How Protected are the Refugees: A Comparative study of the contemporary states of Germany and India in light of the Geneva Convention, 1951

Kusumika Ghosh

Research & Programme Assistant, Calcutta Research Group

The Refugee Convention of 1951 or the Geneva Convention, as known more popularly, is a multi-party treaty with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) as its guardian that lays down the foundation of refugee rights in the post World War II world. Several protocols and compacts have been adopted by the member-states of the United Nations for regulating migration and asylum since the Geneva Convention, the most recent being the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018). While the differences between a 'refugee' and a 'migrant' constitute the major differentiation in policy, the nation-state views both as 'aliens' – hence outside the ambit of its citizenry. International treaties such as the Geneva Convention and the Global Compact seek to regulate human security outside the nation-state. Keeping the Geneva Convention of 1951 as the bedrock, this paper attempts a critical comparative study of the treatment meted out to refugees and asylum-seekers in India and Germany from 2015-2017; focusing specifically on the Rohingya and the Syrian refugees respectively.

Keywords: Germany, India, Refugee, Syrian Refugee, Rohingya Refugee, Geneva Convention, UNHCR

A Polarised Globe

In the 1980s, the 'Brandt Line' was developed as a way of showing the how the world was According to this model:

Richer countries are almost all located in the Northern Hemisphere, with the exception of Australia and New Zealand.

Poorer countries are mostly located in tropical regions and in the Southern Hemisphere.

This has its due limitations, given the world today is much more complex than the Brandt Line depicts as many poorer countries have experienced significant economic and social development. However, inequality within countries has also been growing and some commentators now talk of a 'Global North' and a 'Global South' referring respectively to richer or poorer communities which are found both within and between countries. For example, whilst India is still home to the largest concentration of poor people in a single

nation it also has a very sizable middle class and a very rich elite. (Royal Geographical Society: The Global North/South Divide)[1]

While acknowledging the intersectionalities, the countries of Germany and India check several boxes in the opposite direction on development indices. This comparative study bases itself in these two countries for the following reasons:

- · their respective membership of the Global South and the Global North;
- · their experiences with partition of territories – Germany was split into East and West and later reunited; the Indian subcontinent was divided into India, Myanmar and Pakistan - later bifurcated to create Bangladesh.
- · Germany's anti-Semitic history and India's experience with religious pogroms since the Partition of 1947;
- · finally, the differences of execution of the protection regime as experienced in a signatory of the Geneva Convention (Germany) and another that has not signed and ratified the Geneva Convention (India).

Economically, India was projected as Germany's contender for the third position in world economy in December 2019. It might be of interest to note that Germany has been a welfare state longer than India has been independent of colonization. To disengage from the history of colonization in a comparative study on two states on the opposite sides of the spectrum of colonialism is to erase the structural conditions that have shaped these economies. Thus, we acknowledge the different starting points, and are approaching our research questions from this vantage point.

History of Partition

In the mid-20th Century, following the conclusion of the World War II, the non-European world began experiencing a process of rapid decolonization. Colonialism proved too expensive to maintain for the war-ravaged European economies. In August 1947, the Indian subcontinent was granted sovereignty by the British colonists, but not before carving out two separate states, for the 'two nations'. In popular usage, the term 'Partition of India' does not cover the earlier separation of Burma and Ceylon from the subcontinent. It only refers to the creation of India and Pakistan. The heavily populated provinces of Punjab and Bengal were divided to create Pakistan in the north and its eastern extension, referred to as the erstwhile East Pakistan. The UNHCR estimated that almost 14 million people were displaced in an extremely violent manner as a result. The Indian subcontinent's Partition of 1947 violently displaced millions of people across newly imposed cartographic lines dividing the provinces of Bengal and Punjab. It is marked with an unprecedented mass migration and a massive human rights disaster that exploded in form of the riots between Hindus and Muslims on either side of the new borders dividing India and Pakistan.

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[1] Sourced from: https://www.rgs.org/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?nodeguid=9c1ce781-9117-4741-af0a-a6a8b75f32b4&lang=en-GB (Accessed on 29.04.2020)

It may be estimated that about five and half million people travelled each way across the new India-Pakistan border in Punjab. In addition about 400,000 Hindus migrated from Sind and well over a million moved from East Pakistan to West Bengal. As a matter of fact the partition related displacement and migratory flow had started a year before the partition, i.e., on August 6, 1946 the 'Direct Action' day declared by Muslim League. But on partition, the migration had to be managed by the state, as it was no more migration but evacuation. The state estimated that about 25 lakh Muslims and 20 lakh Hindus had to be evacuated from the two countries (Nag 2001, 4755).

