

REFUGEE WATCH

A South Asian Journal on Forced Migration

59

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Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group

IA-48, Sector-III, Ground Floor

Salt Lake, Kolkata-700097

INDIA

Tel: +91 33 2335 0409

Email: mcrgr@mcrgr.ac.in

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The Time of Becoming Resilient? Rohingya Women of Bangladesh Camps in Between Hopes and Waiting

By

Sucharita Sengupta *

"Life is about change, sometimes it's painful, sometimes it's beautiful, but most of the time it's both"

-Ro Mohammad Faruque, Balukhali Refugee Camp, Bangladesh

This article probes an ethnographic account into the lives of Rohingya women in Bangladesh camps. The dispossession of the Rohingyas from Myanmar and their subsequent marginalisation and deracination is widely known across the globe in contemporary times. Their forced migration resulting from their lack of citizenship status or statelessness has led them to live in Cox's Bazar of Bangladesh in huge numbers, which I shall describe later. Any discussion on dispossession, refugeehood or statelessness necessitates us to study the borders and migration from a feminist perspective because women are most often the worst sufferers of any displacement, ethnic persecution, violence, conflict or war. Refugee women are also subjected to myriad gender-based violence like trafficking, rape and sexual abuses.¹ The usage of the term 'gender' loosely refers to the social construct surrounding roles of men and women in society.²

It is understood that any humanitarian crisis of a great magnitude is deeply gendered, and a refugee crisis like that of the Rohingya displacement is worse in terms of its impact on women. During armed conflicts, women, especially, become the targets of planned gender-specific violence. A gendered analysis of studying forced displacement entails a few key important objectives according to Paula Banerjee. A feminist lens considers gender as the central category of analysis and questions the 'normal'. It also accepts women's own interpretations, voices of identities and experiences.³ Most often, a gendered

* Sucharita Sengupta, Doctoral Fellow, Anthropology and Sociology Department, Graduate Institute of International and Developmental Studies (IHEID), Geneva, Switzerland. Email: sucharitaseng@gmail.com
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lens of analysis in case of a conflict has been narrowed down to imply sexual violence. They are said to be doubly marginalised and oppressed because of their socio-political categories, race, ethnicity, religion and nationality.

However, this kind of a reductive lens tends to ignore how crimes occur with respect to different segments of society like transmen. The problem with the reductive lens is also that it refuses to understand gender as encompassing marginalisation of the less powerful, by which I mean, anything that challenges the dominant power disposition is considered a threat. The reductionist lens also confines to a simplified understanding of gender especially in the context of a war that only focuses on the need to 'protect' and render care. In the post-recovery processes, more attention by care givers is rightfully given on trying to help 'victims' return to a normal life. In this kind of an analysis however, physical violence becomes the core determinant to address issues plaguing women in a post-conflict situation, an analysis that often ignores the power of silence, bearing abilities and resilience. It also fails to address the general status of women within a patriarchal societal system. In cases where women do assume leadership roles and there is a chance of role reversals or of a change in the power equation, it gets least attention or encouragement.⁴ One could see this happening for Rohingya women activists although that discussion is not the focus of this article.

This article attempts to closely look at some of the concerns flagged above and introspect on how waiting in a camp space is gendered and whether Rohingya women, within the space, can deal with the trauma faced in Myanmar and evolve into autonomous beings. Are they able to become self-reliant individuals through employment opportunities in the camps and carve out their belongingness? How does waiting for a change in such contexts feel like? Gendered experiences in this essay, therefore, are looked through the prism of waiting and hope that transcend the boundaries of victimhood. This is no way to state that a binary between agency and victimhood exists. Researchers for long have critiqued victim-centric narratives arguing that they silence voices of survivors. By not problematising victimhood, refugees, especially women, for long were denied a centre stage to narrate their own narratives. Refugee experiences also get lost by limiting their identities as solely victims, for even during the worst of times, refugees constantly negotiate with the ruling power against their marginalisation.⁵ On the other hand, in response to such critiques, scholars have also urged to go beyond simplistic narratives as writing of "women as agentic in efforts to empower them runs the risk of generating overly voluntarist conceptions of agency".⁶ Thinking beyond such binary constructions thus enables one to take into consideration the agency of survivors without ignoring structurally unequal power dynamics.⁷ In common parlance, the defiance against victimisation and to be resilient is often understood as agency. However, Saba Mahmood puts forth an interesting argument in this regard. She contends that equating agency with resistance runs the risk of not understanding the capacity of actions that "historically specific relations of subordination enable and create".⁸ This decoupling between agency and resistance thus, according to her, is necessary so that we understand the lives of women whose identity and

aspirations are not shaped by liberal traditions like that of Islamist women participating in the Mosque movement in Egypt.⁹

The Rohingya women in Bangladesh camps form a diverse group in terms of their choices, accessibility to resources and networks both in Myanmar and then Bangladesh. This article describes the different groups of women that I met in the camps, all of them bound by the single common thread of hope for a change of their present situation. While hope guides most of them, for women who have faced unspeakable violence in Myanmar before their forced eviction, waiting for a normalcy becomes a distant mirage with occasional breakdowns.

The Phase of Waiting and the Process of ‘Becoming’

In this section, I will refer to three snippets of narratives in order to epitomise how the phase of waiting for women in the camps is not passive but prolifically active. It is also a phase of ‘becoming’ empowering individuals and decision-making voices. These narratives are powerful stories of survival marked by the temporality of belonging. This process of becoming comes with its own challenges as well, which I shall point out later in the chapter.

“I Wait to Hear from My Husband”

I met Shaufika in Camp 14, known as Hakimpara, in Cox’s Bazar (Fig. 1). The speciality of this camp is that it is the only widow block among the 34 Rohingya camps built in 2017, after the biggest Rohingya exodus from Myanmar. At the time of this research in 2019, there were 20 women in Camp 14. There is absolutely no male figure living in this widow block as these women have lost all their male family members at the 2017 massacre. Most of them have been killed and some like Shaufika’s husband are incarcerated in Buthidaung, Rakhine state of Myanmar, for being a rebel against the then government of Myanmar.

The Rohingyas have been forced to cross over from Myanmar’s Rakhine state (erstwhile Arakan) to Chittagong and Cox’s Bazar region in Bangladesh since the 1970s. The root cause of the Rohingya crisis or persecution stems from their lack of citizenship in Myanmar and the colonial history of partition in the subcontinent, dividing territories and loyalties. Burma, the earlier name of Myanmar under British rule, is the largest of the Southeast Asian states. Arakan is the westernmost state of Myanmar, now officially known as the Rakhine state. Apparently, the word ‘Rohingya’ is derived from Rohang, the ancient



Fig 1: Widow Block, Hakimpara, Camp 14

name for the Arakan or Rakhine state.¹⁰ In 1942, when Japan attacked Burma, the first communal clash between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims took place.¹¹ In 1978, a military crackdown called '*Ye Tha Ha*' had triggered the first major Rohingya displacement from Myanmar.¹² Twenty thousand Rohingyas were forced to flee to Bangladesh as a result.¹³ This was followed by continuous drives across the borders, especially after 1982, when the Burmese government framed a new citizenship law. This law in reality excluded the Rohingyas from the 13 recognised national ethnic groups affecting their statelessness and subsequent refugeehood.¹⁴ The narrative of otherisation of the Rohingyas had already begun since long but got institutionalised with the implementation of the new Burmese¹⁵ constitution in 1948.¹⁶

New waves of forced eviction thus continued even after the Partition in 1947 with landmark years like 1992, 2012 and 2017 registering the pinnacles of the waves. The military crackdown of the Rohingyas in 2017 has triggered by far the biggest exodus, affecting a million Rohingyas to force flee Myanmar for Cox's Bazar. Thus, the world's largest refugee settlement of 34 camps came into existence in Cox's Bazar from 2017, including the two previously formed registered camps in 1992—



Fig 2: A picture of one of the camps, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Nayapara Camp near Teknaf and Kutupalong Camp in Ukhiya (Fig.2).¹⁷ Both these camps are registered with the UNHCR in collaboration with the government of Bangladesh.¹⁸ Shaufika has also started living in Camp 14 since 2017 August.

I came to know about Shaufika (aged 24),¹⁹ a woman leader of the widow block through the course of my several rounds of conversations in the camps in 2019. It took me a few days to find her, and finally, I was able to meet her. At times, during our long conversations, I felt embarrassed at my 'intrusion' into her life and positions of privilege. My efforts to take her down the memory lane opened her wounds which were still fresh, violent, and ripped with trauma; this triggered my guilt that I have faced multiple times during my stay in Cox's Bazar.

As mentioned earlier, Shaufika is not a widow, although she stays in the widow block. Her husband Ebrahim was a protestor against the current disposition in Myanmar, hence, he was arrested in July 2017. Fearing an impending military crackdown soon, he wanted Shaufika and rest of the family members to escape to Bangladesh. However, within days of his arrest, her in-laws and other family members were witch-hunted and killed. Shaufika somehow managed to escape with her two infant sons as they were already living in hiding after her husband was arrested. She wanted to stay back and

help Ebrahim but had to flee to ensure the safety of her children.²⁰ It took her 10 days to cross over through forests and hills amidst extreme adversaries. In her own words, they walked and walked, hungry and thirsty, losing the sense of time and count of days. All she knew was that the only chance of her survival and that of her children depended on their reaching Bangladesh, along with several others taking the same journey. It was a harrowing experience for them to recount the traumatic journey, even in the summer of 2019, two years since the massacre. It was only after reaching Ukhiya District of Cox's Bazar that she got back her sense of time and distance. The initial days of settling down were marked by immense hardship especially for women like Shaufika, who were mostly used to staying indoors in Myanmar. She never even went out to the markets in Myanmar. This was the first time that she was forced to step out and, most importantly, take decisions like asking the local administration of Bangladesh for help to build her a place in the camps and so on and so forth.²¹

Soon Shaufika became the voice of all single women and widows from her village in Myanmar that needed help to rebuild their lives in the camps. They were given a separate block to live in Hakimpara. Once settled, she took the help of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society to contact her husband in the prison of Buthidaung and ensure him of their safety (Fig. 3). Her joy knew no bounds when she received a response from him (Fig. 4). With a smile in her lips and tears in her eyes she said, "I keep on waiting to hear from him and write to him. It is not easy. Most times we are denied contact by the jail authorities, but I still try and hope that one day we will be reunited as a family again. I am fortunate that he was spared his life and we know about each other. He and my children are the only family that I have ... but the others here are not that fortunate and I feel so sad for the young women here who have lost everything in 2017. Some of them don't even want to live anymore. This is why I try to help them through local NGOs by providing them psychological support to deal with the trauma and keep them engaged in economic activities. I never went out in Myanmar but here I am going to the tube wells to bring our own water, bring food through the ration received from the camps and buy other essentials all by myself. I could have never imagined doing everything by myself in Myanmar." She added with a smile, "I have also learned to make tea. We are safe here. I hope my husband can also come here to the camps. Here we can at least sleep safely in the nights unlike Myanmar. For us, the thought of returning under the prevailing conditions is like a nightmare. We can only go back if there is safety but the painful memories will never leave us"²².



Fig 3: Document facilitating the exchange of letters between Myanmar and the camps in Bangladesh by the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society

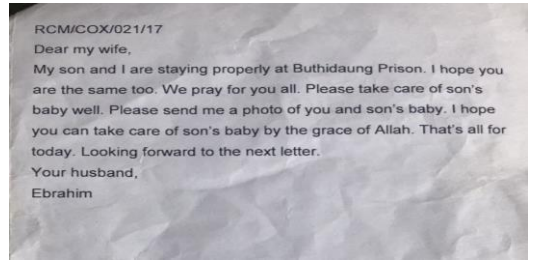


Fig 4: A letter from Shaufika’s husband from Myanmar

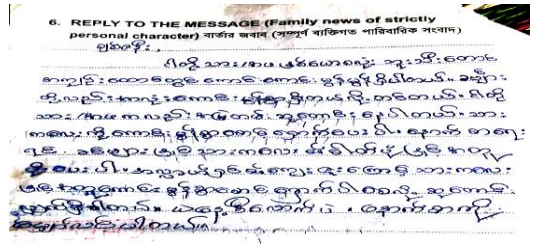


Fig 5: Shaufika too sends her replies back through the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society.

Shaufika had no access to education in Myanmar or any professional course but is now trying to acquire skills training in the camps. She was a housewife in Myanmar and never had to bother about feeding her family or about earnings. The changed situation has led her to take an active role in raising her children and start a new chapter of her life. She has become the selected representative of her block, trains other women of her camping her sewing machine, the only machine that her block has received, and earns money by selling hand-knitted garments like dresses and shawls, to make lives better for her children. She also helps the other women in her camp. Many like Shaufika dream of getting their children out of the camps to get educated and live a different life.

Shaufika was a pillar of grit and strength. Sipping tea made by Shaufika and chatting with her and other widows from Hakimpara over biscuits and warm hospitality, I was immensely impressed by the courage and zest of Shaufika and others to live against every odd. They have taken a journey that is very difficult to imagine. Perhaps imagination, hence, many times it is more intriguing than the reality. Most of the young widows in the block have lost their husbands in the military crackdown in Myanmar in 2017 but have still not lost hopes or surrendered to their fate by living only off the rationing provided by the government. Rather, many of them are striving to earn so that they can keep capital for their children and make their future secured outside the camps.

Shaufika added, “We never got any opportunity in Myanmar to educate ourselves, but now that we are getting the chance here and NGO

leaders and activists trying to help us, we are extremely happy as this is the first time, we are feeling important. We now feel we have a role too in making choices or take decisions and bring our children up in absence of our husbands or any male figure in the family. This is a boon in disguise for us. Many men inside the camps are unable to accept this but since the NGOs are helping and providing protection to us, we have got the courage to come out and be leaders' ourselves".²³ The women in Hakimpara embody resilience. Their period of waiting for a change is marked by becoming self-dependent individuals, eager to get educated, learn new skills and start from the scratch. They live in the moment, and for the moment.

“Waiting To Go Back’—The Story of Pormin

I have spent a substantial amount of time with Pormin, an adolescent youth living in the camps since 2017, throughout my stay in Bangladesh. She has been one of my key interlocutors as well, helping me to navigate my presence in the camps. Pormin, whose eyes lit up each time at the mention of Myanmar, was of immense help in taking me to places inside the camps. I could never understand her longing for Myanmar as during her stay there the Rohingyas had suffered the worst manifestations of violence. “*Deshe jaito mon chaye, tar i apekhyo korchi*” (“I am waiting to return to my country as a free person and study there just like girls of other countries do. I hope we get justice. I am waiting for justice”).²⁴ Pormin along with her family fled Myanmar in August 2017 while she was studying in the ninth standard; so, she had just one year left to complete the first stage of formal education, which she has not been able to complete yet. This is what she was most sad about.

“What do you want from life at this juncture Pormin?” I asked her. “What do you dream of?” She replied, “To have a life of freedom just like you. To have a normal life, just like most girls across continents have. I want to live a free life in a free country where I will be able to have options to choose from, to be educated, to have ambitions, to be independent, but most importantly to be a citizen. A free citizen!”²⁵ The idea of *normalcy* in camps comes with its own problems that get more prominent through the narrative I present in the next section. Normalising theories regarding semi-permanent camps with political exceptionality, often result into legitimising refugee restricting within the camp boundaries, limiting their mobility through narrow ideas and concepts (see Fig. 6).²⁶

Pormin’s family was never a direct victim in Myanmar, probably why she had no direct bitter memory of the homeland. In fact, her father Ayub Alam shared that he had a good working relationship with both the military and the then government of Myanmar. He had his own business in Myanmar, hence, their family had more resources and access than many others in the camps, for instance, Shaufika and the others



Fig 6: Rohingya children in one of the camps —longing, waiting and hoping



Fig 7: Kitchen of Pormin.

I met in the widow block. Hence, the refugee experiences of Pormin and her family were also different. Bourdieu explains this distinction among individuals through his concepts of ‘habitus’ and ‘capital’.²⁷ Differences in individuals stem from their cultural backgrounds that represent their hierarchy in society and determine their access to capital and resources. Pormin was working in a self-help centre, run by the UNICEF, at the time of this interaction. She has an elder brother, and they were treated equally at home so far as rights to education and employment were concerned. What is important here is to note that belonging is also shaped by access to social resources and capital.

For Pormin, the camps, albeit providing job opportunities to women were still not liveable in comparison to Myanmar where her family enjoyed better access to social and cultural institutions. Within the camps too, Pormin’s cottage was bigger and stacked with things like electric inverter or electricity, when most women that I interacted with in the camps were still waiting for their turns to get full ration, stove or a cooking gas to cook, water, sanitation and even a proper shelter (see Fig.7). Pormin’s family had to leave Myanmar only because there was a clampdown over their entire village and since then they have been hoping to go back at the earliest opportunity.

Pormin and a few others from her age group (15-18 years) would often tell me in the camps that they are “waiting to live a life of freedom like you, waiting to go back to Myanmar ...” This leads one to wonder how refugee women coming from deeply bordered and closeted existences make sense of mobility in an immobile space like that of the camp? Is it, as Shahram Khosravi describes as “existential” stuckedness, as “back to square one,”²⁸ or it is a perpetual state of trying to look for a home and let the home find them? While for Shaufika, the camps have offered an emancipatory space, for someone like Pormin, it is a setback because there are no opportunities in the camps. Their accessibility in Myanmar depended upon their networks, relations with the local administration, documents and resources. Pormin’s

family also have documents of their housing in the Rakhine state. The camp, on the other hand, is like a prison for Pormin.

It is thus intriguing to think about how the stage of waiting can be marked by both hope and hopelessness in a closeted, yet open space like that of the camp. Waiting and hope are intricately connected with each other as without hope can there be any waiting? Time flies—in mobility when one is active, but interestingly also in stagnancy, in apparent temporal immobility. Waiting can have an interesting connotation so far as, historically, women are concerned. Both have been traditionally conceived with temporal stagnation. To elaborate, what I mean here is if we consider women of the yesteryears in South Asia, who will not work outside, domestic labour was hardly even considered as ‘being active’ or as proper work. Non-working upper or upper middle-class women married to landlords (zamindars), workaholic industrialists or educationists and likes, despite having household chores would have stalemate days when each moment would seem like an hour.

Traditionally and historically, women have been relegated to the domestic space, the private. For instance, in the colonial period of the 1940s, in an undivided India (including both Bangladesh and Myanmar as one country), women had left homes to take the roads only for emergencies like a famine or war. Women’s participation in public spheres, political movements or the struggle for independence happened in most cases when the men were visibly absent. Even then it was the middle-class women mainly taking part in public affairs. In of her recent articles, Samita Sen shows the gendered layers of women participation into the political that in recent times have sparked debates on the political being the personal. Moving beyond either celebrating women’s political participation or in labour union movements or highlighting their marginalisation in a pre-independent India, she strives to address women’s’ negotiations with their own families and the limits of gendered behaviour.²⁹ Through moving tales of a few women activists of the colonial era, Sen depicts the stages of women activism and how the political is also personal through a parallel descriptive narrative of both the personal and political lives of these women, the confluence and converges of both lives. Most of these women labour activists were associated with the day’s left movements. Interestingly, each of their personal lives and kinship ties were unusually ahead of their times, often leading to a misplaced or stereotyped reading of how the politics of the women or public lives of them shaped their personal too. Hence, if any of the central characters from Sen’s article, for example, had moved out from a stable marriage or smoked cigarettes with their male colleagues it was naturally considered as normal because these women had independent public lives or opinions and, in most cases, were educated and well read. It can be concluded probably that in any movement the public life of women is often judged by their domestic navigations.

The different contexts that I have discussed in this paper are similar in several ways, but the complexities are deeper. It is fraught by moments of breakdown when everyday living is questioned. In this living, there is a break in the normative framework as to how gender has been construed in countries

of the subcontinent. I was curious regarding how life shapes women, who rarely have worked outside in the public and are suddenly put in a supposedly static, frigid place like a camp. Shahram Khosravi describes the feeling of stuckedness in a space like that of the camp as “going nowhere” or a life that is suspended in social mobility but active in spatial and temporal mobility.³⁰ In most times, the standard response to “what are you waiting for” draws responses like “for a normal life”. Is the idea of a ‘normal life’ same for men and women? Is waiting also gendered and mean different things in accordance with class, generation/age? Drawing from Faith Wilding’s poem *Waiting* (1972), Jenny Richards and Gunilla Lundahl write that women, regardless of class or culture, are conditioned to wait, particularly in relation to care work. Care work is gendered because, throughout history, it has been devalued; it is rarely considered as an economic activity.³¹ We can see that the gendered experiences and situations of Shaufika and Pormin are very different. The following section adds one more dimension to this and also the problems that normalization brings in the precarious lives that protracted refugees live over a span of time.

“Waiting for Refugee Rights and Inclusion” Within the Current Set-up

We had an unforgettable Rohingya meal at Shabbir³² and Hameeda’s home (Fig. 8). Over this splendid meal, I chatted with Shabbir, his wife and a few women from their Block H of Camp 26, Noyapara in Teknaf. Shabbir is a registered Rohingya and has been living with his family in Noyapara since 1977, from the time of the earliest Rohingya exodus. He was just 10 years old when he came to Noyapara while his wife Hameeda is born in the registered camp of Bangladesh. Shabbir is a Rohingya activist in the camps and has been working for the community for a long time. Since the last few years, he has been actively involved in helping women with education and skill training. “*Meyera meyeder golpo nijerai boluk. Oder kotha amra chelera kano bolbo? Ei jonne ami oder lekhapora sikhe sabalambi bote shabajyo kori*” (“Women should narrate their own stories. Why should we men do that on their behalf? That is why I am helping them with educational opportunities so that they can be independent and be their own representatives”).³³ Shabbir introduced me to Anwara Bibi and her mother Lucky Akhter. Anwara was born in the camps to Lucky (Fig. 9).



Fig 8: Lunch in Camp 26, Noyapara, Teknaf



Fig 9: Entrance of Camp 26, Noyapara, Teknaf

Lucky is a female leader of her block in Camp 26. She had also migrated in 1978, during the first Rohingya exodus from Myanmar, when she was an infant and has been living in Noyapara since then. It is like her real home now as she does not remember anything of Burma, except it being her homeland. With the help of Shabbir, Lucky could enroll her daughter at a local school. Since they live in the registered camp, they have refugee cards issued by the UNHCR. Although they do not formally enjoy refugee rights because Bangladesh is a non-signatory of the 1951 refugee convention, they have managed to ensure education for their children in the camps. For 40 years they have been waiting for a proper refugee status so that their mobility is not restricted outside the camp area, and they can move freely, without fearing incarceration, besides getting employment opportunities in Bangladesh. Lucky works as an NGO volunteer within the camp to generate awareness among women on nutrition, hygiene and reproductive health. She wants her daughter to be educated and move out of the country for employment opportunities. She does not want her children to live like refugees. However, their situation drastically changed after the 2017 influx of the new Rohingya and formation of unregistered camps. Now, over a million plus refugees live across Cox's Bazar that has created animosity among the local Bangladeshi residents. This has significantly impacted the lives of Lucky and others in Noyapara and Kutupalong, the other registered camps. For instance, Lucky's daughter Anwara Akhter, who has studied till the ninth standard in a local Bangladeshi school just outside the camps in Teknaf, was suddenly asked to leave the school, because her identity as a Rohingya was revealed. All through these years she could get registered and study in the school through forged documents but now with strengthened security and vigilance from the government of Bangladesh, the mobility of the registered Rohingyas have begun to be curbed as well. Despite having UNHCR-approved refugee cards, they are treated equally like the unregistered Rohingya who are known as 'Undocumented Myanmar Nationals' in Bangladesh.

