



The Afghan Muslim Diaspora in India: Opportunities and Challenges

Rayees Ahmad Mir¹

¹ Ph.D. Candidate at centre for International Politics, Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar.

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Instability, economic impoverishment, and continued violence have led to waves of Afghans seeking refuge in neighboring countries and other parts of the world. A complete generation of Afghans has witnessed only conflict by virtue of the three decade old situation, watching it as it metamorphosed into various forms of violence, from actual war to the violence of minefields and the destruction of livelihoods. There have been two distinct peaks in migration, the first following the Soviet invasion in 1979, and the second after outbreaks of conflict between 1992 and 2001. A large exodus to neighboring countries followed the Taliban capture of Kabul in 1996 and after US air strikes in 1998. With the fall of Taliban in Afghanistan and establishment of new Karzai's government in Afghanistan, the Indo-Afghan relations witnessed a big boost and the two countries started new relations. Calls for a regional approach to stabilize Afghanistan have not been accompanied by serious efforts to analyses the evolving motivations and strategies of regional actors. Occupying a unique position as Afghanistan's leading regional development partner, India is poised to play an instrumental role. The development partnership between India and Afghanistan, which emerged in the wake of the United State (US) invasion in 2001, has been recalibrated according to a revised conception of India's own strengths and limitations in its region and a sober reassessment of geopolitical realities.

Indian government opened its doors for the Afghan diaspora and welcomed the different types of people from businessmen to students. Though the policies of the host government were mainly friendly and full of opportunities but the Muslim population faced lot of challenges and the hardship.

This paper will try to Stress the need to remove barriers that hinder diaspora engagement for development and will study the claims to and contestations of identity among the Afghan diaspora, with particular focus on those in India.

What does the concept of identity mean to the Muslim diaspora in India?

I. INTRODUCTION

India and Afghanistan have a relationship and a shared history since time immemorial. From the Indus Valley Civilization to the kingdom of Chandragupta Maurya, to the invasions of Ahmad Shah Abdali, India and Afghanistan have a deep rooted multi-faceted relationship. It was in the late 1970s and early 1980s that Afghanistan was made a flashpoint in the cold war between USSR and USA.

Historically, India has had close relations with Afghanistan. Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh once stated: "Our cooperation with Afghanistan is an open book. We have civilization links, and we are both here to stay." The ancient Indian Mauryan Empire, which included part of today's Afghanistan, influenced northern India, Central Asia and even western China with its unique "Gandharan art²". Many Buddhists, harboring the mission of expanding Buddhism, travelled from India to Central Asia and China via Afghanistan. Geopolitically, Afghanistan is vital for India's security and survival. The Mughal Empire, which ruled India for centuries and originated from Afghanistan, was threatened by Afghanistan for quite a long time until Emperor Akbar, who suppressed the forces of local tribes and clans in Afghanistan in the late 16th century (Jin Wang, 2017).

² Gandhara was an ancient state, a mahajanapada, in the Peshawar basin in the northwest portion of the ancient Indian subcontinent, present-day Pakistan. The center of the region was at the confluence of the Kabul and Swat rivers, bounded by the Sulaiman Mountains on the west and the Indus River on the east.

The British Empire also tried to make Afghanistan the buffer zone against the Russian Empire due to India's vulnerability to invasion from



Afghanistan. Aiming at suppressing the small scale revolts in western Afghanistan provoked by the reforms of pro-Soviet and Communist government, and preventing both the Islamic expansion from newly established Islamic Iran and the Afghan government from possible diplomatic turn to US. The Soviet invasion to Afghanistan in 1979 did not produce peace and stability, but rather broke the political balance both inside and outside Afghanistan. The political disorder, especially the Taliban's dominance in Afghanistan, hampered India's engagement with Afghanistan. India did not recognize the legitimacy of Taliban government and viewed it as a vital threat to Indian internal security. When the international forces led by the US toppled the Taliban regime in 2001, the new political situation in Afghanistan provided valuable opportunities for India-Afghanistan relations.

