



Urban refugees in Delhi

Refugee networks, faith and well-being

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This paper explores the faith context of displacement and settlement for the Sikh and Christian Afghan refugees and Muslim Rohingya refugees in Delhi. It examines the foundation of community faith-based organisations (FBOs) and secular humanitarian initiatives that have emerged from within the refugee communities, and explores wider refugee interactions with local faith communities (LFCs) and other FBOs. The paper shows that faith and faith-based practices are essential aspects of daily life for refugees in Delhi which contribute to their sense of well-being in the city, and that refugees' own faith-based communities and organisations and humanitarian initiatives often provide essential safety nets when government and NGO services are lacking. However, as this paper reveals, the presence and services of these community structures should not be taken as a 'silver bullet' solution for humanitarian organisations that are concerned with supporting refugee well-being more holistically in India.

Acronyms

ACRC	Afghan Christian Refugee Community
FBO	Faith-based organisation
KDWS	Khalsa Diwan Welfare Society
LFC	Local faith community
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RLG	Rohingya Literacy Group
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Executive summary

In October 2017, we published an IIED Working Paper entitled 'Urban refugees in Delhi: identity, entitlements and well-being', which was the culmination of three months of fieldwork research with refugee communities in Delhi, India (Field *et al.*, 2017). The focus of the project was on exploring comparatively how Sikh and Christian Afghan refugees and Muslim Rohingya refugees have attempted to make ends meet and realise their aspirations in Delhi, and the extent to which their needs and ambitions are supported by local, national, and international aid organisations. Our findings suggested that there was a need to move beyond the predominantly economic conceptualisations of 'self-reliance', which guide the UNHCR and its implementing partners' responses to urban refugee crises. The refugee groups we engaged with were not able to find or keep jobs after taking part in these livelihoods-focused aid interventions, and were generally dissatisfied with what 'the market' – namely, the informal economy – had to offer. Instead, or rather despite, the lack of opportunities, many were often engaged in a range of other non-economic activities, including family care and voluntary work with their faith organisations and other self-started initiatives. Recognising this disconnect between humanitarian market-based initiatives and everyday refugee self-reliance practices, we suggested that a programming shift is necessary – one which moves away from viewing the market as the main enabler of self-reliance, and instead moves towards recognising individual and group capabilities to convert opportunities into something meaningful to them as essential components of urban refugee well-being.

These fieldwork interactions and project conclusions resulted in the formulation of a follow-up set of questions around the refugees' own safety-nets and how these are built through daily interactions, particularly those concerning faith-based practices and organisations. We were interested in further exploring:

- What social safety nets and development support do non-conventional humanitarian actors, such as faith-based organisations (FBOs) and local faith communities (LFCs), offer refugees in Delhi? And to what extent do they connect with conventional humanitarian programming?
- How do the refugees' own community initiatives, including FBOs, frame refugee well-being and develop refugee capabilities?
- How do faith-based activities figure in urban refugees' daily routines and their displacement experiences, and to what extent are these factors shaped by gender?

As our previous research shows, the urban realities of a socioeconomically and religiously stratified city such as Delhi give the above considerations around religious freedom and the ability to access the various aid services – often influenced by faith and gender-identity politics – a heightened sense of importance. The freedom and ability to self-organise for their own welfare, and for leveraging the capabilities of their members, can be an important enabling factor for refugees' own sense of urban self-reliance, well-being and belonging. By understanding the faith context of displacement and settlement in an urban space, humanitarian organisations may be better able to appreciate and consider the multi-faceted displacement dynamics that contribute to refugee well-being, thereby moving beyond the more limited economic lens of self-reliance.

Thus, with these additional questions and aims in mind, we embarked on a second round of interviews with our key informants. We returned to the Sikh and Christian Afghan and Muslim Rohingya refugee communities in October and November 2017, sharing our original findings and asking follow-up interview questions along the above research themes during group discussions, one-on-one interviews, walking tours, and observation. During this stage, we were able to build on our original interview material with 16 additional refugee key informant interviews: 2 Afghan Sikh males, 2 male Afghan Christians, 11 Rohingyas (5 males and 6 females) and 1 non-governmental organisation (NGO) worker.¹

¹ The authors of this working paper conducted the research. The team consisted of one male (Indian) and two female researchers (Indian and British), with, collectively, English, Hindi and Bengali language skills. These three languages are spoken to varying degrees by the Afghan Sikh refugees (predominantly Hindi with some English) and Rohingya refugee community (predominantly Bengali and Rohingya, with some Hindi and English). Interviews were conducted in the most common language spoken between the interviewees and the investigators, and all quotations in this working paper have been translated by the researchers where necessary. Translation for the Rohingya language was required with female Rohingya refugees only. Translators from the community were hired and interviews interpreted from Rohingya to Bengali by the translator, and then to English by the researcher.

Since our interviews were primarily focused on the lived experiences of the refugees in Delhi and their interactions with the various stakeholders working to support them, we were able to gather rich qualitative narratives on how the refugees view and experience their faith as part of a wider coping mechanism in a foreign urban setting. Their stories connected us with refugee-founded community initiatives (both faith and secular), and directed us towards exploring these organisations' overall potential for supporting the refugees to enhance their capabilities and develop meaningful lives for themselves in the city. While we offer some initial analysis as to the significance of our findings – and continue to emphasise the importance of non-economic practices as essential components of any meaningful self-reliance support – we wish to leave the conclusions open and invite reflections.

