

Photo essay



Naanwais and Non-Citizens: The Political Economy of Afghan Migrant Infrastructures in Delhi

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Asha Sawhney



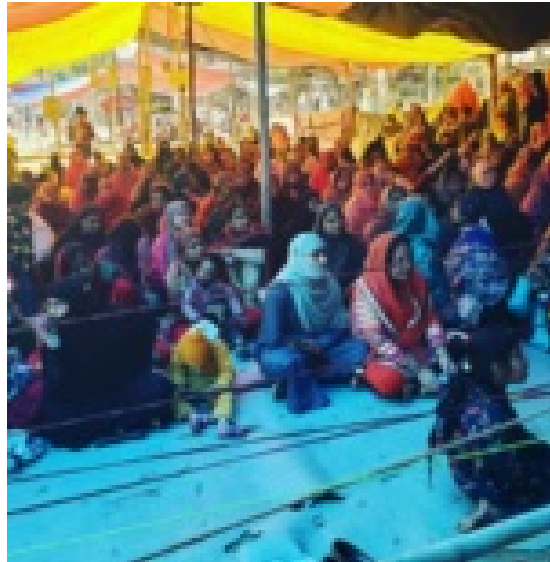
Mantoo and Afghan chai at a small restaurant in Hauz Rani market. By the author



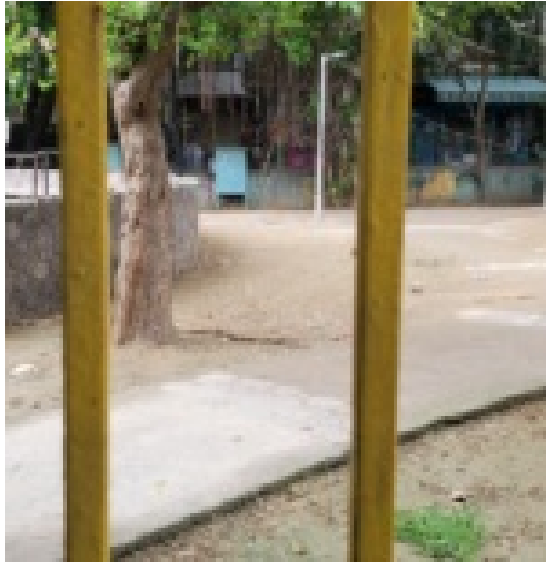
Aushak, bolani, kebabs, and naan in Lajpat Nagar. By the author.



The main site of the anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) protests in early 2020, Shaheen Bagh. By the author.



Hauz Rani Market during the anti-CAA protests. By the author.



The same park that was a site of the protests, standing empty in July 2022. By the author.

There has been much criticism that transnational migration literature that speaks of cities as “magnets” or “gateways” for migrants (Glick-Schiller and Çağlar, 2009; Price and Benton-Short, 2008) overlooks the everyday constitution of urban space and how migrants construct this space (Collins, 2011; Feldman-Bianco, 2018). This essay concerns itself with the Afghan everyday in Delhi, from a multiscalar lens that layers the political-economic and the “cultural.” A cursory glance at Afghan neighborhoods and markets in Delhi reveals only supposedly depoliticized expressions of “culture,” when in fact these infrastructures unfurl and unravel based on the ebbs and flows of political economic struggle. Furthermore, transnational neighborhoods in Delhi transcend a dichotomy of center vs. periphery in tracing marginalization, as refugees and the informal infrastructures required to economically sustain a non-citizen population are paradoxically concentrated in the wealthiest districts of the city.

Construction of the Capital

The Afghan markets of Delhi, most famously in Lajpat Nagar, followed by nearby Hauz Rani and Bhogal, are vivid representations of the hyper-in(visibility) of migrants. Every Delhite knows, whether abstractly or personally, that Afghans have lived in India in large numbers since the late 70s. Nonetheless, comments such as “I lived in the adjacent colony just a few lanes over, how did I never come across this place which looks so much like Kabul?” have been a common refrain throughout my years of ethnographic research with the community. If people have walked these lanes, it has likely been to marvel at the size of Afghan naans being baked on the street, or to try Afghan “momos” (their actual name, mantoo), a name borrowed from the Tibetan dumplings that have populated Delhi’s streets for even longer—one refugee food naming the other.