It might be useful to note from this introductory stage that while the Partition of 1947 of the Indian subcontinent was on the basis of religion, its implications were and continue to be extremely intersectional in nature. Among others, class and gender within class have played decisive roles in the nature of Partition-induced displacement and resettlement, as I have derived from a previous research.

The end of World War II implied not only decolonization of several European colonies in Asia, Africa and Latin America, but also the start of the Cold War era. Prior to the conclusion of the War, USA and USSR had combined their forces under the Allied Powers. The Allies went on to defeat the Axis Powers, of who Hitler's Germany was a part. Germany's defeat in the War ended the Nazi grasp on its existence, but also got it divided into four portions of territorial control where France, Britain and United States occupied the western regions while the USSR took over the east. A divided Germany thus coincided with the world splitting into two blocs of power relations - one led by the erstwhile Soviet Union with communist politics/economics and another by the United States of America, championing the free- market economy with neo-liberal politics. Thus, Germany's bifurcation signalled not only different territorial control, but also ideological affiliation. West Germany, or the Federal Republic of Germany, was officially established in May 1949 and East Germany, or the German Democratic Republic, was established in October 1949. Under their occupying governments, the two Germanys followed very different paths. "West Germany was allied with the USA, the UK and France and became a western capitalist country with a market economy. In contrast, East Germany was allied by the Soviet Union and fell under highly centralized communist rule" (Centre for European Studies, *The End of WW II and the Division of Europe*)[2].

The partition of Germany was not the product of a unilateral policy by one power, still less of one clear-cut decision, but of a gradual historical process. The policies which led to it emerged from a series of pragmatic responses to changing circumstances, and the American role in this process was by no means confined to reacting to Soviet initiatives. Subsequent manifestations of Soviet assertiveness tend to obscure the extent to which, initially, the Soviet Union exhibited both caution and willingness to collaborate with the other

[2] Sourced from: https://europe.unc.edu/the-end-of-wwii-and-the-division-of-europe/ (Accessed on 02.04.2020)

victors in implementing the wartime decisions in Germany. In 1945-6, relations between American and Russian officials were in fact reasonably harmonious and co-operative.5 The real villains in American eyes during this period were not the Russians but the French, who obstructed the creation of a central administration in their determination to dismember Germany (Shlaim, 1985).

India and Germany's experiences with hosting refugee populations thus go back to the history of their formation (and re-formation). This paper, however, limits itself to the two of the most destructive wars and the displacement induced as a result: the Syrian War and the systematic genocidal attack on the Rohingya people in Myanmar. Both triggered an enormous outflow of persecuted people from these countries since 2015, who scattered to different parts of the world for asylum. In this paper, the focus will remain on India and Germany as hosts to the Rohingya and the Syrian refugees, respectively, from 2015 – 2017.

The Geneva Convention of 1951

The need for a global contract to protect the people displaced by the aftermath of colonialism and World War II was felt by the United Nations, and culminated in the Refugee Convention of 1951, also known as the Geneva Convention. "The Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees is central to scholarship on refugee and asylum issues. It is the primary basis upon which asylum seekers make their claims to the majority of host states today and, as a key text of the human rights framework, has come to be associated with the very idea of a universalised rights-bearing human being" (Mayblin, 2014, p. 423). It contains a number of rights and also highlights the obligations of refugees towards their host country. The cornerstone of the 1951 Convention is the principle of non-refoulement contained in Article 33. According to this principle, a refugee should not be returned to a country where he or she faces serious threats to his or her life or freedom. This protection may not be claimed by refugees who are reasonably regarded as a danger to the security of the country or, having been convicted of a particularly serious crime, are considered a danger to the community. It also protects the refugees against persecution for illegal entry into contracted states and expulsion, and guarantees rights to education, work, housing, freedom and public assistance.

Some basic rights, including the right to be protected from refoulement, apply to all refugees. A refugee becomes entitled to other rights the longer they remain in the host country, which is based on the recognition that the longer they remain as refugees, the more rights they need.

However, it concerns itself with persons who became refugees due to events occurring in Europe before 1 January 1951, and turns a blind eye to the nuances of gender, regional politics and intersectionalities.