In Chapter 1, we discuss the emergence, nature, and aims of FBOs and faith-based community initiatives working amongst the Afghan Sikh and Christian refugees and Muslim Rohingya refugees in Delhi, and their interactions (especially faith-based) with the refugees and other stakeholders. Part of the reason FBOs are such important actors to analyse when exploring the urban provision of humanitarian services is that the sheer density of Delhi's population means that they exist in abundance. Moreover, in this context, FBOs tend to have a captive audience amongst the particularly vulnerable members of the population who may not have the option to seek assistance or faith services elsewhere. A community of Rohingyas in Delhi, for instance, is settled on land donated by an Islamic FBO, leaving them with little choice but to engage regularly with the organisation. This should not automatically be assumed as problematic, but the lack of alternative options must be considered as part of the wider context when analysing the role of FBOs in refugee support in urban areas.

In Chapter 2, we briefly examine the existing connections and partnerships (if any) between 'non-conventional' initiatives with 'conventional' humanitarian programming, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and their NGO partners, and the challenges inhibiting a more robust partnership.² We also examine whether there is a potential for strengthening such partnerships, taking into

consideration the inherent possibilities of both 'types' of organised humanitarianism for excluding certain groups, such as women, from their hierarchies.

Finally, we conclude with the reflection that an increased proximity and engagement between humanitarian actors of all types, including faith-based, will certainly be a step in the right direction for recognising the importance of, and supporting, the faith and faith practices of refugees. However, while faith and faith-based practices are a basic need for the well-being of displaced urban communities, they should not be taken as a 'silver bullet' solution for organisations concerned with more holistically supporting refugee self-reliance in India.

BOX 1: AT A GLANCE: REFUGEES IN INDIA

207,535 refugees are registered with UNHCR in India. These include 21,473 from Myanmar, primarily Rohingya and Chin refugees, and 12,721 from Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2017).

- Rohingya refugees have been present in India for decades, following waves of violence and persecution in Myanmar. The most recent spikes of violence and subsequent forced migrations were in 2012 and 2017.
- Afghan Sikh refugees arrived in their largest wave in the early 1990s following the rise of the Taliban and increasing ethno-religious persecution in Afghanistan.
- Afghan Christian refugees have also sought refuge in India on the basis of ethno-religious persecution in Afghanistan and remain a small community in Delhi numbering around a few hundred (Farooquee, 22 July 2013).

For detailed historical, legal and political context related to the situation of refugees in India, please refer to our first working paper (Field *et al.*, 2017), to which this is an accompaniment.

²We use the terms conventional and non-conventional here to differentiate between organisations that have emerged out of the dominant, Western humanitarian system and are characterised by secular mandates and guided by the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, independence and humanity ('conventional'), and those that undertake humanitarian work but do not necessarily conform to the same institutionalised norms of humanitarianism ('non-conventional'). The dominant, Western humanitarian system is taken as 'conventional' because, in the current era, its rules, principles and structures are the presiding way that the international community frames and labels organised humanitarianism. We are certainly not suggesting that faith-based humanitarian action has no history or is contrary to the 'normal' means of humanitarianism – the opposite of this is true; many of the norms and practices we understand as humanitarian are rooted in religious tradition and action (Barnett and Stein, 2012). Nonetheless, for this paper, we are simply taking the international humanitarian system's own understanding of itself as a starting point from which to compare other types of organised action.

1

Refugee safety nets: social and spiritual

There is no universally accepted definition of a faith-based organisation. Though, as Elizabeth Ferris (2005: 312) explains, it tends to have at least one of the following characteristics: “affiliation with a religious body; a mission statement with explicit reference to religious values; financial support from religious sources; and/or a governance structure where selection of board members or staff is based on religious beliefs or affiliation and/or decision-making processes based on religious values”. FBOs have always offered support to individuals and groups in times of disasters, conflict and persecution, and in more recent decades many humanitarian FBOs and secular aid agencies have come to share many characteristics, including that of advocacy (Ibid.: 313-316). Two important characteristics that set them apart, however, are first, that the primary motivation of FBOs is faith, and second, that FBOs have a constituency and agenda that are broader than those of the secular humanitarian organisations (Ibid.: 316).

In addition to secular humanitarian organisations such as UNHCR and its implementing partners, there were a range of FBOs working directly with – or within – the refugee groups we interviewed in Delhi and, for some, their work pre-dates the assistance given by more conventional humanitarian actors, such as UNHCR and aid-focused NGOs. In this chapter, we focus on five such non-conventional initiatives which are active amongst the Afghan Sikh and Christians as well as the Rohingyas in Delhi.

1.1 Sikh *gurdwaras* and the Khalsa Diwan Welfare Society

The Khalsa Diwan Welfare Society (KDWS) was formed in Delhi in 1992 by refugees themselves, following the arrival of an increasing number of Afghan Hindu and Sikh refugees who were fleeing Afghanistan. Its aim was to help Sikh and Hindu Afghan refugees, with a focus on facilitating meaningful access to education for the young refugees. KDWS' other activities include: devotional music classes, language tuition, stitching and computer classes and – more informally – reconciliation and support for domestic disputes and grievances. It also provides assistance to Sikh and Hindu Afghan refugees with refugee certificates, and long term visa and citizenship applications. It is funded privately through contributions from community members. KDWS is also the parent organisation of the Afghan Hindu Welfare Society, thus, working to support both Afghan Sikh and Hindu refugees.

