

Refugees in Rajasthan

PVS

The issue of refugees has become a burning one for the entire South Asian region. Over the past five decades and more, the subcontinent has been caught in a spiral of tensions due to ongoing national, regional, ethnic, religious, linguistic and economic conflicts. Difficulties in accepting and properly handling cultural heterogeneity are a principal cause of persecution of minority groups, and this lies behind the refugee problem in many cases.

Of all the South Asian countries, India hosts the largest number of refugees. India is a big country, having borders with Pakistan (2912 km), Bangladesh (4053 km), Burma (1463 km), China (3,380 km) Nepal (1,690 km) and Bhutan (1463 km). Hence there is considerable possibility for refugees to take shelter in India by crossing the international frontiers.

The Partition of India in 1947 created a massive refugee problem. Millions of people were forced to flee across the newly-created border that divided India and Pakistan, in the years that followed, numerous minority groups from neighbouring countries who faced different forms of persecution migrated to India. Many also came for economic reasons. Yet, despite the relatively large number of refugees living in India, the country still does not have a precise refugee policy. Nor is it a signatory to United Nations Convention on Refugees of 1951 and its Protocol for Refugees of 1967.

Of the various refugee groups presently residing in India, one of the most neglected are refugees from Pakistan's Sindh province who shifted to India in waves in 1965 and after. They are Hindus and belong to various castes. It was to highlight their plight and struggle for their citizenship rights and rehabilitation that the Pak Visthapit Sangh. (pvs) was established in 1999.

Most of these refugees are from Thar Parkar district in Sindh. Others are from other neighbouring districts of Sindh, such as Umarkot, Mirpur Knas and Hyderabad, as well as from Rahimyar Khan and Bahawalpur in southern Punjab. These refugees are different from the Sindhi Hindu refugees who shifted to India in the wake of the Partition in 1947, who are mainly Sindhi-speaking and are ethnic Sindhis. The refugees from Thar Parkar have their own language, *phatki*, and distinct cultural identity, sharing much in common with people living across the border in India. The other recent refugees from Sindh include Marwari-speaking and Gujarati-speaking communities who traditionally engaged in seasonal migration to engage in agricultural labour in the fields in Sindh. Many of these are landless Dalits and Tribals.

Thar Parkar is an arid area, part of the sprawling Thar desert that covers large parts of Rajasthan and Sindh. It borders Kutch in Gujarat in the south and Barmer in Rajasthan in the west. There is evidence of human settlement in Thar Parkar from the period of the Indus Valley Civilisation. One of the earliest references to the area points to it being under the rule of the Parmars in the sixth century. It was then ruled by the Sumras, who were replaced by the Sodha Rajputs, followed by the Kalhoros and then Talpur Baluchis. The British annexed the territory in 1843 and incorporated it into the Sindh province.

Thar Parkar has a mixed Hindu-Muslim population. The Muslims include Rajputs, Baluchis, Syeds and Lohanas. The Hindu castes include Meghwals, Bhils, Sansis, Jogis, Odhs, Rajputs, Brahmins, Malis, Rabaris, Sonars, Jats, Nais, Darzis and several others.

In the wake of the Partition of India, the region of Thar Parkar saw little violence or movement of refugees. The denizens of this area, Hindus and Muslims, had lived in peaceful coexistence for centuries. However, a quarter century after the formation of Pakistan witnessed the creation of a massive refugee crisis in Thar Parkar. The first wave of massive migration to India from Thar

Parkar occurred in the wake of the India-Pakistan war of 1965, when some 10,000 people from the area crossed over to India. Then, in the course of the 1971 war between India and Pakistan, India occupied a large part of Thar Parkar, as a result of which some 90,000 Hindus of the area shifted to India and decided not to return.

Under the 1972 Shimla Agreement, India agreed to give back this territory when Pakistan agreed to receive 90,000 of its nationals, mainly Hindus from Thar Parkar, who had taken shelter in India during the war. India gave back the land but Pakistan did not show any interest in accepting these people, most of whom had sought shelter in western Rajasthan and few of whom wanted to return to Pakistan.

Migration to India of Hindus from Thar Parkar and other parts of southern Sindh was further exacerbated in later years owing to religious persecution and discrimination. This migration continues even today. These refugees are from various caste groups. Those who suffered the most, however, are the Scheduled Tribes and Castes. They are largely illiterate, extremely poor and are the original inhabitants of the Thar desert. In Pakistan they worked mainly as landless labourers in the fields of landlords, in India they continue to live in penury.