It is impossible to disentangle the evolution of Afghan neighborhoods starting in the 1970s to present day from an earlier formative rupture in Delhi’s spatial history: the influx of 500,000+ Sikh and Hindu refugees that flooded the capital city after the Partition of India

and Pakistan. The neighborhoods in which Afghans find themselves comfortable were initially planned and designed to accommodate Partition refugees, and subsequently became neighborhoods with a strong Sikh presence, as the division of Punjab broke the Sikh homeland in two. It was here that Afghan Sikhs and Hindus found accommodation, and in a city where there is little agency in where one lives, where one must be socially accepted by landlords to survive, it was only natural that this is where Afghan Muslims, along with born-again Christians, would end up.

Counterintuitively, transnational refugees in India are often concentrated in some of Delhi's most upscale neighborhoods. The migrant economies are forced to be flexible and mobile to accommodate the precarious legal status of transnational refugees, yet unlike Abdou Maliq Simone's telling of *people as infrastructure* in the context of Johannesburg, these spaces do not represent the periphery, margin, or sites of urban decay that represent the "incompleteness" of Global South megacities. Rather, these ethnic micro-neighborhoods are situated in Delhi's most connected and formally planned zones.

Construction of a Nation

The construction of Delhi's ethno-religious space cannot be separated from the construction of India as a nation. And today under the ruling BJP party, there is a renewed project of nation-building at play, the construction of the Hindu nation and its boundaries. The natural flow of 1947 Partition refugee housing into Afghan Sikh and Hindu property acquisitions, to the integration of Afghan Muslims into what are now some of Delhi's highest rent districts runs directly against the Hindu nationalist logic that must keep Muslims at the margins. But as Appadurai argues, all neighborhoods as social formations represent anxieties for the nation-state, as they represent contested spaces and breaks in the techniques of nationhood.

One such technique of nationhood found in India's policies towards Afghan refugees and most notably articulated in the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, is to delineate who "belongs" to the Hindu homeland. This act announces that migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, all Muslim-majority nations, who are Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Christian, Parsi (Zoroastrian), or Buddhist, are eligible for fast-tracked naturalization (should they have arrived before 2014, but the fanfare around the act tends to ignore the fine print).



Photo of the Max Super Speciality Hospital Saket, from across the street, ranked 13th best hospital in all of India. Image taken by author.



From the “international patient waiting room” inside Max Hospital. Image taken by author.

Transnational Circulations and the Migrant Neighborhood

The Afghan portions of Hauz Rani market, directly opposite of Max Super Specialty Hospital, make the limits of viewing migrant neighborhoods only as hubs for food and outgrowths of “culture” especially clear. As Aihwa Ong notes, in studies of transnationality, there is a consistent trap of viewing the local scale as that of “culture,” and reserving political-economic analysis for the global scale. In Hauz Rani, even the untrained eye can quickly see how the global torment of war and healthcare inequity touches down into a tiny space, perhaps a half of a square kilometer. Pharmacies boast signs in Dari (Persian), Arabic, Russian, and Somali. Max is one of the most elite hospitals in Delhi and among the first to capitalize on medical tourism through none other than Afghans, who circulated between Kabul and Delhi to get their basic needs met.

Unfortunately, since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, flights have been closed between Kabul and Delhi, creating a crisis of existential proposition for the small businesses that relied on circular capital. In South Delhi’s Bhogal market, a second-hand

furniture seller and father of four laments to me:

“Don’t you see, the Afghan people are no longer coming. Look at how empty the streets are...you see when people were coming and going, there were guesthouses all around Bhogal, I would help furnish them, someone else would run the laundry service, and so on. We created an entire infrastructure, a mini-Afghanistan.”

It is not just Afghans who are waiting in existential uncertainty as their funds dwindle; a Punjabi Sikh gold merchant in Lajpat Nagar spoke openly to me about how he may have to shut his doors, as he relied on Afghans coming from Kabul, eager to buy gold as a stable asset.

“They keep saying in a few months they will open, in a few more months, but I am not hopeful...if you went to Kabul and you told people in the markets my name, they would know me. I have never been to Kabul, and I am a Punjabi, but I feel that I am still a part of Kabul.”

I have been told several times by my interlocutors over the years that a bomb will kill you instantly, but hunger kills you slowly. It is therefore non-obvious whether one should continue seeking refuge in India, and in fact, community leaders estimate that around 125 families have returned to Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover to try their luck with businesses back home.