> The refugee regime, built on the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, has long excluded women from the international right to protection from persecution. The gender-blind parameters of the Convention have been exacerbated by the same qualities in the international legal system of which it is a part; state practices toward asylum-seekers; and the dichotomous construction of the refugee regime as a whole,

which has produced and reproduced victimizing identities of refugee women (Valji, 2001).

These limits thus laid the foundation for exclusion – which could not be entirely undone even with its 1967 Protocol.

> When ratifying (becoming a party to) the (1951) Convention, countries could choose to restrict its application even further so that it applied only to refugees displaced by events within Europe before 1 January 1951. After 1951, new refugee situations arose, and these new refugees did not fall within the scope of the Refugee Convention. This protection gap led governments to create the 1967 Protocol, because they considered it 'desirable that equal status should be enjoyed by all refugees covered by the definition in the Convention, irrespective of the dateline of 1 January 1951' (Protocol Preamble).

Mitigation with the 1967 Protocol

The 1967 Protocol removed the Refugee Convention's temporal and geographical restrictions so that the Convention applied universally. Article 1 of the Protocol says that countries that ratify it agree to abide by the Refugee Convention as well – even if they are not a party to it. For instance, the United States has not ratified the Refugee Convention but it has ratified the 1967 Protocol. This means that it is bound to apply the Convention's provisions, which commit it to treating refugees in accordance with internationally recognized legal and humanitarian standards. These include respecting the principle of non-refoulement – that is, not sending refugees to a place where they are at risk of persecution, or to a country which might send them to such a place; providing refugees with a legal status, including rights such as access to employment, education and social security; and not punishing refugees for entering 'illegally' – that is, without a passport or visa.

The effect of the Protocol means that the Refugee Convention now applies universally amongst those States which have adopted the Protocol. The only exceptions are in Turkey, which expressly maintains the geographical restriction; Madagascar, which maintains the geographical restriction and has not adopted the Protocol; and Saint Kitts and Nevis, which has not adopted the Protocol (UNSW, 2018).

India and the Refugee Convention of 1951

India hosts a number of different communities fleeing persecution from political and religious violence.

> India is home to diverse groups of refugees, ranging from Buddhist Chakmas from the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, to Bhutanese from Nepal, Muslim Rohingyas from Myanmar and small populations from Somalia, Sudan and other sub Saharan African countries. According to the UNHCR, there were 204,600 refugees, asylum seekers and "others of concern" in India in 2011. They were made up of 13,200 people from Afghanistan, 16,300 from Myanmar, 2,100 from various other countries and the two older populations of around 100,000 Tibetans and 73,000 Sri Lankan Tamils. The UNHCR financially assisted 31,600 of them. (Sarkar, 2015)

However, it has no defined legal framework stating the entitlements of refugees seeking asylum in the country. The refugees are considered under the Foreigners Act of 1946 and the Passport Act of 1967 – both of which define a person with a non-Indian nationality as a "foreigner, independent of his/her specific legal status". This refusal to acknowledge the category of 'refugee' in India's domestic law creates a vacuum that can have dangerous implications. In clubbing together the political categories of migrants and refugees under the umbrella term of 'foreigners', it glosses over the different degrees of protection and assistance required by the two. With no domestic law in place to ensure systematic and equal treatment to them, refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in India cannot seek the rights guaranteed by the 1951 Convention either, given India is not a signatory to it. Despite the absence of a legal framework, its history with refugees dates back to its decolonization; the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 witnessed one of the largest and brutal population exchanges in the world. It had violently displaced millions of people across the divided provinces of Bengal and Punjab, created communal abrasion that is still felt in the country, and paved the way to problematic equations between the indigenous and the immigrant – characterising the politics of Northeast India till date.

> The United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention, the only refugee instrument that existed at the time, had been created to accord protection to people displaced in the aftermath of World War II. The Convention's Euro-centric nature was clear in its limitations – it was applicable to the events occurring in "Europe or elsewhere before 1 January 1951" and gave refugee status to someone "who has lost the protection of their state of origin or nationality" This essentially meant that the 1951 Convention, in its original form, was only applicable to people who had fled a state-sponsored (or state-supported) persecution (Manuvie, 2019).