KDWS traces its legacy to a similar community initiative in Afghanistan, *Khalsa Diwan*, which was established in the early 1920s (Bose, 2004: 4700). According to the president of KDWS, *Khalsa Diwan* was founded to protect the cultural, religious, political and social interests of the minority Sikhs and Hindus in

Afghanistan; it built many *gurdwaras* (Sikh temples) and schools and actively organised community gatherings on religious occasions, as well as for minority relationship development (Interview: 3 May 2017). For example, the president mentioned an initiative which was organised regularly by *Khalsa Diwan*, where young Sikh men and women from various parts of the country came together to choose potential grooms and brides. In these events there was a definite focus on maintaining the social and religious fabric within their minority community, with an emphasis on faith as a binding factor. In the opinion of an Afghan Sikh interviewee, “the work of *Khalsa Diwan* in Afghanistan provided cultural safety from the Muslim majority” (Interview: 3 May 2017).

However, in India, the Afghan Sikh refugees were faced with a different set of challenges from the ones back home. The early 1990s wave of Afghan Sikh refugees who arrived in Delhi were faced with an immediate crisis of food, shelter and clothing. As one key informant explained, they were surprised to find a limited support infrastructure greeting them:

“ [I]n many ways, India was a natural choice once we had no option but to flee Afghanistan to save our lives. It is true that we share deep connection to the land through our faith, but also the Indian prime ministers regularly told us on their visits to Afghanistan that we are always welcomed as brothers if we ever decide to come there. However, on reaching here, we realised that the government did not care about us but were only concerned about resettling Muslim refugees to third countries who they perceived to be a security threat. Suddenly we had become foreigners for the Indian government” (Interview: 13 May 2017).

Here the informant highlights the importance of religion and ethnicity factors in selecting a place to seek refuge, where a choice is possible. These refugees anticipated an official welcome ‘as brothers’, and yet found themselves on the legal and bureaucratic periphery. They were not recognised by the government of India as refugees, and would have to wait 10 years (later increased to 12) if they wanted to apply for citizenship status (Bose, 2004: 4699; Field *et al.*, 2017). A large number of the refugees thus had little choice but to live in makeshift camps around *gurdwaras* in the city and rely on *langar*, which is a community meal provided in *gurdwaras* to anyone who needs it after each religious sermon or service. *Langar* is distributed by volunteers from the community and is viewed as a religious duty.

These local acts of welcome and sanctuary for refugees have a long history in Delhi. Indeed, the *gurdwaras* are largely located in areas inhabited by erstwhile Sikh refugees who were displaced from the Punjab region as a result of the Partition of British India in 1947. As they

settled, the Partition refugees built their own places of worship – an act, which Mayer (2007: 8) argues “goes beyond religion”, as it is often a way to (re)construct an element of their homeland, express collective identity, or send a message to the host community. These Sikh-dominated areas and places of worship in Delhi were then a natural draw for incoming Afghan Sikh refugees, and thus the *gurdwaras* acted as the first responders when the new refugees arrived in waves from the 1990s onwards. According to Gozdzia and Shandy (2002: 130), “[t]he relationship between religious persecution and refugees is central to the definition of a refugee, has been long considered of importance as a root cause of flight, and should be of equal importance in protection of refugees”. Moreover, these places of worship facilitated (and still facilitate) networking – essential for long-term survival in the city. Through the *gurdwaras*, the refugees were able to make contacts with other refugees, as well as with local Sikh hosts (including Partition refugees), to develop and implement their own survival strategies.

This refugee-refugee networking interaction is what sits at the foundation of the KDWS. Some of the Afghan Sikh and Hindu elders of the refugee community, who arrived in India not long after the advent of the Soviet regime in Afghanistan in 1979, were moved by the plight of their fellow Afghan Sikhs in Delhi who were fleeing persecution in the 1990s. It was members of this group that decided to re-establish *Khalsa Diwan* in India as the KDWS (Interview: 3 May 2017; Bose, 2004: 4700). Utilising local Indian and Afghan Sikh and Hindu contacts and resources, KDWS were then able to provide housing, employment opportunities, and business support to many of the new refugees seeking to start their lives again in Delhi. And it continues to operate in a similar way today, focusing on a range of humanitarian and development activities.

In this context, education has remained a central concern. Persecution and exclusion in Afghanistan had led to “almost an entire generation of young Sikhs being deprived of quality education or any education at all” (Interview, 13 May 2017). This caused significant anxiety, since KDWS members apprehended that without an educated generation, their community, faced with the realities of living in a complex urban setting of a foreign country, would find it extremely difficult to make meaningful lives for themselves. They therefore developed a programme that not only focuses on putting children in partner schools and negotiating a subsidised fee, but also on continually evaluating the progress and challenges faced by the children. For example, KDWS conducts specialised tuition for students after evaluating their strengths and weaknesses in certain subjects and receiving feedback from parents or partner schools. It is also involved in ascertaining the possibility of school fee waivers, depending on the financial condition of

the family – a situation which is the responsibility of the president of KDWS to assess. In such ways, the programme aims to connect refugee families (parents and children), local schools, and volunteer teachers in a manner which places overall emphasis on the specific educational needs of each child.

