culture in India’s current BJP led government. This is the response my paper will attempt to shed light on.

### **India and its stance on Refugees**

India is not a signatory of the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951, which defines what a “refugee” is and outlines the rights of the displaced along with legal obligations the signatory states would need to follow in order to protect them. The core principle of this convention is that of *non-refoulement*, “which asserts that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom” (UNHCR). Despite not being a signatory of this convention, India has largely followed the principle of non-refoulement<sup>1</sup>. However, it does not have any specific national policy or obligations to any international law which deals with refugees and the stateless. “Thus, the status of refugees in India is grounded on morality, humanitarianism, and political and administrative willingness. Moreover, the ad-hoc and ambivalent approach between India and UNHCR has resulted in differential treatment among

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<sup>1</sup> India has maintained relatively open borders in the past and has gained soft power for decades by accepting large number of refugees on a prima facia basis (in which the government assumed they are fleeing persecution and oppression from their country of origin and that they are legitimate). The two most notable groups are those the Tibetans and Sri Lankans. India has been offering these refugees benefits on a national level. However, BJP’s ideology of exclusion based on religion has altered this since it came to power in 2014 and with the arrival of Rohingya Muslims. For more information, read *Playing by No Rules: The Quagmire of India’s Refugee Policy* (Sawhney 2019).

different refugee groups” (Kaveri 2017, p.36).

This essay will show how India follows the principle of non-refoulement for Afghan refugees because the bulk of them are of Sikh and Hindu religion and not predominantly Muslim. On the other hand, Rohingya Muslims are treated unfairly and India conveniently does not follow the principle of non-refoulement when it comes to them because they are viewed as the “dangerous other”.

### **Afghan refugees and cultural assimilation**

#### **History of Hindu and Sikh Afghans**

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the first wave of migration from Afghanistan to India saw the refugee inflow comprising mostly of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus (Ghosh 2016). Members of these communities used to play a huge role in Afghanistan’s socio-cultural ethos and were largely involved in trade and businesses (Ghosh 2020). There was a period of political stability after World War II, during which Afghan Sikhs and Hindus ventured and were largely successful in commercial and banking sectors. Hindus and Sikhs were granted full citizenship status under the reign of Amanullah Khan (1919-1929), who allowed them to be part of civil and military services. It is also interesting to note that Hindus and Sikhs resided in areas where Pashtuns were in majority- in the South and East of Afghanistan (Ghosh 2020). However, there was always a section of society which treated these minorities as second-class citizens and did not accept them to be fellow “Afghans” (Ghosh 2016). As ethnic violence raged across Afghanistan after the collapse of the Soviet-backed government in the early 1990s, Islamist fundamentalists took control and aimed to eradicate the minorities. Due to their professions, Sikhs and Hindus were kidnapped and used for ransom. Civilians were raped, held hostage, and even murdered. Post the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, the Islamists retaliated and burned down religious places of the Hindus and Sikhs (Emandi 2014, p.316). When the Taliban came to power in Kabul in 1996, they adopted a more repressive policy of administration and “suppressed and marginalized Hindus and Sikhs and urged people to avoid buying items from their shops” (Emandi 2014, p.316). They were treated as the “other” in their own country and as Sara Ahmed explains, were only seen as a source of danger. In this case, they were a danger to the growing Islamic fundamentalist society.

Times when they co-existed in Afghan society were completely forgotten and brutal violence against these populations was perpetuated, which conforms to the idea of ‘stranger fetishism’<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Sara Ahmed’s ‘stranger fetishism’ explains how the other/stranger/alien is decontextualized and constructed to be devoid of any social or political history. Read *White innocence in the Black Mediterranean: hospitality and the*

Not following the dominant religion of Afghanistan made them look like strangers to the majority of people residing in the country. "This political repression and religious bigotry convinced many to flee the country" (Emandi 2014, p.315). Ethno-religious commonality with a part of the Indian population made such individuals seek refuge in India. This paper will primarily be focusing on Hindu and Sikh Afghan refugees.

