

Impact Factor: 6.017

ISSN: 2278-9529

# Galaxy

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Peer-Reviewed e-Journal



Vol.13, Issue- 4 October 2024

**13** Years of Open Access

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## **Cultural Geography and Hospitality v/s Hostility: A Study of Contemporary Perceptions towards Refugee and Migrants**

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**Article History:** Submitted-02/10/2024, Revised-24/10/2024, Accepted-30/10/2024, Published-31/10/2024.

### **Abstract:**

The present article tries to explore how various identities intersect with other identities such as identity of religion, race, culture, language, gender, nationality, ethnicity, immigrant status, etc. and also have decisive effect on the process of welcoming /hospitality and unwelcoming/hoostality towards different refugee and immigrant groups in contemporary times. Identity plays major role in *expelling/deporting/unwelcoming* or *accepting/facilitating/welcoming*. By providing a few examples from contemporary refugee crisis – and how certain refugees were welcomed and certain unwelcomed from the European and South Asian context the paper underscores how an invisible particular geography of a intersectionality, particularly culture and religion, work as a psychological agent in stimulating or discouraging and facilitating or rejecting the immigrant or refugees. The aim of this paper to highlights how *religio – cultural similarities* or *dissimilarities* of refugee or immigrant group with the destination country results in to be accepted or rejected in the host society. How a particular immigrant/refugee groups becomes or frames as “legal” or “illegal”.

**Keywords:** Culture, Intersectionality, religion, Identity, migrant, refugee, Cultural geography, Psychology, Politics, South Asia, Europe.

The French philosopher, Jaques Derrida in his influential work, "*Of Hospitality*" (2000) explores the conditional and unconditional nature of hospitality in the context of Europe. He emphasized how hospitality towards unknown/foreigner/other works on certain unconditional or conditional (host's expectation to see guest in a certain manners). He also adds that hospitality is often intervene with other factors of ethics, politics, and the human responsibility.

However, in with the rise of religious and cultural nationalism in 21<sup>st</sup> century the cultural, religious, ethnic, and racial identities are intervening in the processes of hospitality both in the West and the rest. Which can be proved through the recent examples of refugees from MENA to Europe in 2015 and Ukrainian refugees in the wake of Russia – Ukraine War (2022).

In 2015 the newspapers and political debates sparked in EU due to sudden flux of refugees and migrants mostly from Muslim countries such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, Eritrea, etc. This has also led the far rights leaders and political parties to witness the rallies like in Warsaw to call for Muslim holocaust. The News week reports “An annual nationalist rally in Poland drew all-time high attendance Saturday as tens of thousands of young, angry demonstrators marched through the streets of Warsaw brandishing Nazi and white supremacist slogans and calling for an ‘Islamic holocaust’” (Silverstein).

But same Warsaw in Poland, witness the welcoming, distributing food and cloths to the Ukrainian refugees. Indian Today reports, that “With nearly 1.8 million people having fled Ukraine for Poland, locals in Warsaw are donating clothes, prams and food to help the refugees...With Ukrainians pouring into their country to seek shelter, Polish citizens are leaving no stone unturned in helping the refugees in any way they can. At a bus stand in Warsaw, the capital city of Poland, locals have donated clothes, food and prams for Ukrainian refugees.” . (Mohan).

This dual approach towards Muslim and Ukrainian mostly the Christian refugees in Poland shows how religious and cultural also ethnic and racial identities intersect in welcoming and no welcoming particular refugees and migrants in our time.

Religion has profoundly influenced migration processes throughout history. From ancient times, religious narratives have framed the experiences of both voluntary and forced migration and migrants and host community. In Islam, the migration of Prophets, including Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) journey from Mecca to Medina—known as Hijrat<sup>1</sup>—is a foundational moment, influencing Muslim perceptions of migration as a spiritual and practical act. The migrants who took refuge in Medina are called *Muhajirs* and those who gave shelters as *Ansars*. The companion of the Prophet Muhammed were given a fair and warm welcome despite their differences in faith. Most People including the King of Medina were Christians. But one similarity was that they were the people of *ahle kitab*(first books such as the Injeel (Gospel), Tawrah (Torah), Zaboor (Psalms), and, of course, the last heavenly scripture from God, the Quran (Qur'an)). In fact, this pattern of host and guest, despite their differences, became an



ideal model and can be an ideal model for contemporary problems of un/welcoming migrants and refugees on various grounds.

Similarly, in Jewish philosophy, the concepts of *Yerida*<sup>ii</sup> (descent) and *Aliyah*<sup>iii</sup> (ascent) represent migration "from" and "to" the Land of Israel, forming a cornerstone of Jewish identity and mobility. The notion of Israel as the "promised land" stems from this deeply rooted religious philosophy.