In the wake of the 1971 war, the refugees from Thar Parkar and neighbouring parts of southern Sindh were confined in 24 refugee camps in Barmer district of Rajasthan that were established by the Government of India. The refugees were forced to remain restricted within the camps. Being used to "living freely on vast expanses, the refugee camps confined movement and proved distressful to those who were housed there. Moreover, there were strict rules pertaining to the refugees' stay. They had to give attendance daily and were refused permission to visit their relatives anywhere. There were limited tents, which were assigned to joint families. At times one tent housed more than two or three families. Ration cards were issued to the head of the families who lived in these tents. These camps continued to function till 1978.

In 1977 the Janata government came into power at the Centre as well as in Rajasthan state, in 1978 the Government of India granted Indian citizenship to the refugees living in the camps, including both those who had arrived in 1965 and 1971. It authorised the District Magistrates in Gujarat and Rajasthan to do so on the basis of citizenship Act of 1955. Immediately after the completion of the citizenship process the Government of Rajasthan, in collaboration with the Government of India, declared a rehabilitation package for the refugees of 1971.

Most of the 1965 refugees had been allocated villages inhabited by Muslims who migrated to Pakistan during 1965 war. The declared rehabilitation package for the 1971 migrants included land and a total of 90 million rupees cash from the Centre. According to the rehabilitation package, each family was supposed to be allocated either 25 bighas of land in the canal area or 75 bighas of barren land in the desert. However, in reality refugee families received only a part of their total allocated land due to administrative corruption and ignorance. The rest of the land was included in the National Desert Park or occupied by the local people, in several cases, due to fear the migrants could not protest.

The influx of Hindu refugees from southern Pakistan did not stop after 1971. It continued in the years that followed due to religious persecution, insecurity, deterioration of law and order situation, rising religious fundamentalism, forced religious conversion, repeated bouts of martial law and so on. The influx declined between 1972 and 1989 but still continues. Many Hindus living in Pakistan wish to shift to India, but often this is impossible for them.

In 1947, many rich Sindhi Hindus migrated to India, in addition, many feudal and 'upper' caste Hindus from Thar Parkar shifted to India between 1965 and 1989. The recent refugees are mostly Scheduled Tribes and Castes, almost wholly illiterate and extremely poor. Most of them cross over from the Attari check post in Punjab with valid documents, prior to this, many of them used to simply cross the porous border between Sindh and Rajasthan, which was later fenced in the early 1990s.

The influx of refugees suddenly increased in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 and the consequent massive wave of attacks on Muslims in India. The reaction in Pakistan was so violent that many Hindus in the south of the country started migrating to India, in addition to those from Thar Parkar, many of them are actually of Rajasthani and, to a lesser extent, Gujarati origin. They used to cross over from Rajasthan and Gujarat to work in the fields of landlords in Sindh and southern Punjab. This seasonal migration continued till the mid-1960s, after which, because of the fencing of the frontier between Pakistan and India, they could not return to their homes in India.

Most of the migrants who have come to India from southern Sindh after 1965 have settled in Rajasthan. This is because most of them have relatives in the state, particularly in the border districts of Barmer, Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Sri Ganganagar. They have to regularly apply for the renewal of their visas, and this is very often denied. Those migrants who have not received Indian citizenship have to face many problems. They are not allowed to travel to the border districts, which is where most of them have relatives. The Indian High Commission in Islamabad refuses to give visas to Pakistani nationals to travel to these districts. To circumvent this rule, some people from Pakistan, including those who are residing in India without Indian citizenship, earlier used to take visas for other places but travel to the border districts. This was before they received Indian citizenship. Technically, this is illegal. They used to keep their identities hidden. They were not legally allowed to work in India but they often did so in order to sustain themselves, as agricultural workers and daily-wage earners. They were highly exploited by security personnel as well as local people since they had no rights to claim. Before recently receiving Indian citizenship, in part as a result of the efforts of pvs, many of them had already spent the minimum period of five years in India that was earlier required for becoming eligible for Indian citizenship, although this involved the complex procedure of constantly having their visas extended, which was often not granted. Those who had spent five years in India could technically apply for Indian citizenship under the Indian Citizenship Act of 1955 (Section 5(1)(A) for people of Indian origin, 5(1)(C) for people married to and staying together with Indian nationals for more than five years together, 5(1)(D) for people whose parents received Indian citizenship and 5(1)(E) for major children. But this was not easy task as most of the refugees were illiterate and poor. □□□