Anwara speaks fluent Bengali like her mother Lucky, and Shabbir and Hameeda. Their attires were also strikingly different from the majority of the Rohingyas in the camps. For them it is easily possible to pretend as

Bangladeshi nationals because of their attires and general conduct. Although given a chance, they would like to go back to Myanmar, yet for them it will mark a rupture in their settled camp lives for these many years. At this stage all they want is to be given refugee rights in Bangladesh which includes the right to education and economic opportunities, a life of dignity, freedom and inclusion within the society of Bangladesh. The existential experience of the registered Rohingyas have continuously shifted between hope and hopelessness in their quest to form new identities and yet not shelving their own as Rohingyas.

Waiting, thus, has remained a perpetual condition in their lives, as a way of life. They live in waiting, for a change, but again to not change what they have already built in the last few many years in Bangladesh. Waiting to get back and yet waiting to not let go. Scholars like Shahram Khosravi argue that waiting is also tied with the technique of delaying. Refugees are often kept in waiting, through a circular motion of delaying as they need to start from scratch again. “Dialectical relation between the now and the not-yet- generates hopeful visions and practices. Even in the form of daydreaming, these practices are agentive.”³⁴ Protracted periods of waiting are also an aging process as we see in the case of the registered Rohingyas in Bangladesh. In the next section, I write about the current challenges that women collectively face in the camps and their struggles to overcome them.

Becoming Independent, Yet the Challenges ...

Shaufika, Pormin and Lucky Akhter have been able to negotiate with a space like that of the camp—spatially active but temporally immobile—through their courage, valor and grit, occasionally with external help like humanitarian organisations. The humanitarian response platform to the Rohingya crisis, which is a collective of various international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), has given importance to gender rights and prevention of sexual violence on women and children to ensure a safe environment within the camps. Prospects of employment opportunities for women have also increased inside the camps, paving way for self-reliance.

Although there is no system of formal education in the camps, there are



Fig 10: Awareness session organised by local NGO

education awareness sessions organised by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (also known as UN Women) in collaboration with local NGOs based in Bangladesh. Many local NGOs too have separate ‘safe centres,’ focusing on skill training and a space to share personal

problems for young girls and women (Fig.10). According to a UN report on the humanitarian assistance platform created to respond to The Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh, and published in February 2019, women and girls make up 52 percent of the total refugee population with around 16 percent being female headed households (the absence of a male figure mostly owing to the clampdowns in Myanmar). Girls (57 percent) represent a larger and more vulnerable group as they are more prone to sexual abuse, child marriage, child trafficking, abuse and neglect. The report mentions that although initial aid from the government to resettle the refugees post-August 2017 was swift, there remain numerous gaps especially relating to the gender protection sector. One of the key recommendations in the report was to train men and adolescent boys “to promote positive masculinities and gender equality as a strategy to end gender-based violence”.³⁵ To promote leadership among women and equal representation within the camps, various women’s and men’s groups are being formed in the camps to make them audible on protection issues. There are active initiatives to involve Rohingya women as volunteers in:

- The Health Sector, as assistants in health facilities and as assistants to midwives and doctors.
- The Sector of WASH, as hygiene promoters to generate awareness regarding safe drinking water, to teach how to use tube wells and washrooms/latrines that are built in the camps.
- The Protection Sector, as team members in the Protection Emergency Response Units, to provide basic first aid, search and rescue in the camps.³⁶

On the one hand, while ample instances hint at the camp being an emancipatory space for the Rohingya women where they possibly can exercise their liberty without consulting the male members of the family, on the other hand, tales of gender-based violence, border trafficking and forced prostitution continue. Many women and girls that I have met in the camps like Pormin and Anwara are evolving through their education and employment. However, despite success stories, there are severe constrictions that impede many others. Turning skills into commercial purposes, even when they want, have not materialised in some cases. For instance, Rashida (aged 24), housed in Camp 9, Balukhali, said, “I know sewing and have a machine as well donated by a local NGO, but I mostly stitch our own clothes.”

Why doesn’t she sell the products which will help her financially? To my query, she said, “I want to, but I do not have resources to make something good enough to make it saleable. I have asked a few NGO workers to help me multiple times, but no one has helped so far. I send my daughter to the skill training sessions that the NGOs organise here, but she says that the sessions are not effective. Sometimes there are workshops but that will not help us. Even if we know what to do, the question is how to do it. We are not used to working outside or making things for sale”.³⁷ Similar narratives like this and others hint that child marriage and early pregnancy resulting into big families, without even basic education, mark the lives of most Rohingya

women, if not all. Low levels of literacy that restrict many women from public spaces pose the biggest challenge for women to work inside the camps, even if there are now more opportunities that they used to get in Myanmar. Many of them even face difficulty in accessing the latrines because they are built far from home.

Most women I have met confirmed that there were more opportunities in the camps for them to work as compared to Myanmar, but most times they were not allowed by the male members. Even now, when they are trying to earn to help the male members in the family, they do not get assistance or support. While some do manage by teaching in schools supported by INGOs like the UNHCR or IOM, there are internal restrictions from the families itself. For instance, Ali Aham (aged 52) has six daughters. They are a family of eight members, including his wife. He is extremely poor and not educated, which is why he has not managed to get any work in the camp, unlike some of his neighbours. They are dependent only on the ration provided by World Food Programme in the camps. I wanted to talk to his daughters about their lives inside the camps, but it was Ali who kept on answering on their behalf. They hail from Maungdaw in Myanmar, Rakhine state. His elder daughters are twins, aged 18 years and the youngest daughter is four. He had a business of dry fish in Myanmar, but after they left the country in a rush, penniless, following the major crackdown in 2017, he has not been able to start afresh in Bangladesh. Unlike many Rohingya living in the camps, Ali has not been to Bangladesh before; hence, he has no relatives or contacts there who could help him with the capital to resume work. Additionally, he is extremely worried as he doesn't have a son who could support him. In his words, "the daughters are grown up, and already passed the age of marriage but I am unable to get them married off without arranging for the dowry".³⁸

This bit of news was surprising and only proves why gender experiences are different in an apparent homogenising space like the refugee camp. Alam continued, "so many prospective grooms and their fathers have come to see my daughters but because I am poor and cannot arrange anything at the moment, apart from the marriage ceremony, they are not willing to take my daughters. How can I arrange for gold and cash when I am not even able to provide adequate food to the family? The ration is not enough as we get only rice, dal and sugar. Tell me, how can someone survive without vegetables or fish and meat that we are used to having. Is it possible to eat rice and dal (lentils) every day? Others here earn money somehow or the other or they sell off their extra packets of rice and dal to buy vegetable or fish and meat but the ration that I get is not even sufficient!"

Upon enquiring why doesn't he let his daughters work then, when there are multiple opportunities in the camps now for young girls and women, Ali replied, "My daughters are not educated and I will never allow them to study. Our religion does not allow that. I will not even let them go out, especially the eldest ones as they are quite grown up and should stay indoors, covering themselves well. Our women are not allowed to go outside or earn money."³⁹My attempts to speak to the girls were not much successful as although they kept staring at me with eager eyes, their father was vigilant to

make sure that they do not get the chance to communicate. One of the daughters, aged seven, was eager to speak, and I asked her whether she goes to the women-friendly spaces—one was built right next to their shelter—which prompted me to ask the question.

The daughter replied that she and her sisters enjoy going there. “The women teach us, allow us to play, and we can also sing there freely. The teachers are really good.”⁴⁰ At this point, Ali intervened by signalling her to stop. Then he told me, “I have till now allowed three of my daughters to go to this centre because they are not yet adults, but I cannot allow them to continue as I am already receiving threats for this. The camps are filled with many outsiders. There are so many male NGO workers. Often, they try to be friendly with our daughters, marriages are also taking place. But, I will never let my daughters go out and be friends with men. I am a god-fearing person and cannot allow something that our religion does not permit for women.”⁴¹

There are several similar families who would restrict women mobility sighting religious reasons, while others would talk of ‘threats from within the community’, not naming the groups or sources. For instance, Arifa (aged 16) was teaching Burmese in a school built by a local NGO, close to her home. My interaction with some of the NGO workers on their work in the education sector led me to Arifa who had studied till the ninth standard in Myanmar and was forced eviction from there in 2017. Her family was supportive when she got the job in school for 8000 Bangladeshi Taka (BDT). But after a few months, she said, “My father started getting threat calls to stop me from working. Then one night a group of four-five men came and told my father if I do not stop working, the consequences would not be good. I was still adamant of not leaving work as women security is much better in the camps in comparison to Myanmar, but then I got a call recently and the man told me if I still continue to work then they will kidnap and kill me. On hearing this, my parents and brother got very scared and that is when I left my job. I have told this to my school authority but reporting to the camp administration will be risky as they might harm me or my family. Although there is security in the camps, after 5 p.m. till the next morning there are no guards or protection. That is when all stray incidents take place in the camps”.⁴² In recent years, following my visit to the camps, especially due to the Covid lockdowns, the protection scenario of the camp has further weakened resulting in rise of petty crimes.

While young girls like Arifa and Pormin wait, not fully knowing for what, oscillating between hope and despair, for others like Jasmin (aged 10) the wait is for some kind of a “normal life”. I prodded Jasmin to reveal what does normal mean to her, to which the very reticent young girl responded “to get married in Australia and get settled there”. She does not like the camps which are restrictive with no big spaces to play or mingle with other kids like Myanmar. She has learnt from her parents that living normally like others mean a life like her own elder sister who has been married off to Australia from the camps in 2018. Jasmine is patiently waiting for her turn to freedom. For her, marriage spelt freedom, hope and the promise of a good, normal life.⁴³ Both for Arifa and Pormin the right to education for camp settlers is

extremely important as awareness regarding rights and justice for refugees and women specifically can stem from there. For them and women living in the widow block, justice is also very important for losing their families and gender based violence like rape. They believe that justice in the form of a legal redressal in their homeland Myanmar can provide them the security necessary for facilitating a return to Myanmar in near future.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that women and children continue to constitute the most vulnerable group among refugees and stateless people. Striking is how they can ride over the boundaries of being victims and find new ways of belonging through their work and activism. In “At Home but Not at Home,” Nicole Constable explores the shifting notions of home for diasporic women.⁴⁴ Through an exclusionary space as that of the camp which reeks of captivation, deprivation, and marginalisation, the Rohingya women can make a mark for themselves.

So, waiting within this paradigm is an ontological notion when belonging can be understood through time as well as space. Although traditionally, the idea of belonging is tied with home and homeland, it can also be relational to space.⁴⁵ It is through this lens that we can try and understand the different kinds of temporal belonging that is shaped by the Rohingya women across age and generations, old and new settlers. In this context, for women like Lucky who has barely any recollection of her homeland and Anwara who is born in Bangladesh, a return or deportation by the state of Bangladesh to Myanmar now can mean a ‘temporal un-belonging’, in addition to the spatial belonging that has marked the most part of their lives. They have spent their entire camp lives in believing they only belong to Myanmar and Bangladesh is their temporary space to be in, but in this process, Cox’s Bazar has become their home and thus for them there is a lot of doubt in waiting. This existential doubt comes from the danger at both sides of perpetually not belonging to their present time and not fully comprehending their belonging to their future, potentially their homeland, Myanmar.⁴⁶

Do they still have hope? The answer is yes. This phase of uncertainty is not bereft of hope which is often shaped by humanitarianism. As Ranabir Samaddar reminds us, humanitarianism that shapes the discourse of refugees, stateless people and migrants actually emerge out of these refugee situations.⁴⁷ Over the last couple of years, the Bangladesh government has decided to resettle registered Rohingyas in a different region since Cox’s Bazar is primarily a tourist area and the smuggling-trafficking nexus in the region has led to a lot of anti-social activities, including drug smuggling. While rising forced prostitution in and outside the camps and generally in Cox’s Bazar is of concern, it is also time to consider these options as labour of choice for women. There are times when the line between force and volition obliterates, and in both physical and spatial mobility, choice is triggered by a condition, just as in a displaced situation there are works and choices that women take to

be independent, and this autonomy needs to be recognised even within the ambit of coercive external forces.

The author has published on Rohingya refugee experiences in the camps in Bangladesh from her multiple visits to these campsites and interviews with the refugees. Few interviews in this article are borrowed from the author's previously published work "Towards Emancipation or Bondage? Rohingya Women's Narrative from Bangladesh Refugee Camps and Indian Jails," in Migration, Trafficking and Gender Construction: Women in Transition, ed. Roli Mishra, (New Delhi: Sage/Stree, 2020).

Notes

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¹⁶Chowdhury and Mohanty, *Citizenship, Nationalism and Refugeehood*.

¹⁷Sengupta, "Towards Emancipation or Bondage?"

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Shaufika, Camp 14, Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, interviewed by author, March 2019.

²⁰Shaufika and other women, Camp 14, Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, interviewed by author, July 2019.

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²⁴Pormin, Camp 7, Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, interviewed by author, January–August 2019 and *Signal* messages, June 2, 2022.

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³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Sengupta, "Towards Emancipation or Bondage?"

³⁸Rashida, Camp 9, Balukhali, Bangladesh, interviewed by author, June 2019.

³⁹Ali Alam, Camp 9, Balukhali, Bangladesh, interviewed by author, March 2019.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Arifa, Camp 9, Balukhali, Bangladesh, interview by author, June 2019.

⁴³Jasmine and her family members, Camp 7, Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, interview by author, June 2019

⁴⁴Nicole Constable, "At Home but Not at Home: Filipina Narratives of Ambivalent Returns," *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no. 2 (May, 1999): 203-28.

⁴⁵Khosravi, *Waiting*; Nasreen Chowdhory, *Refugees, Citizenship and Belonging in South Asia* (Singapore: Springer, 2018).

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⁴⁷Ranabir Samaddar, *The Postcolonial Age of Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

Enigma of 'Brus' in Mizoram: Displacement, Repatriation and Livelihood

By

V. Bijukumar*

The construction of ethnic identity and perpetuation of ethnic consciousness among various communities of India's Northeast often legitimises the dominant position of some communities in exercising control over resources and accessing government jobs and thereby depriving the marginalised ethnic communities of their basic needs and survival. Territorial concentration and the making of ethnic boundary enable the dominant community to assert their rights over the smaller communities and put a strong demand for the homeland through Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). The simmering discontent and recurring tensions between the major and the minor communities often lead to violent conflicts resulting in the displacement of the latter and migration to neighbouring states as refugees. However, the government's failure to ensure safe repatriation for refugees who are fearing retaliation from the majority community hampers the process. The ethnic conflict between the Mizo ethnic majority and Brus minority in Mizoram is a classic example of how assertion and mobilisation of the majority and their access to political power and resource control leads to violent conflict, inhuman displacement and deprivation of the minority from the homeland.

The existing literature on the Brus issue in Mizoram, however, takes a more subjective position and selective understanding. Roluahpuia asserts that the ethnic conflicts between the Mizos and Brus are due to the extremist ethnic mobilisation of the latter. The ongoing process of repatriation of the Brus from neighbouring Tripura without reconciliation would be a short-term solution than an ensuring one.¹ On the contrary, Shyamal Bikash Chakma and Suraj Gogoi locate the ethnic animosity between the majority Mizos and minority Brus in the larger context of the domination of influential civil society and culture-religious bodies within organised politics and in the everyday life of the majority Mizos. Putting the issue in the larger context of

* Dr. V. Bijukumar, Associate Professor, Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.
Email: vbijukumar2014@gmail.com
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state and minority ethnic communities such as the Hmars and Chakmas, they argue that “the situational identity of Mizos has a dynamic history of constructing an enemy out of the non-Mizos in Mizoram.”²²

The Brus, officially known as Reangs, are the minority ethnic community inhabited mainly in three major districts of Mizoram—Mamit, Kolasib and Lungeli. The word *Riang* has been used in all government records and publications, but they call themselves *Brus*, which means ‘man’. As a minority ethnic group, the Brus often face stereotyping, discrimination and humiliation from the dominant Mizos, and are forced to live in poor conditions, along with social and economic deprivation. Mizos claim that ‘Mizoram is for the Mizos’ and not for the Reangs, thereby affirming that Reangs are outside the cultural boundary of Mizo ethnic identity. The Mizos consider the Brus not as the original inhabitants of Mizoram, but those who had migrated from the Shah state of Burma and are often called Brus ‘Tuikuk’, a derogatory term. Moreover, they accuse Brus of creating disturbances in the state, which is considered to be relatively peaceful among all states in Northeast India, and even demand the deletion of their names from the state voters’ list.

On the contrary, the Brus claim themselves as the indigenous population in Mizoram. A memorandum submitted to the former Prime Minister I. K. Gujral by the Bru National Union (BNU) contended that the Brus lived in Mizoram before the fourteenth century. They often claim that the 1971 census reported 9,828 Brus in Mizoram. Further, a memorandum submitted by the Bru Students’ Association (BSA) to the chief electoral commissioner in 1997, in New Delhi, pointed out, “historical records proved that the ever-peace loving Bru people have been peacefully living in the state since time immemorial.” The Bru leadership argued that even though the Brus constitute the second largest ethnic community in Mizoram, they were denied all constitutional rights and civic amenities over the years. In 1989, the Reang Peoples Union (RPU) submitted a memorandum to the Government of Mizoram with a three-point demand: *a*) inclusion of Reang programmes in All India Radio, Aizawl; *b*) reservation of jobs for the Reang in government services; and *c*) nomination of Reangs in the Legislative Assembly. It was considered to be the first step towards the political articulation of the Brus in the state.

The Bru political mobilisation began in the mid-1990s. On 15 June 1990, the Reang Democratic Convention Party (RDCP) was formed to safeguard Bru culture, language and custom and ensure their welfare. In July 1993, RDCP demanded separate ADCs. In 1994, the BNU, another political organisation of the Brus, was formed and in its meeting held on 24 September 1997, at Saihapui, a resolution was passed again, demanding the creation of separate autonomous districts for the Brus in Mizoram for the protection of its cultural identity. It needs to be mentioned that Mizoram set up three ADCs for three smaller ethnic communities Chakmas, Lai and Maras. The Chakma ADC was set up in south-western Mizoram bordering Bangladesh, Lai ADC in the southern part of the state and the Mara ADC in the south-eastern corner of Mizoram. The demand for separate ADCs by the Brus was

considered as a demand for the realisation of the goal of self-governance under the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. It is a common phenomenon in the Northeast that the minority ethnic community demands autonomy from the dominant ethnic community. The ADCs are not only the territorial space for protecting the communal identity but are also often considered as the protected ethnic enclaves for political avenues. Seyla Benhabib argues that "the ideal of self-governance was increasingly interpreted as the formal equality of citizens who now sought to realise the equal value of their liberty in terms of an equivalent schedule of rights and entitlements."³

In 1998, the demand for Bru Autonomous District Council (BADC) was again rejected by the state government and the ethnic organisations in Mizoram. In 1998, Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla declined the demand for BADC, as the Reangs do not inhabit a compact area of Mizoram. Ethnic organisations like Young Mizo Association (YMA) and the Mizo Zirlai Pawl (MZP), the Mizoram students' body, rejected the demand as they were apprehensive of the further geographical division of the state and threat to their material and political survival. In fact, the government rejected the demand for a separate ADC due to pressure from these ethnic organisations. Even though recognised as citizens, there has not been much political participation of the Brus in the governance of the state. The lack of political representation in the State Legislative Assembly forced them to frequently demand reservations for their community in the Mizoram Legislative Assembly.

The churches in Mizoram often take a hostile attitude towards the cause of Brus, as they practice other religions. The Brus are essentially a non-Christian tribal community which traditionally practised animism, an indigenous faith. Their religious practices are similar to that of the Hindu religion, as they have a significant influence of Vaishnavism. Some of the Brus were converted to Christianity due to the proselytising activities of the Presbyterian Church on the western side and Baptist Church in the southern region. The influence of Christianity has changed their religious life, and some sections got connected due to Mizos. However, the majority of the Brus opposed the Christian values propagated by the YMA. On the other hand, the YMA claimed that the Brus have not assimilated into Mizo culture because of different religious beliefs and practices. It often demanded Mizo names for the children of Brus in an attempt to impose its Christian values on the Brus.

In the mid-1990s, the peaceful call of the Brus for self-determination transformed into an extremist path. In 1996, the Bru National Liberation Front (BNLF), an armed outfit of the Brus, was formed following violent clashes between ethnic Mizos and Brus in the Mamith sub-division of Mizoram. In 2003, the Bru Liberation Front of Mizoram (BLFM), a breakaway faction of the BNLF, was involved in extortion, abduction of several Mizos and killing of security personnel. However, the Government of Mizoram concluded a Peace Agreement with the Bru armed outfit for laying down arms in July 2005. In 2009, the murder of a Mizo youth by the suspected BNLF rebels further rekindled militant activities in the state. The

Mizos often accused the BNLF of having a link with the extremist organisation of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT).

Ethnic Clashes and Displacement

India's Northeast is known for virulent forms of ethnic mobilisation, recurring ethnic violence and internal displacement of many ethnic communities. The animosity between the Mizos and the Brus reached its zenith on 21 October 1997 following the ethnic tensions after the murder of a Mizo forest guard Lalzawmliana in the Dampa Tiger Reserve in Mizoram by suspected BNLF militants. Subsequently, the YMA and MZP, the Mizo youth and student organisations, passed a resolution that all the illegal settlers of Chakmas and Brus should leave Mizoram within one week in general and those within Tuipaibari area within twenty-four hours in particular. In the aftermath of the ethnic tensions, hundreds of Brus took asylum in neighbouring Tripura. In the second spate of violence on 13 November 2009 in the state, a 17-year-old Mizo was allegedly killed by Brus near Bungthuan village, which triggered violence against the Brus. These two tragic incidents forced the Brus to leave their place in Mizoram and settle in refugee camps in the bordering state of Tripura. As a result of these ethnic tensions, in 1997 and 2009, over 30,000 Brus (5000 families) had left and had taken shelter in six camps in north Tripura's Kanchanpur subdivision. In the refugee camps, they lived in psychological trauma and human rights violations without adequate food security, access to education, health, sanitation, safe drinking water, etc. The India Human Rights Report 2006 indicted the YMA for physical attack on Bru minorities in the state.⁴ In order to articulate and fulfill their material interests, the Mizoram Bru Displaced People's Forum (MBDPF) was formed by the Bru refugees in the relief camps in Tripura.

Although settled in the relief camps outside Mizoram, the MBDPF demanded their participation in the election process in Mizoram and pleaded for the setting up of polling booths in relief camps in Tripura. The YMA protested against allocating polling booths for Bru refugees in Tripura and to permit them to exercise their franchise through postal ballot. In a memorandum submitted to the Union Minister P. Chidambaram in April 2012, the YMA demanded that the 1995 electoral roll be the basis for determining bonafide residents of Mizoram from among the refugees lodged in Tripura camps. According to a news report published in the Assam Tribune on April 5, 2012, in the memorandum, "only names of those refugees enlisted in the 1995 electoral rolls of Mizoram and their descendants be repatriated to their villages. This is because many Reang tribals from neighbouring states and adjoining Bangladesh could have infiltrated into the refugees' camps during the past 12 years." On the contrary, the Brus strongly opposed the demand of considering 1995 as the cut-off year for the repatriation of refugees. The YMA, time and again, urged both the centre and Election Commission of India (ECI) not to allow the Bru voters to cast their votes outside the state, but it proved to be vain.

