

# Afghan refugees in India: chasing the mirage of stability and security?

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** Afghan refugees are the oldest and the largest refugee group present in India, wherein they face many challenges, as there is no refugee policy to support them. The present study attempts to look at the Post Migration Living Difficulties faced by the Afghan refugee families in India and the coping mechanisms used by them.

**Research Methods:** 20 Ethnic Afghan refugee families were interviewed for the purpose of this study, using snowball-sampling method. An interview schedule was used to and the collected data was both quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed.

**Findings:** The findings show a significant change in the socio-economic conditions status of Afghan Refugees post migration. There is a rise in the number of young people working in the interviewed Afghan families, however, due to lack of work permit most of them end up working in the informal sector leading to a significant decline in the family income. All these factors make unemployment and lack of money to buy items of necessity, the biggest Post Migration Living Difficulties faced by them.

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** The study concludes that Afghan refugees flee from their country to start a better life in India but besides basic protection to life, India does not ascertain anything for them. They face many challenges and have an uncertain future here. Awareness regarding their situation and significant steps for their inclusion are required to enable these families lead a better life in India.

**Keywords:** Refugees, Socio-economic conditions, Post migration living difficulties.

## 1. Introduction

International migration is a global phenomenon that is growing in scope, complexity and impact. "In today's increasingly interconnected world, international migration has become a reality that touches nearly all corners of the globe, often making distinctions between countries of origin, countries of transit and destination obsolete. Modern transportation has made it easier, cheaper and faster for people to move. At the same time conflict, poverty, inequality and lack of decent jobs are among the reasons that compel people to leave their homes in search of better futures for themselves and their families" [1].

There is a growing trend of urbanization among migrants as both internal and international are moving towards cities and urban areas. This creates new linkages and connects communities within and across borders, hence, creating a need for new approaches to migration policy [2]. "The number of international migrants worldwide has continued to grow rapidly over the past fifteen years reaching 244 million in 2015, up from 222 million in 2010, 191 million in 2005 and 173 million in 2000" [3].

People move for a variety of reasons. They consider the advantages and disadvantages of staying versus moving, as well as factors such as distance, travel costs, travel time, modes of transportation, terrain, and cultural barriers. Broadly migration is a result of two factors-

**Push Factors:** Reasons for emigrating (leaving a place) because of a difficulty (such as a food shortage, war, flood, etc.).

**Pull Factors:** Reasons for immigrating (moving into a place) because of something desirable (such as a nicer climate, better food supply, freedom, etc.).

The difference in motivation behind migration leads to the different status. A refugee is defined as, "someone who has fled his or her country and cannot return because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Refugees may also flee their countries due to serious and indiscriminate threats to life, physical integrity or freedom resulting from generalized violence or events seriously disturbing public order" [4].

Refugees fleeing war or persecution are in the most vulnerable situation imaginable. They have no protection from their own state - indeed it is usually their own state that is threatening to persecute them. They are completely at the mercy of the state where they go seeking asylum. In 2010, the number of refugees was estimated at 16.3 million representing 8% of the total migrant stock in the world. Eighty-six per cent of all refugees in the world, or 14 million, were residing in less developed regions. Asia hosted by far the largest number of refugees (10.9 million), followed by Africa (2.6 million) [4].

India is broadly a country of immigrants, where over 92% people living in India are not the original inhabitants of India. This continuous flow of immigrants to India has led to tremendous diversity in India in form of multiple religions, languages, regions, castes, ethnic groups, etc. In India, some 25,865 refugees and 5,074 asylum-seekers, mainly Afghan, Burmese and Somali nationals, were registered with UNHCR as of end of 2014. India has always been a host to a large number of refugees not only from neighboring countries but from other areas too, due to its democratic society and geographical location. Afghans make up the second largest refugee population in the world. 1 in 4 Afghan's 26 million citizens has been a refugee at some point of life [5]. The hardships faced by Afghan refugees not only constitute the language problem but also economic, social and problems of integration into the Indian culture. In India it is currently estimated that approx. 10,000 Afghan refugees are seeking asylum.