KDWS also offers the opportunity for spiritual interactions and opportunities. For instance, the institute offers *gurbani* (Sikh religious music) training which caters to the aspirations of certain young refugees - “I want to be a ‘*Raagi*’ [religious singer]”; “My dream is to teach every child to play the harmonium so that he can provide relief to his parents”; “It’s my dream to learn *Kirtan Shabbad* [religious studies] and perform in a *gurudwara*” (Sheoran, 20 August 2007). Many younger male refugees offer music sessions and other musical activities at the *gurudwara* and KDWS (Field *et al.*, 2017: 26).

These invisible but active linkages between KDWS, as a refugee community initiative, and various faith organisations and local actors appear to be vital safety nets for many of the more vulnerable in the community. One female Afghan Sikh refugee described in an interview with a newspaper how she finds “peace” while spending her time in a *gurudwara*, besides getting food at the *langar* for her son and mother-in-law (Alawadhi, 4 February 2012). Without a breadwinner in the family and suffering from an ailment herself, she has been largely dependent on her neighbours in the locality to which she recently moved. Prior to this, she had been moving within the city between a range of temporary dwellings, including living in a room provided by a *gurudwara* for a year after arriving in Delhi. She feels grateful to her “kind” neighbours for informing her about the tuition classes conducted by KDWS, where she now sends her son.

1.2 The Afghan Church as a refugee community initiative

For Afghan Christian refugees in Delhi, one of their key support networks has been the church. In the early years of their arrival a decade or so ago, these refugees were assisted by the evangelical Delhi Bible Fellowship, who gave them a building for their worship practices (Farooquee, 22 July 2013). This small refugee group then established their own place of worship – the Afghan Church – which remains an important source of spiritual and social capital for the community today. The Delhi Bible Fellowship continues to provide support to the various Afghan churches in the city in a variety of ways, including, for example, by allocating its religious instructors to visit the refugee church for

English bible reading sessions (Interview: 4 October 2017). Presently, this church is headed by a pastor and assisted by a team of young Afghan Christian refugees.

In our interviews with the Afghan Christians, the importance of faith in their daily lives was evident. First, through their stories of displacement, our informants revealed the precarious condition of Christians in Afghanistan where they face threats to their lives, movements, and freedom of religion – both from Islamic extremists and the Afghanistan constitution, which declares apostasy as a crime and can carry the risk of the death penalty (Afshar, 2006). The present pastor of the Afghan Church last left Afghanistan in 2012 and came to Delhi for treatment of his leg – he was injured in a bomb blast at their secret ‘underground’ church in Kabul, allegedly perpetrated by Islamic extremists linked to the Taliban. However, once he arrived in Delhi, he received information that, due to the attack, the government has also found out about the church and its members, and there was a significant possibility of him being arrested for the crime of apostasy if he returns. He never returned and was subsequently joined by his other family members in Delhi (Interview: 28 April 2017).

A similar account was narrated by another male refugee who was working with an NGO in northern Afghanistan while pursuing his higher studies. He had converted to Christianity two to three years before finally leaving Afghanistan in 2005, and was part of a secret church, before one of his acquaintances informed the authorities about his church and all its members. He had to flee immediately for fear of being arrested and “possibly hanged”. This refugee mentioned that even though he had the option of going to neighbouring countries such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, he preferred the secularity of India, which at least gave him the freedom to profess his new religion (Interview: 12 April 2017).

Nevertheless, India does not remain free of religious persecutions (Field *et al.*, 2017). The Afghan Church is currently located in a basement in South Delhi. This, we ascertained over the course of the interviews, is to maintain a low profile, echoing the ‘underground’ churches of Afghanistan. Delhi remains a significant destination for both Muslim Afghan refugees, and for non-refugee Muslim Afghan populations who seek medical treatment, travel for business purposes, or personal visits. Our informants explained that, when considering places for residing, Christian Afghans prefer anonymity and distance from Muslim Afghans (both refugees and visitors), and are increasingly seeking to move away from the Muslim Afghan-dominated areas of settlement. One of our informants shared experiences of religiously-motivated threats he had received from non-refugee Muslim Afghans visiting the city and, in one of our walking interviews, we witnessed the visible anxiety of an informant who thought he spotted Afghans from his tribal region in the streets of Delhi. However, moving

to a different locality presents a difficulty, as the Afghan Christian community prefer being close to their church. While the details and veracity of these threats would need to be independently verified, the foregrounding of these daily risks in their personal narratives provides important insights into the relationship **they perceive** between displacement, faith and the city, and their sense of well-being in this environment. Such tensions highlight the opportunities and risks that a transnationally connected city such as Delhi holds for refugees attempting to self-settle.