In 1999, the Delhi High Court allowed the Brus in the relief camps in Tripura to cast their votes in Mizoram election. It needs to be mentioned that the election to the State Assembly in 2013 also witnessed the elections in six Bru relief camps such as Asapara, Naisingpara, Hazacherra, Kakau, Khakchangpara and Hamsapara in North Tripura district, with a combined total strength of an electorate of 11,612. The enthusiasm showed by the refugees in the election was reflected in the high voter turnout of 74.34%. However, the YMA and other organisations in the state opposed the ECI's move to establish poll booths in Tripura for Brus to exercise the vote. In the general election in 2014, the MBDPF demanded to conduct an election in their relief camps in Tripura. However, the ECI's move to allow the Brus in the relief camps in Tripura to vote was strongly opposed by the YMA. The ECI, ultimately, had to succumb to the pressure of the YMA on this issue and the Mizoram Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla announced that the state would exert pressure on the ECI to permanently remove the displaced Brus from the Mizoram electoral roll, if they were reluctant to return to their respective places in Mizoram. Earlier, the ECI allowed the Bru refugees to cast their votes using postal ballots in refugee camps from 1 to 3 April, and around 71% of the refugees cast their votes. The ECI had to reschedule the polling date for the general election from 9 to 11 April, following a state-wide three-day shutdown called by the YMA and other community organisations in protest against the exercise of the right to franchise by the Bru refugees. However, the bandh was called off a few hours after the poll panel rescheduled the polling date and assured that the Bru refugees would not cast their votes from outside in future elections. After calling off the bandh, the YMA and others asserted that they would not accept their election to the Lok Sabha if the Bru votes were counted, which was rejected by three major candidates in the fray in the state. The contention of YMA was that the Brus were not refugees, and they left Mizoram of their own will, and nobody forced them to leave the state. According to YMA, the Brus originally belonged to Tripura; they came to Mizoram and stayed there to seek shelter and peaceful lives and, again, returned to their homeland Tripura on their own.

Recurring Repatriation Process

The continued stay of Bru refugees in the relief camps of Tripura has been a grave concern for the state government for a long time. Clashes between the refugee Brus and the tribal and Bengali communities in Tripura created a law and order problem, thereby causing an internal security crisis in the state. The Tripura government repeatedly raised this issue with the Union government and the Government of Mizoram. On 15 October 2016, clashes erupted, furthering the repatriation process. Bru refugees burned and damaged at least 26 homes of locals at Kanchenpur, forcing the Tripura government to urge the centre to accelerate the process of repatriation. Apart from the law and order problem, the human security of the Bru refugees in the relief camps was a daunting task for the government. Considering the grave situation and under

pressure from the Tripura government, the Union government initiated the repatriation process with the support of the Government of Mizoram.

The initial attempt to repatriate the Brus to Mizoram started in 1998 when the three-member committee of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), after visiting the Bru refugee camps in Kanchanpur in Tripura, came to the conclusion that the Bru refugees there were the lawful residents of Mizoram and the Government of Mizoram was obliged to take them back following the agreement with the Union Home Minister in November 1997. On 13 January 2005, the Supreme Court issued notices to the Ministry of Home Affairs, ECI and the governments of Mizoram and Tripura on public interest litigation (PIL) seeking resettlement and enrolling of names of displaced Brus in the revised electoral rolls. On 26 April 2005, BNLf signed a peace accord with the Mizoram government, agreeing to disarm the rebels to the peaceful repatriation process. The Ten-Point Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the BNLf and the Mizoram government contains provisions for repatriation and resettlement for the Bru refugees by the Mizoram government, development package for the Brus, inclusion of names in the electoral rolls and establishment of central school in Bru-inhabited areas. Further, among other things, the MoU contained provisions, which required complete dissolution of the BNLf, and that the members should live a life of proper citizen. The Government of Mizoram was asked to recall the Bru refugees in six camps at Kailashahar in Unakoti District in Tripura. While the Mizoram government was planning to rehabilitate the Brus in Mamit, Kolashib and Lunglei districts, the repatriation process often encountered hurdles when violence took place. However, the agreement failed to resolve the Bru imbroglio due to the lack of political will of the Government of Mizoram. In November 2010, the ongoing process of repatriation was suspended following protests by the MBDPF.

The Union government announced several times the repatriation of 36,000 tribal refugees back to Mizoram. Moreover, it requested the Mizoram government many times to take the refugees back, but there was no inclination on the part of the state government. In the repatriation process, the Mizoram government did not accept any demand of compensation package for the Brus, land for every family, free ration cards and grouping of villages for their safety. Steps have been taken to complete the repatriation process and as a result of regular follow-ups, 197 families have been repatriated in the sixth batch, including self-repatriation, making a total repatriation of about 1622 Bru families (approximately 8573 people) in 2015. In February 2015, YMA and MZP objected the demand for Kashmiri Pundit-like status by the Bru tribals staying in refugee camps in Tripura. According to them, Brus were not refugees and could never be compared to the Kashmiri Pundits as they left Mizoram and migrated to Tripura to fulfil their political aspirations. However, they welcomed the return of Brus to Mizoram. In April 2016, hundreds of them returned to Mizoram. Although some Bru families returned to Mizoram in 2010, a large number remained in Tripura. In February 2016, the MBDPF submitted a six-page memorandum to the central ministers accusing the Mizoram government of discriminating against them.

In 2011, the YMA and other organisations submitted a joint memorandum to the then Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram to rehabilitate the displaced Mizos. According to the memorandum, more than 80 Mizo families displaced from Tripura's Sakhan Hill range in 1998 after being threatened by Bru militants were to be adequately rehabilitated by the centre. In Roadmap IV, the Mizoram government proposed a total expense of Rs 68 crore for repatriation, of which over Rs 9.7 crore was released by the centre in 2015. In May 2016, the Mizoram government submitted Roadmap V, a detailed plan for repatriation of Brus to the Ministry of Home Affairs, which was approved. Accordingly, over 207,000 Brus, including 11,500 minors belonging to 3,455 families from six relief camps in North Tripura, were repatriated. On 2 November 2016, the first day of the repatriation process, over 40 Bru families came forward for identification at the Kaskau relief camp in North Tripura.⁵

In a written reply to a question, the Minister of State (MoS) for Home Affairs said that "The Ministry of Home Affairs released approximate of Rs 246 crore to Government of Tripura since 1997–98 for the maintenance of Brus lodged in various camps and approximate of Rs 45 crore to Government of Mizoram since 2004–2005 for the disbursement to Bru migrant families for the rehabilitation in Mizoram".⁶ On 26 November 2014, in answer to a starred question in Rajya Sabha, Kiren Rijiju, Minister of State for Home Affairs, stated that his ministry has taken measures to repatriate the Bru refugees to their home in Mizoram in a phased manner. The ministry has also extended financial as well as other logical assistance to both the state governments of Mizoram and Tripura. The minister further informed that since the repatriation process started in November 2010, approximately 1210 Reang families (around 5000–6000 people) have been repatriated. He claimed that since 1997 the ministry has been giving grants-in-aid to the Government of Tripura for providing rice, ration, cash dole, etc.⁷

The Ministry of Home Affairs has been extending the following assistance/grants-in-aid to the Government of Tripura since 1997–98 for the maintenance of Bru migrants, sheltered in the relief camps of Tripura, and to the Government of Mizoram since 2004–05 for rehabilitation and resettlement of Brus in Mizoram. Its report claimed that the ministry has been providing each family a housing assistance of Rs 38,500, cash assistance of Rs 41,500, free ration to each adult and minor member for one year, reimbursement of the transportation cost incurred by the Government of Mizoram, and blankets and utensils to each Bru family.⁸ Approximately, Rs 308.62 crore has been released to the Government of Tripura and Rs 52.40 crore to the Government of Mizoram as on 31 December 2017.⁹ The Bru migrants have been repatriated from Tripura to Mizoram in a phased manner. The repatriation process got disrupted/stopped due to protests by certain Mizo NGOs in 2011, 2012 and 2015. As on 31 December 2017, about 1622 Bru families (approx. 8573 people) have been repatriated and resettled in Mizoram, while 5407 Bru families (32,876 people) have been identified to be repatriated to Mizoram. As per the revised plan submitted by the Government of Mizoram, the repatriation of remaining Bru migrants from Tripura to

Mizoram had to commence in March 2018.¹⁰ The MHA is monitoring the repatriation of Bru migrants at the highest level for completing the process.¹¹

Stalled Repatriation Process

The repatriation of displaced Brus from Tripura started in May 2010. Since then, the Government of India has been making sustained efforts to permanently repatriate and rehabilitate these refugees in Mizoram. The Union government has been assisting the two-state governments for taking care of the refugees. It was reported that till 2014, 1622 Bru-Reang families in different batches returned to Mizoram.¹² In June 2018, Bru leaders signed an agreement in Delhi with the centre and the two state governments, providing for the repatriation of Brus to Mizoram. However, most residents of the camps rejected the 'insufficient' terms of the agreement. Only 328 families, comprising 1369 people, returned to Mizoram, rendering the process fruitless.¹³ The camp residents said the package did not guarantee their safety in Mizoram and feared a repeat of the violence that had forced them to flee. There had sustained demand from most Bru-Reang families that they may be allowed to settle down in Tripura, considering their apprehensions about their security.

The repatriation process was stalled many times due to either the fear or unwillingness on the part of the Bru refugees or inadequate rehabilitation measures guaranteed by the Government of Mizoram. Despite several initiatives by the Mizoram government to bring them back, the refugees have been reluctant to go back to their villages in Mizoram, fearing their security. They also demanded that repatriation should be followed by protection of their rights, and they should be allowed to resettle in a compact area in the Mamit District for security reasons. Most of the refugees were unwilling to return to their homes in Mizoram without a written assurance from the Mizoram government to provide adequate security. In fact, the fear of insecurity about their life prevented them from repatriating. Over the years, the Brus have been demanding that they should be placed in a certain place in a group and not sent to different dispersed villages. They have demanded that the YMA should not involve in scrutinising the people who were returning with the 1995 electoral roll. However, the YMA's apprehension has been that if the repatriated refugees are placed in one or two villages, they would demand a separate ADC within the state, which is not acceptable in the present condition. Moreover, the YMA alleged that when the Brus left Mizoram, they had driven out some Mizos in the villages of Sakhan Hill Range in Tripura, like Sakhan Tualsen and Upper Dosda, which also contributed to the tension between these two communities. The repatriation process was disrupted/stopped due to protests by the YMA in 2011 and 2012. Often the adamant stand taken by the ethnic organisations such as MZP and YMA against repatriation failed to achieve its goals. In September 2011, the YMA and MZP conducted an identification process to ascertain whether the refugee returnees were from Mizoram, especially in Mamit District and often demanded the deportation of those who were not. The Brus were often

subjected to atrocities in the hands of YMA and MZP. On 8 August 2005, the members of YMA even attacked the refugee camp in Tripura, alleging that the Brus were involved in the abduction of engineer Chaaranjeet Singh and Mizo labourer Zoramsang employed in the Tuiram Hydel Project in the Mamit disaster. It created further hurdles in the process of repatriation.

In spite of the Supreme Court's directive on the repatriation of the displaced people, the repatriation policy has not been followed by an inclusive settlement policy. The MBDPF demanded the state government fully implement the rehabilitation package before the refugees move to Mizoram. Earlier, it had submitted a 14 point-demand to the MHA. The demands included, among other things, allotting five hectare land to each family, undertaking special development plan for the backward tribals and providing adequate security to the repatriated refugees. Repatriation should be followed by the whole-hearted policy on land, health, education, employment and housing, which are considered as the basic entitlement for other 'primary goods' (in Rawlsian conception).¹⁴ In fact, the lack of an adequate rehabilitation package for the repatriated refugees would denigrate them into the status of denizens. Denizens have duties but weak entitlements. Turner defined a "denizen" as a person who has "a legal right of residence (by virtue of a visa or work permit) in a given territory, but who has limited rights to welfare and political participation such as the rights to vote".¹⁵ Denizens are 'subjects' or second-class citizens for whom the electoral representation is often denied along with any political engagement.

The repatriation process was stalled due to the lack of local integration of repatriated Brus with local Mizos. It needs to be mentioned that a successful repatriation and rehabilitation process depends on local integration with the host communities. The repatriation process often faced problems of integration of the repatriated Brus. A process of local integration should have followed the process of repatriation and resettlement, wherein the repatriated become full members of their host community. Lucy Hovil talks about two levels of local integration—de facto and de jure integration. According to her, "De facto integration is an informal process that takes place primarily at a local level, whereby refugee individuals or groups negotiate belonging in the locality in which they are living. Integration takes place on a spectrum and can function on multiple levels—whether economic, social, cultural, and, at times, political—and is strongly context specific."¹⁶ Hovil says that "the relationship between refugees and the host population (often including local government officials) is key to their ability to integrate locally: for instance, their legitimacy to live in the area might be built on localised understandings of belonging that transcend national identities, or through recognition of refugees as a potential asset."¹⁷ The "de jure local integration, on the other hand, is primarily about national belonging (despite the misleading notion of 'local'). It is represented by the formal process of obtaining new citizenship and is an overtly political process. This acquisition of a new national identity represents, at least in theory, the gateway to rights as citizens of that state."¹⁸ The government often evades this approach. As Hovil states "...formal citizenship does not necessary translate into inclusion for

former refugees: the legitimacy to belong is a far more complex process. On the one hand, local belonging is unstable without national recognition; localised forms of integration have the potential to be undermined should external circumstances change. On the other, national citizenship holds little promise if individuals and groups fail to be accepted within a particular locality."¹⁹

Repatriation is a process of reasserting the bond between citizens and state and bringing back to visibility from exile. It needs building a trust between state and people. Any kind of repatriation involves security, land, livelihoods and resources. Roluahpuia asserts that "attempts at repatriation, without reconciliation, will provide a best short-term solution."²⁰ He says that as long as the memory of conflict continues to linger on even after the end of the conflict, repatriation would be a futile exercise. However, the reconciliation often undermined the material conditions for the security of the returning Mizos and the basic entitlements provided to them in the repatriated areas. He says that "the delay in repatriation has only widened the differences between the Brus and the Mizos at large."²¹ Others argue that the problems lie with the assertion of identity by the Mizo ethnic majority, who deprived the Bru minority.²² It is argued that "... the Reangs lack the political power to establish a ring of security around themselves. Ethnic, religious, political and cultural domination by the majority Mizos coupled with the lack of economic opportunities are responsible for the present travails faced by the Reangs."²³

The Quadripartite Agreement, 2020

The quadripartite agreement signed between the Government of India, the state governments of Mizoram and Tripura, and the Bru community's representative have been described as a historical initiative to end the 23-year-old Bru refugee crisis in Tripura and Mizoram. The agreement was signed on 16 January 2020 in a meeting presided over by Amit Shah, the Union Minister of Home Affairs, in the presence of the chief ministers of Mizoram and Tripura and the chairman of North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA), Himanta Biswa Sarma. It allowed the Brus to stay back in Tripura, among other things. The agreement came after almost eight repatriation attempts over the last decade to send back the Brus to their homeland in Mizoram. Although the repatriation process was initiated during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regimes at the centre, it got accelerated during the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime since 2014. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) took much interest in the repatriation process during the first tenure of the NDA government as part of its larger political agenda in the Northeast. The repatriation process got a conducive atmosphere when the BJP and the Mizo National Front (MNF), the NEDA partner, came to power in Tripura and Mizoram, respectively.

While Amit Shah, the Union Home Minister, described the agreement as to the 'historic' resolution of the Bru refugee crisis,²⁴ Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted it as 'a special day' for the Brus.²⁵ The agreement was hailed by the chief ministers of Tripura and Mizoram, major political parties

and ethnic organisations of the Mizoram. It promised to give a 40 x 30 sq.ft residential plot to each of the displaced families and Rs 1.5 lakh aid to build their house, in addition to the aid under earlier agreement of a fixed deposit of Rs 4 lakh, Rs 5000 cash aid per month for two years and free ration for two years. Besides providing the cash assistance through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), the Central Government would implement a special development project for the resettled Brus in Tripura. The physical verification to identify beneficiaries would be carried out within 15 days of the signing of the deal. The land for resettlement would be identified within 60 days, and the land for allotment would be identified within 150 days. As per the agreement, the Government of Tripura would provide the land required for resettlement. The quadripartite agreement to end the more than two-decade-old Bru refugee problem was signed between the Government of India, the state governments of Mizoram and Tripura, and the Bru communities' representatives under the initiative of the BJP-led NDA government at the centre. However, by allowing the Bru refugees to stay back in Tripura, the agreement does not solve the problem in its comprehensiveness.

Unlike the previous agreements, which emphasised on the issue of repatriation of the displaced Brus and their resettlement in Mizoram, the current one more or less reflects the sentiments of the Brus. On many occasions, the vast majority of the Brus were reluctant to resettle in Mizoram, fearing the attack against them by the host Mizo communities, though both the union and state governments assured them of safeguards. The present one is considered to be more practical as it aggresses on formal resettlement in the refugees' camps in Tripura. From the side of the Mizo organisations, the agreement is more or less acceptable as it is not infringing their ethnic interest in Mizoram. However, the real testing point for the success of the agreement depends on resolving the apprehension of the host community in Tripura. Perhaps that can be resolved through the politics involved in the conclusion of the agreement.

Hindutva Mobilisation of the Brus

As stated earlier, the Brus are the minority ethnic tribal community in Mizoram, which originally believed in the spiritual essence of animism. While some converted to Christianity, a vast majority still maintains their distinct religious and cultural identity. Although their practices are more close to Hinduism, they are not considered to be Hindus. However, in the largely Christian-dominated state of Mizoram, with greater proselytisation efforts, the Hindutva groups have penetrated among the Brus. They are taking up the issues of marginalisation of Brus at home in their political agenda. The Hindutva forces are appropriating the cause of the Bru tribals as neo-Hindu converts. The Akhil Bharatiya Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (ABVKA), an RSS affiliate in tribal areas, moved into the area in solidarity with the Brus against the persecution from the Christian Mizos and to spread the faith. Earlier too, the RSS accused foreign missionaries of converting Hindu Reangs to Christianity with the help of the police. In April 1998, the RSS Conclave in

Bangalore adopted a resolution condemning the attack on Brus by the Christian Mizos. Even the RSS leaders, under the banner of the ABVKA, urged the Union government to set up ADC for Brus in Mizoram. However, on 9 April 1998, Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla cautioned the RSS to refrain from instigating the Bru community in Mizoram and claimed that the ethnic upsurge in 1997 among the Brus was the handiwork of the RSS. He categorically asserted that "there had been no repercussions against them by the Mizos and not anyone forcibly converted into Christianity."²⁶ Even in the refugee camps in Tripura, the ABVKA was active in providing relief to Brus and declaring them as Hindus. For the BJP, which has minimal base in Mizoram, the Bru issue is a religious issue and not ethnic issue for its political mobilisation. On 16 December 2011, in an article, in *Sammada*, Ram Madhav wrote, "Reangs are the victims of religious persecution from the majority Mizos."²⁷

The eagerness on the part of the BJP to resolve the Bru issue and the quadripartite agreement, signed between the Government of India, the state governments of Mizoram and Tripura and the representative of the Bru communities, has to be seen in the larger context of furthering the political agenda of the BJP in Northeast Region. The recently passed Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) too has immense political significance and adds to the context. In fact, while the BJP government in Tripura allowed the Brus to settle in the state, their settlement was facilitated by the government led by the MNF, an ally of NEDA, in Mizoram. The BJP government at the centre had a hard bargain with these two statements to settle the Bru crisis, which was shuttling between the states government of Mizoram and Tripura for the last two decades. However, only time will tell how the agreement would reap political harvest for the BJP in Tripura and rest of Northeast India. Moreover, the continued legal resettlement of the Brus in Tripura depends on its local integration with other communities such as the dominant Bengalis and the indigenous tribal minority population, and also the material conditions provided by the state.

Notes

¹Roluahpuia, "The Bru Conundrum in Northeast India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 17 (April 28, 2018): 16–18.

²Shyamal Bikash Chakma and Suraj Gogoi, "The Bru-Mizo Conflict in Mizoram," *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 44 (November 3, 2018): 59.

³Seyla Benhabib, "Borders, Boundaries, and Citizenship," *Political Science and Politics* 38, no.4 (October 2005): 673–77.

⁴Suhas Chakma (ed.), "India Human Rights Report 2006" (New Delhi: Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2007): 134, https://archive.crin.org/en/docs/India_HR_2006.pdf.

⁵"Mizoram Government Has Submitted Roadmap V, for Repatriation of Brus," *The Economic Times*, May 18, 2016, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/mizoram-government-has-submitted-roadmap-v-for-repatriation-of-brus/articleshow/52327002.cms?from=mdr>.

⁶*Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 54*, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, July 22, 2015, <https://www.mha.gov.in/MHA1/Par2017/pdfs/par2015-pdfs/ls-210715/54.pdf>.

⁷"Mizoram Submits Bru Repatriation Plan to Centre," *The Hindu*, May 19, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/Mizoram-submits-Bru-repatriation-plan-to-centre/article14327222.ece>.

⁸"*Annual Report 2015–16*," Department of Internal Security, States, Home, Jammu & Kashmir Affairs and Border Management, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, accessed on September 20, 2021. <https://www.mha.gov.in/document/annual-reports/annual-report-ministry-of-home-affairs-2015-2016>.

⁹"*Annual Report 2017-18*," Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, accessed on September 25, 2021, p.26, https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/AnnualReport_17_18.pdf.

¹⁰*Ibid*, 26.

¹¹*Ibid*.

¹²"Shri Amit Shah Presides Over Signing of Historic Agreement to End the Bru-Reang Refugee Crisis," Press Information Bureau, Government of India, accessed on September 25, 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetailm.aspx?PRID=1599633>.

¹³*Ibid*.

¹⁴John Rawls in his conception of justice as fairness asserts that a just society would be realised through the provision of the distribution of primary goods. The primary goods include basic rights and liberties and self-respect, freedom of movement and free choice of occupation against a background of diverse opportunities, income and wealth. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹⁵Denizenship emerges from the erosion of social citizenship, even though political citizenship is offered. The Brus are entitled to have voting rights but denied social entitlement; this is often described as 'denizens'. See Bryan S. Turner, "We Are All Denizens Now: On the Erosion of Citizenship," *Citizenship Studies*, 20, nos. 6–7 (2016): 682.

¹⁶Lucy Hovil, "Local Integration," in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, eds. Elena Fiddian-Qasimiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long and Nando Sigona (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 488–98.

¹⁷*Ibid*, 489.

¹⁸*Ibid*, 489.

¹⁹*Ibid*, 489.

²⁰Roluahpuia, "The Bru Conundrum," 16.

²¹*Ibid*, 18.

²²Chakma and Gogoi, "The Bru-Mizo Conflict," 59–61.

²³Abdul Mannan Mazumdar and Bonali Bhattacharjee, "The Displaced Reangs of Hailakandi District," in *Blisters on Their Feet: Tales of Internally Displaced Persons in India's North East*, ed. Samir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008), 197.

²⁴"Explained: What Is the Agreement to Settle Bru Refugees in Tripura?" *The Indian Express*, January 20, 2020.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/understanding-the-bru-refugees-settlement-mizoram-tripura-6224956/>.