### **Afghan refugees in New Delhi, India**

In 2009, there were around 9000 Afghan refugees in Delhi, "ninety percent of whom belong to Hindu or Sikh faiths that are religious minorities of Afghanistan, the rest ten percent belong to Hazaras, Pashtun and other communities" (Sharma 2009). A decade later, UNHCR India reported that it assisted 10,395 refugees from Afghanistan of which 7,346 refugees were Hindus and Sikhs (UNHCR 2019). Most refugees reside in or around Delhi. The Indian government kept its borders open for these populations and the BJP government supports them by portraying India to be a "natural home for persecuted Hindus" (Sawhney 2019). The government also expresses the Sikhs as individuals returning to their homeland. This works both ways - "These refugees regard India as their ancestral homeland and claim that their ancestors were originally from Punjab" (Ghosh 2020).

Afghan refugees are one of the few refugee groups that have assimilated into Indian society and made a place for themselves. The traditional understanding of assimilation was in the form of a zero-sum game, in which migrants were required to choose between blending into their hostlands or maintaining their cultural ties and relationship with their places of origin (Brocket 2020, p.138). This would mean that the Afghan refugees would have to completely adjust themselves to Indian socio-cultural situations and not retain any links with their previous identity which was tied to Afghan cultures and various traditions which had made them "Afghans". Being pushed out of their homelands (which are sites of national memories) instills some anxiety in the migrants relating to what is lost when they seek refuge in another nation. It is "the memory of one's own life and family world in the old place, and official memory about the nation one has left that has to be recombined in a new location" (Appadurai 2019, p.5). This recombination of their memories from the homelands and their life in the hostland was originally said to be completely distinct from each other and could not exist in harmony. It was first said to be a choice between keeping connected to your homeland and integrating into the new society. Achieving both was not possible. However, the new conceptions of cultural assimilation in the transnational context indicates the possibility of combining one's cultures from their homeland nation into the society in which they presently live (Brocket 2020, p.138).

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*erasure of history* (Danewid, 2017) for more information.

Today, Lajpat Nagar (an area in New Delhi) is filled with such Afghans who have undoubtedly made a place for themselves in their host nation. They have socially and culturally integrated into Indian society. This has to do with the cultural and religious commonalities of both nations and the relationship they both have been sharing for many centuries<sup>3</sup>. A “Little Kabul” is very well known in Delhi, where a huge number of locals go to get a glimpse of the rich Afghan culture that these Afghans wish to share with their host country and retain the memories of.

The neighborhood is bustling with many Afghan general stores that keep all the required everyday items along with those that are of importance to the Afghan patrons, like *chilgoza* (pine nuts which are found in Afghanistan but now common in all homes in India as well), *khajoor* (a delectable Afghan dessert), and *Pegah cream* (cream which is thicker than Indian dairy and is imported from Iran). The signboards of these shops are both in English and Dari (the official language of Afghanistan). *Manthu* (dumplings filled with meat and onion), *Kabuli pilaf rice* from Northern Afghanistan (rice cooked with vegetables, meats, nuts, etc.), *qaburghi* (mutton chops), and Afghan flatbreads prove to be a big hit with locals and Afghans alike (Shaktawat 2019). The *Kabul Delhi* restaurant is renowned for serving delicious food and the name also serves as a metaphor for the amalgamation of the cultures of both Delhi and Kabul. These refugees also bring to their new home country a passion for Bollywood movies and TV serials, which emerged as a result of India’s soft power in Afghanistan (Yar 2017).

The Afghans who have made themselves a safe haven in the Lajpat Nagar area of Delhi are classic examples of what the transformed notions of assimilation embody- “migrant groups can retain material and emotional links with their homelands whilst also being deeply shaped by the hostland”(Brocket 2020, p.138).