India is home to many neighboring countries of war struck nations. These wars and military conflict have brought in their wake innumerable uprooted people that include millions of refugees in search of a new home [6]. Indian government has no one fixed way while it comes to their dealing with refugees, they directly assist groups such as the Tibetans, Sri Lankans, and the 'Chakmas' from Bangladesh, while refusing assistance to groups like Afghans, Burmese, Somalis, and the others. India is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention on the Status of refugees or the 1967 Protocol, which defines the term 'refugee' and establishes the cardinal principle of 'non-refoulement', according to which no person may be returned against his or her wish to a country or territory where he or she may be exposed to persecution. This principle also sets standards for the treatment of refugees, including their legal status, employment and welfare [7]. In India the state decides whom to extend hospitality to and whom to withhold it from. The varied encounters between the state and refugees demonstrate that India's story of providing care is simultaneously one of limiting care [8].

Looking at the current life situation of refugees in India, a recent study was conducted on Urban Profiling of Refugees Situations in Delhi. Refugees from Myanmar, Afghanistan and Somalia and their Indian Neighbours: A comparative study[9], states that there are 20,782 UNHCR registered refugees in Delhi. Out of which half i.e. 10,046 belong to the Afghan community. The visa is an important document for foreign nationals in any country, it is often asked from most refugees to show their Visa as a form of identification. Refugees must have a valid passport and if it is not available (most of the passports have expired in any case), a certificate of residence given by the FRRO, which is also called a 'visa' [10].

The UNHCR, New Delhi gives a certificate to Afghan refugees which says: "This is to certify that (name)...a national of Afghanistan is on the basis of available information considered to be a refugee within the Mandate of the Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees". Afghans are one of the biggest groups of refugees who have been living in India since decades. Afghans in India are broadly divided into two categories of Hindu-Sikh Afghans who are culturally very similar and have been naturalized into Indian population. The other group comprises of Ethnic Afghans who are the biggest refugee population in India among those recognized by UNHCR. Most Afghans come to India having faced or witnessed some form of violence in their host country. The trauma of the past along with finding themselves in a new environment in India where even the language is alien for them poses a number of difficulties for them in all arenas.

Most Afghans coming to India are from good socio-economic conditions backgrounds and also they are the refugees with highest education level in India. They lack work permits and even trained doctors or teachers are unable to practice here. Their social position is suddenly subverted in society making it even more difficult for them to cope. This study focuses on seeing these difficulties faced by Afghan refugees after they migrate to India and the means used by these families to cope with these difficulties. Though a number of newspaper reports and articles are present on the life situation of Afghan refugees in India, not many research studies have been done on them in Indian context. Moreover, there is no study looking at the post migration living difficulties of Afghan refugees in India or their coping strategies. The Afghans are one of the oldest and largest refugee groups in India, but there is a very conspicuous dearth of literature related to their lives in India. The present study, attempts to explore some of these issues.

## 2. Objectives

1. To understand the socio-economic conditions profile of Afghan Refugee families.
2. To assess the Post Migration Living Difficulties of Afghans.
3. To understand the coping strategies of Afghan community to overcome the Post Migration Living Difficulties faced by them.

## 3. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, Ethnic Afghan refugee population- those registered by UNHCR- residing in Delhi, were included. Hindu-Sikh Afghans who have assimilated better with the Indian population were not taken to be a part of this study. The study has a descriptive research design. The sample size for the present study was 20 Ethnic Afghan Families. The sample was drawn through Purposive sampling. Snowball sampling was used as a method of data collection as identifying the population was difficult; this made it easier to locate the Afghan refugee households who were willing to be a part of this study.

The study is mixed methods study so both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. An interview schedule was used to gather information from Afghan refugee families, as the purpose was to gain a range of insights on specific issues. As an interpreter was also used for the data collection process, the questions had to be translated and explained to the interpreter to make them more understandable. The interview schedule broadly looked at the socio, economic and demographic details of the family, the educational qualifications, occupation and the major mental and physical health issues in the family.