The interplay between religion and migration is also evident in modern history. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 exemplifies how religious and political motives converge to shape migration patterns. This event not only fulfilled the vision of a Jewish homeland but also led to the forced displacement of Palestinians, highlighting how religion served as a critical precursor for the creation of the Jewish state while simultaneously pushing Palestinians from their ancestral lands.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the 1947 partition of India, where religious concerns drove migration on an unprecedented scale. Millions of Hindus and Muslims migrated between the newly created states of India and Pakistan, seeking safety and religious freedom while fearing persecution. This migration illustrates how religion, whether as a unifying force or a dividing line, profoundly influences voluntary and forced movements of people.

In contemporary Myanmar, one of the primary reasons for the persecution of the Rohingyas is their religious identity, which sets them apart from the majority Buddhist population. A similar dynamic exists in other South Asian countries, where forced migrations underscore the significant role of religious and cultural identities.

The plight of the Rohingyas is paralleled by other groups in the region. For instance, the Shin Khalai community has migrated from Afghanistan to India, while Lama Buddhists were exiled from Tibet to India. Similarly, the migration of the Chakma and Hajong Hindus from Pakistan highlights how religion, ethnicity, and political contexts intersect to drive displacement. These cases illustrate how deeply religious and cultural identities influence both the experience and trajectory of forced migration in South Asia. Moreover, the refugees and migrants in South Asia found host country as safe heaven if their cultural and religious identity match with those of host society, if those differs the host country turns to be hostile and hospitality metamorphose to hostility.

The interesting aspect of religion and migration is the psychological effect of religion on people both who are 'immigrants' and those who are 'host community' and also on people's movement and mobility. "The *invisible visibility* of religion of both the immigrant and the host

society works in accepting or rejecting a particular immigrant or an immigrant community” (Chapparban 4). In recent time these identities also control the migrant and refugee flows. Religion enforces people to leave one place and migrate to another and at the same time it also shapes the people’s perceptions and behavior towards the immigrants.

The dominant religious community often envisions its own ‘imagined religio-cultural geography’ and its own "imagined community" that transcends socio-cultural or national borders. These imagined geographies significantly influence the dynamics of hospitality and hostility toward migrants and refugees. The arrival of the "other," someone culturally and religiously distinct, is frequently perceived as a potential disruptor to the existing demographic balance. This can evoke fears of losing dominance, cultural hybridization, or external influence. As a result, immigrant groups with differing cultural and religious values face resistance and are often not easily accepted by the host society. Conversely, immigrants whose cultural and religious values align with those of the host community are more readily welcomed, supported, and even encouraged to migrate. India’s Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 exemplifies this phenomenon. The law facilitates citizenship for minority groups from neighboring countries—such as Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians—based on cultural and religious affinities, irrespective of their immigrant status. However, Muslim migrants and refugees from these same neighboring states are explicitly excluded, highlighting how religious identity can determine the acceptance or rejection of migrants within legal frameworks in contemporary South Asia.

In contemporary Western contexts, particularly in Europe and America, Muslim immigrants and refugees are often perceived as the "obvious other." Host societies frequently harbor fears that they might "Islamize" the demographic fabric of a monolithic West unless their migration is restricted, controlled, or stopped. This perception creates a stark contrast in the treatment of Arabs from Muslim cultural-religious backgrounds versus those from Judeo-Christian or Christian traditions in the MENA region. The latter are seldom viewed as outsiders or immigrants, and their migratory status often goes unremarked.

Muslim immigrants in the West are frequently misinterpreted and misrepresented, with narratives portraying them as "ready to commit crimes," "social bombs," "job-stealers," or "burdens on society." By contrast, immigrants moving between Europe and America typically escape such negative stereotypes. This disparity underscores the discriminatory lens through



which Muslim communities are often viewed, resulting in their subjection to prejudice, humiliation, and systemic discrimination due to their cultural and religious differences.

A similar dynamic exists in India, where immigrant and refugee communities are treated with varying degrees of acceptance. Historically, India has welcomed diverse immigrant groups, including Muslims. But in recent time only refugees and migrants from a specific religious background are encouraged and entertained to enter into India, particularly Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists from neighboring countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Afghanistan. These groups are generally integrated into Indian society with relative ease. In contrast, Muslim immigrants are often viewed through the prism of stereotypes, biases, and suspicion, leading to a lack of acceptance.

Compounding this issue, certain Muslim minority sects in South Asia face marginalization within their own majoritarian sectarian countries. This has prompted migration toward more accommodating nations. However, legal frameworks like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have introduced significant complications to their mobility. By favoring non-Muslim immigrants, the CAA keeps religion as criterion for Indian citizenship irrespective of their immigrant status, further restricting the opportunities for Muslim refugees or migrants to seek refuge in India during difficult times.