Even though Afghan Sikhs and Hindus comprise the largest chunk of the refugee arrivals, India has seen more Muslim populations from Afghanistan also seeking refuge in more recent years. Long term visas are only given to Hindu and Sikh refugees, which gives them the right to legally

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<sup>3</sup> India and Afghanistan’s relationship can be traced back to the 13th Century, with the establishment of the Khalji Dynasty in Northern India. Even though Afghanistan gained independence from the British Rule in 1919, many Pashtun leaders like Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan supported India in their fight for independence as they saw it running parallel to Afghanistan’s struggle. India was the only South Asian nation to recognize the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and provided humanitarian aid to the Najibullah’s government. Kabul was once a Hindu and a Buddhist city; while Delhi was a leading centre of Persian literature and language, as well as the home of a Pathan political dynasty and Sufi Islam. For many Afghans, India is among the few places that accords them respect and dignity, unlike many others which treat them as unwanted, backward, terrorists or drug-dealers. For more information, read *The Afghans* (Willem 2002) and *A memoir of India and Afghanistan* (Josiah 1842).

work, rent, and attend school (Sawhney 2019). All refugees coming from Afghanistan fall under the UNHCR and are granted short term rights. However, the anti-Muslim sentiment increasing in the country due to the rise of the BJP has led to the differential treatment of refugees coming from the same nation on the basis of their religion. Muslims are required to go through a very lengthy process to prove they are not economic migrants, and then only do they get to apply for long term visas. There have been many reports of Hindu and Sikh migrants being granted citizenship, but none of Muslims. In February 2019, the home ministry stated that 391 Afghani migrants had been granted citizenship in the past 2 years. This did not include or confirm that Afghan Muslims were granted it too (Chakravarty & Lalwani 2019). As will be elaborated later in the paper, the viewing of the Muslim as the “other” plays a huge role in such treatment of the refugees.

Even though Afghan refugees have integrated into the fabric of Indian society, a lot needs to be done regarding those of Muslim religion. Additionally, this picture of a happy and well-adjusted refugee population is promptly shattered as we move from the west to the east where another crisis awaits- the entrance of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar.

## **Rohingya Muslims and othering**

### **History of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar**

The Rohingyas became stateless in their own country, Myanmar, after the Citizenship Law of 1982<sup>4</sup> (Chakraborty 2015, p.3). Myanmar has denied citizenship to these individuals claiming that they are “illegal Bangladeshis”. To understand this rationale, it is important to go back to when Myanmar was under British Rule. The conflict between the Muslim Rohingyas of Arakan and the majoritarian Buddhist Rakhine population began when Arakan (an independent kingdom till 1784) was occupied by the Buddhist Burmans. Due to this, most of the Muslim population fled to nearby Chittagong (Chakraborty 2015, p.3). However, the establishment of the British Rule in Myanmar encouraged the Rohingyas to return in order to cultivate the land. The British promised to grant them an autonomous state if they supported its rule. Rohingyas remained loyal to the British and sided with them while the Arakanese supported the Japanese (Human Rights Watch, 2013). However, at independence, they were not given an autonomous state. Even though Rohingyas were granted citizenship and full rights in 1948, violent conflicts broke out between

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<sup>4</sup> According to the Burmese Citizenship Law of 1982, a Rohingya is eligible for citizenship only if he/she provides proof that his/her ancestors have lived in the country prior to 1823. Else, they are classified as “resident foreigners” (even if one of the parents is a Myanmar citizen). Most failed to prove that their ancestors had lived in Myanmar prior to 1823 and became stateless in their own land. For more information, read *For Rohingyas, there is no place called home* (Hindu 2017) and *Being Stateless and the Plight of Rohingyas* (Kaveri 2017).

more than a hundred ethnic and racial groups (Dutta 2017). The Rohingyas demanded an autonomous state and began an armed insurgency. However, a coup led by General Ne Win in 1962 crushed all movements by minorities. 200,000 Rohingyas were driven out of Myanmar by the Burmese military army in 1978 “in a bloody rampage of killings, rape, and arson” (Human Rights Watch, 2013). A wave of attacks in 1991 also pushed around 250,000 Rohingya Muslims out of their own land. The predominantly Buddhist population was intolerant of these Rohingyas which forced them to flee to nearby Bangladesh. Violence against this population has continued over the years and peaked in 2012<sup>5</sup> and 2017<sup>6</sup>. This history of persecution and oppression of this population explains why the United Nations called the Rohingya Muslims “one of the most persecuted minorities in the world”.