While the Partition was on the basis of religion, its implications were and continue to be extremely intersectional in nature. Among others, class and gender within class have played decisive roles in the nature of Partition-induced displacement and resettlement, as I have derived from my Master's dissertation research on women who were displaced by the Partition of 1947 on the Bengal border. What it could not be classified as, however, was 'state sponsored persecution'. South Asian experiences with decolonization and state-making did not find space within the Refugee Convention of 1951. Thus, the Partition and the forced displacement it had induced in 1947, while within the Convention's timeline, did not fall into the category defined in it. People who had to leave their homeland were forced to do so due to socio-religious, perhaps even socio-economic persecution instead of 'state-sponsored persecution' or 'war on the civilians by the state'. Most importantly, as Manuvie (2019) opines in her article, "the subsequent concerns of both India and Pakistan to attribute a more liberal meaning to the term 'refugee' in order to include internally displaced people or those displaced due to social rifts were rejected at the international level. This created an overall scepticism towards the 1951 Refugee Convention". India under Jawaharlal Nehru did not sign the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol for the fear of international interference in what it has considered its "internal affairs", as well as the fear of international criticism should it fail to provide the minimum living/housing conditions to refugees in its territory, as per the treaties. Thus, it continues to follow the ad hoc policy of administering issues around protection of refugees that it had adopted at its independence. This is a grave cause of

concern, especially when considered with the newly passed Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 that bases naturalisation of non-citizens on religious grounds. Interestingly, it does not concern itself with Myanmar and thereby bypasses any possibility of bringing the Rohingya refugees under its purview.

> The Rohingya are an ethnic group, the majority of whom are Muslim. To escape persecution in Myanmar, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have been fleeing to other countries for refuge since the 1970s. The largest migrations of this community took place in 2016 and 2017, when episodes of brutal suppression by the security forces of Myanmar caused more than 723,000 Rohingya to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. While the vast majority of the Rohingya that fled Myanmar are in Bangladesh, there are an estimated 18,000 Rohingya asylum seekers and refugees registered with UNHCR in India. There are two main patterns of Rohingya migration to India: from Bangladesh westward to the state of West Bengal in India and northeast to the Indian states of Mizoram and Meghalaya. On both of these routes, the Rohingya are vulnerable to exploitation due to their lack of official identification documents, their inability to speak local languages and their lack of financial means (Mixed Migration Centre, 2019).

According to UNHCR's *Global Focus* Report on India[3], the "protection environment in India remained positive" in 2015 with 4,200 refugees having their stay regularized, following the issuance of long-term visas which provide access to employment opportunities. Refugees and asylum-seekers continued to enjoy access to Government services, including health and education. However, the detention of people of concern to UNHCR – mostly of Rohingya asylum-seekers in border areas – continued to be reported and it complained of inaccessibility of the detained people. The 2016 report contained the same clause of concern:

> In 2016, India hosted over 33,800 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR, with the vast majority coming from Afghanistan and Myanmar, as well as smaller numbers from the Middle East and Africa. The number of new arrivals reached 7,100, an increase by 9.5 per cent compared to 2015. Afghans constituted the largest group of new arrivals (3,859) followed by Myanmarese (2,178). 69 Afghans repatriated voluntarily in 2016, a similar number as compared to 2015 (UNHCR).

Interestingly, the same report notes the figure on voluntary repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees, which increased from 452 to 852 compared to 2015. However, the alarm is actually raised in its report of 2017.

> The traditionally generous protection environment in India became constrained in 2017, impacting refugees' access to documentation and basic services, as well as the right to seek asylum. Increased incidents of harassment and evictions, particularly of Rohingya refugees, were reported. UNHCR initiated contingency plans to assist people of concern to relocate from areas of tension or risk, and to intervene immediately in the event of possible deportation or *refoulement* (UNHCR).

Non-Refoulement is a key principle enshrined in the Refugee Convention of 1951. Following from the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution, as set forth in Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this principle reflects the commitment of the international community to ensure to all persons the enjoyment of human

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[3] Sourced from: http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/10314?y=2016#year (Accessed on 06.06.2020)

rights, including the rights to life, to freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and to liberty and security of person. These and other rights are threatened when a refugee is returned to persecution or danger. This is an important indicator of the lacuna created in the absence of a monitoring framework.

Germany and the Refugee Convention of 1951

In comparison, Germany has displayed a relatively consistent attitude to refugees and asylum seekers after the Nazi dictatorship was uprooted and replaced with a democratic government. Its citizenship and asylum laws are based on the experiences of German emigrants, who, on the run from the Nazis, became dependent on a country that had taken them in as refugees. A new article (article 16) was added to the Federal Republic's Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) in 1948–49 stating: "Politically persecuted persons have the right of asylum." With this, the Federal Republic of Germany is obliged to grant a right of residence to the politically persecuted. The second legal basis for the asylum policy of the Federal Republic of Germany is the Geneva Convention of 1951.

