

DELHI, INDIA

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns

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Contents

- About the RIT Project** **3**
- Location** **4**
- Introduction** **5**
- Methodology** **6**
- Overview of Refugees in India** **7**
- Overview of Refugees in Delhi** **7**
 - Mapping the Refugee Population 8
- The Urban Impact** **9**
 - Food as Livelihood 9
 - The Choice to Cook 9
 - Making Ends Meet 11
 - Ingredients and Innovations 11
- The Refugee Experience** **12**
 - What the Cooks Eat at Home, and What They Miss From Home 12
- Conclusion** **13**
- References** **14**

About the RIT Project

This report is a case study of Refugees in Towns (RIT), a research project that aims to promote understanding of migrant and refugee experiences with integration—both formal and informal—in urban settings in the U.S. and around the world. Our case studies are ground in local knowledge. They are designed, conducted, and written by refugees and locals, capturing their voices and the perspectives of the communities in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen, and is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University. It is funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

1. First, by gathering a range of case studies we are amassing a global data base that will help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant and refugee integration. These cases reveal global differences and similarities in the factors that enable and obstruct integration, and the different ways in which migrants and hosts perceive, co-exist, adapt, and struggle with integration. We draw our case studies from towns in resettlement countries (e.g. the United States); transit countries (e.g. Greece), and countries of first asylum (e.g. Lebanon). Our long-term goal is to build a global, grounded theory of integration.
2. Second, the RIT project seeks to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy and practice. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

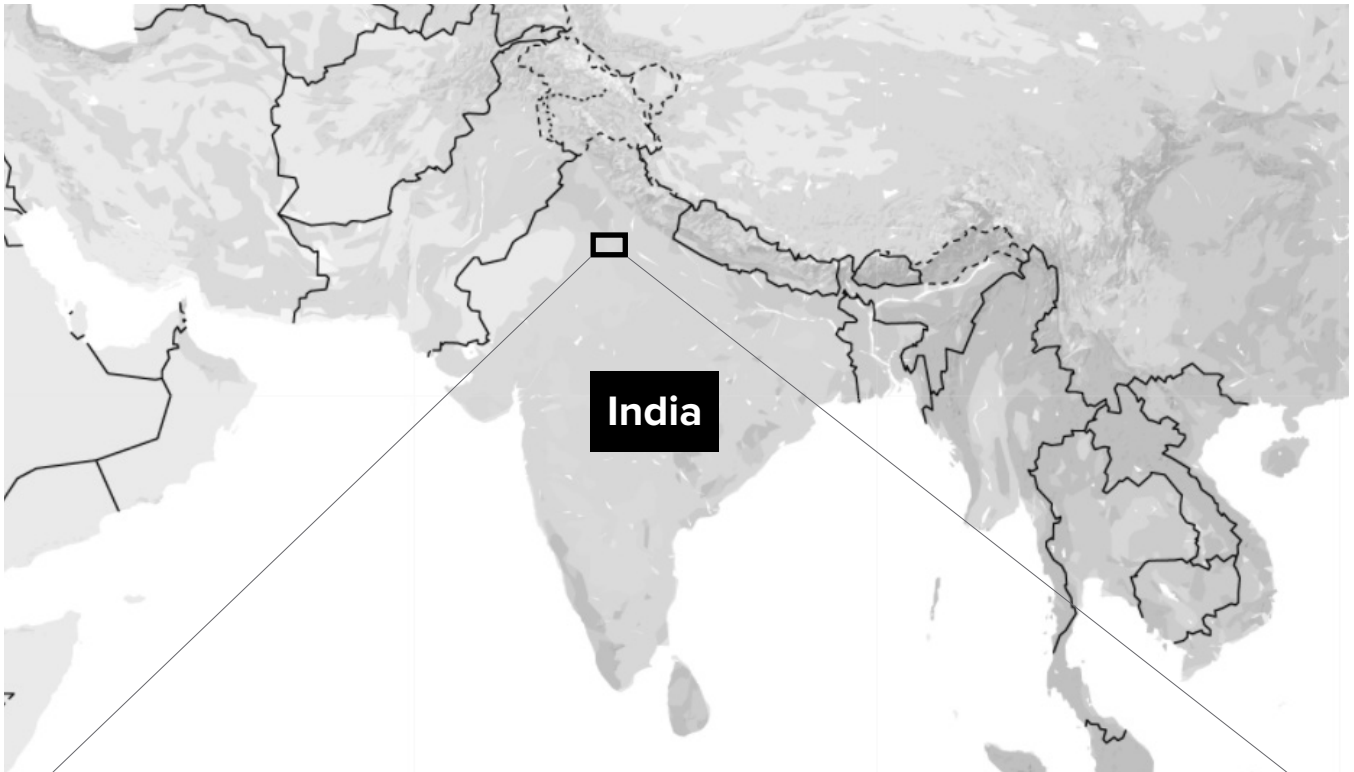
The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policies through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. and globally are responding in a range of different ways: some are resisting national policy changes by declaring themselves to be “sanctuary cities,” while others are supporting travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we need deeper understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, other migrants, and their hosts interact. Local perspectives on these processes are not well represented in the scholarship on integration: our RIT project seeks to draw on—and give voice to—both refugee and host communities in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case study reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world. Keep in touch: we regularly release more reports as our case study projects develop. There is also more information available about RIT’s researchers, goals, practical local outcomes, and theoretical analyses.