²⁵"PM Modi welcomes agreement to permanently settle Bru-Reang refugees in Tripura," *Business Standard*, 16 January 2020. <https://www.business->

standard.com/article/pti-stories/pm-modi-welcomes-agreement-to-permanently-settle-bru-reang-refugees-in-tripura-120011601609_1.html.

²⁶"Target Northeast: How RSS Plans to Make Region Saffron," *The Hindustan Times*, December 15, 2014. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/target-northeast-how-rss-plans-to-make-region-saffron/story-YZGPkOBXb6tS301BvpunpJ.html>.

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Refugee-Turned-Voters: Refugee Identity and Voting Rights among Exiled Tibetan Community in Mcleodganj

By

Swati Condrolli *

Introduction

The Tibetan exiled community has been viewed as a successful refugee community in comparison to other refugee groups in South Asia.¹ It cannot be denied that the community has not only sustained themselves but also successfully preserved their culture in a foreign land and kept the spirit of their cause alive. However, it is significant to note that the mainstream image of Tibetans and their cause is largely represented by the Tibetan government-in-exile and the Dalai Lama. Such representations have a homogenising tendency where all Tibetans in exile are viewed as a part of a singular reality. The problem with such an understanding is that it ignores the worldview of the ones in minority within that group. For instance, the refusal of Indian citizenship by Tibetan refugees in India has been viewed as an act to strengthen a sense of a common political and cultural reality. While this is true for a large population of Tibetans, this excludes the Tibetans who have not only taken Indian citizenship but have also keenly participated in Indian elections in recent years.

This paper attempts to disentangle the complex issue of extending voting rights to a refugee community and the response of the concerned community to such an extension thereof. The major objective is to understand the complexities and specificities within the Tibetan exiled community about taking Indian citizenship with a focus on voting rights. Consequently, the paper engages with the static and processual elements of extension of voting rights to the Tibetan community in India. First, we peek into the current citizenship and refugee framework governing the Tibetan community in India and unravel the legal considerations for acceptance or

* Swati Condrolli, Doctoral Fellow, Department of Political Science, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India. Email: swati.condrolli@gmail.com
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refusal of Indian citizenship by the Tibetan refugees. Second, the paper closely examines the process of participation of refugee-turned-voters through interviews and ethnographic engagement in local municipal elections in Mcleodganj. To corroborate this, newspaper sources have been consulted. Few preliminary interviews were conducted in December 2018 in Dharamshala followed by fieldwork conducted in May 2019 during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The major part of the fieldwork for this research was conducted between December 2018 and May 2021 which included close observation of the Dharamshala Municipal elections, 2021. The study locates itself in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, which is the *de facto* capital of the Tibetan government-in-exile and the second largest Tibetan settlement in India. Within Dharamshala, Mcleodganj was decided as the site for fieldwork as this ward is demographically dominated by the Tibetan community. Another significant consideration for choosing Dharamshala at the beginning of this research was that Dharamshala witnessed the maximum number of Tibetans enrolling for voting after the Election Commission's notification to enrol Tibetans in the electoral rolls in the year 2014.²

This paper is organised into four sections apart from this introductory note. The first section provides an overview of the research problem. The second section discusses the legal framework that guides the stay of Tibetan refugees in India. The subsequent section documents the narratives of refugee-turned-voters has been divided into two sub-parts, discussing narratives of Tibetans who applied for voting cards but later surrendered them and those who chose to become Indian voters/citizens respectively. The fourth section is a discussion based on Tibetan participation in municipal elections in Dharamshala. The paper concludes by making an argument that the nuanced and significant factors that led some Tibetan refugees to become Indian voters are best understood by analysing their participation in their respective local contexts.

History and Context

Tibetans have been residing in India as political refugees for more than six decades now. According to the amendment to the Indian Citizenship Act 1955, any person born in India from January 1950 to July 1987, is an Indian citizen by naturalisation. However, the majority of Tibetans in India have chosen not to avail Indian citizenship and remain stateless instead. Estimates suggest that only 2 to 4% Tibetans in India have taken citizenship.³ Moreover, the Tibetan government-in-exile has constantly discouraged Tibetans from taking Indian citizenship. Some of the reasons for discouraging the younger generation from acquiring Indian citizenship are a possible setback to the freedom struggle of Tibet, fear of loss of Tibetan identity and culture, impact on funding in aid to the refugees, and the fear of diminishing sympathy of the Tibetan freedom struggle.⁴

The last decade has invited a debate on the question of Indian citizenship for Tibetans. It gained momentum in 2010 when Namgyal Dolkar Lhagvari, a Tibetan born in India, challenged in court the Ministry of External Affairs' decision to deny her Indian passport.⁵ The court ruled that children of Tibetans born in India between 26 January 1950 and July 1987 are Indian citizens. The same was reiterated by the Karnataka High Court in 2013 in *Tenzin Choephag Ling Rinpoche vs Union of India*.⁶ Following the court's judgements, the Election Commission of India in February 2014 issued a notice to all state commissions to enrol Tibetans eligible to be Indian citizens in the electoral roll.⁷

This decision, however, stands at crossroads now and is in contradiction with the principle of 'non-assimilation', which lied at the heart of India's policy towards Tibetan refugees since 1959. The principle of non-assimilation manifested in the establishment of separate settlements/clusters for the Tibetan community aimed at supporting Tibetans to preserve their cultural values while living in a foreign land.⁸ Therefore, as stipulated, Election Commission's announcement evoked a mixed response from the Tibetans. The move was welcomed by only a few Tibetans as the majority chose not to enrol themselves. The decision to not vote was primarily driven by two factors. One, they were required to submit their registration certificates (popularly known as RCs, they are the main document of identity held by a Tibetan refugee in India) issued by the Indian government. Second, participating in elections would be seen as a dilution of their cause of 'Free Tibet' and returning to their homeland. Nonetheless, few Tibetans living in Himachal Pradesh and Delhi showed interest in enrolling themselves and becoming voters. Around 1200 Tibetans in Dharamshala applied for registration as voters out of which 217 were approved as voters before the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.⁹ In 2016, elections were held for the first time in the Municipal Corporation, Dharamshala. There was an increase in the number of Tibetans who registered for the voting card in 2016 for the municipal elections in the newly formed Dharamshala Municipal Corporation.

The larger picture that appeared through the initial newspaper reports following the Election Commission's decision was that the Tibetan community collectively does not intend to dilute their cultural and political identity by becoming Indian citizens/voters. This paper, however, is an attempt to understand the perception of those Tibetans who have turned into Indian voters and understand the factors that inform their choice. The terms 'choice to vote' and 'not to vote' used in this paper refer to the choice of enrolling or not enrolling as Indian voters (not to be confused with whether a person went to cast his vote on the polling day). The article does not draw generalisations for the Tibetan diaspora in all the Tibetan settlements/clusters that chose to vote. Rather, the attempt is to unfold the complexity that prevails in the Tibetan community regarding the issue of voting rights in a local setting in Mcleodganj.

The Legal Framework for Tibetans in India

There are two broader domains within which we can view the legal status of the exiled Tibetan community in India. These are the practices followed by the Indian government to deal with refugee influx in the absence of uniform refugee law and the country's citizenship law. This section analyses the reverberation of the refugee and citizenship framework to the exiled Tibetan community residing in India.

India is not a signatory to the two major agreements guiding international refugee law, i.e., the UN Refugee Convention 1951 and Protocol for Refugees, 1967. This raises serious concerns regarding the applicability of the term 'refugee' in India. According to the internationally accepted definition of refugee, the term 'refugee' shall apply to every person who, 'owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality.'¹⁰ This definition is accepted worldwide irrespective of a country being a signatory or a non-signatory to the UN Convention. India, though a non-signatory, thus far has hosted 2,16,333 refugees owing to the porous South Asian borders.¹¹ The largest and the first movement of refugees to (and from) India was a consequence of pre-independent India's partition. After more than a decade of this experience, it was a request for asylum by the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, followed by many Tibetans, which raised the issue of refugee rehabilitation for the Indian government. The refugee group was granted asylum on humanitarian grounds by the then Indian prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. The definition of refugee, as discussed earlier, applies to the Tibetans who were forced to leave their land following China's declaration of the "peaceful liberation" of Tibet in 1951 and its crushing of the Tibetan national uprising in Lhasa in 1959.¹² However, what remains a peculiar feature of this community is the fact that it was not only a group of people relocating themselves but rather rehabilitation/relocation of political, religious and educational systems as well. With no refugee law in place, the Indian government relocated the Dalai Lama and his administration to Mcleodganj, Himachal Pradesh, and asked state governments to provide land to resettle the community.¹³ This was done on the Tibetan spiritual leader's request to Pandit Nehru that Tibetans should be able to preserve their culture and provide education to young children. This unique facility was provided to the community.

Further, it is considered important to bring attention to the status of 'Tibetans in exile' as 'citizens' in the Tibetan government-in-exile. The Tibetan government-in-exile (officially called Central Tibetan Administration) is seen as a precursor to the 'imagined government' that would be formed once the Tibetans return to their homeland. The exiled Tibetans pay taxes and exercise franchise within this institutional exile set-up. They simultaneously are seen to perform the roles of a citizen and a refugee. This unusual state of affairs makes the Tibetans stuck between parallel regimes.

Moving over to the issue of legal identification of Tibetan refugees, it is noteworthy that while the language used in the government and popular narrative confers the term 'refugee' on the exiled Tibetan community, they are legally governed under the Foreigners Registration Act, 1946. It would be safe to say that Tibetans are *de facto* refugees and *de jure* foreigners in India. Consequently, the main identity document possessed by any Tibetan refugee in India is a registration certificate, which is generally issued to any foreigner residing in India. This document needs to be renewed annually; additionally, it has a provision to renew it once in five years applicable to Tibetans who have been residing in India for 20 years and more. The document is issued through the Superintendent of Police in the concerned district. Presently, more than six decades later, after the initial exodus, this registration certificate and the exile seem to have turned into a permanent feature of their existence. To come out of this rut of statelessness and uncertainty associated with it, one plausible solution seems to be availing Indian citizenship.

Part II (Articles 5 to 11) of the Indian Constitution deals with citizenship. Ironically though, it does not define what citizenship stands for. Instead, this part suggests who is eligible to be an Indian citizen at the time of the commencement of the Indian Republic and leaves the legislations about citizenship to be made by the Parliament from time to time. The Citizenship Act of 1955 stated that every person born in India on or after 26 January 1950 would be a citizen of India. This was changed through an amendment made in 1986 in response to the matter of illegal Bangladeshis in Assam. This amendment provided that from 1 January 1987, which was the date of the enforcement of the Citizenship Amendment Act, 1986, every person born in India could be a citizen of India only if either of his/her parents was a citizen of India. This was further amended in 2003, where it was declared that a person born in India could become an Indian citizen if both his parents were Indian citizens or one parent was an Indian citizen if the other was not an illegal migrant. Applying this to the Tibetan context, this implies that any Tibetan born in India on or before 3 December 2004 is considered an Indian citizen (Gupta, 2019). However, to materialise this right to citizenship, the Tibetans had to take recourse to the Indian judiciary¹⁴ as is evident in two of the most talked-about cases where the Tibetans were denied Indian passports and they reclaimed this right through judgements issued by the courts in their favour.¹⁵

Generally, one would view voting rights as a corollary of citizenship rights, but in this case, situating the voting rights granted to the Tibetan community in India within the country's citizenship framework is also troublesome. Sonika Gupta in her 2019 paper on voting rights argues that "the Indian state has determined the relationship between voter and citizen as not necessarily mutually reinforcing." This is because Tibetans are required to seek citizenship legally to hold an Indian passport, whereas voting cards, on the directions of the Election Commission of India were issued to them without legally registering as Indian citizens.¹⁶ Therefore, while the timeline within which Tibetans are eligible to become Indian citizens and Indian voters remains the same, the way the identity of a Tibetan as an Indian voter and citizen gets materialised is different.

The above paragraph reflects the legal and political standing of the extension of voting rights to Tibetan refugees. In the upcoming sections of the paper, I analyse the process of participation of refugee-turned-voters at the local level within their clusters and the factors associated with making a choice to vote and participating in the elections.

Documenting Lives of Refugee-Turned-Voters: Reflections from the Field

This section presents the perceptions of Tibetans living in Mcleodganj, Dharamshala, about voting rights extended to them. The study limits itself to the Tibetans who enrolled for voting rights after the Election Commission's notification to all states to enrol Tibetans on the electoral list in February 2014. According to news sources, around 48,000 Tibetans were eligible to vote as per the criteria.¹⁷ However, a minuscule number of them came forward and welcomed the move of the Election Commission. After the extension of voting rights, Tibetans in Himachal had an opportunity to vote in five elections, Lok Sabha elections in 2014 and 2019, municipal elections, Dharamshala in 2016 and 2021, and Vidhan Sabha (state legislative assembly) elections, 2017. It is interesting to note that with every consecutive election, Tibetans grew more enthusiastic about getting enrolled in the electoral list and more people enrolled themselves as voters. Surprisingly, however, in the aftermath of the 2017 Vidhan Sabha elections of Himachal Pradesh, Tibetans started surrendering back their voting cards. This happened because the Tibetans who possessed Indian voting cards now were required to submit back their Registration Certifications which meant withdrawing the benefits they received as a refugee.

In this section, the respondents have been divided into two cohorts. These cohorts represent conflicting positions of Tibetans who, at least for once, have applied for voting rights. The first cohort constitutes those Tibetans who withdrew from voting by surrendering their voting cards while

the second represents those who continue to maintain their political identity as Indian citizens or voters.

A Stint with Citizenship: Oscillating Between the Status of ‘Refugee’ and ‘Citizen’

Based on the newspaper reporting, it was realised that the dynamics of why and how Tibetans choose to vote, despite a majority of them turning down this opportunity, have not received attention. Accordingly, the factors that influence voting choice and preference were decided as the final points of exploration. After a few interactions on the field in December 2018, the first information that came out was that the Tibetans who had voted in the previous elections (Vidhan Sabha Elections, 2017) were surrendering back their voting cards. This had not been reported in newspapers till that point in time. It raised a question about why would a refugee not entail citizenship and choose to be stateless instead. It was in contrast to the notion that integration with host societies is the ultimate goal in refugee situations. This section hereby explores how availing of citizenship and/or voting cards has repercussions for refugee communities beyond gaining membership in a state. For Tibetans, refugee identity depicts the decisive role it plays in choosing to vote or not vote. The upcoming paragraphs are a reflection of narratives that can be drawn out of the excerpts from interviews with the Tibetans who returned their voting cards to go back to their refugee status. Given the sensitive nature of the research, the names of respondents have not been used in the paper.

It was in January 2018 that the Tibetans started surrendering back their voting cards. The impetus to this was provided by the Tibetan Settlement Officer returning his voting card after he was removed as the nominated councillor from the Municipal Corporation. The Dharamshala Municipal Corporation has 17 elected councillors for its 17wards and five nominated ones. In February 2017, for the first time, a Tibetan has inducted a councillor nominated by the Himachal Pradesh Government’s Department of Urban Development. However, after the Vidhan Sabha elections in 2017, the Government in Himachal changed and the new BJP Government replaced the nominated councillors with new ones. Ironically, this time there was not a single Tibetan on the list of nominated councillors. This episode at the local level can be seen as the beginning of the process of withdrawal from voting rights. The second major reason that can be attributed to this is the issue of holding dual identity cards in the form of voting cards and registration certificates at the same time by all interviewees who had surrendered back their voting cards. The respondents mentioned that they received orders of submitting back their registration certificates if they were availing voting cards. A respondent who runs a shop in Mcleodganj said, “We got voting rights but it was taken back by the government. After giving us voting rights, we were

asked to submit our registration certificates therefore, we returned our voting cards. If a Tibetan does not have a registration certificate, we will not get any benefit from being a Tibetan.”¹⁸

This raises concern not only about issues related to documentation but also two other things. The first question it raises is whether it is a well-informed individual decision made by a person or is it a lack of knowledge (because of ambiguity in-laws) that results in making such a choice. As another interviewee puts it, “India has a dim dull policy on Tibetans.” The ambiguity of the refugee law itself and lack of clarity and awareness about the repercussions of holding a particular identity document were observed in interviews as well as informal interactions. The second noteworthy issue that this statement raises is about benefits associated with the retention of a registration certificate which is a mark of *de facto* refugee identity for Tibetans across India. It further draws attention to the whole political economy of international funding for refugees. Almost every local Indian will refer to the international funding as the reason why Tibetans have not shown interest in becoming Indian citizens. Such responses reaffirm the notion of refugee identity as the pursuit of interests where the basic need of survival is fulfilled by sticking to the refugee status. This reflects in Richard Jenkins’s statement that “Identification and interests cannot be easily distinguished”.¹⁹ A respondent also pointed out that it is not only the ambiguity in the law that poses a problem; rather, the unawareness of the officials of the rules is an added problem. Sensitising the officials on such sensitive matters was mentioned as a concern across all interviewees.

Second, conversations with respondents throw light on the linkage between voting right as a political right in a democracy and how Tibetans assess its utility for them. Respondents also mentioned that surrendering back registration certificates would mean that the Tibetans could not stay in their settlements if they availed the voting rights. “What does voting right give me? This piece of paper does not give me a place to live, a job, or food. I cannot eat a voting card. I cannot eat a passport,” a middle-aged respondent questions while interacting on the significance of voting rights to Tibetans.²⁰ This particular respondent was eligible to become an Indian voter, voted in the Municipal elections 2016, as well as Vidhan Sabha elections 2017, but mentioned the local politics and lack of systematic laws as the reasons for returning his voting cards. He remarked that survival and shelter are the first concerns of not just Tibetans but of any living being. “If the Indian authorities ask us to leave the settlements for availing voting rights, are they providing us shelter or food?”²¹ The basic needs of survival come first for anybody. If being a refugee can serve the interests of survival better, why would one become an Indian citizen? Yet another respondent compares the situation of a Tibetan availing voting rights with that of a beggar. He argues that both are eligible to be Indian citizens, but none can secure his livelihood

or have a place to live by being a citizen. It draws attention to the lack of substantive advantages that becoming a voter or a citizen entails.

Along with the individual concerns highlighted by the Tibetans who surrendered back their voting cards, the role played by the Central Tibetan Administration is also a pertinent factor to be discussed. Although the Tibetan Charter followed by the Central Tibetan Administration provides for dual citizenship, it generally discourages Indian citizenship for Tibetans. The Tibetans living in exile are Green Book holders²² (citizens) of the Tibetan government-in-exile. As discussed in the previous section, this makes them eligible to elect the members of *Kashag* (Tibetan Parliament) and pay taxes. However, after 2014, the Central Tibetan Administration has maintained an official position that getting citizenship is an individual choice and it has no role to play in such decisions. Simply put, it maintains a stance that it neither encourages nor discourages Tibetans in India or elsewhere to avail citizenship rights of the host country. Even so, the interviews with Tibetans in Mcleodganj reflect a slightly contrasting picture. The Tibetans, irrespective of whether they have Indian citizenship or continue to reside in India as a refugee, more or less said that the Tibetan government acts as a stumbling block in actively taking up voting or citizenship rights. Moreover, some Tibetans mentioned that pressures from the Central Tibetan Administration and the local Tibetan community were one of the factors for them to withdraw their names from the electoral list. For instance, one Tibetan cited that the Tibetan government issued a notification in the settlement that the Tibetans should not go for voting in Indian elections as it will hurt the cause of free Tibet. The Indian government also issued a notice that there will be no further registrations for voting cards. He said, “The Indian Government and Central Tibetan Administration’s position on this matter have instilled fear in Tibetans and they are reluctant to enrol themselves now. Therefore, this process has come to a standstill.”²³ It is evident how the extension of voting rights to Tibetans has become chaotic. For this new group of Tibetan refugees, exercising their newly granted right to vote was ephemeral. This particular case acts as an outlier, where a group of refugees eligible to become voters initially celebrated the host country’s move to grant them voting rights but later had to give up on them as becoming a voter meant losing their residential, educational and other benefits that they are already receiving from either their exiled government or the Indian government. This brings us to conclude here that availing voting rights are not a mere political act, rather there is a cost-benefit analysis that is accompanied by such rights.

For Tibetans living in Dharamshala, from the 2014 Lok Sabha polls which offered them the first opportunity to vote till the Municipal Corporation elections held in 2021, the process of electoral participation has not been consistent. From getting voting rights, going out to cast their vote, becoming active in local politics and being approached by the local leaders and parties to vote for them—everything became a signpost of conducting

oneself as citizens/voters. However, this experience was short-lived for some of them because their repudiation of voting rights took them back to the state of statelessness and refugeehood. One observes that the provision of citizenship or voting rights to refugees might not answer all their grievances as is evident in this case. As one of the respondents put it, “I will never reclaim Indian citizenship. I have survived without a voting card for so many years. In the future also, I will survive. Even if I am not able to return to Tibet, I will be happy to live as a Tibetan refugee throughout my life.”²⁴

The Saga of a Refugee-Turned-Voter: A Localised Perspective

We have discussed how the year 2014 made several Tibetans fervent about exercising their voting rights. Owing to reasons discussed in the previous section, a few of them also surrendered back their voting cards. This section discusses the narratives of Tibetans who continued to exercise their right to vote even after the 2017 State Legislative Assembly elections when many others had surrendered their voting cards. It is an attempt to understand the dynamics that keep this cohort of Tibetans firm about not abandoning their voting rights. It helps us decipher what voting means to them while they try to maintain their Tibetan cultural identity and Indian citizenship simultaneously. Voting rights, in this context, are seen as providing recognition and acceptance to refugees at par with the host population (see next section on municipal elections for more details).

Sudeep Basu argues that identity is a situated process, i.e., one’s identity becomes allied to places where one resides. Place-making emerges as a dominant theme in his work on Tibetans in Darjeeling. Viewing identity as a situated process, as Basu does in his work, assists us in unfolding ways in which Tibetans associate with Mcleodganj as well.²⁵ Choosing to stick to the decision to become an Indian voter is a manifestation of not merely portrayal as Indian citizens. I argue that this act is rather a claim at the local level to assert that having lived in Mcleodganj for decades now puts them at par with the host Indian community residing there. For instance, an interviewee responded on being asked about how he identifies himself: “I was born in India. I am also an Indian. You are also an Indian. We both are the same”.²⁶ This reflects how a person constructs his/her identity in terms of his association and ties with the place of residence. It further depicts that the identity of being an Indian voter/citizen does not exist in isolation. Rather, it builds on how Tibetans view themselves vis-à-vis the host population. While on the one hand, they view themselves as a distinct cultural group, on the other hand, there is a sense of claim of being equal to their Indian counterparts based on decades of living in the same place, sharing the place of birth, similar eating habits, common development issues at the local level, etc. This is evident in the words of one of the Tibetan interviewees who said, “Tibetan identity is not something which is on paper. It is within you. It

cannot be separated from you. Even if you become a citizen of any country, you will remain a Tibetan. There can be no comparison between a Tibetan with an RC and a Tibetan with an Indian passport.”²⁷

Along with this sense of belonging to India as a country and Mcleodganj specifically as the place of birth and upbringing, there is no denial of the fact that even the decision to become a voter/citizen is guided by additional factors such as the benefits (other than political) that it brings along. A Tibetan man recently turned voter amidst his other friends returning their voting cards stated, “I am not giving back my voting right. I was born in India. My wife and children live here. I am an Indian.”²⁸ This statement asserts the self-image of a Tibetan born in India. Contrary to a Tibetan for whom “a voting card is nothing more than a piece of paper,” a conversation with this person provides an account of the benefits that a voting card possibly carries. Starting a new business or buying property, for example, is easier if one holds citizenship. This depicts how easing daily struggles of life holds more prominence for people rather than living with a fixed identity thus reiterating the relevance of the immediate context and the fluid nature of identity.