## 4. Findings

The study attempts to understand the socio-economic conditions status of 20 Afghan refugee families in India. It looks at the family's composition, their duration of stay in India, besides looking at the education status, occupation and family's income. The findings also compare the life situation they had in Afghanistan and now in India and how it has changed with their migration. The study then attempts to look at the physical and mental health issues in these families and how treatment is sought. These findings will show us the major vulnerabilities of the refugees. The study then goes on to look at the Post Migration Living Difficulties of the Migrants as the intensity of different factors affecting migration is asked from them. This brings out the major issues of most migrant families, while also showing which issue is not a pressing need for most families. The coping skills of these refugee families was then seen, as how are they attempting to cope with these major Living Difficulties Post Migration. While some coping skills are inbuilt in an individual, other skills are adapted over time to suit the necessities of life.

### 1. Demographic profile

Among the Afghan refugee families interviewed, most of the respondents have been in India since 6 years and on an average most families had lived in India for 3 years. This shows how the in-surge of refugees from Afghanistan has been continuing with people still seeking refuge outside their country every year. Out of the 20 families, most of the families i.e. 8 had 6 members and on an average most families had 5 members. It shows that most Afghans have big families with an average of 3 children per family. As the principle respondent of all these interviews was a woman we see that 11 women were married, and 6 were widows, while 2 were single and 1 was separated from her husband of the 20 respondents we see that though most of them- 18 followed Islam, there were 2 families following Christianity too. These families had converted into Christianity a few years back and were facing a lot of discrimination from their community. They had security issues also due to this, as they were threatened by members of their community, also repatriation was an absolute 'NO' for them as Afghanistan being an Islamist state did not tolerate other religions.

### 2. Education

Among the interviewed Afghan refugee families most of the adults of the family had studied upto class 12th, while in India 9 individuals were pursuing English/ Computer course. We see that the second generation of these families was all receiving some form of education. All the children of the interviewed families had been going to school or college in Afghanistan and in India. This shows a favourable trend towards education as unlike the earlier generations a lot of emphasis can be seen on education for children in Afghan families. Among the families interviewed most of the families shared that they are either sending their children to government schools or private schools. Almost all the families shared that they were dissatisfied by the quality of education being given in government schools, also children studying Hindi seems futile to them, as most of them hoped for a future outside India. Families who were sending their children to government schools shared that they cannot afford education from elsewhere; while most of the families sending their children to private schools shared that they are cutting out on other necessary expenses for a better education and hence better future of their children. Out of the 20 families interviewed 16 said that they did not receive any external support with the fees.

### 3. Occupation

The interviewed 20 Afghan refugees shared that most women i.e. 9 were teachers in Afghanistan, while some worked for the government and NGOs too, while one respondent shared that she used to stitch clothes in Afghanistan and is also continuing the same here. Whereas, most men i.e. 7, had their own shops in Afghanistan, one each shared that they were working in as a teacher, in a private company, as a policeman, driver and as a builder. In India among the women interviewed, most i.e. 11 were working as interpreters or community animators with BOSCO (one of the implementing partners of UNHCR, in Delhi) or working as freelance interpreters. Among the respondents, the number of housewives has increased from 10 to 12 between Afghanistan and India. However, the overall number of women engaged in some kind of income generating activity has increased from 14 in Afghanistan to 20 in India, this can be attributed to more young girls stepping out to work and support their families.

Out of the 20 families interviewed 5 reported that the biggest hindrance for them in finding a good job in India and not having similar job as in Afghanistan is that the education they had attained there is not recognized here. 4 families said that the main reason for them was not knowing the local language, whereas, 3 families each attributed it to not having work permit in India and not having the work skills as required in India. Two families shared that the death of their husband lead to their change in family occupation and 1 family said that the husband's poor mental health is the main reason.

### 4. Income

Among the interviewed 20 Afghan families, 8 families reported a family income of 6,000-10,000 and only 1 family had income in the range of 26,000-50,000, whereas 5 families shared that they survived on less than 5,000 per month. This depicts how the family income of most families has declined after coming to India. Most of the families having more income in India had support from their relatives abroad.