www.refugeesintowns.org

Location



Introduction

Refugee Localities in Delhi



Driving through Delhi, you can identify localities by the communities that live there, and the food. Descendants of the Mughal Dynasty live in the area surrounding Jama Masjid, so a visitor will be told: “Go to Jama Masjid for the best *biryani*!” A large Bengali community lives in CR Park, so a visitor will be told: “Go to CR Park for the best sweets!” As refugees from Afghanistan and Burma have settled in Delhi, new food locations have emerged: “Go to Lajpat for Afghan food,” or “go to Khirki for Somali food,” are common refrains. For upwardly mobile young professional Delhiites, this is an opportunity to show solidarity with the “less privileged,” indulge their experimental

taste-buds, and pretend they are spending their money on charity of some form. It is exciting to post on Instagram or Facebook a picture of a plateful of Afghani *roth* or Burmese sprouted peanuts and say “#refugees #yumminmytummy #oneworld.” Whatever one may think of all this, the demand from upper-middle class Delhi to indulge in global cuisine is seen as an opportunity by long-time refugees who have skills but very few assets at their disposal. This paper looks briefly at the history of refugee integration in Delhi, the livelihood, economic, and social integration opportunity that ethnic cuisine provides, and the association of food with emotional resilience.

Methodology

When the Refugees in Towns project was announced, I thought back to an incident in May 2014. I was then a practicing human rights lawyer and had walked over to the Child Welfare Committee's office in Lajpat Nagar to handle a case. I found myself for the first time in a locality where everyone looked different from the regular Delhi crowd, and spoke a different language. Even the signboards on shops were in a script I did not recognize. I had walked into the Afghan colony in Lajpat Nagar. It seemed imperative to me that the Refugees in Towns project should include Delhi. Growing up in Delhi, I have always been able to access cuisine from different parts of the world. Initial desk research showed that food is often a binding factor between migrants and hosts. In Delhi, there is much disdain between different communities for each other's cultures, but there is a current of enthusiasm for cross-cultural cuisines.