In addition to the reasons cited for opting for voting cards, the factors that impact their voting choice in elections are also significant. The interviews of those who voted (irrespective of the fact that a few of them withdrew later) suggest that the development of the place of their residence remains the first concern while casting their vote. This is particularly relevant in the case of municipal elections and state assembly elections. The respondents mentioned that the Tibetans mostly try to stay away from party politics. “For us what matters is what a candidate can do for the whole place. Good roads, good water supply, as Mcleodganj suffers from water crisis every summer, and other facilities provided in the area will benefit the Indians and Tibetans alike,” said a 34-year-old Tibetan.²⁹ Further, factors that have prominence when we analyse the process of participating in local elections have been discussed in the next section.

Dharamshala Municipal Corporation Elections 2021

It is significant to mention that the early years of the 1990s were marked by anti-Tibetan politics followed by the vandalisation of Tibetan properties in Mcleodganj. However, two decades later, the Tibetan refugees participating in local elections with local Indian leaders trying to woo their Tibetan vote bank seems remarkable. The Municipal Corporation of Dharamshala, at its nascent stage, went to the polls just for the second time in April 2021. The conversion of Dharamshala Municipal Council into a Municipal Corporation in 2016 was a matter of pride for its residents including the Tibetan community which dominates Mcleodganj demographically. This decision came two years after the Indian Election Commission had announced the enrolment of Tibetans in

the electoral list, wherever applicable as per the country's citizenship law. Since this announcement of the extension of voting rights to members of the exiled Tibetan community, Himachal Pradesh witnessed five rounds of elections as discussed in the previous segment. It is quite evident that the Tibetan community is not a strong vote bank for the general and state legislative assembly elections owing to its small numbers. Therefore, the most active participation of the new Tibetan voters has been witnessed in local elections, i.e., Dharamshala Municipal elections.

Mcleodganj, Ward number 3 of the Dharamshala Municipal Corporation, as discussed in the earlier sections of the paper, has the highest number of Tibetan residents. The Tibetan votes have a deal-breaker impact on the results in this particular ward. The Tibetan voters in Mcleodganj offer a fresh perspective on voting rights as a right beyond merely a political right/act. A Tibetan man residing in Mcleodganj says, "I originally belong to another settlement and I have not enrolled for voting here. I have observed that even if the proportion of Tibetan voting in Indian elections is small, it is helpful for the entire community living here. It gives us a platform to raise issues at the local level that are specific to the Tibetan community. We can go up to the councillors and raise our concerns and they will have to listen to us as they are dependent on us for votes."³⁰ This statement reflects a sense of claim and rights among the Tibetans after the formal extension of voting rights to them. Voting rights, as analysed in the local setting of these newly turned voters can be thus viewed as a turning point for them, a transition from being mere spectators to active participators in these elections. For instance, a Tibetan person who has availed Indian citizenship said, "As residents here, at least some of the Tibetans have always been speaking for local issues, but what voting rights have done is that we are being listened to and attention is paid to what we have to say."³¹ Furthermore, Tibetans who voted in the election also expressed their concern over difficulty in deciding whom they wanted to vote for because the two main contenders from the Bhartiya Janata Party and the Indian National Congress were both in the good books of the Tibetan community. A Tibetan lady mentioned that the choice to vote was a difficult one to make for her as both the candidates had shared a friendly relationship with her family for four decades now.³² Similarly, another Tibetan voter post elections feared that while the winning candidate has endlessly expressed his gratitude for Tibetan votes, the losing candidate might view Tibetans as the reason for not making him win.³³ From the ways Tibetans participate in elections, the other significant aspect is the process of the candidates wooing their voters. A particular trend witnessed in 2016 as well as in the 2021 Dharamshala Municipal elections were the nomination of a Tibetan as a member of the Municipal Corporation.³⁴ However, a Tibetan contesting municipal elections is yet to be seen. Also, in these elections separate meetings were organised for the Tibetan voters by the election in charge of political parties. Special attention was paid by the contesting

candidates to publish their manifestos for these elections in the Tibetan language. The hoardings to promote the candidates were also seen in the Tibetan language all across the streets in Mcleodganj. Mcleodganj, therefore, provides an interesting insight into the integration of a few refugee-turned-voters at a local level.

Conclusion

Within the larger narrative of the refusal of Indian citizenship by the Tibetan refugees in India, a small number of Tibetans who chose to become citizens and actively participate in the Indian elections in their respective locations, remain an outlier. This group of refugees who turned into enthusiastic voters should not be mistaken for a homogeneous group. While some Tibetans continue to exercise their rights to vote in the elections, few others in Mcleodganj abandoned their voting right as they had more to lose than gain. This ephemeral label of a voter/citizen for some Tibetan refugees signifies their conception of a refugee and citizen beyond a political/legal identity. It is suggestive of their understanding that being a *de facto* refugee in India is more favourable than becoming an Indian citizen. The nuances of such an outlook are evident in a number of factors such as losing residential, educational and other benefits provided to Tibetan refugees by the Central Tibetan Administration or the Indian government if they availed Indian citizenship. This reflects the assessment of voting rights by the Tibetans based on their political and economic viability to them.

Furthermore, it is evident through cases like that of Namgyal Dolkar Lhayagri that the route to Indian citizenship for Tibetans follows through the Indian judiciary which as Yamamoto (2019) suggests is available to Tibetans from a decent economic background because of the money required to fight court cases. Moreover, evidence from fieldwork in Mcleodganj reflects that the participation of the refugee-turned-voters (who did not abandon their voting rights) is more visible in the municipal elections as compared to state legislative assembly and general elections. At the local level in Mcleodganj, it marks a shift from anti-Tibetan politics witnessed in the early 1990s to these new voters becoming an indispensable part of the local politics in Mcleodganj. Further, this study provides insights on voting right as an equalising factor for the Tibetans vis-à-vis the host population in addition to factors like ease of doing business, applying for jobs in the public sector, etc. The electoral participation of the Tibetan refugees who turned into Indian voters in Mcleodganj provides a glimpse of how this community has been able to use its agency at the local level.

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Notes

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Study of Process, Determinants and Consequences of “Donkey” Migration from South Asia to Greece in Europe

By

Mohammed Taukeer *

Introduction

According to United Nations, there were a total of 25.9 million refugees globally with 20.4 million under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and 5.5 million refugees registered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in the Near East, by the end of the year 2018.¹ “Refugees are persons who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. They are outside of their country of nationality and are unable or, owing to such fear, are unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country. Persons recognized as refugees under this definition are sometimes called convention refugees and are usually granted an open-ended permission to stay in the country of asylum while asylum seekers are persons, who file an application for asylum in a country other than their own. They remain in the status of asylum seeker until their application is considered and adjudicated for the status of refugees.”²

The process of illegal migration of refugees from South Asia to Greece is led by human trafficking network of illegal migration.³ These Asian refugees enter Greece illegally for migrating to countries of the European Union because Greece is the major route for migration to the developed European countries.⁴ These illegal Asian refugees face hurdles during the long journey of illegal migration and find themselves isolated due to their unidentified socio-economic and political identities among Europeans in Greece.⁵ These refugees live in camps in vulnerable conditions⁶ and face problems with access to health care benefits and basic human rights benefits

* Mohammed Taukeer, Research Fellow, International Institute of Migration and Development, Trivandrum, Kerala, India. Email: taukmd@gmail.com
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in Greece.⁷ The socio-economic status of illegal refugees is low compared to legal migrants who have the right to access the socio-economic and political rights prescribed under the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).⁸ The illegal South Asian refugees do not have access to educational rights in Greece and the consequences are against their rights prescribed under the UDHR.⁹ In these consequences, the newly arrived refugees face problems of deprivation of basic human rights in Greece.¹⁰ Looking from this perspective, the current research tries to understand the process, determinates and consequences of the ‘Donkey’ migration of refugees from South Asia to Greece via the route of Iran and Turkey taking the endless arduous journeys in search of a better life in European countries than the precarious economic conditions prevalent in South Asia and its consequent reflection on the socio-economic status of the South Asian refugees in Greece.

Donkey Migration across the Barbed Wire: Dignity or Despair?

The European Union has emerged as the hotspot for refugees and asylum seekers from Asian countries, especially from Islamic nations, namely, Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, due to political instability in these regions.¹¹ Turkey due to its geographical and socio-economic connection with Europe acts as the transit destination for refugees from Asia¹² creating political and economic instability in both Turkey and European countries¹³ in managing the challenges posed by the illegal migration of refugees.¹⁴ Massive flows of refugees crossed the international borders of Schengen countries illegally, avoiding the border security procedures of registration and identification. This illegal refugee bulge created a fear psychosis amongst the border regimes.¹⁵ Therefore, eastern European Schengen countries, in particular, decided to defend the fragile system of control and the structure of the nation-state with violent means such as razor wire.¹⁶

Statelessness leads to multiple vulnerabilities and is now increasingly being conceived in terms of human rights violations as such persons have to face discrimination in basic rights such as the right to work, health care and education-related problems and often get trapped in the human trafficking network.¹⁷ Asian refugees have to face socio-economic and psychological problems of identity crisis and lack of psychological attachment with Europeans¹⁸ creating complex issues of social integration as Asian refugees find themselves isolated among Europeans.¹⁹ Many times the host country does not accept the presence of Asian refugees in the main discourse of development practices in Europe.²⁰ However, the social network system of refugees in host societies provides a space for refugees that minimise the socio-economic and psychological risk-related problems of refugees.²¹

It was during one of my academic visits to Athens, Greece in August 2017 that I came across many Asian migrants, and it goes unspoken that many of them were illegal migrants. It was through the continuous informal communications and the time spent that made the ‘field’ or case studies for

this paper. It was easy to interact with the undocumented South Asian migrants of South Asia, especially refugees from Pakistan, as there has been huge lot of them in Greece who used Urdu language for interaction amongst them and which I could understand partly. I observed that Bangladeshi refugees were also visible in Greece and they used Urdu partially to interact with the refugees of Pakistan as well as Bengali, their mother tongue, to communicate with migrants from their country. Hence, language was the major tool of identification of South Asian migrants to Greece through legal and illegal processes. I focused my field work in Omonoia Square, located at the centre of Athens in Greece. There were numerous South Asian restaurants at the Square where South Asian refugees and asylum seekers used to come for food.

I closely observed the working-living conditions of South Asian refugees and asylum seekers in Greece. The sampling procedure of South Asian refugees was determined by snowball and accidental sampling method under saturation stage of information among 150 South Asian refugees including to Pakistanis and Bangladeshis refugees, those illegally entered in Greece as well as identified as “Donkey” refugees among Europeans. I collected information through the observation method and had taken informal and focus group interviews among South Asian migrants in restaurants, metro stations and parks. I closely observed the subject of discussion among South Asian migrants and found that mostly migrants of South Asia used to discuss about their working and living circumstances in Greece. I have taken informal interviews from both types of South Asian migrants, including documented migrants who migrated to Greece through legal channels with passport/visa and undocumented South Asian migrants who entered into Greece through informal channels of human trafficking network system, known as the Donkey process of migration. The primary data is analysed by narratives, descriptions, oral history and case studies about process, determinants and consequences of Donkey migration.

According to the South Asian refugees in Greece, the term Donkey denotes a process in the human trafficking network system, though they claimed that they did not know about the underground mechanism that led to the entire process of migration from South Asia to the Schengen countries of Europe. In this study, it is found that entire process of illegal migration of refugees from South Asia to Greece is known as Donkey migration among South Asian refugees but these South Asian refugees identified themselves as Donkey with self-respect and honour. They felt proud to recognise themselves as Donkey because they suffered and tolerated pain of long journey of migration. They crossed the sea, rivers, deserts, valleys, mountains and forests on foot, riding on trucks, and sailing in boats to illegally enter Greece. Donkey denotes the geographical and social identities of the undocumented South Asian migrants to Greece who used the term in a positive way explaining the entire travel of their migration as a *narrative* of their bravery and courage in overcoming geographical and political hurdles. These South Asian refugees were called as Donkey by European but these South Asian refugees had taken the term of Donkey as the geographical identifier of

South Asia and nearly coterminous with their national identities of Pakistani and Bangladeshi. The term Donkey represented their emotions, perceptions, attitudes and norms about their presence in Greece—they did never think about its negative aspects as they migrated with hopes of better life in the glamour of European countries.²² I met Asif, a 26 years old Bangladeshi, who migrated with the help of a human trafficking network. He felt proud to identify himself as a Donkey refugee. He do not have any type of identity-related problem with the term Donkey because he considered himself an illegal Donkey migrant from South Asia.²³ Raza, a 27 years old South Asian refugee from Pakistan, told me that it was the unemployment problems that he decided to take the illegal Donkey route of migration to Greece via Iran and Turkey. He further told that the meaning of Donkey is associated with their livelihood as well as socio-economic identity among Europeans.²⁴

The Migratory Trail: Routes of Donkey Migration

Economic and non-economic factors determined the process of illegal migration from South Asia to Greece as migrants move in hope of better opportunities of life than in their country of origin. The undocumented South Asian migrants reported that instead of political instability the precarious economic conditions in their country acted as the main push behind their migration decision. The entire process of Donkey migration is managed by the social network system of migration that provides sociological, economic and psychological support to undocumented South Asian migrants in Greece. They develop a form of social bonding among the South Asian community in Greece. Favourable images as conveyed through active information technology arouse the dreams of South Asian youths for a brighter life in Europe. Hence, when they try to migrate to Schengen countries of Europe and fail to get a work permit through the formal channel, they fall for illegal migration seeking the help of human trafficking network system known as the Donkey route of migration. There are two routes of Donkey migration—from the Middle East to Greece; and from South Asia (Pakistan and Bangladesh) to Greece.

The unskilled and semi-skilled labours lured by the expectation of higher wages and better working conditions migrate to the Gulf countries. However, in reality, they face worse working and living conditions in the Gulf where *kafuels* (sponsors) used to retain their passports, hold their salaries back as well as physically and mentally exploit them. Such adverse conditions forced the migrant labourers to return to their motherland while some decided to migrate to developed western countries. These underprivileged migrant labourers illegally migrate from the Gulf countries to labour markets of southern European countries like Greece and Italy using an illegal system of migration. They enter in small groups of five to ten members, in southern Europe via Turkey, the neighbouring country of Iran and Greece as well as the gateway of Europe in the Middle East. Mohammed Ahamed from Bangladesh, told that he worked as a driver in Saudi Arabia but the *kafael*

mentally and physically exploited him as well as retained his passport. In this condition, he had no option to return home and finally, he decided to migrate to Greece with the help of a human trafficking network in the Middle East.²⁵

Mohammed Roshan an undocumented migrant labourer from Bangladesh, told that he migrated to Greece from Saudi Arabia due to unsafe working conditions in Saudi Arabia. He worked as a taxi driver in Dhaka. He migrated to Saudi Arabia with the help of a labour recruitment agency in Bangladesh. He used to earn an equivalent of BDT 40,000 per month as a taxi driver in Saudi Arabia. He reported that he faced precarious working and living conditions in Saudi Arabia because *kafuels* retained his passport and held back his salaries for six months. Hence, he decided to migrate to Greece with the help of a human trafficking network and paid them BDT 500,000. He reached Greece via Turkey in two months overcoming many hurdles like complex geographical boundaries and political barriers and psychologically had to bear the anxieties of uncertainties involved in migration. But his conditions became even more precarious upon reaching Greece as he had no national identity card. Hence, he was jailed for two years. He used to live as an asylum seeker in an asylum camp with little hope about his future because he could not return to Bangladesh. He said that many members of his group have to face many problems like poverty, hunger and unemployment because they had no source of livelihood in Greece as they had no national identity. He said that some asylum migrants worked as manual labourers in the cotton textile industry where they used to earn EUR 40 per day for six working days a week. These migrants stayed connected with their homes and families through mobiles and the internet.²⁶ The use of digital interlude minimises the psychological panic and anxieties by connecting with left behind families and adds to the migrant social networks. The entire journey of illegal Donkey migration from Bangladesh to Greece is based on these well-developed social network systems because Bangladeshi migrants migrate with help of their familiars who had already migrated to Greece through the Donkey route of Migration. There are two routes of illegal Donkey migration from Bangladesh to Greece—the first route is from Bangladesh to Pakistan and later to Greece via Iran and Turkey while the second route from Gulf countries to Greece via Iran is mostly taken by Bangladeshi migrants in Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan is one of the major routes for illegal Donkey migration to Greece due to its geographical connection with Iran and Turkey. Process and determinants of illegal Donkey migration from Pakistan to Greece are led by push and pull factors where poverty, unemployment-related problems, political instability in Pakistan, work as push factors while a well-developed social network system from Pakistan to Greece works as a pull factor for illegal Donkey migration. Underprivileged labourers migrate to Europe with the hope of better opportunities for livelihood while being unaware would happen to them during the entire route of migration. I interviewed a 21-year-old Pakistani migrant labourer named Majid who migrated to Greece with the help of the human trafficking network. He reached Greece in two months via Iran and Turkey. He lived in a refugee camp in Greece because he had no travel documents.²⁷ Hasan also migrated from Pakistan to Greece in search of

better life. He initially paid PKR 700,000 to the agent of human trafficking network for the journey to Greece and another PKR 150,000 for illegal entry into Greece. He finally reached after two and half months of journey. The agent mentally and physically exploited him at the border of Turkey. He had a positive expectation about his future in Europe because he considered that Europeans would accept their presence in Greece as European authority provided him with socio-economic and psychological support for adjustment to life in Europe. Therefore, Hasan had great respect and honour for Europeans and considered Europe as his second home with a land of opportunity to achieve a better life compared to Pakistan.²⁸ Wasim Ahamed, a 25-year-old migrant from Pakistan said that the illegal route of Donkey migration is synonyms to risk. They migrated in group of 20 to 30 refugees because they could not complete the long journey of illegal migration alone. These South Asian refugees provided socio and psychological support to each creating bonds of camaraderie among refugees. He further told that he is unaware of the risks and barriers in illegal migration but he was afraid to see dead body of refugees in forest and rivers because Donkey route of migration is name of death among these South Asian refugees but they had taken risks of migration with passion and courage.²⁹

Labouring Lives: Work Conditions of Undocumented South Asian Migrants in Greece

South Asian refugees in Greece working in restaurants, shopping malls, motor garages as driver and manual labourers in the industry and agricultural sector are regularly monitored by the UNHCR. During my interview with the 25-year-old Bangladeshi refugee Mohammed Afjal working as manual labour in a cotton textile industry located in Athens, Greece, he told me that apart from the UNHCR, South Asian refugees receive economic and psycho-social assistance from several South Asian organisations, hence, developing social bonding among South Asians in Greece. He further told that he was happy with his working conditions in Greece.³⁰

The work and jobbing scenario differs for different categories of migrants depending on their identity status in the host country as convention refugees, asylum seekers or illegal migrants. The undocumented South Asian migrants after arriving in Greece file an application for refugee status. They remain as asylum seekers until their application is considered and adjudicated. The asylum seekers work and live in precarious economic conditions. Most of the time they fail to get the status of legal refugees due to the difficult documentation process of UNHCR. The legal refugee status from UNHCR gives the socio-economic and political rights to work and residence in Europe. Malik, a 24-year-old Pakistani, remigrated to Italy as he did not get the status of a refugee under the norms of UNHCR in Greece. Malik also told that he had not legal rights to work in Greece but he worked illegally with support of South Asian community. He also told that there was a well-developed socio-economic bonding among South Asian refugees and consequences of social

bonding providing a platform to illegal South Asian refugee for adjustment in the working environment of Greece because South Asian refugees had multiple skills of jobs according to the demand of job market in Greece.³¹

There is a huge presence of South Asian migrants working and living as undocumented migrants in Athens because they have not fully satisfied the conditions and requirements set by the immigration authority of Greece and UNHCR. These migrants work illegally at very low wage rates compared to migrants with refugee status. These undocumented South Asian migrants move to other European countries like Italy, Germany and France with the help of human trafficking networks and face exploitation. Having no travel documents like passports and national identity cards of home countries, these migrants are identified by the immigration authority of Greece by their native languages like Urdu (Pakistan) and Bangla (Bangladesh). Mohammed Ahamed who migrated from Bangladesh told failed to get the status of legal (convention) refugee in Greece because he had no valid identity card like passport or national identity card of Bangladesh. As an illegal migrant Ahamed worked in precarious conditions as a manual labourer on agricultural farms in a remote area of Athens. He further told me that he was not interested to stay in Greece because he searched the way for illegal migration to Italy with the hope of a better situation for refugees compared to Greece.³²

South Asian refugees labour in vulnerable working conditions in Greece due to their unidentified socio-economic rights and visually recognizable geo-national identities among Europeans. These precarious working conditions impact the quality of life of the South Asian refugees/migrants in Greece. Despite the hurdles, these Donkey migrants/refugees have positive expectations about their future in Europe and keep moving forward from one country to another country in Europe in search of employment. There is no guarantee of a regular job for illegal South Asian refugees in Greece because it is very difficult to find a regular job through the legal way in Greece. Therefore, illegal South Asian refugees are involved in illegal migration from Greece to developed western countries mainly Germany and Britain because these South Asian refugees consider themselves as job-seekers according to their skills in the job markets of Europe. Both Pakistani and Bangladeshi refugees work together without any discrimination and contradiction and both provide a space for each other to adjust to the life of Greece.

At Home in Diaspora? Living Conditions of South Asian Refugees in Greece

The South Asian refugees and asylum seekers face panic conditions due to their precarious socio-economic conditions and geographical distance from their family members. The auto-isolation of these migrants in host societies leads to the natural propensity of ghettoization through the emotional bonds and attached to the South Asian societies in Greece and develop a sense of social security, which in turn minimises their socio-economic risks and psychological panic. In the interviews conducted, the common thread of

narration was their sense of longing for the left behind family members who have a lot of expectations from them migrating and such thoughts give them the strength to adjust to the socio-economic life of Europe. Facebook and WhatsApp help them to minimise the geographical distance with their family members, reducing thereby the psychological panic that both South Asian refugees and asylum seekers experience. These South Asians have developed a mental region of their homeland in the geographical territories of Greece, sustaining their South Asian culture in their socio-economic activities. They try to use a multi-lingual pattern of communication using Greek alongside their native languages and readjusting their habitational and traditional living cultural practices to realign with the European culture. These migrants try to follow the European practices as mainstreaming into the popular ways of life in the West and practice their South Asian culture in their personal living practices.