Out of the 20 families interviewed, 5 families shared that their relatives from abroad either supported their family income or completely helped them in India, whereas, only 1 family in India was receiving support in kind, through ration from church.

### **5. Housing**

All the 20 families interviewed, paid rent between ₹7,000- 20,000/month, for a 1-3 BHK home in south Delhi. Most of the families lived in a 2BHK set. Almost every respondent shared that they have television and fridge at home. ‘

### **6. Health**

Most of the respondents shared that they sought treatment mostly from government hospitals but also added that they are not able to go there very often as it takes very long and most of them were dissatisfied with the treatment they had received before. Almost half the families interviewed, revealed that there was some sort of mental health issue in the family, of which depression being the most common ailment. The families mostly noticed the mental health disorder only after having moved to India.

This shows how the mental health issues of most refugees is related to either some trauma they underwent in their home country, usually being the reason behind the family's migration too. Most of the cases of depression were in India due to feeling helpless about their life and seeing no hope for future. All the ailing family members were under treatment and mostly from BOSCO's tie-up with VIMHANS; they also mostly reported at least slight improvement in their condition, ever since they have been on medication. The level of awareness among these refugee families in India was considerable, with most families being comfortable in talking about mental illness.

### **7. Post migration living difficulties**

The respondents were asked about the major concerns they face in the country of asylum. The most serious problem according to the maximum number of respondents was not having sufficient money to buy food, pay rent and buy necessities, followed by unemployment in India. As making ends meet is a struggle most families go through, as their life style has still undergone a sea change with lower income levels in India. Most respondents said that difficulty getting medical facilities and worrying about not getting medical treatment was serious problem for them, as they could not afford private treatment and government hospitals were too crowded and required multiple visits. Among the interviewed Afghan refugee families, most reported facing discrimination in a number of ways, most common form being asked to pay more for things like auto-rickshaws and vegetables, some respondents said that they are also made to pay more for rent than their Indian neighbors. A few families also shared that the children reported being discriminated at school, while some reported that they felt that the neighbors discriminated against them.

A number of Afghan families reported issues from members of their own community, as many Afghan refugees had fled from Afghanistan due to threat from members of own community. Most of these refugees are constantly scared for their safety even in India and are suspicious of other Afghans living here. This threat is either due to not relenting to conscription from Taliban or due to extended family forcing the young girls to get married to very old or unsuitable men. So the community is at large very suspicious of each other as many Afghans keep coming to India for business or treatment too and they fear their enemies might also come here or get to know about their whereabouts. Most families shared that in India they felt that women were not safe. Some of the respondents had faced instances of eve teasing, while most perceived it unsafe because of hearsay and what they have heard through media. As a lady said, "...we see Crime Patrol (TV show), even Indians are afraid due to all this so we will definitely be."

### **8. Coping strategies**

Knowing India mostly through Hindi movies, most Afghans know about only that reality of India, as a respondent said, "We used to think it will be as we see in movies, but after landing we realized what India really is." Refugees arrive in India with the barest minimum they could carry with themselves, with no means of support in a new country. Coping to the new life here is very difficult for most refugees.

Finding accommodation is the first challenge faced by refugees on arrival. Most of the refugees ask around from other Afghans in India, while others seek help from property dealers or Indians. Some families found it a bit easier to adjust and find their way around, as they knew the local language. Another major challenge for the refugee families is getting treatment from government hospitals, which though free, is a very long and tedious process. As a means of coping they then opt to go for treatment from private hospitals. They also shared that going to government hospitals becomes easy when staff from Bosco accompanies them for interpretation; however, the staff is very busy and not available that easily. For some families affording treatment from a private clinic was not possible so they continued with the treatment from government hospitals, even though dissatisfied with it.