A UNHCR Delhi report told about a group of Afghan refugee women who turned into food entrepreneurs and improved their standard of living, I was drawn to studying culinary services as a means of livelihood, a source of emotional resilience, and potentially a promoter of refugee-host integration. However, studying refugees'

restaurants was not easy. I had imagined I would saunter into restaurants, order a plate of exotic food, and then start chatting with the chef. That's what journalists seemed to do, and a lot of my preliminary research was based on newspaper reports and documentation of refugee chefs. But I found restaurant owners reluctant to talk. Indian attitudes have become hostile to Muslims in general and Muslim refugees specifically, whom the government has branded as "illegal immigrants." Trust, therefore, was hard to earn. Ultimately, I approached ACCESS, a UNHCR partner organization, to introduce me to the Afghan women whom they had helped form a culinary enterprise called ILHAM. This required getting clearance from UNHCR, which was a straightforward but comprehensive process. ACCESS had connections with many refugee groups and were forming more culinary enterprises like ILHAM. I was thus able to interview members of ILHAM, but also a group of Somali women, and a Chin Burmese woman and young man.

While most of the Afghan community could speak or understand Hindi, language was a barrier for other communities. ACCESS provided a translator

Interview Sampling Chart

	Men	Women
Number of individuals	4	8
Age range	19-40	25-45
Nationalities	Chin Burmese Afghan	Chin Burmese Afghan Somali
Number of key informants	1	2
Main organizations of key informants	ACCESS UNHCR	

for the Chin Burmese cooks, but the only person in the Somali group who spoke English was the twelve-year old son of one of the respondents. This made it difficult for me to ask direct questions about discrimination and economic hardships, but fortunately the respondent was comfortable with her son knowing their life conditions. Still, it was beyond the child's vocabulary to put discrimination-induced job inequality into coherent sentences and required some interpretation and contextualization.

In July, I began by visiting well-established, and easily identified Afghan restaurants in the Lajpat Nagar area of South Delhi. July and August were bad times of the year to ask people to take time out of their daily schedules and come into the

ACCESS office to talk to me. Between extreme heat and extreme rain, I felt I was adding to the burdens of a group of people who already had more work than would fit in a day. I interviewed one Indian restaurant owner who was the business partner of the Afghan owner, and had preliminary conversations with two servers in two other restaurants. Later in July and August, I interviewed small-scale entrepreneurs who were forming culinary service groups with the help of ACCESS. I met the Chin Burmese cooks in the Vikaspuri office of ACCESS in West Delhi, and the Afghan and Somali groups in the Bhogal office of ACCESS in South Delhi.

IRB clearance for this project was obtained in May 2017 from Tufts University.

Overview of Refugees in India

India has been home to refugees from the time of its independence in 1947. Beginning with families that crossed over during Partition, followed by the Tibetan community in 1956, India is presently home to about 200,000 refugees and persons of concern, from over nineteen countries (UNHCR, 2017). UNHCR determines refugee status for all these individuals, except the Sri lankan and Tibetan communities (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2017). India has long avoided signing the 1967 Protocol due to porous borders, de facto compliance with treaty obligations, and its annoyance with UNHCR for repatriating Bangladeshi refugees at a time when Pakistani

atrocities were exceptionally brutal (De Sarkar, 2017). Yet, India usually treats its refugee population well. They are allowed to integrate with the local population and apply for long-term residency and work visas (UNHCR, 2014). In January 2013, Antonio Guterres, then UNHCR High Commissioner, exhorted India's refugee policy as an example to the international community at a time when borders across the world were shutting down. He specifically referred to India's culture, tradition and history that facilitated such generosity and ensured the safety of all refugees who came to India (Kak Ramachandran, 2013).

Overview of Refugees in Delhi

Delhi has attracted migrants and refugees for centuries. Rural Indian migrants have come, as have economic migrants representing international trade and commerce. When India was partitioned

in 1947, the majority of citizen-refugees from the Pakistani region settled in Delhi. Over time, new groups of arrivals clustered in different locations, and in post-independence India, very few