India-Afghan Ties after 2001

India's interests in Afghanistan cover a wide range of issues to include trade, commerce, and security, and to ensure a stable government in Afghanistan. Countering Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan and its attempts to install a weak and pliable regime is one of the objectives. However, this is not the only and primary motive for India seeking a larger role. India seeks to project itself as a regional power beyond the confines of South Asia and sees the building of stable, long-term relations with the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and Afghanistan as crucial to its economic, trade and security interests.¹⁵ Of equal significance to India is securing access to, and obtaining an assured supply of, the natural and mineral resources found in abundance in the CARs and Afghanistan to fulfill the burgeoning demand for its industrial base and energy security need. India's relations with Afghanistan have improved significantly since the Taliban regime was toppled by international forces led by the US in 2001. The India-Afghanistan relation is not hindered by territorial disputes or border ambiguity. Meanwhile, India's long-term support for the "Northern Alliance", the Afghan opposition forces against the Taliban in the 1990s, helped India with favorable political positions in the foreign policy of the new Afghan government, as the key Afghan government posts were controlled

by Northern Alliance senior members after 2001. It is against this backdrop that, as many argue, New Delhi decided to pursue a "soft power" strategy, that is, sticking to civilian rather than military matters, toward Afghanistan. To satisfy the security, economic and geopolitical concerns, India has taken several measures to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan (Ashish Bose).

First, India assists Afghanistan in the state-building process. Diplomatically, India actively improves its relationship with Afghanistan. India was one of the major states that recognized the newly established Afghan government. India updated its diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and reopened its embassy in Kabul in 2002. India and Afghanistan furthered their bilateral relationship in 2002 through signing the Strategic Partnership Agreement, which made India the first "strategic partner" of Afghanistan. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's official visit to Afghanistan in 2006 was the first of an Indian prime minister since 1970. India also actively assisted Afghanistan in political establishment. For example, with its political experience, India not only helped train Afghan staff in electoral processes, but it also provided electronic voting machines to facilitate the election. India and Afghanistan also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation of Local Governance in 2008 to train Afghan local government officials (EPW, 2014).

Second, India also focuses on the area of development and economic reconstruction in Afghanistan. India has made substantial efforts in the recovery of Afghanistan's economy. It believes that economic development is vital for the stability and peace in Afghanistan. On the one hand, India has provided Afghanistan with large amounts of humanitarian assistance and loans for the construction of projects like power generation plants and roads. India is Afghanistan's largest donor (behind the US, Japan, UK and Germany), having provided Afghanistan with nearly \$2 billion aid from 2001 to 2014. ☐ India helped fghanistan build the Zaranj Delaram Road, Salma Dam Power Project and Pul-e Khumri Transmission Line. Many hospitals and schools in Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Heart and (Aurangzeb Qureshi, 2014).

India's Trade volume with Afghanistan (2009-2014)

Year	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14
US Million	588.74	568.44	643.41	632.18	683.1
Dollars					

Source: Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry



STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

- Strategic Partnership Agreement of 2011 strengthened the relation between India and Afghanistan.
- The construction and opening of Afghanistan's parliament building and the Afghanistan-India friendship dam (Salma Dam) stands out.
- India's timely provision of a few helicopters, which has contributed to an enabling environment for stabilization, and development of Afghanistan.
- India helps Afghanistan to rebuild its infrastructure and institutions, education and technical assistance, encourages investment in Afghanistan's natural resources, providing duty free access to the Indian markets for its exports.

BILATERAL TRADE

- India and Afghanistan have a strong relationship based on historical and cultural links, it's focal point have been trade and commerce.
- The Silk Road has proved to pave the way of forever existing equation between the two countries.
- Their corridor is important for the geo-strategic location connecting the East and the West Asia.
- India's bilateral trade with Afghanistan stood at \$684.47 million in 2014-15, an increase of 0.20% over \$683.10 million a year ago.
- India's export to Afghanistan in 2014-15 stood at \$422.56 million, while its imports from Afghanistan were worth \$261.91 million.
- India delivered three Russian made MI-25 attack helicopters to Afghanistan in December 2015.

Afghans in India

The term diaspora comes from an ancient Greek word meaning "to scatter about." And that's exactly what the people of a diaspora do — they scatter from their homeland to places across the globe, spreading their culture as they go. The Bible refers to the Diaspora of Jews exiled from Israel by the Babylonians. But the word is now also used more generally to describe any large migration of refugees, language, or culture. Diaspora is a large group of people with a similar heritage or homeland who have since moved out to places all over the world. Similarly in the Afghan context where the people of Afghanistan were forced to move out of their country due to the long on going war in Afghanistan.