Learning to live within limited means is a big challenge for most Afghan refugee households. As a respondent shared, "One always does not have the same life situation, I believe in this and then on the months we have sufficient money I try to save a bit for later." Some families had more difficulty in coping with the life in India, while others have adjusted well now and though bigger issues remain there are not much everyday living difficulty for them. A respondent said, "Earlier we did not know much about the price of items, so we used to get things much costlier but now we see Indians and also dress like them, so we don't face any discrimination." While some other families shared that they still cry and feel hopeless about the life situation in India. Religious institutions did not have a big role to play in the lives of refugees in India, as the only two Christian families received slight help from the church in the form of help with school fees and ration. Also most of the refugees shared that in India they had no close friends or family who could be there for them in times of need. They either did not share much with each other fearing that their family issues will become 'gossip' in the community or they felt that since every refugee family is struggling with their own lives, there was no point sharing their concerns with others.

The only organization working for the needs of refugees in Delhi is UNHCR and its implementing partners. Most respondents felt that education and health support from BOSCO has played a crucial role in helping them cope in India. Also, the subsistence allowance some families received was a big help for them. Though still largely dissatisfied by the support provided by UNHCR, a participant said, "We see India and its poverty but BOSCO/ UNHCR is doing so much for us which is not available for even Indians. I feel they are doing a lot for us." Most of the interviewed Afghan refugees said that the ultimate solution to their problems is getting resettlement from UNHCR, however to improve their lives in India, refugees sought better education for their children, along with better safety and improved living conditions. They felt that BOSCO can help them with better job options and some of the jobs given to Indians in their office can be given to refugees, as a participant said, "BOSCO gives all its good jobs to Indians. Even the office cleaner gets Rs.8000/month, I can work better than them but I have to work in the IGA(Income Generating Activity) where I can only manage a maximum of ₹3000-4000/month after a hard day's work." Getting Work Permit and Visas was a popular demand of most Afghan refugees as they felt that it would help them find better job opportunities and hence lead to a better life situation in India. Also a Visa will allow them to travel both within and outside India and also give some identification, as their refugee card is not recognized anywhere. As a family said, "We cannot go anywhere in India, we feel as if we are locked in a prison."

## 5. Conclusion

The present study depicts two main concerns of every Afghan refugee family in India i.e. stability and security and also the illusion of having these in India. They fled from Afghanistan expecting to be safe in India and hoping for a better future, trying to restart their lives. However, in them lives the hope of being resettled to a developed country instead of being in India, which though more stable than theirs is still a developing country, with enough mouths to feed of its own. Living in a present where they have no certainty of the future, they are unsure whether it will take years or decades or a lifetime for them to be able to move out of India. These families are neither able to settle down properly nor live as guests for a few years. In India, most Afghan refugees who have fled from Afghanistan still feel insecure and unsafe. India is easily accessible to Afghans with many coming seasonally for treatment and business, those who are living in hiding are afraid that their enemy will know their whereabouts.

Most of the families in India did not deal with police but those who had to, tell sad tales of them verbally harassing the girls or coming again and again to check on them, which made their Indian neighbours suspicious of them. The youth that left their studies in between is dismayed at the futile future that stands in front of them. India is not able to give them higher education or work permit-which would have allowed them to either pursue vocational courses or work in the unorganized sector-which limits the dreams and potentials of many of these youth. Afghan refugees in India neither have the stability nor security but India does provide them with a better alternate where they can at least have the illusion of this stability and security, which is essential for them to go on.

## 6. Recommendations

1. The qualifications of those refugees who already hold degrees and skills from their country of origin should be set at par according to Indian standards, so they are able to find jobs comparable to their skills.
2. Raising awareness at government hospitals about refugees so that when they go there to seek treatment, they are not discriminated against.
3. Organizing regular health camps to take care of dominant health issues so that they do not have to go to government hospitals always.
4. Awareness campaigns need to be organized about refugees especially in areas they predominantly stay at so that there is a general sensitivity towards their problems.
5. Teachers need to be sensitized about the background and struggles of refugee children so that they do not discriminate against them.
6. Schools should encourage intermingling between the refugee children and locals so that the refugee children do not feel left out in anyway and there develops a better understanding between them.

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