The Afghan Church is also a source of companionship and contact for Afghan Christian refugees and tends to relieve them from the psycho-social hardships of leading a 'lonely' life in Delhi. The Afghan Church offers weekly services in English, Pashto, and Dari – with the English service being popular with the younger refugees, and the Pashto and Dari services mostly attended by families speaking the respective language. As well as religious fulfilment, these services act as a place for forming networks and engaging with the pastor's network of other Afghan Christian refugees and local Christian hosts and FBOs. For example, after every service, the members and the volunteers of the Afghan Church who are present disperse and sit in circles, forming separate men and women discussion groups. Here, every person is encouraged to share their feelings and concerns with each other and seek advice from elders or others present. It is also a time to discuss general issues, not necessarily concerning the community. If someone needs private counselling or consultation, they are encouraged to talk to the pastor separately, who provides such counselling. The service is also a time to relax in a musical atmosphere – an activity that is particularly popular amongst the youth during the English service. In this way, the Afghan Church, if viewed as a refugee community initiative, directly interacts with the faith needs of the refugees, as religion helps refugees "define their identity" while providing the coping tools to comprehend the trauma and the pressures of a refugee life in an urban setting (Gozdziak and Shandy, 2002: 130-131).

At the same time, the pastor of the Afghan Church also acts as the director of the 'Afghan Christian Refugee Community' (ACRC), whose aim is to assist any refugees since, as the pastor explained, "the Bible tells us to help each other". He clarifies that the Afghan Church receives its funding mainly from other local Christians or Afghan Christian refugees as donations or fellowship offerings. The money is then used for the church charges and for community welfare initiatives under the umbrella of the ACRC. He points out that ACRC does not get support (financial) from the government or other NGOs since "it is a church" – a definition he uses perhaps due to its funding pattern, and since it is headed by a community religious leader (himself). Nonetheless, its conduct extends beyond that

of the spiritual, to non-faith relief and welfare activities for the wider benefit of the Afghan Christian refugee community in Delhi. For instance, to assist the refugees in their registration and documentation processes, it has partnered with a local team of lawyers who represent the refugees *pro bono*. The pastor, as the director of the ACRC, holds consultation meetings with stakeholders including local governmental authorities, local NGOs and international NGOs and institutions, including the UNHCR, on behalf of the community. Strategically, as we will return to in Chapter 2, such consultations may be easier to conduct as the representative of the ACRC than as a representative of the Afghan Church, due to the challenges of engaging in a secular dialogue between a faith-based institution and the above-mentioned actors.

1.3 Camp leaders and refugee youth initiatives amongst the Rohingyas in Delhi

Rohingyas in Delhi have largely settled in two *jhuggi* (slum) camp-like settlements around the area on the banks of the river Yamuna. This area has historical ties to Muslim refugees, many of whom settled there after Partition, and internally displaced Muslims, who have been drawn to the area after sporadic communal riots in Delhi – in addition to being a site of settlement for other Muslim migrants over the years (Jamil, 2011). Presently, the area adjoining the Rohingya settlement is predominantly inhabited by a local and migrant Muslim population, and is also in the vicinity of Jamia Milia Islamia University, established in 1920 as a centre for Islamic studies. The university's presence, Jamil argues, has contributed to the settlement of Muslims in the area as they are working and studying at the university (Ibid.).

One of the two settlements where we conducted field research is named and signposted as *Darul Hijrat*, loosely translating from Arabic to 'home for Muslims in involuntary religious migration', where *hijra* means involuntary religious migration (Wenzel, 2013: 4). According to Abbasi-Shavazi *et al.* (2005: 12), the practice of *hijra* asserts "that practising Muslims fleeing their own country on the grounds that they are unable to properly practice their faith deserve the noble status of *mohajer*". The land has been provided for settlement by the Zakat Foundation, an Indian FBO whose *Darul Hijrat* signage also bears their moniker. Located in a Muslim-dominated area, and demarcated by signage as a settlement site for involuntary migrants, Rohingya refugees here experience regular visitations by individuals and groups seeking to give charitable donations and, specifically in the case of Muslims,

zakat – a religious ‘tax’ proscribed in Islam to be paid as charity to the needy, including the *mohajer* (migrant) (Muzaffar, 2001). In this way, clear faith identification (through the signage) may be considered an enabling feature for the Rohingya refugees in Delhi to connect with concerned citizens who visit the camps, and to receive donations. However, these networks and donations are mediated.

In the *Darul Hijrat* camp, initially donations received as *zakat* were either routed through the Zakat Foundation or given directly to the camp inhabitants by the visiting private donors. According to one of the elder camp leaders, “the nature of the task becomes daunting, especially in certain periods, for instance during the months of Ramadan when there is an increase in donations and even the otherwise efficient managing of the donations requires a certain self-organisation by the refugees” (Interview: 28 May 2017). The camp leaders are then responsible for distribution – ostensibly according to need, and also in terms of community faith priorities. For instance, one of the camp leaders described how it was important for them to keep the mosque within the camp premises clean at all times for which they are willing to pay since it is important in their religion (Interview: 29 April 2017). The camp leaders are also responsible for the delegation of community tasks – for example, membership of the mosque committee, which is entrusted with the maintenance and handling of matters relating to the mosque within the camp.

Notably, this camp leadership – as with the Afghan Sikh and Christian refugee networks – tends to be both hierarchical and dominated by a handful of men in the settlements, despite being ‘democratically elected’. However, unlike the majority of the Afghan Sikh and Christian refugee groups, the leadership and the community do not act separately and distinctly from the conventional humanitarian community in Delhi. In other words, the Rohingya refugees come into much more frequent contact with more conventional aid organisations (such as UNHCR and its implementing partners), due to their comparatively high level of urgent humanitarian need. This heightened frequency of interaction is resulting in the transformation of some Rohingya grassroots initiatives into organisations that much more closely resemble their secular NGO partners than FBOs.