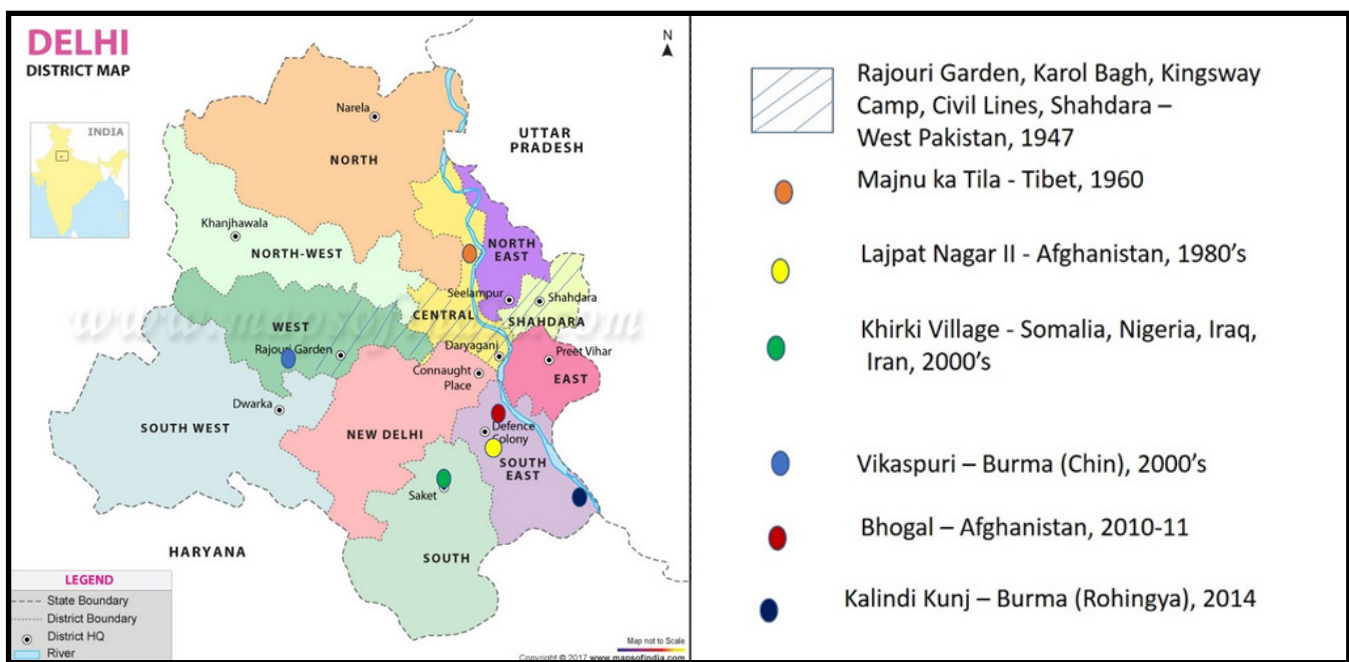
residents can claim that their families have lived in Delhi more than three generations back. There are many internally displaced people, and or refugees too. Eight thousand Tibetans have lived in Delhi since being granted asylum by the Government of India in the 1960s (UNHCR, 2016. See also Sharma, 2017). By 2017, Delhi became home to about 15,000 refugees and 5,000 asylum seekers – mostly Somalis, Syrians, Afghans, Burmese – registered with UNHCR in India. Non-Tibetan refugees are required to register with UNHCR whose India office is located in New Delhi, so it is convenient for refugees to stay in the city.

Refugees tend to live where they have pre-existing networks of relatives or friends, which results in somewhat geographically segregated refugee communities. Thus, the first wave of Afghan refugees, who came to Delhi in the 1980s, mostly settled in Lajpat Nagar. The second wave of Afghans, who came after 2010, settled in Bhogal (which is close to Lajpat Nagar), but also in a new location, Khirki Village in Malviya Nagar. Perhaps this shift occurred because refugee assistance centers sprung up in Malviya Nagar, in response to the high concentration of other refugee nationalities living in Khirki Village, who settled there because of their pre-existing social networks. Most Indians stereotype “Africans” as

one group, and thus refugees from various African countries – Somalis, Nigerians, Kenyans, etc. – all tend to live in Khirki, as protection against a common “othering.”