### **Rohingya Muslims in India**

“In India, the status and condition of Rohingyas are unenviable—foreigner, Muslim, stateless, often suspected as Bangladeshi, illiterate, impoverished, and dispersed across the length and breadth of the country” (Kaveri 2017, p.35). This aptly describes how Rohingya Muslims are treated as an undesirable “other” and a threat. The “other” is different from the “self” on various grounds and is a possible danger to the “self”. It is known that when the self is interacting with the other, “the potential for transforming relations of difference into relations of threat and conflict is always there” (Rumelili 2007, p.21). The religious difference between the Rohingyas and the majority of Indians plays a huge role in determining their position in Indian society today.

A large number of Rohingyas live in unhygienic and deplorable conditions in makeshift camps of slums or unauthorized colonies. Most of them reside in the states of Delhi, West Bengal, Jammu & Kashmir, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu (Kaveri 2017, p.35). These populations have to endure innumerable hardships before reaching India, a country in which they are faced with extreme backlash and discrimination. Appadurai (2019) speaks about Muslim migrants losing their lives and combating several different situations to reach European nations to seek refuge. Similarly, Rohingya Muslims cross perilous routes through forests, dangerous mountains, and rugged terrain, especially when arriving in India via Bangladesh. They become victims of human trafficking through these routes. The trafficking which takes place at these locations is known by the national authorities, yet is ignored due to unwillingness to take responsibility for

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<sup>5</sup> 140,000 Rohingyas were forced into refugee camps by extremist Buddhist groups in 2012. For more information, visit the UNHCR site.

<sup>6</sup> Entire Rohingya villages were burned to the ground in Rakhine state which forced hundreds of thousands to flee their homes in August 2017. For more information, visit the UNHCR site.

these “illegal migrants” (Kaveri 2017, p.34). Many people from these populations are at risk of immediate or slow death<sup>7</sup> as they are once again trapped in circumstances that they wished to avoid in the first place. Authorities claim that there are 400,000 Rohingya Muslims in India and the UNHCR has registered 18,000 of them as refugees and asylum seekers (Mahmud 2019).

India has sent back many Rohingyas to Bangladesh or Myanmar, which is a clear digression from its stance on other refugee populations and a violation of the principle of non-refoulement which India had been following prior to the Rohingya crisis. These deportations endanger their lives and freedoms dramatically (Mahmud 2019).

Realists may argue that India wishes to deport Rohingya Muslims as it feels that such populations pose a threat to its national security. Leaders like Kiran Rijju<sup>8</sup> and Nalin Kohli<sup>9</sup> (from the BJP) have repeatedly said that they will not go soft on the Rohingyas and will deport them because they have entered the country illegally and are a “security threat” to the nation (Mahmud 2019). “Insofar as nation-state ideologies rest on some sort of implicit idea of ethnic coherence as the basis of state sovereignty, they are bound to minoritize, degrade, penalize, or expel those seen to be ethnically minor” (Appadurai 2019, p.2). Such coherence is needed to meet state sovereignty, which has always been of prime importance to nation states traditionally. However, these discriminatory practices against the Rohingyas exist without concrete evidence of them being a threat to the nation and are founded merely on the basis of BJP’s bias against Muslims.

Until 2012, the presence of Rohingyas was not known to many- the majority of the Rohingya population had come to India before 2012 or following the widespread violence against them in that year itself (Kinseth 2019). The trajectory of the status and treatment of Rohingya refugees in India can be viewed against the backdrop of the rise of the BJP, its anti-Muslim stance, and right- wing populism.

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<sup>7</sup> Slow death refers to structural inequalities and injustices that mark out certain populations for slowly dying. In the case of the Rohingyas, their religion marks them out for dangerous and unpredictable living conditions- ironically- in a country in which they had dreamed to belong safely.

<sup>8</sup> Kiran Rijju is the current Minister of State of the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports and Minister of State in the Ministry of Minority Affairs of India. At many occasions, he has claimed that Rohingyas need to be deported in order to protect the citizens of India. For more information, read *Rohingya are illegal immigrants who need to be deported, says Kiren Rijju* (Hindu 2017)

<sup>9</sup> Nalin Kohli is one of the official spokespersons for the BJP and has said that not being a signatory to international protocols allows New Delhi to take action against the Rohingyas. For more information, read *They threatened to kill us if we didn't leave India: Rohingya* (Aljazeera: Mahmud, 2019).