In this context, it may be useful to refer to a fairly new youth refugee initiative in the camp – the Rohingya Literacy Group (RLG). It is a secular, democratically elected youth initiative (currently all male), which is trying to project itself as a progressive youth-led refugee organisation with the aim of operationalising its understanding of the refugees’ needs and aspirations. According to one of its young founding members, who has also worked with UNHCR as a translator:

“[O]ne of the issues confronting my community in the camp is that they have become very reliant on external help. We want to eradicate this reliance and turn it into ‘self-reliance’. Donations help only for one month or two months but long term help can only be if one is self-dependent” (Interview: 7 May 2017).

One of the key challenges identified by an RLG youth leader is that it will be difficult to make his community understand what they are trying to do as their work often entails challenging their existing ‘mindset’. However, he believes that his place in the community as an ‘insider’ will assist him in convincing others. He explained:

“When I talk about women’s empowerment, it’s a challenge because their mindset is women are only for cooking and giving birth, so to change that mindset is a big challenge. But for me, as a member of the community, it is easier to change the mindset than an outsider. This is a challenge but I also see this as part of my work. If my mindset can change then why not of other men in my community” (Interview: 7 May 2017).

While the ‘women’s empowerment’ aspects of his reflection and the RLG’s programme should certainly not be taken as unproblematic without further interrogation, the point we want to highlight here is the perception of the benefits of embeddedness when it comes to community well-being and transformation – the idea that it will take an insider, a local, to catalyse progress. According to another member of the RLG, the group are willing to work with anyone who is interested in contributing to the Rohingya’s development, including the UNHCR, although he clarifies that:

“UNHCR and its partners’ thinking and outlook is different from our community’s. They need to come to the community more often” (Interview: 7 May 2017).

This statement supports much recent research done on the localisation of humanitarian aid, which recognises the need to redress the power imbalance between international, national and local organisations, and the need for a more equitable sharing of resources, given that much community support comes from within (Wilkinson and Ager, 2017: 12). And in one sense, it could be argued that the RLG is the poster organisation for this agenda as it is secular and therefore remains ‘uncomplicated’ by faith practices and religious hierarchies. However, although this youth leader is referring to cultural rather than religious practices in his reflection above, the point taken must be one which is much wider: there is an overall reluctance by conventional humanitarian organisations to engage with the complex world of community (and personal) identity **and faith** practices and politics.

Nonetheless, it is important at this juncture not to assume that communities are 'doing things right' internally, and it is just a case of increased local-national interaction that will improve community well-being. While recognising the importance and effectiveness of FBOs and other non-conventional organisations in certain areas of daily life and humanitarian/development activity, it is important to be mindful of certain sections of the communities who may tend to be ignored in these endeavours. Rohingya women, for instance, have little to no contact with external FBOs and other actors that give time and donations to the community, limited representation at camp leadership level, and limited involvement in the organisation of grassroots initiatives emerging from the community. A few of them have had interactions with private donors who have visited their settlements, but these were generally sporadic visits where the women received food or material donations (such as rice or clothes), and the interactions have had limited long-term impacts on their day-to-day lives.

In terms of personal religion, all the women who were interviewed described their faith as an essential part of their day-to-day lives – be it praying five times a day, fasting during the month of *Ramadan* (keeping *roza*) or through their children; either teaching them about their faith or ensuring that they go to the *madrasa* within the camp settlements (Interviews: 6 November 2017). The importance of their religiosity was further underscored by the fact that the women also described their leisure time or 'free' time as revolving around their faith. As one woman explained to us, "whenever I have [free] time I read the Qur'an" (Interview: 6 November 2017). These interviews overwhelmingly relayed that the women spent some, or all, of their time that was not devoted to their families, work, or household work, partaking in faith-based practises which included reading the Qur'an, *tasbih* (using prayer beads to pray) and general worship.

What seems apparent is that the lack of the women's engagement with FBOs and other aid actors, even those within the Rohingya community, is reinforced by some of the wider norms of the community itself. For

example, the women went to *madrasas* as children and continue to pray five times a day, but they are not permitted to worship in the mosque as adults. Moreover, though there is a women's camp leadership group, the majority of the decisions taken around community faith practices, spaces of worship and engagement with external faith and aid actors, are taken by the male camp leadership. One NGO aid manager explained:

"[We] had a tough task talking to the women. They [the male camp leaders] wouldn't let us talk to the women, they will stand with them all the time. So it took us a lot of time to say we need to talk about women's issues separately – reproductive health, sanitary napkins. That was our way in... Once we realised the leadership structures were very unfair, we thought we would support the community to have an election... Anybody could stand for the election. But people were so scared to go and stand. So even now we have leadership structures, and women are a part of it... but the women are mostly namesake they don't really have decision making power... now the women for reproductive health sessions they say, why don't you have these sessions with our men? They are the ones who decide how many children we have" (Interview: 12 May 2017).