Whether it's the rich western world of Europe and America where millions of refugees have landed in hope of asylum, or the South-East Asian countries like Malaysia, and Bangladesh, where thousands of Rohingya Muslims have entered from Buddhist Myanmar, the world is witnessing a

refugee crisis far intense than ever before. Although India has decided to deport nearly 40,000 Rohingyas, who illegally entered India from Myanmar and Bangladesh borders, but on the other hand, India is home to nearly 3 lakh refugees from 30 odd countries. Apart from refugees from neighboring countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan and Bangladesh, India also houses refugees from rich western countries like the US, UK, France, Germany and Australia. According to the latest available data which was presented by Minister Of State for Home Affairs Kiren Rijiju in March 2016, a total of 2,89,394 refugees living in India (as on 31/12/2014) from 28 different countries which also included stateless people. This the number of refugees living in India legally and doesn't include the numbers of Rohingyas and Bangladeshi migrants living illegally in India.

Pakistan and Iran together host some 2.5 million Afghan registered refugees, with equivalent numbers of unregistered refugees also expected to be present in both host countries. In addition, it is estimated that there are some more than 300,000 settled in the United States, at least 150,000 in the United Arab Emirates, perhaps 125,000 in Germany, and smaller numbers in Canada, Australia and across Europe. While many of those in the UAE are temporary labor migrants, the majority elsewhere are settled permanently and often educated and skilled. It is estimated that there are about 12,000 Afghan refugees in India, mostly settled in Delhi, including many Hindus and Sikhs.

Indian Afghans are Indian citizens and non-citizen residents born in, or with ancestors from, Afghanistan. Majority of them migrated from Afghanistan during the last decade of the 20th century when Taliban was controlling Afghanistan. Mainly Hindu and Sikh fled the Taliban regime and political instability in Afghanistan, they are concentrated in and around Delhi.

Apart from citizens and emigrants, there are hundreds of communities in India who trace their ancestries back to Pashtun forefathers. Before the creation of the modern state of Afghanistan, the term Afghan was used synonymously with Pashtun, and there has been much history of Pashtuns that have lived in India. Thousands of Pashtun descent Indians migrated to Pakistan after the partition.

Currently are a few ethnic Pashtuns that have retained their culture in India. Most have integrated into Indian culture. There's a sizable number Pashtuns in Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The North-Western Frontier Province (now called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) was incorporated into British India in the late 19th century. The earliest



record of Afghans in India is during the late 13th century when the Khalji dynasty formed an empire in Northern India. They belonged to an Afghan Ghilzai tribe. It was first Afghan dynasty which ruled large part of the Indian subcontinent between 1290 and 1320. It was founded by Jalal ud din firuz khilji and became the second Muslim dynasty to rule the Delhi sultanate of India, the Lodi dynasty was made up of local ethnic Pashtuns. They ruled Northern India until the invasion of Babur in 1526, at which point the Mughal Empire was created. During this period Afghans from Kabulistan began arriving to India for business and pleasure. During the Mughal period, the Afghans mainly Muslims became regular visitors to the Indian subcontinent and a large number of stayed in the continent and became the permanent residents especially in the Northern region.

During the 19th century many Afghans migrated to India. Prominent among them were the families of Nawab of Sardhana and the Qizilbashi Agha family of Srinagar Kashmir. Both the families had martial lineage and belonged to the feudal aristocracy. During the Soviet invasion lots of Afghan citizens mainly Sikhs and Hindus migrated from Afghanistan to India. But it was the Taliban period which resulted in the large exodus of Afghan population from Afghanistan. During the late 1990s the Afghans migrated to India for shelter and security. The Taliban's barbaric laws forced the liberal minds of Afghan to migrate and settle in the different countries throughout the globe. It was during this period that Afghans especially non-muslims started to migrate to India.

After the 9/11 attacks and the war on terror by the United States, the law and order situation deteriorated in Afghanistan. The bombing of inhabitants and main land Afghanistan by the international community worsened the security situation in the war torn nation. This situation resulted in the forced migration of Afghan including all the religious communities (Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs). The large number of this diaspora settled in the northern states of India especially in Delhi. These migrants started their own ventures in south Delhi. The bulk of these refugees, settled in the Lajpat Nagar of India's Capital. Delhi's bustling Lajpat Nagar, a colony originally built for partition refugees from Pakistan, has become home to Afghans fleeing the turmoil in their country. Today, there are at least 11,000 Afghan refugees registered with the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), living mainly in the capital city. Many Afghans have started their own

small scale business from small food stalls to general stores.