Mohammed Naved, a 28 years old South Asian refugee from Pakistan, told that he lived in Greece for the last ten years with Europeans. He faced socio-economic and political problems of adjustment to the culture of Greece but Europeans provided a space for him to adjust to life in Europe. He also revealed that he was not interested to return to Pakistan due to the precarious economic conditions in Pakistan. He earned EUR 60 per day and he spends EUR 10-15 on food items per day. Naved lived in the refugee camps managed by the government of Greece and UNHCR. The managing authority of Greece regularly monitored the living conditions of the South Asian refugees according to the norms of human rights of legal refugees.³³ The legal convention South Asian refugees who live and work under the monitoring of UNHCR, had access to socio-economic and political rights and receive psychological support from the Europeans. Sonu, who also belonged to Bangladesh, told that Bangladeshi refugees developed their social and cultural region in their settlement pattern according to Bengali culture which was known as *Gav* (village) among refugees of Bangladesh in Greece. Sonu further told that he was happy with their identity as refugees from Bangladesh because they were emotionally attached to each other and these consequences gave positive energy for adjustment to the culture of Greece.³⁴ Another Bangladeshi refugee named Asgar Hussain told that he illegally worked as a sweeper in a South Asian restaurant but he did not find a regular job, therefore he slept hungry in parks during the winter season. He further told that he was trapped in an endless journey of illegal migrations due to precarious unsatisfactory living conditions in Athens. He did not feel comfortable with Europeans because Europeans did not give acceptance to Asgar due to his unidentified socio-economic and geographical belongingness.³⁵ A 56 years old South Asian migrant named Asraf Chaudhary from Pakistan said that he legally migrated to Greece for purpose of business. He had three restaurants in Athens with many legal convention refugees working as cooks, waiters and sweepers in his restaurant. But he was unable to give jobs to illegal South Asian refugees due to the strict rules and regulations of the Government of Greece. He also mentioned that he had sympathy with

South Asian refugees. He also provides socio-economic and legal support to these illegal South Asian refugees for getting status of legal convention refugee because he considered South Asian refugees as his brother.³⁶

It is also important to discuss the process, determinants and consequences of living circumstances of South Asian refugee because well-developed social network system determines the living conditions of South Asian refugees in Athens. There is no proper mechanism to arrange the refugee camps in Athens due to the huge inflow of Asian refugees. These Asian refugees live in the remote area of Athens and islands of Greece. Mostly illegal South Asian refugees live in the rural areas of Greece because it is very difficult to survive in Athens city due to the costly rent of apartments as well as due to strict rules, and regulations for residence in Athens city. In this condition, these illegal South Asian refugees live in the remote area of Athens because they find socio-economic and psychological support from South Asian and European community. Both South Asian and European community provides food; clothes and blankets to illegal South Asian refugees to survive in the life of Athens. Apart, there are several NGOs and civil societies; that provide socio-economic and legal support to illegal South Asian refugees for getting status of legal convention refugees as well as food, clothes and camps for illegal South Asian refugees.

It is well known that legal convention refugees do not have to face any types of difficulties in their living conditions because of their granted legal status and have the right to live in the UNHCR refugee camps. There is a close nexus between working circumstances and living conditions of South Asian refugees because those South Asian refugees who earn EUR 50-100 per day can easily survive in the life of Athens but those illegal South Asian refugees who are unemployed have to face problems of survival. They live in the remote areas of Athens and work as manual labourers in agricultural farmhouses or engage informally in the job market of Athens with a low wage rate in the bottom segment of the labour market. The low income pushes the illegal South Asian refugees to live in the irregular settlement pattern in the slum areas of Athens city on very low rent. They are often arrested by police due to their status as illegal refugees. These circumstances create an environment of fear before illegal South Asian refugees and recreate and redefine the socio-economic and political identity of South Asian refugees which reflect in their living circumstances in European society in Greece. These narratives and descriptions show that South Asian refugees are developing their own world with positive attitudes toward the culture of Europe because a positive approach gives them a way to sustain themselves on their way. The Government of Greece considers these illegal South Asian refugees as a crisis and challenge to the economy of Greece. These challenges are being taken as opportunities by Europeans because South Asian refugees have the capability to fill the gap in the labour market. It is also seen that South Asian refugees represent the South Asian culture because they are symbols of South Asian living style but the process of assimilation of South Asian and European living styles are determining the living circumstances of South Asian refugees in Greece. These South Asian refugees make traditional

South Asian foods with traditional food of Greece as well as give the sign of South Asian culture in their living circumstances in Greece. It is also important to mention that these South Asian refugees are developing mix cultures of South Asia and Greece in their living style in Greece with the positive aspect of their future in Europe.

The Cultural Roulette: Consequences of Donkey Migration

South Asian refugees integrated and associated with European society in their working-cum-living conditions in Greece. They have been accepted by European societies, and such assimilation has created a hybrid society in Greece. South Asian refugees are re-creating their geographical and social identities; Greeks address them generally with reference to their national identities, namely, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. The social identities of South Asian refugees are being recognised and identified by their native languages and dialect in Greece. As a result, a multi-linguistic pattern is evolving. Owing to the socio-economic coherence and integration between South Asian refugees and the European society and the positive participation of South Asian refugees in the socio-economic development of Greece, there has been considerable social integration in the economic behaviour of refugees in the labour markets of Greece. These factors have been crucial in the development of a hybrid society in Greece.

Raju, from Bangladesh, frequently speaks in Greek and English languages with Europeans along with their native Bengali language for their inter-community dialogues. He learned Greek and English language from his interactions with Europeans. Initially, he was unaware of the European culture but the process of assimilation with Europeans gave him a space to learn European culture, language and dialectic patterns.³⁷ Shoaib from Pakistan, told that he felt hesitant due to his unidentified socio-economic and political identity among Europeans but his identity was re-created due to the process of assimilation with Europeans as both gradually started accepting and recognizing each other by language giving rise to new dialectic patterns. Language and dialectic patterns determine the identity of South Asian refugees and assimilation between European and South Asian cultures gives rise to a positivist hybrid cultural practice.³⁸ Akhtar from Pakistan, told that he felt proud of the Donkey identity. He was emotionally connected to the Europeans by communicating in Greek. Akhtar spoke in the Greek language along with English and Urdu language. It was through ³⁹

Language and dialectic patterns are the major indicator of assimilation and aided in developing a cultural landscape that reflects in the socio-economic and cultural activities of South Asian refugees in Greece. These South Asian refugees take amusement in their endless journey of migration because they have only one option which is to think about the positive aspect of migration among Europeans. These South Asian refugees are emotionally and culturally attached to their homeland. South Asian music, films, folks, foods digital television channels and South Asian restaurants are

so popular among South Asian refugees. Additionally, the culture of Greece like Greek music, films and drama are also popular among these South Asian refugees. Food and media are constantly recreating and redefining the identity of South Asian refugees with respect and honour among Europeans.

These South Asian refugees are aware and serious about their legal human rights because they are in touch with NGOs/INGOs, civil societies and resident South Asian community in Greece and discuss their human rights concerns as well as organise meetings every month where they make plans about welfare and protection of South Asian refugees. It is also important to mention that European society gives their acceptance to the matter of South Asian refugees. These South Asian refugees consider European society as liberal toward issues of South Asian refugees because Europeans give space to these South Asian refugees in Greece. It can be concluded that the illegal migration of refugees is being considered by Europeans in a positive way which helps to minimise and reduce the communication gap between South Asian refugees and Europeans and trying to connect with each other through the modicum of culture. A confluence of two different cultures—European culture of Greece and South Asian culture in Europe—are getting merged to represent a mixed South Asia-European dynamic cultural landscape.

Conclusion

The Asian refugee crisis is perceived as bilaterally creating pressure on the economy causing humanitarianism, security and diversity-related problems in European countries.⁴⁰ Therefore, European countries should start a comprehensive dialogue with Asian countries to manage the challenges and issues of illegal migration of refugees from Asian countries to Europe.⁴¹ With these consequences, a broad, dynamic, complex process of interactive decision-making that is constantly evolving and responding to changing circumstances of refugee-related issues across the globe,⁴² a multi-global governance-based decision-making processes may help manage the challenges of refugees in European countries.⁴³

South Asian migrations have brought several challenges before us including those regarding identities and re-creation of identities of South Asian refugees in European society. For example, refugees of Pakistan interact with each other in Urdu, as well as in their regional languages like Punjabi, Sindhi and Pasto but they also speak Greek. As well as, Bangladeshi refugees also speak Greek along with their native Bangla language. Such phenomena minimise the social distances between Greek society and South Asian refugees as well as create new debates on the issues of diaspora. The formation of such kind of diaspora is the result of assimilation between South Asian refugees and Europeans. Additionally, these consequences are determining the economic behaviour of South Asian refugees due to social integration with Europeans.

South Asian refugees illegally migrate taking the Donkey route of migration without any valid identity documents like a passport or visa. Not

just an indicator of the migratory route the term Donkey determines their geographical and socio-economic identity among Europeans. These Donkey migrants face challenges and problems in getting the status of legal refugees. These circumstances lead to the illegal migration of refugees from Greece to developed western countries of Europe because these Donkey migrants do not have any option of returning to their homeland, instead getting enmeshed in an endless web of migration from one country to another country in Europe. These Donkey refugees follow the uncertain route of migration because they do not know about their exact and final destination in Europe. Yet they have a positive expectation about their endless journey of illegal migration, a hope to ensure their victory on hurdles of the long journey of Donkey migration from South Asia to Greece. Both South Asian refugees and European society underwent assimilative and hybrid culture transitions both accepting and rejecting the either at the same time and developing a mixed type of cultural landscape that represents the cultural values of South Asia and Greece. Sometimes this hybridity does not recreate or redefine the socio-economic and cultural identities of South Asian refugees in a positive orientation but the West is almost perceived as liberal by these migrants and acts as a major push towards the beginning of their migratory trajectory.

It is also important to mention that the process of cultural confluence also led to cultural homogeneity amongst South Asians in the diaspora despite their cultural and geographical diversities in South Asia. These South Asian refugees are recognised and identified through the geographical notion of South Asia beyond their national identity because the term Donkey migration gives them a homogenous socio-economic and cultural identity of South Asia among Europeans. These South Asian refugees developed a new type of diaspora where they are socially, culturally and economically attached to their left-behind family members in their homeland as well as European society. These consequences minimise the distress of the endless journey of migration as well as start a new debate on the process, determinates and consequences of South Asian diaspora in Europe. The huge presence of South Asian refugees is playing an important role in the development of symbols of South Asian culture which reflect in the socio-economic and cultural behavioural of South Asian refugees.

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²⁴Raza, Athens, personal interview by author, August 24, 2017.

²⁵Ahamed, Athens, personal interview by author, August 24, 2017.

²⁶Roshan, Athens, personal interview by author, August 24, 2017.

²⁷Majid, Omonia Street, Athens, personal interview by author, August 2017.

²⁸Hasan, Omonia Square, personal interview by author, August 2017.

²⁹Wasim, Athens, personal interview by author, August 25, 2017.

³⁰Afjal, Athens, personal interview by author, August 25, 2021

³¹Malik, Omonia Square, Athens, personal interview by author, August 23, 2017.

³²Mohammed Ahamed, Athens, personal interview by author, August 25, 2017.

³³Mohammed Naved, Omonia Square, Athens, personal interview by author, August 24, 2017.

³⁴Sonu, Omonia Square, Athens, personal interview by author, August 25, 2017.

³⁵Asgar Hussian, Omonia Square, Athens, personal interview by author, August 25, 2017.

³⁶Asraf Chaudhary, Roti-Boti Restaurants, Omonia Square, Athens, personal interview by author, August 25, 2017.

³⁷Raju, Roti-Boti Restaurants, Omonia Square, Athens, personal interview by author, August 26, 2017.

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³⁹Akhhtar, Athens, personal interview by author, August 26, 2017.

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The Conceptualisation of State Linguistic Policies and Education System Analysing Community Solidarity: A Refugee Protectionism

By

Azeemah Saleem *

In the wake of the Arab uprising and the Syrian civil war, the refugee crisis became apparent in contemporary international politics. Germany's 2015 'Welcome Policy' introduced by Angela Merkel opened up borders for millions of refugees, specifically from Syria, escalating the debate of integration into German society. With the intake of refugees, the host societies regulated their state policies to achieve successful integrations. However, the multicultural identity of the refugees and the host societies made the social, cultural, political and economic integration of refugees complex. Taking the case study of Syrian refugees in Germany, within the multicultural approach, language is the key source of all interactions, communications and integration; and a key indicator of economic, social and educational advancement in the host society. The introduction of compulsory language programmes to adapt to the host society seems to be a way forward in integrating the refugees. Nevertheless, the methods and inculcations of language training created layers of complexities between the refugees and the host society, exploring further the central arguments of this essay.

First, the conceptualisation of language within the state policies and its implications served as a tool for the integration process between the host and the refugees. Second, wake of the systematic language integration process echoes the growing community's alienation due to varied language barriers and the development of an alternative community within the community, influencing the cooperative coexistence between multicultural identities. In counterargument, this growing alienation produces alternative community

* Dr. Azeemah Saleem, Assistant Professor, Center for Communication and Critical Thinking, J K Lakshimpat University, Jaipur, India.
Email: azeemah.saleem@yahoo.com
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solidarity. For instance, a separated and segregated space was formed for Arabic and Turkish-speaking migrants and refugees in Germany. It further intensified the psychological differentiation between the state, locals and the refugees. Thus, language plays a significant role in integrating, alienating the community, or forming an alternative community based on their language competency, interest and choice. Third, the institutionalisation of language in education has a role in forming a community within a community and/or developing community solidarity. The questions of the school education system induced by state policies shape the personalities, behaviour, attitude and development of the individual within societies. Thus, the school education system became the prime aspect for the systematic application of language training. Despite comprehensive state linguistic policies, how language proficiency impaired refugees' overall development such as language brokering, cultural impositions and socio-economic limitations remain uncertain. Based on the above objectives, the aspect of language sustainability became apparent in all argumentative discourse. The integration process to adapt with the host language and an approach to sustain one's native language can be an alternative to enhance the sense of social solidarity between the refugees and the host societies. Thus, it promotes one's basic cultural rights to develop and form a pluralistic and tolerant society.

The Conceptualisation of State Policies on Language Integration

Language becomes a critical factor in the integration process of multicultural identities for social, cultural, economic and political interaction, integration and assimilation into society. The language phenomenon is defined as the totality of the outcome that can be made in a speech community interacting with each other.¹ In the Bloomsfield analysis, language is a medium of complex communication and symbol activities related to a social activity.² Thus, language is a shaping factor in analysing people's conduct and interaction in a diverse and pluralistic society. In the broader context of politics and society, the role of language in speech communities and relationships among and within these communities in social and political environments are usually emphasised.³ The linguistic state policies shaped, formulated and formed society's structure and dynamic development process. However, the dominance of language, the impact of cultural imperialism, fear, insecurity of losing one's language, and economic, political and social backwardness impact language proficiency and question the linguistic approach in the long-and short-term development process. Thus, the large influx of immigrants, refugees and migrants from diverse linguistic groups, cultures, identities and regions resulted in a complex integration process, challenging state policies and forming an alternative argument on language development in society.

The German state's intention to integrate Syrian refugees entailed initial steps of providing a compulsory 'integration programme'⁴ for all the refugees arriving in Germany. The programme featured compulsory German

language lessons and education about German history and culture. The programme was adopted under federal government and state policies to promote productive and substantial integration. Along with integration policies, the German state adopted welfare policies for the refugees by providing them accommodation and welfare expenses for their basic needs such as food, clothes and other essential items. However, despite the comprehensive German state policies, the lack of socio-cultural background of refugees and homogenous institutionalisation of language resulted in a wider gap in the formulation and implementation of these state-induced policies and practices.

German is the single national official language in Germany, accessible in all public spheres, schools, politics, legal system and administrative procedures. Looking at the history of diverse immigration in Germany, seeking asylum and entering as a guest worker, Germany adopted concrete integration policies, making language a key factor, with minor development on introducing a second language within the education system. In 2004, articles 43 and 44a of the Act to control and restrict immigration and regulate the residence and asylum integration of EU citizens and foreigners was adopted in Germany. The article introduces the integration course, introducing German history, language, legal system and culture. The language course consists of introductory and follow-up courses to attain 'sufficient' language skills. Article 44 stipulates 'compulsory attendance' for foreigners who cannot speak the basic German language. Thus, acquisition and good command of the language play a central role in the integration process. The article's introduction was debated on grounds of diversity and migration, which focused on German language proficiency as the significant criteria of integration and "perpetually reproduced the ideological discourse of the monolingual state".⁵ Emphasis on the German language was proposed in schools and education, even for non-German speaking children. Thus, Germany is institutionally a monolingual state, with a minor exception of the second language such as English, French, Danish or Arabic at the school level.

In 2008, the Institute for the German language surveyed 'language and language attitudes in Germany', in cooperation with social psychologists from the University of Mannheim. It stated that 90.2% of the respondents responded in 'German' as their mother tongue and used it in all public spheres, although there was a German-language dialectal competency between older and younger; East and West Germany; and locals and the foreigners/immigrants.⁶ Thus, the state sustained a strong tendency towards using a single language in public, with limited dialectal variations within the German language.

In 2015, the arrival of Arabic-speaking Syrian refugees with limited German language knowledge formed a linguistic gap between German and native refugees. It is challenging to learn the German language in a short duration since the refugees' educational background varies. Some have skilled qualifications to enhance knowledge of Latin alphabets, while some have secondary and middle school qualifications or no knowledge of Latin

alphabets; and in other instances, there is no knowledge of their native language alphabets whatsoever.⁷ Thus, it challenges the common standard of ‘compulsory language integrative programme’ in Germany, where the German language programme is inculcated as being central for state integration. In 2016, the German Federal Statistical Office (*Statistisches Bundesamt, Destatis*) reported that 18.6 million people in Germany with a migrant background came from Southern and East Europe and Turkey until the 1970s and 80s, and from Africa and West Asia (Middle East), especially during 2015–16.

Despite huge cultural and linguistic diversity, there was no substantial work on the diverse language policies of the varied groups, not only by state institutions and administrations but also by experts and scholars, to provide an intellectual space within the public and political discourse.⁸ A survey conducted in 2017 reported that 75% of the immigrant and refugee respondents had completed at least one language training programme, while 50% (in 2016, 33%) had participated or completed an integration course, i.e., the most important state-sponsored programme for refugee language training, and 9% of the respondent has participated in or completed an advance language course.⁹ Since 2014, the courses included the ESF-BAMF language course and the ‘vocational language course’ since 2016, financed by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (*Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales, BMAS*). In 2017, 12% respondents completed Federal Employment Agency and introductory programme with occupation-specific language support, Perspective for Refugees (*Komp AS, Perspektiven für Flüchtlinge*), Perspective for Adolescent Refugees (*Perspektiven für Jugendliche Flüchtlinge*), and Perspective for Female Refugees (*Perspektiven für Weibliche Flüchtlinge*). Moreover, additional language programmes escalated by federal states, local authorities, welfare organisations, volunteers, and other private actors offer numerous language promotion programmes regarding quality, scope and objectives. By 2017, the graduate percentage rose by 51%, who had either participated or completed a language course, and had a direct dependent variable on their stay in Germany. The basic knowledge of the German language played a significant role in the refugees’ residence and asylum status.¹⁰ Though the majority of the refugees who arrived in Germany from 2015–17 had no German knowledge, there is a steady increase in language competency in the areas, i.e., speaking, reading and writing based on the in-depth analyses through the survey conducted in 2017.¹¹ Thus, the intensification of the state policies in promoting the German language to the refugees, migrants and foreigners signifies that the heart of the integration process lies in learning the language and integrating with the German society and polity.

In 2017, questions on the language of the population were raised for the first time in 80 years in the German micro census, resulting in a growing interest in the minority language.¹² The change became evident when most of the Syrian refugees who arrived in Germany in 2015 knew a native Arabic language, along with a substantial percentage of the first-time asylum seeker who knew English. While only a minimal percentage of the asylum applicants knew German post-language acquisition training.¹³ Thus, the language barrier

and the question of native language sustainability as the basic right to culture became evident in Germany, challenging the integration at multiple levels.

It impacts refugees from school-aged children to the skilled labour workforce. The elementary and secondary schools manage to teach refugee children the German language. However, many companies were reluctant to recruit skilled refugee labour for a higher position in the workforce due to their lack of knowledge of German language and 70% of the major companies were willing to place these refugees in temporary or internship positions. Learning the regional and local language leads to awareness of the societal values of the host society. Hence, despite possessing the required qualifications, owing to lack of language fluency, the feeling of 'others' deepened among refugees of varied cultural identities. The lack of communication isolates the refugee from any direct interaction and develops a fear of being disconnected from their roots by losing their touch with the native language.

Language barriers also create obstacles in psychotherapy with refugees, as sessions can only be conducted with the help of interpreters or translators. However, funding for such services is generally limited or not guaranteed.¹⁴ Thus, the state-induced policies on language pose severe challenges and complexities in the process of integration, specifically in the cultural context, and the question of language barrier became valid in the due process of integration and adaptation.

The focus is on compulsory integration and orientation courses on German language training and teaching about German history and culture, its legal system with its core values, rights, duties and ways of living together in German society. However, the course imparts education by inculcating integration and understanding of German values without any space for interactive discussions. The integration course is a procedure to attain an integration certificate to 'live in Germany', determining and reforming the identity of the refugees. Moreover, the bureaucratic system is a top-down approach, and an unequal relationship between locals and refugees complicates the integration process within the German context.¹⁵ On the contrary, the term 'Integration' is negatively perceived by the Syrian refugees, as it is seen as one way of assimilating with the German values due to the direct teaching method applied in integration courses. The top-down dynamic between the Germans and the refugees affected the integration values, as they teach the Syrians the basics about the functioning of the German system without any social, political, and cultural consideration of the refugee's groundwork, along with their moral and logical reasoning. In an interview with the Syrian refugees in Potsdam, Germany, the respondent prefers to use the term 'adaptation' over 'integration', as the respondent was persistent in preserving the indigenous values and accommodating the German values as a prerequisite to sustain society.¹⁶ The Syrian refugee interviewed aims to sustain an individual identity, regardless of the terminology, emphasising preserving indigenous culture while interacting and adapting with the host community. To thoroughly scrutinise the compatibility of values and norms

between the host and the refugees, one of the alternate ways is to be flexible in opening up values and norms of the host society, which is not accustomed to them in their country of origin, and to sustain their culture and languages. Thus, the most radical change in perception and belief is a matter of time, space and ethical reasoning. For instance, many refugees in Germany have changed their views on homosexuality, recognise their rights and defend them.¹⁷ Thus, within the integration process, the cultural rights presuppose the existence of difference. It commits to settle this difference peacefully and through reasons. Similarly, the language of rights proclaims a sustaining culture.¹⁸

Language Development in the Integration Process

Language development enhances the interaction between vibrant linguistic identities, develops a pluralistic mindset, forms a cultural empathy and affiliations and connects diverse societies culturally, socially and politically. Germany, being a monolingual state institutionally, administratively, legally and in all public spheres, has a complex impact on the refugees.

From the socio-cultural integration analysis, the formation of identity based on values, sentiments, and traditions is a continuous process of past and present experiences of both the individual and the society. Identity, as a process, includes individual and collective identities and is the product of the dialectical interaction of processes of internal and external identifications. Thus, it strengthens the sense of uniqueness and inner harmony between society and the refugees by interacting with other people and social groups and their ideas and values,¹⁹ rather than having them imposed through administrative and institutional procedures. It underlines various stereotypes, prejudices, discriminations and identity conflicts and understands how and why people formed groups within groups forming community solidarity, such as the Syrian refugee group. The group has common characteristics (positive or negative) or has a common position of destiny. The identity formation on common characteristics roots the sense of belongingness to one group and influences group members' perceptions, beliefs and behaviour towards each other. Thus, it develops alternative community solidarity, defined by the homogeneity of their language, interest, choice and belief.