The refugee population is often joined by immigrants from their home countries. Thus, Afghans who come to Delhi for medical treatment live in Lajpat Nagar, either with friends or family, or in rented accommodations, bed and breakfast arrangements, or cheap hotels. Similarly, Nigerian students live in Khirki Village, where they can access networks of earlier Nigerian migrants. Generally, there are fewer daily acts of racism in this migrant-dense neighborhood than in majority-Indian neighborhoods, but sporadically—sometimes once in two years, other times multiple times per year—the neighborhood is attacked by xenophobic mobs, intolerant of those they consider “outsiders.” The most shocking example was in January 2014 when former law minister of Delhi, Somnath Bharti, led a mob at midnight to attack the Africans living there (Ugandan and Nigerian, but all the same to the mob), accusing them of peddling drugs and prostitution.

Mapping the Refugee Population



Usually, refugees from the same community live in the same neighborhood, and this map is a representation of such neighborhoods. However, it is possible that some families move to other locations in search of better work opportunities or better housing facilities.

The Urban Impact

Food as Livelihood

In Delhi, the ethnicity of a geographic space defines the cuisine of the area. Thus, in Majnu ka Tila one finds shacks selling *momos* and *thukpa*; in Lajpat Nagar there are lanes famous for Afghan restaurants; and Khirki village has Iraqi food stalls, Somali restaurants, and now some Afghan restaurants.

The Choice To Cook

My first foray was to Lajpat Nagar, where it took some effort to locate the “Afghan Colony.” I crossed the Central Market and could feel myself getting closer as clothes and complexions changed, signboards were in a different language, and suddenly I could no longer understand the language on the street. I stood outside two adjacent restaurants, Afghan Durbar and Kabul Delhi, trying to decide which to enter first. Then I noticed the staff of Afghan Durbar glaring at my friend (also an Indian woman, whom I had dragged along because I was nervous) and we made up our minds and went in. After ordering and relishing a plate of *phirni* (a dish similar to rice pudding, but many times better), we walked over to the counter to pay our bill, and attempted to chat with the waiters. They were three young men, who had come to Delhi from Afghanistan in the past three years and worked in the restaurant because the owner, or somebody who knew the owner, had helped them get jobs here. We explained our study, and they said they would be unable to help us, since their owner had warned them to not talk to anybody about their lives as refugees. The owner himself sat at the other restaurant he owned – Mazar – which was down the road. “*Wo 30 years se yahaan rehte hai, wo aapko behtar bata payenge*”, they explained in Hindi. (He has been living here for 30 years, he will be able to answer your questions better.) At the next stop –

Kabul Delhi – the man behind the counter smiled when he heard I was doing research on refugee issues. “*Haanji, bahut aate hai aapke jaise. Pichhle hafte bhi aaye the students*,” he nodded understandingly. (Yes, many like you come here. Last week also some students came). Here too, the waiters and other workers had been prohibited from speaking to researchers, and we were recommended to speak to the owner.

I found this strange, but in light of national politics, it made sense – the government of India had recently started using anti-Muslim refugee rhetoric. For many refugees who at most have a UNHCR card but few other identity documents, it made sense to lie low and be invisible.

Amir, one of the owners, was unwilling to talk. “I do not give interviews. No interviews. Please,” he said curtly, before hanging up the phone. Instead, I met with his business partner, Ismail, who was happy to talk to me. Ismail was the Indian co-owner, and the face and signature on all things official – interviews, photographs, government documents, and the restaurant lease. He told me that their restaurants mainly catered to the Afghan diaspora in Lajpat Nagar. “They feel good when they can find comfort food. I am sure you feel that way about Indian food in the US?” I asked if Indians eat at their restaurant often. He answered in the negative. “Afghan food is not spicy. Most Indians come looking for Mughlai food and are disappointed. Though, of course, there are youngsters who come in to experiment with a new kind of food. They come with an open mind, and they often find that they like Afghan food, and they come back again.”