Thus, while the women's personal lives are defined by a deep spirituality, this exists almost entirely outside of the formal structures of faith-based organisations and non-conventional community initiatives. Moreover, as we noted in our first working paper, such exclusion is further exacerbated by their limited mobility outside of the camps, and their limited Hindi and English language skills, which ensures a near absence of interactions with the local population (Field *et al.*, 2017). These observations re-emphasise the importance of faith in daily life and refugee well-being in Delhi, but stress the need to not assume that community faith structures/organisations, and their counterpart secular grassroots initiatives, are representative and inclusive by default – a point which we shall return to shortly.

2

The dilemma of engagement between secular and faith-based organisations

What is clear from this cross-section of narratives is that local FBOs and local faith communities (LFCs)³ play an important role in support networks and the provision of humanitarian assistance for refugees in Delhi, and that – over the longer term – they offer a range of other services and opportunities to enhance refugee well-being. While some of these are spiritual, such as devotional music tuition and the ‘peace’ of worship, others are also secular with practical aims, such as the organisation of legal support and language classes. As literature on FBOs points out, many of these spiritual services, opportunities and moments of care cannot be provided by secular humanitarian agencies in their current form, and yet they are vital for every day well-being (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager, 2013; UNHCR, 2013a; RSC, 2010). This limitation on the part of secular agencies is partly because, according to their principles, “assistance [must] be given on the basis of need alone” (Wilkinson and Ager, 2017: 8) and secular agencies tend not to include religious identity and belief

systems within the spectrum of “basic need” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016: 3).

International secular humanitarian agencies have certainly begun to acknowledge the crucial role played by FBOs and LFCs as one of the first responders to refugee crises and their sustained work for the welfare of the refugees. UNHCR, for instance, describes that, “as active members of civil society, faith actors and their organisations can leverage significant social, physical and **spiritual assets** for the benefit of those UNHCR serves” [authors’ own emphasis] (UNHCR, 2013a: 8-9; Ferris, 2005: 311-312), and UNHCR globally has been seeking ways of partnering with FBOs. Ager describes this in terms of “a degree of re-examination taking place regarding the role of faith-based humanitarian agencies within the context of an evolving humanitarian regime” (Ager and Ager, 2011: 2). However, not all of this is translating to collaborative or complementary practice at the local level.

³ According to UNHCR, LFCs “consist of people who share common religious beliefs and values, and draw upon these to carry out activities in their respective communities” (UNHCR, 2013a: 8; see also Wilkinson and Ager, 2017).

In both the Afghan Sikh and Rohingya communities in Delhi, for example, education seemed a bifurcated practice, with the LFCs offering parallel services to UNHCR. For the Afghans, this was in the form of special tuition to support the refugee children to be up to the standard of their age – something that UNHCR also offers, through one of their NGO partners, known as bridging classes. The inclination of Afghan Sikh parents to approach KDWS rather than UNHCR for matters relating to their children's education may be due to the better suited programmes run by the KDWS, tailored to the realities of its young refugee generation, or the holistic fulfilment the organisation offers through its other services and activities, such as devotional music. Or perhaps more broadly, it may be due to the connection the parents already have to the organisation as community members, as adult refugees, and/or as Sikhs, bringing with it a sense of trust – more research needs to be done in this area. For the Rohingya, collectively paying for and sending their children to *madrasas* alongside local schools was not just a current expression and action of religious faith, but was also an investment in their children and the community's future. Many of the parents aspired that their children would be future religious leaders in the community. This intergenerational and faith-infused expression of individual and community well-being is not currently reflected in aid agency programmes that seek to support refugee self-reliance aspirations (Field *et al.*, 2017).

A major challenge which continues to inhibit partnerships between FBOs and secular humanitarian organisations on this front emanates from the foundational principles guiding the secular organisations' activities, ie the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence. Wilkinson and Ager (2017: 48) note that the potential of proselytisation poses particular difficulties for secular NGOs actively engaging with FBOs, as it can be difficult to ascertain levels of impartiality in the provision of aid when worship activities are interwoven in humanitarian practices. Further, the practice of proselytising can be difficult to prove (Wilkinson and Ager, 2017: 48-49).

Another major impediment to collaboration and complementarity is that conventional aid organisations borne of the international humanitarian system often find it difficult to engage with groups which are not sufficiently 'organised'. Or, at least, not organised into structures with which they are designed to engage. Field (2016: 179-189) writes that "where local aid workers rely on interpersonal networks and trusted connections [to undertake humanitarian activities] ... international actors ... can be wary of personal

networks", particularly if they are informally ordered, hierarchical, and/or driven by faith considerations. In the case of the Afghan Christian community, for instance, the Afghan Church and ACRC are headed by the pastor, a role which is non-democratic and presents a highly-centralised authority underpinned by religious convention. This can present concerns over representativeness and proselytisation. In the Afghan Sikh community, formal and informal networks operate to provide assistance where needed, with *gurudwaras*, KDWS and neighbours providing safety nets and referrals depending on circumstance. This can present a challenge of who to engage with, and for what particular purpose. Interestingly for the Rohingyas in Delhi, part of the reason such a dominant camp leadership now exists is because several years ago UNHCR decried the dispersal and lack of leadership among the community. In 2013 they noted: "Another concern specific to the Rohingya is that they are not well organised; they have no leadership or congress" (UNHCR, 2013). The international aid community's difficulty in engaging with non-conventional structures and modes of organisation can lead to the oversight of important coping mechanisms and networks that are vital for refugee well-being in the city.