As evident in Berlin, the proportion of students speaking 'non-German native languages' is significantly higher in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods such as Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, Neukölln, Wedding and Moabit. The neighbourhood has a huge immigrant population who arrived as guest workers in the 1960s and 70s and found affordable and low-standard housing. Among the non-German native language speaker, within the Berlin borough (neighbourhood), 16% are in Mitte, 56% are in Wedding and Moabit, 48% in Friedrichshain Kreuzberg and 47% in Neukölln. In comparison, the East Berlin borough is more socially privileged and has between merely 4%–15% 'non-German speaking natives' without any segregated space.²⁰ Thus, it stresses the undermined conditions of the language programmes and policy implementation with the poor composition of German language courses in

the education system and administration. Nonetheless, the figure does not emphasise on the capacities and differences of the non-German native speakers. The establishment of a separate space for non-native speakers increases a setting of social segregation.²¹ The formation of the comfortable zones, based on language, taste, food and lifestyle, diverse from the German values, creates 'parallel societies' in the state. The alternative space of community solidarity for refugees creates a sense of belonging for them, rather than being tagged as 'others' in the host society. The common language, food, traditions and culture provide the refugees a sense of security and become a platform to sustain their indigenous culture in the host society. For instance, in Berlin, Neukölln Sonnenallee has a sensory and cultural experience of Arab and Turkish traditions. The display of signboards on the shop fronts in Arabic, Turkish and German, and the superfluity of restaurants, shisha bars, bakeries and cafes sustain the cultural and culinary delights of Turkey, Lebanon and Syria, among others. It reflects an essence of familiarity for the newcomers and the locals, who have developed the taste over the years. Thus, the Arab and Turkish sustains their cultural diversity and native identity through food, vibes and cultural essence, forming alternative community solidarity. Places like Neukölln also face serious issues such as unemployment, lack of housing and overcrowding. Nevertheless, the bustling street of Sonnenallee shares the power of living, sharing and eating together by bringing the community together. The homogenisation of communities within alternative communities is challenging, specifically homogenisation of Arab or Turkish culture. The varied languages, dialects, scripts, food habits, culture and traditions within Arab and Turkish cultures confound the question of homogenised community solidarity and open up the space for extensive intercultural discussions. Such segregated spaces are considered the epicenter of multiculturalism and a central place for cultural exchange. However, the space developed on the community's initiative limited state regulations, promoting programmes.

Meanwhile, the German integration policies and programmes focus on German values and norms without discussing intercultural values. Thus, it questions German policies' integration process and develops a sense of fear and insecurity among the refugees, forming a segregated space based on community solidarity. These aspects of identity formation are reflected in the need to preserve one's identity, and the state of continuity structure is reflected in the need to integrate with the member of the society. In group formation, communal and associative social relationships contribute to different forms of integrative bonds. Furthermore, the dialectical and language difference within language competence has resulted in Max Weber's distinction between two types of relationships within the community; first, based on sentiments and traditions, and second, on reasoned values practised in their daily life.²²

The growing community alienation based on language competency further varies due to age, gender, cultural and social background and psychological development in both public and private spheres. First, the

adaptation gap due to diversified language competency has a differential outcome. The first-generation immigrant parent's participation in primary cultures tended towards integration is complex. The quality and quantity of social interactions are determined by language and dialectical competence.²³ The use of language, language preference and practices varied across the public and private domain, mostly reflected in the personal choices made by acculturating, adaptation towards the receiving culture and maintenance or shedding of heritage culture. Minority cultural maintenance and majority culture acquisitions are associated with the acculturation outcome. Parental attitude regarding language plays an important role in shaping a child's language competence, dialects and ethnic identity. These notable outcomes are experienced in a heavy detrimental impact on the quality of the parent-child relationship, where first language proficiency predicted a larger gap between parent-child. Thus, it causes frequent disagreement due to language brokering, thereby developing a communication gap.²⁴

Language brokering is a language practice involving translations and interpretations, undertaken by the children in the family who are more proficient in the language of the host country than the less proficient family members, including parents. In many cases, the eldest child who has gained proficiency in the host society's language takes up the family's responsibility. Thus, language brokering results in disagreement between parents and children, and early maturity of a child increases the child's stress and leads to many psycho-traumatic situations, especially in post-migratory period when children are in a transitional and more vulnerable phase.²⁵ Thus, it is challenging to design and deliver effective language policies and programmes for successful integration into host societies. The development of the host language skill is a "universal, rudimentary approach to the question of settlement, services promoting integrations".²⁶ The failure to learn the host language complicates the immigrant integration process, consequently resulting in stress, frustration and psychological problems.²⁷

Second, people's love for their native language is as old as their history.²⁸ The preservation of the Turkish and Arabic languages in Germany is to maintain an individual's cultural integrity and sensitivity in society. In Germany, there are only a few regulations dealing with the heritage languages or some pilot projects on the second language within the school and educational institutions. In assessing German languages, people who favour the accuracy and diligence in writing and orthography of the German language have a positive interest in the perseverance of minority languages. The education and the school system are the major actors in maintaining, preserving and regulating the balance between the state's majority and minority languages.²⁹ In a similar context, the contradictory argument is to maintain the heritage of the German language in the wake of a consistently rising immigrant population. The emphasis on the second or the foreign language develops a sense of insecurity even among the native Germans. These issues and challenges have actively been raised by the rise of the conservative Right-Alternative Party for Germany, AFD, and questioned the policies in national political debates.³⁰ Thus, the integration implementation

programme in Germany raised many intricacies due to ethically, linguistically, socially, culturally and politically diverse immigrants/refugees and standardised integration of state policies and regulations. Moreover, the status of the second language of refugees/immigrants in the educational system in Germany became the core value to shape the political, social and cultural process of integration and adaptation.

Third, acquiring language skills promotes admission into the labour market, access to employment, successive earning, and continuous learning of societal norms. It further facilitates the settlements and integration of minority newcomers into mainstream society. However, experts have emphasised that learning German is one of the biggest socio-political challenges among the immigrants and refugees in Germany. Due to the lack of acquisition of language fluency, even the educated and skilled refugees faced an immense 'native-wage gap', as these professional experiences are often not portable to the labour market of the host societies.³¹ According to the study, three-fourths of the Syrians surveyed do not have jobs or are not satisfied with the current situation.³² The lack of language skills is a significant obstacle in the labour market, causing dropouts without a training diploma and undermined capabilities in the labour market.

Language is closely linked with the inclusion dimension, and the inability to acquire language skills lead to the formation of 'parallel societies'.³³ Thus, the persistent inequality creates an experience of isolation, vulnerability and lack of civic engagement among the newcomers, and lack of language proficiency creates serious communication barriers with mainstream society. As a result, the newcomers are socially systematically excluded, and they experience living in the host societies as 'living in an open prison'.³⁴ Thus, social alienation due to the language barrier led to the formation of an alternative community. However, successful integration does not depend merely upon language proficiency but is interrelated with other factors such as education, race, gender and immigration policies. Immigrants' and refugees' language programmes cannot focus on language training alone, other interrelated factors that influence the integration and settlement process need to be considered. In one of the arguments, the issue of the low percentage of language competency is due to an assumption that the language program is for the participants to enter lower-end jobs, and those who are literate assume they can learn a language in the short term. Thus, undermined language skills facilitate pre and post-migratory occupation, resulting in a significant drop or downward mobility among well-educated immigrants and refugees.³⁵ Moreover, lower language proficiency in the host language is subjected to racial discrimination, specifically for university graduates and those unemployed.

Role of Language in the Education System

The education system is the key factor in determining the host society's long- and short-term language development. The conduct of any language policies

in a state is influenced by the educational institutions, the teaching of foreign languages and the emphasis on language curriculum. An educational institution is a source of shaping and managing the language among the students and setting up the nation's linguistic discourse. It improves the student's linguistic in-depth skills and develops new ones by balancing possibilities and realities by exploring new theoretical research within the field of education. Thus, the educational institution is the prime aspect for the systematic application of language and to deal with issues of language brokering, cultural imposition and so on.

Refugee children and adults have access to compulsory language courses upon their arrival at the reception centre. Once the asylum status is granted, children are put in regular schools, where quality education is undermined, as the school authorities improvise the curriculum based on cognitive learning and language ability on short notice.³⁶ Schools lack socially inclined trained staff and the knowledge of the native language of the pupil. When refugee children enter the school, they do not have command over the German language without substantial support for learning through their native language or the second language of the education institution.

IGLU ('PIRLS') Internationale Grundschul-Lese-Untersuchung ('Progress in International Reading Literacy Study') survey has intensified the perception of German language skills, and good school performance became a significant criterion of refugee integration. The German federal government emphasises the German teaching method based on the German medium of all instruction that encompasses all teaching and grades based on its migration history. First, the methods and concepts have not been fully developed despite teaching the German language for over decades. However, the method and the realisation of the testing language skills are under consistent revisions. The responsibility of teaching German language skills lies with the school and institutions. Second, migrant/refugee parents are obliged to send their children to kindergarten with German language instructions, resulting in support of German language skills. Thus, it results in language brokering between/among the migrants/refugees and the host society. Moreover, the undermined language skill proficiency causes discrimination against non-German speakers. Most of the time, migrant children develop learning disabilities due to substandard German language skills, lack of confidence in public speaking and dialectical variations.³⁷ Thus, the lack of German language skills among the migrants and refugees highlights the failure of the school track system, resulting in a socially disadvantaged and disproportionately high percentage of pupils, especially among migrant backgrounds.³⁸ It creates a sense of alienation and segregation from mainstream society and develops a parallel society. Thus, since the early stage of schooling, it leaves a benchmark on pupils' attitudes and behaviours based on their language competency.

Further, in the counterargument, implementation of the second language or native tongue additional class reflects the perspective that migrants would return to their home countries. The perception's revision has contributed to the revival of assimilations, understanding that acquisition of German language skills is the only means of integration. In Hesse, the

administration refuses to support the native language and insists that the student and their parents fully adapt the German language and society. However, many federal ministries emphasise supporting the first language of migrant children, while many organisations demand respect and support for their native languages in school. Thus, a small pilot project on bilingual German-Turkish alphabetization commenced between 1983-84 and 1993-94 but has not been implemented on a larger scale. As a result, the state continues to emphasise on feasibility, financing and prioritisation of German language skills.³⁹ The federal-state programme aims to foster an innovative approach in both German language education and bi-and multilingualism. The approach was not addressed, as the teachers were overwhelmed and debated on improving school performance by providing early learning to teach the second language.⁴⁰

In the multicultural argument, refugees and host societies has the cultural right, as the basic right to speak their respective languages in every sphere. Nevertheless, the practice of native refugees' language both in school and at home has impaired child linguistic development of the German language. It further limits its academic and professional endeavours, as the German language is the prerequisite in every public sphere. For instance, teaching Turkish or Arabic language at the primary level creates an impairment in prospects as the linguistic pre-requirement in all public spheres is German.

Overall, the process of language integration concreted in the education system shapes the non-native German speaker according to German languages, values and norms. First, the immediate language accommodation of the refugee children at the school level impacts the child's personality, attitude, and behaviour. It creates confusion and discrimination due to language competency, especially in their grading and scoring. It reflects in the professional or vocational pursuit of a child. Second, irrespective of intercultural teaching, the rigid pedagogy of specific subjects on German culture, history and society nurtures the individual within German values rather than developing mixed cultural values. Thus, it causes variations in understanding the society between the parents and the children, a communication gap and develops a sense of fear of losing one's culture. Third, the sharp linguistic difference at school and at home affects the child's psychological development and can impact his/her behavior within society per se. Thus, through the inclusion of multiple second languages within the German education system, the non-German native languages earn respect. By establishing language sustainability through the road of the education system can develop a pluralistic and tolerant society in the long-term prospect.

Language Sustainability Approach

In 2015, Germany became a promised land for Syrian refugees, and within three years, more than one million refugees arrived in Germany. Reality began to emerge with the alternative political decision taken up by Germany. With

growing segregation, isolation and hostilities, forming solidarity among the groups and community became prevalent for sustainable linguistic integration of refugees in the host society. In the existing society, we need to determine what kind of solidarity can develop social cohesion. It can be done by comparing social bonds and identifying the species of social solidarity. Social solidarity is a wholly moral phenomenon, which is amendable to exact observations, especially not to the measurement.⁴¹ Through mediation, things are integrated into society. The first condition to form an entity is to be coherent with the nature of the society that develops social cohesion, where one man acknowledges the rights and limitations of another man, not only as a matter of logic but as a matter of daily living and agrees to have its limits. It can reach mutual limitations within the parameter of mutual realisations, understandings and harmony. Sometimes, independent societies reach an agreement over respective rights and approaches in their territories.⁴² An individual personality is absorbed in the collective consciousness, uncovering the individual personality in the sphere of action, for instance, evident in the opening up of an Arabic library in Berlin.

The intensity and prospects of social and cultural integration are not apparent in a similar context through the linguistic programme. Meanwhile, the practices of various informal majority and minority groups are increasingly polylingual. However, in German schools, especially at the kindergarten level, the minority pupils internalise the German language with less emphasis on their heritage language. While European policies facilitated linguistic diversity in education to enable labour and educational mobility, empowering the majority over minority groups, the fear of undermining one's heritage language, society and culture creates a sense of insecurity among the refugees and immigrants and causes a detrimental effect on sustainable and productive integration.⁴³ The inclusive pedagogical method is to recruit teachers from bilingual backgrounds, as they are more empathetically involved in teaching languages than their colleagues. Thus, they make the language learning experience more adaptable. Many Syrian refugees have projected their willingness to learn and significantly impact the acquisitions of German languages and culture, keeping their culture intact.⁴⁴ Thus, the traditional pedagogy is opposed to assume deficits and emphasises on different but equal cultural affiliations. The pedagogy of recognition aims at enabling the educator and the children to perceive and respect differences.

In a universalist approach, different cultures are being perceived as being of the same value, and at the same time, universal values provide a common and transnational basis. Pedagogy aims to educate towards autonomy and rationality and maintain individual cultures within collective consciousness.⁴⁵ Moreover, language gives a special degree of flexibility and greater possibility of political manipulation and negotiation, especially in a situation of plural groups, where the very nature of segmentation limits the possible dominance of a group.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, the interaction of such interests has given rise to a developing structure of organisational representations, which has created a new institutional setting that has strengthened the pluralistic decision-making system. Both in respect of building a national

community and further the representative institutions, language politics provided crucial support and proved to be a positive democratic channel for pursuing political integration and development. The democratic system, widely perceived as a post integrated system and not a development system, can initiate and promote integration in a new state. One can assume that democracy can provide a better alternative model of integration based on a pluralistic decision system, as the responsibilities are widely dispersed over the system. The dispersal facilitates the development of the communication equipment and the capability of the unit of the system and thereby increases the chances of political coordination through voluntary representations. It provides the development of the art of making demands for forming a coalition of the demand groups for their interest, for support of aggregating institutions and ultimately for negotiation skills. These interests for the optimum pay off from the interaction of diverse interests. Thus, the idea reflected in the Arabic Library Baynatna, established by the Syrian refugees in Berlin.

Baynatna positions itself as a literary oasis or an artistic escape from Germany's growing uncertainty of being a refuge. *Baynatna*, translated as 'between us' in Arabic, arranges a few hundred books from sophisticated political tomes to children's books on the ground floor of the Berlin public library, with open space for visitors and hosts events. Maher Khawis, a Syrian refugee and one of the founders of Baynatna, told in an interview, "it as a small collection of Arabic literary work and a first of its kind cultural centre in Berlin."⁴⁷ Moreover, the library is deeply entrenched in politics, inspired discussion on revolutionary politics and freedom of expression, and debates on being a refugee and integration. It has also become an intellectual space to discuss politics in West Asia and North Africa and the contemporary and future refugee crisis.⁴⁸ Many educated Syrian refugees volunteer as translators and play a significant role in creating an inclusive space for multi-cultural communities.⁴⁹ In the asylum process, Syrian refugees learn the German language; simultaneously, only a few have advanced the German language to read German literature, and it can be difficult to express complex ideas in new languages.

Baynatna has become an academic space that discusses, interacts and develops an alternative hypothesis regarding Syrian politics, the debates on Syrian refugees in exile, and the role of Germany in future political negotiations. German and English events are introduced for Arabic speaking, and Arabic literary ideas, experiences, and expressions are used for non-Arabic speakers. Thus, the dialogue between Arabic and German speakers redefines integration, specifically in the political realm, where refugees learning the language and finding employment are central. Through the inclusive space of Baynatna library it is making integration a two-way process by learning German culture and hosting German authors, artists, and academicians at the library, but at the same time, sharing refugees' own culture and society. Moreover, in respecting and observing Germany's tradition, Syrian refugees are trying to sustain their art, culture and language in Germany. The approach

focuses on combining the two cultures in the solidarity of social cohesion, rather than assimilating with the dominant culture. Similarly, cultural exchange experienced through food, especially at places like *Sonnenalle* or the cooking group like *Über den Tellerrand* in Berlin has become the platform for locals and newcomers with vibrant cultural diversity to interact, learn and connect ultimately within the multicultural shadow. Thus, social and cultural integration through language sustainability became significant for contending discrimination, racism and extremism in the public sphere.

Conclusion: Refugees Protectionism

The situation of refugees' cultural rights has been detrimental in the host societies due to the dominance of the majority over minority identities. The contradictions between nationalism and pluralism with the current immigration policies, the goals and the functions of the existing language programmes and courses impact refugees' development.⁵⁰ The immigrants' identities are marginalised in the name of the standard languages and cultural traits. However, the new linguistic and cultural practices should not oppose or substitute the 'old' culture and languages. Assimilating bi or multilingual and multi-cultural integration is a dual process characterised by the connecting economic and socio-cultural factors. Regarding economic integration to help the newcomer enter the job market, immigration policies and programmes should provide specific linguistic skills to join pre-migration occupations as well. Similarly, such policies and programmes should recognise the native language and value it as a resource for socio-cultural integration rather than threats. There is a growing tension of cultural rights between the host and the refugees, as the host society fears losing one's culture with the coming of massive refugees/immigrants. On the other hand, it undermines the cultural rights and sensitivity of the refugees/immigrants.

Pluralistic integration allows refugees to sustain their native languages and their cultural values while also learning the host language and culture. Doing so will be helpful for the refugees to learn the targeted language while keeping their identity alive. Language teachers also need to see their job not merely as language skill instructors but as the provider of the agency through which the newcomer can learn to work against the integration barriers such as racism, gender bias and linguicism. The language programme has failed to reach the target language, therefore, immigrants' language proficiency for successful integrations did not improve. Understanding the missing link in the integration process will help integrate the new members into the host society economically, socially and culturally.

Once the cultural priorities have been settled, the administrative action could be easier to put the plan into practices.⁵¹ It could be done by promoting the social inclusion of refugees by addressing the issue of identity, the definition of varied cultures and how to deal with stereotypes, prejudices, discriminations and racism. It can develop educational programmes, even in the native language of the refugees, to increase the knowledge of German history, the political system and the form of institutional structure. It should

create space and programmes to preserve the country of origin's culture such as supporting religious institutions for learning Arabic and preserving culture. Developing a platform may encourage interactions and discussions, beyond the activities related to food and music and more emphasis on public intellectual discourse. Organising an event in the host countries introducing the heritage and culture of Syria, and the various ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds of Syrian refugees,⁵² promotes effective cooperation and communication between refugees and local German. The emphasis is on achieving an equal relationship and expecting to be accepted and treated as an equal human being.

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Notes

¹Jyotirindra Das Gupta, *Language Conflict and National Development Group Politics: National Language Policy in India* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1970), 15–35.

²Ibid, 15; Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (New York: Holt, 1933).

³Leonard Bloomfield, "A Set of Postulate for the Science of Language," in *Language* 2, no.3 (1926):153–156. <https://doi.org/10.2307/408741>.

⁴The integration course consists of 600 hours of language courses and 60 hours of orientation course. The purpose of the language course is to convey B1-level language skills that are necessary for everyday life, like work career, and social interaction. The orientation course is German's legal system, history, and culture; rights and obligations in Germany, and ways of co-existing in society. See Benjamin Bathke, "Integration Courses in Germany: What Are They, and Who Can Take Part?," InfoMigrants, accessed October, 2019, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/16814/integration-courses-in-germany-what-are-they-and-who-can-take-part>

⁵Astrid Adler and Rahel Beyer, "Languages and Language Policies in Germany (*Sprachen und Sprachenpolitik in Deutschland*)," in *National Language Institutions and National Languages-Contributions to the EFNIL Conference 2017 in Mannheim*, ed., Gerhard Stickel (Budapest: MTA Nyelvtudományi Intézet, 2018), 22,

<http://www.efnil.org/documents/conference-publications/mannheim-2017/EFNIL-Mannheim-27-Adler-Beyer.pdf> ; also see Patrick Stevenson, Kristine Horner, Nils Langer and Gertrud Reershemius, *The German-Speaking World: A Practical Introduction to Socio-Linguistic Issues*, 2nd ed. (London/New York: Routledge Language in Society, 2018); Johanna Laakso, Anneli Sarhimaa, Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark and Reetta Toivanen, *Towards Openly Multilingual Policies and Practices: Assessing Minority Language Maintenance Across Europe Linguistic Diversity and Language Rights* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2016): 65–67.

⁶Adler and Beyer, "Languages and Language Policies," 221. The study was conducted by the University of Mannheim and was reported extensively in *Aktuelle Spracheinstellungen in Deutschland: Erste Ergebnisse Einer Bundesweiten Repräsentativumfrage*, eds, Ludwig M. Eichinger, et al., (Mannheim: Institut für Deutsche Sprache, 2009): 54.

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https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/EN/Forschung/Kurzanalysen/kurzanalyse10_iab-bamf-soep-befragung-gefluechtete-alphabetisierung.html?nn=447268

⁸Adler and Beyer, “Languages and Language Policies,” 228.

⁹For more details see Table 4 on “Refugee Participation in Language Courses and Language Proficiency, by Year of Arrival,” in Brücker et al., “Language Skills and Employment Rate of Refugees,” 54. It also discusses course counts as “completed,” if the respondent reports that they participated in the course and indicated the course’s end date. Integration courses are available for all immigrants regardless of why they came to Germany and comprise 600 (general integration course), 900 (special course), or 400 (intensive course) class hours in their language section, depending on the course. In addition, there is an orientation course with a further 100 class hours, which teaches refugees about the German legal system, culture and history. If the language test is not passed, there is the possibility to repeat 300 class hours and take the test again. Only asylum seekers from countries with good prospects of staying (Syria, Iraq, Iran, Eritrea and Somalia) are eligible to attend an integration course.

¹⁰Brücker, et al., “Language Skills and Employment Rate of Refugees,”: 53–5.

¹¹Table 5 explains the German language skills of refugees through ‘Regression’ analysis in Herbert Brücker et al., 2019: 54; Herbert Brücker et al., “*Geflüchtetemachen Fortschritte bei Sprache und Beschäftigung*,” *DIW Wochenbericht*, no. 4 (2019), https://www.diw.de/de/diw_01.c.612227.de/publikationen/wochenberichte/2019_04_1/gefluechtete_machen_fortschritte_bei_sprache_und_beschaeftigung.html.

¹²Ibid., 221.

¹³Stefan Trines, “The State of Refugee Integration in Germany in 2019,” Humanitarian issues- *WENR- World Education News and Reviews*, August 8, 2019, <https://wenr.wes.org/2019/08/the-state-of-refugee-integration-in-germany-in-2019>

¹⁴Joerg M. Fegert, Birgit Leyendecker, Kurt Halhweg and Valeria Prayom-Blum, “Psychosocial Problems in Traumatized Refugee Families: Overview of Risks and Some Recommendations for Support Services,” *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 12, no. 1 (December 2018): 5.