But Inside Max Hospital, the medical tourism industry continues to run. Using Anna Tsing’s brilliant metaphor in her own work on the global supply chain, the frictions of the global political economy may stop and threaten the livelihood of Delhi’s Afghan migrants, but they serve as a source of energy for healthcare executives. The hospital has calmly and silently transitioned, shifting gears to serving patients from other parts of Central Asia, Iraqis, Syrians, sub-Saharan Africans (with a notable Somali presence), and Bangladeshis.

Coming back to Simone’s *people as infrastructure*, in which marginalized residents of a city practice radical provisionality in a manner that is simultaneously flexible and regular or provisional, there is a defeated air among the Afghans who initially made their livings in Hauz Rani and Lajpat Nagar from the circular economy of medical tourism. Institutional actors noticed the profit potential of formalizing what was once an informal industry and capturing the blueprint of Afghan infrastructures built out of desperation and collaboration in order to produce a polished and glitzy international marketing campaign.

The hospital has let go of the hundreds of Afghan refugees who relied on informal work from interpretation and has learned how to keep its costs low by paying interpreters as little as possible. Currently they have professional Arabic and Russian interpreters working in person, French interpreters on call, informally hired local Somali refugee interpreters, and Indian Bengali staff who step in to interpret for Bangladeshis. Afghanistan is no longer seen as a profitable source for visiting patients and is therefore absent from the new medical tourism campaign, which goes as far as to sending hospital “ambassadors” to target countries to advertise Max’s available services.

As the industries created by Afghans continue to thrive, such as medical tourism, a market valued at 6.2 billion USD, there is a constant feeling by Afghans of being left behind, and of

being the only ones who can notice the subtle changes in how certain streets are quieter in the bustling markets of the world's second largest metropolis. Moreover, on a global scale, many Afghans in India are in fact the family members who are "left behind," waiting to be reunited with their siblings, children, and cousins who have made it to Europe or North America. The rights attached to their refugee status are not complete, because this status is meant to be temporary, but the extent of their impact on urban space shows their *permanent temporariness*, a paradoxical state common in Asian transnational migration stories (Collins, 2011).



A single storefront opposite Max Hospital displaying a cacophony of migrant economies, restaurants, pharmacies (chemists), travel agencies, and medical testing. Image taken by author.



A Paytm (one of India's largest UPI applications) sign hangs over a roadside momo stand in Delhi. Image sourced from <https://mashable.com/article/paytm-200-million-wallet-users>

Digital Infrastructure in Urban Space

The ₹1,000 rupee note never returned after India's infamous demonetization policy, in

which Prime Minister Modi announced on November 8, 2016 that all ₹500 and ₹1,000 rupee notes were demonetized effective immediately. Instead, new ₹500 notes and bright pink ₹2,000 notes were issued. Since this campaign, which by all reputable independent accounts was disastrous for the poor and did little to reign in the circulation of black money in India, the government has been on a relentless digital payments campaign. The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) system now reigns supreme.

This year, through a combination of recent currency devaluation and the announcement that the recently printed pink ₹2,000 rupee note will now be retired from circulation, India will not produce physical currency worth more than 6 USD. In megacities, though one may choose to ignore it, there are physical manifestations of where incomplete formal infrastructures trail off and leave massive populations beyond their scope, forcing residents to act collaboratively and creatively to meet their needs. Digital infrastructures can mask their hypocrisies and shortcomings more easily.

The scale of India's UPI system is massive and has accrued over 300 million monthly users in the seven years since it was launched. Even a 10-cent cup of chai can now be paid for by scanning a QR code with a smartphone. The system has been heralded as a model for global adoption and has received immense praise from organizations such as USAID as a means to uplift and empower. The techno-financial elite feel that they are beating the West by paving the way for a digital future.

The darker side of a digital economy is blissfully tucked away from view in the headlines. Using the UPI system requires having an Aadhaar card, which is linked to one's biometrics. The government has been disconcertingly opaque about how it will protect this data and has said that exceptions to citizens' privacy can be made under the auspices of security. Refugees who lack long-term visas (known as stay-visas), which are granted far less frequently to Muslim migrants, are not eligible for Aadhaar. The *naanwais* of the Afghan lanes in the Bhogal market in South Delhi are often displayed in food and culture pieces in Indian journalism, as they supply the staple bread to their community, a bread much thicker than what is commonplace in India. When I asked one *naanwai* what he thought of UPI applications such as Paytm and Gpay, he told me,

"I know nothing about those things, and I never want to."