> Article 16 of German Basic Law – its constitution – provides the right to asylum for those fleeing political persecution, and Article 116 provides the right to citizenship for people with German heritage from Eastern Europe suffering from persecution. Because these constitutional rights thereby limit the scope of electoral politics on this issue, a 'liberal' asylum policy remained mostly intact during occasional asylum crises. In the 1980s, for example, Germany devised ad hoc administrative solutions such as requiring entry visas for certain asylum seekers or prohibiting asylum applicants from working upon arrival. Only in the early 1990s, following reunification, did Germany modify its asylum law, when unprecedented numbers of ethnic Germans sought entry from Eastern Europe and refugees were fleeing the Balkan wars. Specifically, a constitutional amendment removed the right to asylum for those who entered from a 'safe third country' or a 'non-persecuting' state (Ilgit & Klotz, 2018).

In 2015, the migrant crisis in the world had peaked with the Syrian refugees becoming the most vulnerable group of asylum seekers. Under Chancellor Angela Merkel, Germany adopted an open door policy for the Syrians and displayed a welcoming stance for immigrants in general. Before 2015 ended, the country took in a massive one million applications for asylum, of who Syrians constituted the majority (AFP, 2015). Syrians make up the largest group of arrivals, followed by Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians, Eritreans and Albanians. Chancellor Angela Merkel has been criticised for her decision to open Germany's border to refugees during the height of the crisis, as thousands drowned in treacherous boat crossings over the Mediterranean and Aegean seas.

"Merkel's decision to welcome Syrian refugees had won her praise but also sparked a backlash, with some senior ministers openly questioning the approach and her usually-high poll ratings slipping several points" (Connolly, 2015). The hostility is primarily justified on grounds of security – right-wing groups have blamed the welcoming policy for terror attacks carried out by migrants and refugees, including the massacre at a Christmas market in Berlin. It raised the alarm for a review of Germany's national security and made the Chancellor promise a "national effort" to ensure that people who are not entitled to stay go home

following revelations attempts to deport ISIS supporter Anis Amri had failed months before he committed the Berlin attack (Dearden, 2017).

> 'I understand that many of us are feeling insecure at the moment', said German Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere at a news conference in July 2016, before announcing his order of greater police presence across the country. The minister's statement came after a series of deadly attacks in a week – three of them involving refugees as alleged perpetrators – heightened public anxiety. Anti-immigrant sentiments and scepticism over the government's handling of the refugee crisis had already spiked since reports of mass sexual assaults and thefts during the 2015 New Year's Eve celebrations in Cologne claimed perpetrators to be foreign nationals. While more and more people demanded stricter limits on migration politically motivated crimes against asylum seekers increased sixteen times from 2013 to 2015 (Amnesty International, 2016). Tapping into these anxieties, a new anti-immigrant party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) grew rapidly, gaining seats in 13 (out of
> 16) Länder since its founding in 2013 (Ilgit & Klotz, 2018).

The scepticism towards accepting migrants and refugees in Western Europe has manifested in deadly implications for the asylum seekers. The number of asylum seekers arriving in Germany plummeted by more than 600,000 in 2016, government figures show.

> The number of refugees arriving in Europe dropped dramatically last year after the EU struck a controversial deal with Turkey aiming to prevent crossings over the Aegean Sea, by detaining anyone arriving on Greek islands under the threat of deportation. That had been the main route for the vast majority of migrants reaching Germany after journeying through Balkans countries to reach Western Europe. Border closures and security crackdowns along the route have since left thousands of people trapped in squalid camps, with at least three asylum seekers dying in sub-zero temperatures in recent days. Despite the fall in numbers, 2016 was the deadliest ever year for refugees, after the EU-Turkey deal made the main route revert to the far wider and more treacherous Central Mediterranean Sea. More than 5,000 asylum seekers died in sea crossings, either by drowning, fuel inhalation or suffocation in overcrowded and unseaworthy boats (Dearden, 2017).

Germany's relationship with the Refugee Convention of 1951 is therefore more established as a signatory, supported by a domestic legal framework of providing asylum. However, in a comparative study with India, its geo-political location has to be taken into account, considering Germany is central to European history and is therefore well placed in the context of the Convention.

This paper will explore the particular comparison of the conditions of the Rohingya refugees in India and the Syrian refugees in Germany in further detail in the coming months.

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