Hringtu Nu, a Chin Burmese woman who lives near Vikaspuri in West Delhi, had a similar story to tell. “I have never approached any Indian people with my food. I don’t even speak their language; how will I sell them my food?” Back home in the Chin district of Burma, Hringtu Nu worked as a weaver, “But now my eyesight is failing, and I also do not have

my loom or other materials that weaving requires.” Hringtu Nu opted to cook for a living because she felt that her lack of education made this her only option. It also allowed her to work from home, so she does not have to spend money on renting a work space or travelling to work. In the mid-morning, she goes from door to door carrying home-cooked food in large pots. Often, she has to lug her heavy pots up many flights of stairs to knock on the doors of potential customers. On hot days, the struggle worsens.

For some others, like Hleikua, a nineteen-year old boy, also Chin-Burmese, the choice to cook for a living was defined by his circumstances: “When I came here, I was fourteen. I was given shelter by a family who had a food stall, so I helped them. Now I have learned enough about the trade to open my own stall.” Hleikua would like to go back to school and get a services job “In a company.” His schooling was interrupted when he left Burma for India in 2014, and his ambition is to get to a country where he can go back to school. In five years, though, Hleikua has grown to like cooking: “It gives me pleasure to see my efforts take shape, and to see people eat. The food I cook reminds me of the hills where I grew up. I would like Indian people to come to my stall too, so that they can see that refugees work hard, and they can appreciate my efforts.”



Shukri, her friends, Ishri, and me.

Shukri and her friends live in Khirki Village. They fled Somalia about eight years ago, went to Yemen briefly, and when the conflict escalated there, came to Delhi. I felt hesitant asking them about

their livelihood struggles because our interpreter was Shukri’s 12-year old son. Shukri, however, did not believe in censoring her son’s views of the world. “It is no problem, madam. He should know,” she insisted (we had some initial interactions in broken Hindi). Her friend’s two-year old daughter, Ishri, refused to play with me until I offered her some sweets (I met them on my birthday). After this gesture, she did not let go of me.

Shukri used to sell juice and shakes from a cart in Somalia. When she came to Delhi, she initially worked as an *aayah* (domestic nurse), before being approached by a posh South Delhi school to cook for their dining hall. Once in a while, she gets orders to cook at parties as well. “As a woman, one thing I know well is how to cook. I did not have to learn anything afresh.” One of her friends has always been an assistant at restaurants – back in Somalia, later in Yemen, and now here Delhi. “Someday I will have my own restaurant, and I will employ other women,” she said.

For the ILHAM group, Afghan food was a way to introduce themselves to their new home. “We really like it when people eat our food and realize there is more to Afghanistan than war and the terrible things you see on TV,” says Ameena, a former beautician, who came to India about seven years ago and started working as a cook in an Afghan food stall.

ILHAM is a success story – seven single mothers from privileged backgrounds who came to India under dire circumstances started out by doing low-paying odd jobs in the informal sector, but today are invited to cater at embassy events and food festivals. The group came about with the help of UNHCR’s partner organization ACCESS, which provides relief services, including job placements, to refugees. The international and local media hails ILHAM as an entrepreneurial group that provides catering services. “We are invited by rich people to cook when they have parties. They are really nice to us, they invite us to meet their guests, and everybody has so many questions about our food. We really enjoy it!” Access to, and acceptance from, the rich and powerful of the country augments the self-esteem of the ILHAM

women significantly. They feel recognized by those who are important, they develop contacts with those who can open up opportunities for better business, and there is the obvious economic advantage of good earnings on every order that is placed.

Delhi has been mostly good to these women: “I let my daughter dress like her classmates – she wears sleeveless tops and jeans and doesn’t wear a veil. She is free because women have the option to be free here,” said Sameera, who was a school teacher in Afghanistan. Yet, they are afraid of discovery by the Taliban, and prefer to keep their address secret. Orders are picked up from the ACCESS office, and invitations to cater are placed through ACCESS as well.