¹⁵Katib Amir, “*andimaj alaljinii alsuwrinii aaltameiif 'almanya: altabadiyat wamliqaribat* (The Social Integration of Syrian Refugees in Germany: Challenges and Approaches),” *markaz harmun lildirasat almueasira (Harmon Center for Contemporary Studies)*, November 1, 2020.

¹⁶Took a personal interview with a Syrian refugee, living in Potsdam, pursuing Masters in Data Science from University of Potsdam, Germany.

¹⁷Amir, “*andimaj alaljinii?*”

¹⁸Rajeev Bhargava, “The Right to Culture,” *Social Scientist*, 18, no. 10 (October 1990): 55 and 56.

¹⁹Amir, “*andimaj alaljinii?*”

²⁰Frauke Miera, “German Education Policy and Challenges of Migration”, Paper prepared for the EMILIE project, WP3, Deliverable D4 Final version (December 2007), 8; Ahmad AL Ajlan, “Older Refugees in Germany: What Are the Reasons for the Difficulties in Language-learning,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34, no. 2 (2019): 38; OCED (April 2016), “Integrating Refugees and Other Migrants into Education and Training,” Germany Policy Brief: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, (April 2016), <http://www.oecd.org/germanyOECD>. 34; Lili Hindy, “Germany’s Syrian Refugee Integration Experiment,” The Century Foundation (September 2018), <https://tcf.org/content/report/germanys-syrian-refugee-integration-experiment/?agreed=1>

²¹Frauke Miera, “German Education Policy”.

²²Das Gupta, *Language Conflict and National Development Group Politics*, 75.

²³Katrin Lindner, Kathleen Hipfner-Boucher, Anna Yamashita, Claudia Maria Riehl, Mohcine Ait Ramdan and Xi Chen, “Acculturation through the Lens of Language: Syrian Refugees in Canada and Germany,” *Applied Psycholinguistics* 41, no. 6 (October 26, 2020): 1354–55, doi:10.1017/S0142716420000454.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 1353. Also see, Dina Birman, “Acculturation Gap and Family Adjustment: Findings with Soviet Jewish Refugees in the United States and Implications for Measurement,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 37 (2006): 568–89, doi: 10.1177/0022022106290479; Lydia P Buki, Tsung-Chieh Ma, Robert D Strom, Shirley K Strom, “Chinese Immigrant Mothers of Adolescents: Self-perceptions of Acculturation Effects on Parenting,” *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology* 9 (2003): 127–40.

²⁵Rachele Antonini, “The Study of Child Language Brokering: Past, Current and Emerging Research,” *Medi Azioni* 10 (2010), <http://mediazioni.sitlec.unibo.it>; Jessica Shen and Jessica M. Dennis, “The Family Context of Language Brokering among Latino/a young adults,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 36 (2019): 131–52, doi: 10.1177/0265407517721379; Lindner et al. “Acculturation through the Lens of Language”, 1353.

²⁶Guofang Li and Pramod Kumar Sah, “Immigrants and Refugee Language Policies, Programs, and Practices in an Era of Change: Promises, Contradictions, and Possibilities,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Migration Studies*, eds, Steven J. Gold and Stephanie J. Nawyn, (London: Routledge, 2019), 325.

²⁷The problems are discussed in Li and Sah, “Immigrant and Refugee Language Policies, Programs, and Practices”, 325.

²⁸Das Gupta, “Language Conflict and National Development Group Politics,” 16.

²⁹Adler and Beyer, “Languages and Language Policies in Germany”.

³⁰ Amir, “*andimaj alaljini*.”

³¹Li and Sah, “Immigrants and Refugee Language Policies, Programs, and Practices,” 325–26; Yann Richard, Mathilde Maurel and William Berthomière, “The Integration of Immigrants in France: Economic and Geographical Approach,” in *Global Change and Human Mobility*, ed. Josefina Domínguez-Mujica (New York: Springer, 2016), 116; Monica Boyd and Xingshan Cao, “Immigrants’ Language Proficiency, Earnings, and Language Policies,” *Canadian Studies in Populations* 36, nos 1–2(2019): 63–86; Ken Clark and Joanne Lindley, “Immigrant Assimilation Pre and Post Labour Market Entry: Evidence from the UK Labour Force Survey,” *Journal of Population Economics* 22, no. 1(2009): 175–98; Casey Warman, Arthur Sweetman and Gustave Goldmann, “The Portability of New Immigrants’ Human Capital: Language, Education, and Occupational Skills,” *Canadian Public Policy*, 41(2015): 64–79, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43697451>

³²Qantara.de, “*allughat miqyas aliandimaj al'aval fi 'almania cavamil gbayr mutawaqaeat aketisab almuhajirin allughat alalmania*” (Language is the First Measure of Integration in Germany. Unexpected Factors for Immigrants to Acquire the German Language), Qantara.de, 2021, *عواملغير متوقعة لاكتساباللغةالألمانية: اللغةمقياسالاندماجالأولفيألمانيا*, Qantara.de, last accessed on September 28, 2021.

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⁴¹Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, (New York: The Macmillan Press Limited, 1984), 24.

⁴² Ibid., 73–6.

⁴³Pfaff, "Multilingual Development in Germany in the Crossfire of Ideology and Politics," 14–15.

⁴⁴Qantara.de, "alughbat miqyas."

⁴⁵Miera, "German Education Policy and Challenges of Migration," 3.

⁴⁶Das Gupta, "Language Conflict and National Development Group Politics," 262 and 269.

⁴⁷Anna Lekas Miller, "Berlin's First Arabic-language Public Library Aims to Redefine Refugee Integration," *Global Post*, July 21, 2018 (also available in Arabic), <https://www.post-gazette.com/news/world/2018/07/19/Berlin-s-first-Arabic-language-public-library-aims-to-redefine-refugee-integration/stories/2018070%E2%80%A626>. Josie Le Blond and Gordon Welters, "Syrian Student's Library helps Arabic Culture Blossom in Berlin," UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, (22 June 2017), <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2017/6/5947cef54/syrian-students-library-helps-arabic-culture-blossom-berlin.html>

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⁴⁹Many Syrian novels about the story of refugees, brutality of dictatorship and totalitarian regime reflects from the Nazi regime to an academic conversation about Hezbollah's political economy and its role and impact on West Asia (Middle East) are translated. Many of these novels are Alan Grazts, *Refugee* (New York: Scholastic Corporation, 2017); Saman Yazbek, *Cinnamon* transl. Emily Danby (London: Haus Publishing, 2012); Khaled Khalifa, *In the Praise of Hatred* transl. Leri Price (London: Transworld Publishers, 2012); Nihad Sirees, *The Silence and the Roar* transl. Max Weiss (London: Pushkin Press, 2013).

⁵⁰Adler and Beyer, "Languages and Language Policies in Germany," 234.

⁵¹Das Gupta, "Language Conflict and National Development Group Politics," 93.

⁵²Maram Salem, "tathir makan al'i'qamat ealaa aliandimaji.. lajiunwn yatabadathun ean tajaribibim" (The Impact of Place of Residence on Integration: Refugees Talk about their Experiences), *Deutsche Welle*, September 28, 2019. ثقافتو مجتمع | لاجنو نيتحدثون عن تجاربهم.. تأثير مكان الإقامة علينا الاندماج. 2019 | قضايا اجتماعية ممنعاً لمانيا والعالم العربي | DW |

Book Review

Viewing Migration Through the Gender-Identity Prism

By

Aparna Eswaran *

Gender, Identity and Migration in India, edited by Nasreen Chowdhory and Paula Banerjee, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. XVII+365, EUR 119.99. ISBN 978-981-16-5597-5 (Hardcover)

Gender, Identity and Migration in India is an impressive collection of critical reflections on the gendered nature of migration addressing a significant lacuna in the production of knowledge on forced migration in India. Bringing together a wide range of scholarly engagements, the anthology provides its readers with a rich transdisciplinary conversation which nudges us to rethink the various received understandings of a global phenomenon by privileging the voice of the migrants while highlighting the relevance of their local contexts. Organised along four major thematic nodes—the methodology and production of knowledge in the context of forced migration studies; labour, development and the migrant body; migrant identities and borderlands; and gender, conflict and migration—the work does not shun away from the ethical questions of researching migration, which is reflected in its foregrounding of feminist epistemologies rooted with an emphasis on post-coloniality.

The seriousness of the ethical import of this book project is evident in how it starts, training its critical eye inwards, reflecting on the politics of knowledge production and the positionality of the researcher. The introductory theme addresses the different dimensions of politically

* Dr Aparna Eswaran, Assistant Professor, School of International Relations and Politics, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, India.

Email: aparnaeswaran25@gmail.com

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committed scholarship which is marked with the courage to recognise the vast chasm of inequality that exists between the researcher and the researched. The anthology is not veiled in its attack on the 'methodologies of dismemberment' formed in the nexus of different institutions and mechanisms of power, and forwards what Nergis Canfe terms as an "ethics of witnessing." With the emphasis on knowledge production in the Global South, the ethics of witnessing address along with the unequal geographies of mobility and displacement, the socially embedded political processes of gendered dispossession. The keystone of this conceptual refiguring is the 'responsibility' of the researcher, an accountability that affects the reader of the anthology as well.

Along with this recognition of responsibility is the critical understanding of the power-laden processes that construct the subjectivity of the dispossessed, the displaced, the migrant. Instead of magnifying the 'temporariness' of the phenomenon, we are asked to witness the permanent marks of the migrant experience on individual identities and place it alongside the ubiquitous 'multi-faceted nature of uprootedness' in women's lives. In this collection of research articles, a praxis of critical scholarship is put forward where methodological interventions do not presume gender neutrality, instead, we bear witness to the multitude of experiences of trauma in various dislocations, where injuries of different makings are addressed in its gendered specificities. What emerges is a recognition of the ambiguity as well as the complexity involved in research which is also a process of political engagement.

The scholars in this work turn to the migrants' experiences and narratives as well as pertinently place these experiences being in connection with the 'precarised' conditions of life in the global capitalist economy. Privileging the migrant narratives pose an important and engaging challenge to the hegemonic state-centric discourses and myopic understandings of forced migration. Calcified categories of enquiry are broken and new reflexive concepts are forwarded with clarity. For example, Paula Banerjee's work as well as Giorgio Grappi's article in this collection bring to attention how the larger institutional framing of forced migration within a 'politics of protection' depoliticises migration of its contents, treating the migrant as an anomaly or a mere victim at best. This begs the question: how would the discourse transform if we recognise migration as the pervasive condition of our present lives, where simplistic dichotomies of choice/coercion will have to be radically reassessed, forcing us to move away from 'methodological nationalisms' and 'state-gaze' to look at research and possibilities of connections and solidarities from 'out of place' perspectives.

The anthology, while providing us with a rich source of narratives and experiential recounting, also moves beyond a superficial assessment of feminisation of migration to arrive at important intersectional analysis of gender in migration. The ethnographic analysis and the narratives of migrants make transparent how intersecting identities of caste, age, region and class form the gendered experiences of migration. This was brought out forcefully in the narratives of domestic workers who are also migrants by marriage

which reflects their negotiations with family, employers and different spaces like workspace and university. From Paula Banerjee's question "what is feminist about studying forced migration" to Shubra Seth's determined migrant women who take on the role of vanguards in the aftermath of communal violence in their community's struggle to be considered as right-bearing citizens, we can see in the research how there is an engagement with the agency of women which emphasises on women's own interpretations of their identities and experiences. For example, in Amrita Pritam Gogo's chapter, we see how women repeatedly affirm their role in the armed insurgency of Maoist People's War in Nepal, highlighting their experiences of carrying weapons. This recounting is done in the context of an amnesia of public memory which erased their roles and forced them to return to domesticity at the end of the war. Memory then reinstates them into public histories. The formation of identity as seen in the chapter by Namreeta Kumari on facilitators and surrogates who "fake husbands," and use persuasion as a tactic does not fall into the simple dichotomies of victim and perpetrator, and also looks at the tactics of survival or resisting the disciplinary power of state's governmentality. It will be interesting to place this research on trafficking which leans on the tenets of radical feminism with the research on sex work by Prabha Kotiswaran and the narratives by Nalini Jameela which are critical of this position. The book contributes to larger feminist debates on care work, globalised networks of labour and will be interesting to be read along with Maria Mies, Silvia Federici and Naila Kabeer to map the sheer diversity and nuances in feminist research on labour. Similarly, the range of texts and narratives that are brought together in conversation is an important contribution. Suchismita Majumder's rigorous work employing methodological and data triangulation on young Rohingya children crossing the West Bengal-Bangladesh border intersperses narratives of the children and NGO workers with a range of international covenants, national mechanisms, as well as a Supreme Court case law, and gives us a glimpse of former child migrants acting as interpreters for the latter migrants.

The work also prioritises the 'physicality' of migrant experiences, where the lived body is not just a docile body, but among many other things, a labouring and remembering body. The collection also traces the constitution of identities at porous borders and borderlands bringing into mind Gloria Anzaldúa's conception of borderlands as open wounds where a possibility of reconfiguring identities resides. The sites of identity formation traced are multifarious—child homes, rehabilitation centres for trafficked individuals, surrogacy clinics, prisons, border belts that are the painful legacies of partition—while there is also a recognition of how women carry the burdens of borders, imagined nations and homes on their back as they move. Nasreen Chowdhury and Shamna Thacham Poyil's work on the exceptionality of camps in South Asia is interesting in this context as it places the exceptionality of camps within the ad hoc refugee protection structures of state that bear the post-colonial conditions of bloody histories of nation-formation. Past forces of connection and disconnection in history, exigencies of present socio-political milieu, the affective relationships to sites of resettlement, work and

documents of state governance, census and international organisation data sets along with categories of refugee, asylum seekers, marriage migrants, development migrants, conflict migrants are all called for an ontological and epistemological reassessment in this work. The book squarely addresses the issue of production of knowledge as being located in the Global North, dominated by discourses and perspectives of scholars and thinkers from Global North where metanarratives are fashioned and a complete change in the agenda of research in forced migration is advocated. It addresses the urgent need to break free from ossified categorisations of forced migrants by championing the voice of the marginalised and recognising the nuanced variations in vulnerabilities. While tracing of the genealogies of categories refresh debates on forced migration, the collective force of the work resides in its moral force of triggering transformative political responses and processes which recognise migrants as individuals with unique specific stories as well as bearers of rights to live in dignity.

Book Review

Migration and Cultural Practice: The Subaltern Entertainments and Role of Labour

By

Rajat Kanti Sur *

Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the 'Folk Performance' in India, Brahma Prakash, New Delhi: Oxford University Press 2019, 352 pages, ₹1195. ISBN:9780199490813 (Hardback).

*"Milal ki na, antardeshi lifafa, E bataibai ki'na
Bairan mein puchbtani safai sipahi sainya, aibai ki'na."*¹

[(O my dear) will you please write back if you get my (inland) letter,
Otherwise, the neighbours will think that you left me forever.]

The Bhojpuri poem quoted above describes an account of migration. Female members of the families of (male) migrant workers are always sceptical about their husbands. In this specific instance, the narrator thought that her husband got a companion in the city and left her alone in the village. The sense of scepticism and separation, and the helplessness of families of a migrant labour are been reflected through different forms of culture. Cultural practices, rituals and festivals are one of the mediums to keep the connection between the ancestral village/homeland of a migrant worker and his shelter (temporary or permanent) at the workplace intact. Cultural practices keep them entertained and simultaneously make them feel at home. This tradition has been continuing for years. Scholars of northern India have been focusing on the evolution in the trends of migration, studying different cultural

* Dr. Rajat Kanti Sur, Researcher, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata, India. Email: rajatkantisur@gmail.com
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practices from the past few decades. According to them, migration and its suffering began in the medieval period. There are songs for the *sipahis* (Indian soldiers in the lowest rank) in different regimes. But the increasing use of migration-based literature from the Bhojpur² region flourished with the increase in labour migration during the colonial times.³

Scholars like Dhananjay Singh, Badri Narayan and many others wrote about the linkages between migration and culture. Dhananjay Singh has argued on the reflection of migrant labour and their families in folk literature. He gives narrations of several Bhojpuri poems and songs on migration and shows the transformations. Although Singh's book is one of the fundamental contributions in the field of vernacular literatures on migration, it does not give any particular analytical framework. Badri Narayan's book, on the other hand, provides an analysis through a different dimension. The book based on the story of 'Reshma-Chuharmal,' the love relationship between a *bhumihar* (an upper-caste landed community in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) girl and a *dusadb* (a comparatively lower caste agricultural labour community from the same region) boy. Narayan critically analysed the transformation of the narrative 'Reshma Chuharmal' and described the changes of a popular narrative to a dalit popular discourse. Narayan showed how one local story incorporates popular narratives from different mythological texts like The Mahabharata: new narratives have been made, politicised and have become tools for dalit identity politics.⁴ Narayan mentioned some passing references to the changes in the nature of labour migration to explain his thesis of politicisation of a dalit narrative. Brahma Prakash's book is probably the first one which made labour a 'central' subject to conceptualise different folk cultures of northern India and one particular theatre group in Andhra Pradesh (Jana Natya Mandali) where labourers and their family members played an important role.

In *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the 'Folk Performance' in India*, Prakash attempts to describe the relationship between culture and the labouring communities. According to him, cultural labour is an attempt to bring culture and labour through the lenses of different folk performances. The book claimed that the question of aesthetics is "fundamentally a question of labour—the production of values".⁵ It depends on the bonding between culture and labour which aestheticised labouring bodies in their exhaustive work environment and performance context. The conceptualisation of 'folk culture' through the eyes of 'labour' reflects the belief of the author on the Marxist idea of "mass culture" which claims itself closer to the reality.⁶

Brahma Prakash's book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is based on the historiography of performance studies, including the expositions on the nature of performance that is believed to have begun with the ancient Sanskrit text on performance studies, *Natyashastra*. Prakash highlighted the biased view of this highly acclaimed Sanskrit text where the performers who did not follow the rules of performances mentioned in this text are socially alienated and marked as *shudras*. He pointed out the social locations of the labouring classes from the ancient to colonial period and the technique of marking their performance as "folklore" and conceptual

limitation of terming something folkloric as defined by the orientalists. Prakash also shows how the idea of folklore were adopted by the nationalists as well as the Left cultural activists through their respective cultural organisations and how they used the labours, migrants and subalterns as a ‘metaphor’ for the educated middle class. The section on the Indian People’s Theatre Association (henceforth IPTA) extensively explained the meaning of “mass culture” to the Indian left. He quoted the works of Sudhi Pradhan and his extensive writings on the history of cultural movement reflected the views of the Indian Marxists towards folk culture. It would be good if Prakash goes through some of the autobiographical sketches and writings of initial members of IPTA (Niranjan Sen’s writings on Tamasha and adapting folk theatre of the northern and western part of India are particularly important) to understand alternative opinions within the organisation.

The attitude of the “mainstream” world of theatre and other forms of performances did not notice the changes outside of itself. Prakash explained the change through the four chapters of his book. He takes help of the five conceptual frameworks of performance studies—Landscape, Materiality, Viscerality, Performativity and Choreopolitics—to re-conceptualise the folk performances in India and the role of the labouring class. His extensive ethnography of four folk performances in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (popularly known as the “Hindi Heartland”) like *Bhuiyan Puja*, *Bidesia*, *Dugola* within these conceptual frameworks adds new perspectives to examine some basic concepts like morality, sexuality and gender sensitivity, among the labouring class. His reading of ‘Reshma-Chuharmal’ (performativity) opens the politics behind the subaltern myth-making process through the denial of the conventional idea of “civilised society”. Prakash correctly pointed out the problems of liberal populism to take the cultural practices of the labour seriously. Therefore, labour tried to resist the liberal populist idea through ‘folk performance’. The use of obscene languages in the *Bidesia* performances and increasing use of obscenity through a female or transgender body as resistance against the dominating upper class (Prakash referred Achille Mbembe’s idea on the “aesthetics of vulgarity”) might not be true everywhere. Nautanki performers and theatre activists like Atul Yaduvanshi and Javed Akhter Khan criticised the idea of using obscene languages unlimitedly in the performances. They said that the extensive use of obscene dialogue can only create cheap publicity. It never creates any statement of resistance.⁷

The chapter on Choreopolitics was based on Jana Natya Mandali (JNM) by Gummadi Vitthal Rao aka Gadar, a revolutionary poet and alleged Maoist sympathiser of Andhra Pradesh, now Telangana. His association with JNM or Peoples’ Theatre Group was since its inception in 1972. Most of its artists came from labouring communities. Prakash’s study showed how the performances of JNM broke the dominating attitude of the middle class in theatres, especially left political theatres. The process of de-elitisation and transformation of the subaltern cultural practices as viable in the cultural sphere had undoubtedly been recognised as a “social revolution”. Prakash’s study on JNM showed gender sensitivity in most of the performances where women characters usually dominated the entire play. Apart from the subject,

choreography itself played a political role here and Prakash correctly pointed that out.

Brahma Prakash's book is an important contribution to the disciplines of performance and cultural studies, cultural anthropology and sociology. Apart from the misidentification of Sudhi Pradhan, the book critically discussed labour as a decisive element in the folk cultural performances in India. It helps us to understand the relation between performances and labour through a new conceptual framework. It gives us the vision to look into the idea of subalternity through a new lens. The book is an important contribution to future research in social science.

Notes

¹Balam Bhojpuria, *Devi ya Balma Bihari ke Superhit Bhojpuri Dhamaka: Purwa Bayar* (Delhi: Prakash Publication, 2006) cited in Dhanajay Singh, *Pravasi Shram Itibaas: Maukhibik Shrota-Bhojpuri Loksabitya* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2016), 49. Couplet translations by author himself.

²The Bhojpur region in India is an area of 59,003.82 sq.km. approximately. It includes the western districts of Bihar (28,192.82 sq.km.) and the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh (30,811 sq.km.). Presently, one district of Bihar is named Bhojpur. Arah is the district headquarters of that district. The region is named after the kingdom of Bhojpur approximately in AD605. For more details, see Rajiva Nain Prasad, *History of Bhojpur 1320–1860 AD* (Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1987).

³Singh, *Pravasi Shram Itibaas*, 23-4.

⁴Badri Narayan, *Documenting Dissent: Contesting Fables, Contested Memories and Dalit Political Discourse* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2001).

⁵Brahma Prakash, *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the 'Folk Performance' in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

⁶Theodor Adorno evolved the term "mass culture" as an alternative to bourgeois cultural industry. According to him, "mass culture" has many self-contradictions. On one hand, it came as a critic of the so-called traditional culture but simultaneously accepts the frame. According to him, "'mass culture' treat conflicts but in fact proceeds without conflicts," *The Culture Industry: Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge (Indian Reprint), 2010), 61-97.

⁷The detailed discussions, based on the interviews of Atul Yaduvanshi and Javed Akhter Khan, are available in "Culture, Migration and the time of an Epidemic: The Nautanki Theatres/Bhojpuri Natak since the 1990s," *Policies and Practices*, 119 (2020) Occasional Paper Series, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group.

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Articles submitted for consideration of publication in REFUGEE WATCH should be around 5,500 -7,500 words. Book reviews can be around 1000 words and review articles can be around 2000 words. Articles will have endnotes and not footnotes. Endnotes should be restricted to the minimum. Please refer to www.mcrg.ac.in for a details style sheet. Roundtables can also be proposed for publication. Enquiries about possible submissions are welcome.

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