Others, on the other hand, have figured out ways to cope with the system, borrowing the account information of friends and family and later distributing and transferring cash amongst themselves, a classic example of personal relationships between the marginalized filling the gaps left by an intentionally incomplete infrastructure. If you asked the average self-identifying "modern" Delhite, a descriptor that cultural psychologist Sunil Bhatia has found common among upper-class and elite Indian youth, along with "exposed" and "independent," the issue of transnational migrant access to UPI is making a big fuss over a tiny population. Such is life, but they should be happy to be away from Taliban gunfire, shouldn't they?

I, on the other hand, see this small population as a stubborn reminder of how Modern India silently excludes and leaves behind who she finds inconvenient. Afghans are a rare

group that are marginalized yet conduct their daily lives in some of the highest rent neighborhoods in the nation's capital. They cannot be entirely removed from view. Meanwhile, when the government made a smartphone app the official method by which to register for a Covid-19 vaccine, the fact that only 34% of rural Indians have consistent internet access was conveniently left out of view.

There are also quirks of the system that render inaccessibility and should be obvious, such as when I realized my father and I could not use our shared account's UPI system simultaneously, because the dual-factor authentication code can only go to one phone number. I, an entirely privileged US citizen non-resident Indian, found myself in a small storefront that advertises UPI assistance to transnational migrants. The shopkeeper confirmed, for joint accounts, only one phone can be active at a time. When I asked how the millions of women in our country on joint bank accounts purchase things without their husband's phones and active approval, he smiled at me and said "Well, I suppose that is exactly the problem, ma'am."



Interview in an Afghan market with two Sikh shopkeepers from Kabul and Ghazni. Image sourced by author.



Photo of a Somali restaurant in Hauz Rani. Image taken by author.

Social Solidarities in Migrant Infrastructures

The quiet and stubborn ways in which Afghan communities resist the expectations laid upon them by India's dominant society are my favorite details to capture in the spaces built by these communities. One of my favorite interviews was with two Afghan Sikh shopkeepers who wore Afghan dress daily, wrote their business cards in Dari, listened to Afghan music all day, and wished that as native Dari speakers they could also speak Pashto to conduct business with more of their brothers. Although all Afghan Sikhs are clear that it is entirely mythical that they are of "Indian origin" or Punjabi ethnicity, these two even more vehemently rejected the idea that they should use their knowledge of Punjabi to render themselves assimilated. Besides, if one is ever having a day where they feel comfortable in Indian society, the stack of rejected naturalization applications in the drawer of their shop, or a nasty encounter with the police should remind one that they are indeed an unwanted Afghan.

There is a sense of unraveled social hierarchy in Afghan restaurants and other businesses that simply cannot function in Indian spaces, where the caste system is the dominant social framework that marks people's bodies and how they relate to a severe degree. In the traditional Indian hierarchy, human bodies are quite literally used as prosthetics to a limited infrastructure, evidenced by the continued use of specific groups of Dalit laborers as manual sewage cleaners, or the gendered work of water procurement by women in informal settlements (Truelove and Ruszczyk, 2022).

Some argue that such dehumanizing work is a natural byproduct of a Global South economy, that even countries with as large of a national GDP as India have limited public funds. Yet in neighborhoods where residents have their economic prospects and means limited by their legal status, Afghan restaurants have employees who are engineering students that pick up odd jobs, a concept absolutely foreign to educated Indians. The caste taboos that shape Indian labor are less present, so there isn't a precise notion of who sweeps the floor or cooks the food or takes the orders. And when employees need a break, they eat their meals among the customers. They need only to prove to the Indian state they are worthy of a life of dignity, not to one another.

And now, the story continues, as anti-black violence begins to increasingly manifest in mob attacks in the Chhattarpur area of Delhi, somewhat near Max Hospital, and more African migrants are moving into the Sikh strongholds of Tilak Nagar. The Sikh property owners who have been migrants themselves, either coming from Afghanistan, or having worked in the Gulf, offer a small opening of refuge for the next generation of temporary migrants who may find themselves permanent fixtures of Delhi's urban space.

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Authors



Asha Sawhney

PhD student in Sociology » University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Asha Sawhney is a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. In her dissertation project, she explores migration to and through the Americas, tying together perspectives from South Asia and Latin America. Her research lies at the intersection of migration studies, urban studies, and the study of social movements.