Making Ends Meet

The restaurants in Lajpat Nagar make average revenue. They have proper infrastructure, air conditioning, and shiny cutlery. Over time, their reputation has grown and the owners have saved enough money to open branches. As their reputation spreads, all their locations prosper.



A street in the 'Afghan Colony' of Lajpat Nagar.

For newer ventures, finding success has been more difficult. The ILHAM group, for all their efforts and good press, still find it difficult to make ends meet. “The money is good, definitely more than we made as maids, but it is not enough. We still have to choose between rent and school fees every month. We still need to borrow a little every month.”

Shukri has a very pragmatic approach to her work. “This is what brings in money right now. Tomorrow, if something else helps me earn more I will be happier doing that. My son should be able to study as much and as far as he wants to.” Her friends nod in agreement and approval.

Hleikua had started his own tea stall just a week before our conversation. So far, he gets about 20 customers per day. “A tea stall is usually a family venture. I am trying to run this by myself. I will probably need to hire help, the way I worked for the family I stayed with,” he mused about future plans.

Hringtu Nu has applied for a grant to ACCESS to boost her food business. “I can cook most kinds of Burmese food but I have no capital to collect the ingredients. I can even make *shen khao suey*, a special delicacy. When I receive the ACCESS grant, I will make all these things, and not just *bebinpao*.” Hringtu Nu’s cooking is popular among her customers, but that does nothing to help her “They are always happy to eat what I make, but since we are all refugees, they often take food on credit. I understand their situation, so I do not refuse, but it puts me in a difficult position. If I do not make money on one day, I cannot cook anything for the next day.” Hringtu Nu cannot hold back her tears at this point, “Families have ten children and they send all ten to school, but as a single mother I am unable to send my one daughter to school.”

Ingredients and Innovations

Hringtu Nu economizes by growing a lot of her ingredients at home. *Bebinpao* is made with the

peanut plant, and she grows these in pots on her balcony. Other ingredients are easily available as they are used in Indian dishes too. On days when she receives full payment and has enough cash on hand she makes *mohinka*, a rice soup, and *khao suey* to sell. On a daily basis, though, this more extravagant dish is not possible.

Hleikua sells Burmese soups and snacks, and Burmese tea. He finds most ingredients easily at Indian stores, where they are cheaper than imported ingredients. He cannot really tell the difference in quality between ingredients found in Indian and local Burmese stores, but for special Burmese spices goes to the Sung Bazaar which sells Burmese necessities in his neighborhood. The owners of these shops, also Burmese, have networks back home who send them supplies every fortnight, Hleikua explained.

Ismail got into mansplaining mode and lectured me for a bit on how easy it is to travel between Delhi and Kabul. “What is the difference between Afghanistan and Delhi? Hardly a few hundred kilometers, the same terrain, the same climate. What grows there, grows here. What we can’t find here, we go and bring from there. Don’t think there isn’t a coming-and-going happening here!” We stare at each other for a few seconds, he defiant, I skeptical.

The ILHAM ladies agree that most ingredients are easily available in Delhi, but they attribute it

to Delhi’s cosmopolitan culture, rather than ease of travel. “But your onions are too small,” sighs Ameena. I visited their stall in the food court of a crafts festival a week later, and they showed me how they were adapting kitchen equipment to a catering lifestyle. “We can’t carry a *tandoor* around, so we use a *kadhaj* (wok),” they point to the adapted *tandoor-kadhais* on the floor. Two dishes on their menu – *ashak* and *mantu* – are steamed dumplings of vegetables and meat, respectively. “We get a special kind of pasta back home, and we have different equipment. Here we use regular dough and *momo* steamers.”



The ILHAM stall at a food court.

Shukri and her friends do not elaborate, but just “hmm.” and nod that they find all ingredients to cook Somali food easily enough. “You can get some of our things at INA Market if you want, but for us that is too expensive,” one of her friends adds as an afterthought.