### **Rise of right-wing populism and the anti-Muslim stance of the BJP**

Going back to the 19th century, the ideological roots of the BJP can be seen when social reformers and spiritualists propounded the idea of Hindus comprising a single distinct people- “one which had long been the victim of powerful foreign elites in the form of Muslim and then British conquering forces” (McDonnell & Cabrera 2018, p.2). The coining of the term and emergence of the ideology of ‘Hindutva’ by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar alienates the Muslims and speaks of “a public culture for the Hindu people” (McDonnell & Cabrera 2018, p.2). Duncan McDonnell & Luis Cabrera brilliantly explain the three conceptions of right-wing populism- namely the ‘people’, ‘elites’, and the ‘other’, in their paper titled *The right-wing populism of India’s Bharatiya Janata Party (and why comparativists should care)*.

The true people of India consist of only Hindu and patriotic people, and “those who do not subscribe to this homogeneous conception of the single “Hindu people” put themselves outside “the people” ”(McDonnell & Cabrera 2018, p.6). These individuals who are excluded from “the people” include and emphasize on Muslims being outside the homogenous and unified idea of being a “Hindu” and belonging to the Indian community. This is one reason that the Rohingyas do not tend to fit into the fabric of Indian society and seem to be threatening it, whereas the Hindu and Sikh Afghans are able to make a place for themselves. The elites are seen to be in an antagonistic relationship with the people. In the context of Indian politics, the BJP regards the Indian National Congress (INC) to be those elites who only care about themselves and not about “the people”. The INCs stance on Rohingya Muslims differs from the BJPs as it has advocated to grant them the status of refugees and allow them to live on Indian soil on the basis of humanitarian grounds (Dutta 2017). The BJP, on the other hand, believes that Rohingyas threaten the security of the true people, and the INC or “elite” is not playing a role in protecting or working for “the people”. Any news channel, political party, or NGO is also seen as an antagonistic elite that has set out to ruin the reputation of the government and its leader, Narendra Modi (McDonnell & Cabrera 2018, p.7). However, it is important to note that the people are not only under the threat of the elites, but of the “other” as well. The main “other” which the right-wing populist party criticizes is the Muslim. The “other” does not have the same values as “the people”. In this context, the values would relate to the ideological differences between specific religions. The “other” is said to be dangerous, which is the primary reason the BJP has provided for not accepting Rohingyas into the country. The Rohingyas, viewed as hostile and menacing, are often met with retaliation for the fear that they cause to the nation. They are always seen with suspicion, which also explains why the Rohingyas are under constant surveillance, face harassment, beatings, and arbitrary arrests in states like Jammu & Kashmir and Haryana (Kinseth 2019). “The other”, who is of a different ethnic identity and holds different religious or political views is also seen in the light of an antagonist relationship with “the

people". Hence, this establishes a relationship in which "the people" are in an antagonist relationship with both the "elites" and "the other" and it is the BJP that is the "sole true defender of a sole true people" (Mcdonnell & Cabrera 2018). The Rohingyas are blamed for their own plight and complex developments like migration, "are often simplified into a process of naming the culprits—those guilty of destroying the 'pure nation' "(Pelinka 2013). Therefore, it can be inferred that India's response to the Rohingya crisis is severely impacted by BJP's anti-Muslim stance and the rise of right-wing populism under which the BJP deploys religion to define "the people", as well as the Muslim "other" (Mcdonnell &Cabrera 2018, p.13).

### **Conclusion**

Comparing the treatment of Afghan and Rohingya Muslim refugees- escaping from similar problems and seeking their refuge in the same country- brings to light the sad truth of religious discrimination. In the face of the impoverished and defenseless, such religious politics, in fact, proves to be *sacrilegious* with regards to the sacred ideals this nation was built on. Religion should not be a parameter in deciding whether refugees are a risk or *at risk*.

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