

Managing Refugees without a National Policy: Reflections from India's Experience with Tibetan and Rohingya Refugees

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India's engagement with refugees fleeing from her neighbouring countries occasionally becomes paradoxical. Though the country has received and hosted different refugee communities, its refugee management mechanism has always been uneven. Post-colonial India's tryst with refugees begins from the very beginning of its creation. Partition of British (ruled) India into the independent nations of India and Pakistan was followed by one of the largest forced migration and subsequent refugee crises in human history. Surrounded by countries that are undergoing political instability, civil war, severe conflict and ethnic cleansing, the refugee influx to India still continues to exist.

Life of refugees in India is observed to be determined by various factors. In the absence of a national policy for refugee management, nor a legal framework, the plight of refugees in the country is largely influenced by the bureaucratic discretion, political atmosphere prevailing in the country and the bilateral relation of India with the country where the refugees are fleeing from. The socio-religious and ethnic background of the refugee community, community networks and the level of affinity from the local communities also have a crucial role in deciding the plight of refugees. Role of state governments is also seen to be highly influential in the treatment of refugees living in different parts of the country.

A revisit to the historical background of refugee management, and empirical evidence from the living condition of various refugee communities in India, it displays an uneven trend at various degrees. It reveals the ambiguous yet composite nature of the refugee management system in India. Inconclusiveness and adhocism in India's refugee management mechanism is clearly evident from the differential treatment of various refugee communities and the contrasting immunities that different refugee communities in India are entitled to. This paper attempts to portray the differential treatment of refugee communities in India through a comparative study of two major refugee communities in India; the Tibetans and Rohingyas; focusing specifically on the asymmetric distribution of rights and services that are entitled to these to refugee communities.

Key Words: Refugees, Refugee Policy, Tibetans, Rohingyas