The Refugee Experience

What the Cooks Eat at Home, and What They Miss From Home

Shukri likes to make her son Somali burgers with meat and vegetable fillings. She feels this will keep her son in touch with his cultural heritage. “It is quite elaborate. I wouldn’t make it commercially,”

Shukri says. One of her friends says she makes special Somali treats for her children when they have a bad day at school, or on the way back. “Every once in a while, someone will call them ‘*habshi*’ (a South Asian racial slur for dark-skinned Africans) and my son gets really upset. Earlier he used to cry, now he gets angry.” This statement reflects how gender norms caught on for her son as he grew up. Society teaches boys to not cry,

which is considered vulnerable and weak. Anger, on the other hand, is seen as powerful, and worthy of masculinity. The mother can no longer appease her male child with treats, so she tries to soothe his anger at racial insults by presenting ethnic food as a reminder of pride in their culture – a reminder that they belong to a culture that is inferior to no other. None of them want to go back to Somalia in the near future, however. “Maybe in the distant future, if everything becomes alright again,” Shukri said, trailing off.

Ameena loves *ashak*. “I always put some aside when I make these,” she smiles. “My daughter loves them too! I am so glad she likes food from home, even though she has lived here most of her life.” Similarly, Sameera shakes her head and said: “My daughter is a complete Indian now,” looking over at her teenager sitting a few tables away, vigorously texting on her mobile phone. All of them hope that the situation in Afghanistan settles down and they can go back home soon. “We had such a comfortable life, you know. We had a good home and a comfortable life. We used to watch

Hindi television soaps with dialogues dubbed in Dari. If we slept on the floor it was not because we couldn’t afford a bed. We never had to cover all three of our children in one blanket and stay cold ourselves. We cooked these dishes on special occasions, not as a means of income.”

By contrast, Hringtu Nu looked at me blankly when I asked her what she misses most about home. “What was there to miss?” In December, she misses the festival season, but the rest of the year holds no special memories for her. At the end of the day, she and her daughter take the left-over gravies from the pots for their meal.

Of the dishes Hleikua cooks and serves, corn soup, called *satuti*, is his personal favorite. Hleikua said he does not miss much from back home, except for his friends and the hills. He described missing sitting with his friends on a hilltop, drinking tea, and singing. These things were “nothing much, though,” he said, dismissing the memories nonchalantly.

Conclusion

The ethnic and racial heterogeneity of Delhi gives refugees an advantage in the city — with people from all over India living there, refugees do not stand out as a distinct group. Delhi also cultivates an upwardly mobile young adult population who are keen to experiment with diverse cultures and cuisines. Refugees fill this niche, since their identity is exoticized by the media, creating greater interest in their ethnic cuisine.

Of the refugees I interacted with, the ILHAM women seemed to be the best integrated, in so far as they were happy, and financially better off than when they first started working in Delhi. The others were neither earning enough, nor happy. A key distinction was that ILHAM had the support of UNHCR and ACCESS, and were able to tap into the social networks of Delhi’s upper

class. The Chin and Somali groups have so far only attempted cooking within their own social circles, or for a few regular customers. Hopefully, as they continue their association with ACCESS and UNHCR, they will be able to earn a better income. While income alone cannot guarantee integration, a basic income is the first step towards social integration – being able to send children to a good school, and moving into a good house in a clean and safe neighborhood.

What works well in Delhi is the traditional culture of welcoming guests and assisting those who seek refuge. This culture is reinforced through mythology and folklore, and there is the virtue of magnanimity associated with accommodating refugees. Thus, even though India is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol,

refugees were always made welcome — until the recent rise of religious nationalism in India. The absence of an official refugee policy allowed government actors to be liberal in their attitude towards refugees, based on their personal beliefs

and convictions. I sincerely hope this phase of religious-nationalism passes without causing additional suffering to refugees in India, and we can continue welcoming our guests as before.

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

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