The Afghan women who were living a miserable life in Afghanistan have started a new life and have joined many local organisations and NGO's in Delhi. Ilham, which means "positive" in the Dari language, is a catering service that serves traditional Afghani dishes to people in Delhi. Ilham, was launched in late 2015 by the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, and its partner Access. The initiative brings together many women, all refugees from conflict-torn Afghanistan. "There are too many restrictions on women there," says Farhat, who tried to support herself and her six-year-old son with odd jobs after her husband's death. Neighbours started calling me a bad woman for leaving the house and I was afraid of attracting the Taliban's attention. So I left for India" (Venkatraman Shai, 2016).

Education is another sector which attracts many Afghans to come to India. India offers quality education at cheaper rates. The degrees from Indian institutions have a greater value in Afghanistan, than the degrees from other neighbouring countries.

II. CONCLUSION:

On the basis of very limited study of Afghan Muslim diaspora in India based on some articles from academic scholars and other persons familiar with Afghanistan, I wish to make the following observations:

Citizenship does not exist solely within a binary of either possessing or not possessing legal membership in the state. Rather, those excluded from legal membership can also enact citizenship-like affects and actions. These actions that highlight the exclusion of non-citizens, serve not only to give meaning to ideas of citizenship, but also reflect the particular contextual dynamics of citizenship.

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 after 2001.

The data on refugees remain significantly deficient, preventing analysis on refugee flow and their parlous existence. Such paucity of data also



leads to misrepresentation and exaggeration in national and local media.

What India can do?

India still remains a non-signatory to 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, which help define the legal obligation of states to protect refugees. It remains the duty of a state, especially one with a democratic ethos like India's, to keep its doors open for people in distress.

Any refugee, whose grant of asylum has been approved, should be given a formal recognition of his/her asylum status along with an identity document and a travel document. They should be able to apply for residence permits, and be able to choose their place of residence across India. Their documents must also enable them to seek employment in the private sector. Primary education, a powerful enabler, should be offered on no-charge basis in government schools, while primary healthcare services available to Indian citizens should be offered as well. Simply announcing policies alone will not do. Social sensitisation remains Local municipal corporations should be asked to sensitise neighbourhood associations to accept refugees who can pay, along with conducting integration workshops for youth and women empowerment initiatives.

Outreach should be conducted through government welfare programmes and biometric initiatives like Aadhaar in addition to a simpler registration process. We need a system that enables the management of refugees with greater transparency and accountability, replacing one that offers arbitrary decision-making to a vulnerable, victimised population.

. There is an urgent need for sensitisation programmes. People have no idea what they are fleeing from, their back stories, so there is a perception among some that they are freeloaders. The government should conduct awareness campaigns so people come to know what's going on in their countries. The Indian bureaucracy has remained largely indifferent to the complex issues involved and the need for review of India's long standing ambiguity over a refugee policy. As a refugee prone area, south Asia and chiefly India, needs to devise a regional policy consistent with the region's needs and the capacity to absorb refugees while ensuring them equity. The Afghan refugees in India are victims of geo-political and historical circumstances in Afghanistan where the big powers are playing their game, like Russian aggression, CIA sponsored Taliban movement and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. The American

bombardment of Afghanistan and subsequent events have led to a very tragic situation. Afghan refugees in India who have come here during the last two decades. Most of their efforts to become Indian citizens are a cry in the wilderness thanks to the bureaucratic hurdles and the absence of a Refugee law in India. The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2015 is a land mark step but the current debate on the bill is disappointing.

The Muslim refugees are mostly impoverished. It is a sad state of affairs. The Afghans are a hardy and enterprising people with a great sense of dignity. In spite of the government's indifference they have survived all these years and they are not pleading to get allowance from UNHCR. What they need most is some support from the government to educate their children, get worthwhile medical aid (or some sort of special medical insurance whereby they can go to private medical institutions also) and above all, licensing procedures, which will help them to set up honest business enterprises. I feel that the cause of Afghan refugees has been pushed to the margins not because of any discriminatory policy on the part of the government towards such refugees but because nobody in the government (concerned ministers and bureaucrats) was really interested in looking at the complex issues involved and overcoming the bureaucratic hurdles by announcing bold policy decisions.

One way out is to declare that all Afghan refugees in India will be given citizenship subject to security clearance. This is not possible without the direct intervention of the prime minister, the external affairs minister, home minister, and the law minister or in short, the government of India at the highest level. The present policy of letting things take their own time will not do as our prime minister repeatedly emphasizes, we need a high degree of professionalism for good governance. While the security interests of India must remain paramount, taking care of refugees in India is a moral duty for the largest democracy in the world.

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