Nonetheless, it is important not to idealise the level and nature of humanitarian support that FBOs and LFCs can offer vulnerable refugee groups. As with our first working paper, examining the realities of market access and understandings of self-reliance for refugees, faith-based support and faith activities are highly gendered. In all three of the case studies we explored above, the FBO structures are dominated by 'elder' men. These men – the president and committee of KDWS, the pastor of the Afghan Church and the Rohingya camp leaders – are often the key interlocutors between the community and relevant government and NGO power brokers. As pointed out by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager (2013: 12), these leaders are often considered to be legitimate representatives, and yet they "may have little outreach with the hosting and/or refugee community members", nor are they always representative. In the Rohingya community, as we highlighted above, while faith is a guiding part of daily life and their personal sense of resilience, women are excluded from participation in the formal faith/power structures of the mosque and camp leadership committee. Thus, in discussions between the community 'leaders' and external power brokers such as NGOs and external FBOs, the perspectives of women may not necessarily be represented. Part of this issue comes from patriarchal hierarchies that can be legitimised by both religious and secular organisations (Ibid.: 7). But it also comes with what the international

humanitarian community understands 'leadership' to mean in the first place, and how that determines its engagement. As Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager (2013: 12) continue, "Traditional definitions [of leaders] have tended to identify people with theological and/or ceremonial authority, and yet this has largely excluded women. However, women occupy many leadership positions within and across diverse religions, often leading social outreach programmes and mobilising

volunteers and refugees themselves". Thus, while it is important to acknowledge that FBOs, LFCs and other non-conventional initiatives do not automatically offer equitable opportunities for conventional leadership, secular humanitarian agencies must also reconfigure their modes of working with diverse and dispersed networks, and alternative understandings of authority.

3

Concluding reflections

What we have begun to explore in this paper is some of the ways in which local FBOs – and even secular initiatives – engage with, and support ‘from within’, refugee groups in Delhi. The wide-ranging nature, aims, and membership of these initiatives and organisations defy simple classification and bridge a number of ‘categories’, including voluntary organisation, FBO, local faith community, youth initiative, leadership ‘committee’, and so on. Their faith-led practices, informality, and/or dispersed authority, often render it difficult for more conventional, humanitarian organisations to work with them (given their secular priorities and somewhat rigid ideas of partner structures), but they nonetheless continue to provide vital lifelines, safety nets, ongoing development support, and a sense of community and belonging for refugees in a complex urban environment. As such, it is clear that faith and faith practices cannot be ignored as a basic need and safety net for the well-being of the community.

The idea of religion as a community resource for well-being is certainly nothing new (Maton and Wells, 1995) but, building on the conclusions of our first working paper looking at urban refugee self-reliance, it has yet to break into the policy discourse of self-reliance and the practice of supporting refugees to make meaningful lives for themselves in Delhi. In that policy and practice, the economics of livelihoods and self-sufficiency continue to dominate the ‘self-reliance’ imagination, despite clear indications that alternative understandings of well-being are necessary. As a follow-on from our first working paper, we have attempted to fill some of the knowledge gaps around the ways that these non-conventional, local, faith-based organisations work with vulnerable refugee communities in the complex urban environment of Delhi. But there is much more work to be done. What we have not explored directly here is

how these organisations engage with and support (or do not) refugees from the same ethnic/cultural/social group, but that perhaps do not share the same religious beliefs or level of active worship. It is as important not to homogenise refugee group experiences of faith and faith-based support, as it is to recognise their presence and reach in the first place. There is also much more work to be done on the gendered element of these faith groups and practices – not least in exploring alternative understandings of ‘leadership’ in the Afghan and Rohingya refugee groups, and how women and non-‘elder’ men lead initiatives focused on community well-being.

While we are keen to leave conclusions open for response and reflection, it is worth highlighting at least one recommendation from a recent study that would prove pertinent here. Wilkinson and Ager (2017) noted, as part of a scoping study on LFCs, that “‘culture brokers’ or actors with an understanding of both the international humanitarian system and local faith structures can be essential in increasing partnerships and breaking down barriers”. And the barriers and biases of particular concern are those around partnership with local faith actors. They recommend that: “A greater familiarity with the structures of LFCs is needed”. In many ways this is what can be read between the lines of the reflection by the Rohingya youth leader who argued that “UNHCR and its partners’ thinking and outlook are different from our community’s. They need to come to the community more often”. Although an increased proximity and engagement between humanitarian actors of all types, including faith-based, will certainly not provide a ‘silver bullet’ to issues of refugee-supporting self-reliance in India, it will certainly be a step in the right direction.

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This paper explores the faith context of displacement and settlement for the Sikh and Christian Afghan refugees and Muslim Rohingya refugees in Delhi. It examines the foundation of community faith-based organisations (FBOs) and secular humanitarian initiatives that have emerged from within the refugee communities, and explores wider refugee interactions with local faith communities (LFCs) and other FBOs. The paper shows that faith and faith-based practices are essential aspects of daily life for refugees in Delhi which contribute to their sense of well-being in the city, and that refugees' own faith-based communities and organisations and humanitarian initiatives often provide essential safety nets when government and NGO services are lacking. However, as this paper reveals, the presence and services of these community structures should not be taken as a 'silver bullet' solution for humanitarian organisations that are concerned with supporting refugee well-being more holistically in India.

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