Moreover, the labels like “legal” and “illegal” immigrants are also determined based on religion in contemporary South Asia which also led to social and political humiliation and hostilities.

In the post-Partition era, India’s approach to refugees has reflected varying policies, often influenced by religious and political contexts. For instance, Hindus and Buddhists who fled religious persecution in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) have been granted citizenship. The Chakma and Hajong communities, who arrived in the 1960s after fleeing the Chittagong Hill Tracts, were welcomed with a decision announced by the Union Home Ministry, stating, “The Union Home Ministry on Wednesday cleared the citizenship for over one lakh Chakma-Hajongs, Buddhists, and Hindus, who fled to India in the 1960s to escape religious persecution in the Chittagong Hill area of Bangladesh (the then undivided Pakistan).” (Vijaita.).

At the same time, a different approach has been taken regarding the Rohingya refugees, with steps to repatriate them to Myanmar despite the ongoing ethnic crisis. This decision was supported by an affidavit filed in the Supreme Court, citing security and demographic concerns. The Affidavit filled states following reasons (excuses) in the decision of deporting Rohingya Refugees to Myanmar:

1. The continued stay of Rohingyas, who number about 40,000 in India, has serious national security ramifications. 2. The government has security inputs indicating links of Rohingya refugees with Pakistan's ISI, the Islamic State and other extremists groups that want to spread communal and sectarian violence in India. Rohingyas with militant background are also found to be very active in Jammu, Delhi, Hyderabad and Mewat. 3. The Rohingyas are indulging in illegal/anti-national activities i.e. mobilisation of funds through hundi/hawala channels, procuring fake/fabricated Indian identity documents such as PAN and voter ID cards for other Rohingyas and also indulging in human trafficking. 4. The fragile north-eastern corridor may become further destabilised in case of stridency of Rohingya militancy, which the Central government has found to be growing, if permitted to continue. 5. There is also a serious possibility of violence erupting against the Buddhists, who are Indian citizens and live in the country, by the radicalised Rohingyas. (Ashok).

These differing policies highlight the nuanced and complex nature of refugee management in India, where cultural and religious identities often shape the responses to various communities.

The Shin Khalai community, a Hindu group from Afghanistan, serves as another example of migration from neighboring countries to India. Forced to flee during the Partition, they sought refuge in India and were generally welcomed. However, their journey and settlement reveal complexities beyond initial acceptance. *The Hindu* newspaper highlights this through an interview with Lakshmi Devi, a member of the community, "The government told us to leave quickly and go to India. We didn't even look back at our homes, just ran," (Haidar) says Lakshmi Devi, who can't remember her age now but recalls being a teenager at the time. *The Hindu* continues, "It was their blue skin, the colour of the face tattoos that women in tribal areas have, that set them apart from their neighbors, and even from the Hindu women of Pakistan," explains Shilpi Batra Advani, "a documentary filmmaker from a Pushtun Hindu family. Ms. Advani is completing a film on the Sheen Khalai."

Like many other Hindu families from Sindh and Balochistan, Lakshmi Devi and her family were resettled in Unniara, a village in Rajasthan about 130 km south of Jaipur. While being Hindu provided them refuge, it did not guarantee full acceptance, as their identity as "Shin Khalai" marked them as distinct within the host society.



This account underscores the layered challenges faced by refugee communities, even when religious commonalities exist. It reflects how cultural nuances and perceptions can shape the reception and integration of migrant groups.

The other examples of acceptance of refugees from Sri Lanka and Tibet in India is also born due to the cultural similarities of these refugee communities. The case of the Rohingya refugees is more complex, as their religious and cultural values differ from those of the majoritarian culture and religion. Interestingly, Vijay Ramniklal Rupnai, a Jain with strong cultural ties to Hinduism and originally from Burma/Myanmar, served as the Chief Minister of Gujarat. His family, migrating due to political instability in Myanmar, was able to integrate into Gujarat's dominant community thanks to their shared Jain and Baniya heritage. In contrast, immigrants from Myanmar who share similar geographic origins but differ in religious practices are not given refuge in India, illustrating how religious and cultural differences influence acceptance. In neighboring Bangladesh, the situation is different. Despite being a smaller country, Bangladesh has welcomed around 700,000 Rohingyas on humanitarian grounds. But this can also be due to the shared religious and cultural affinities between the Rohingyas and the Bangladeshi population.

In conclusion, the imagined geographies of cultural and religious identities play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of immigration, influencing whether immigrants are accepted or face complex challenges in their host societies.

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<sup>i</sup> *In Arabic Hijrat means "migration". It came into prominence with the migration of Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina with his followers. Islamic teachings emphasize on Hijrat for the sake of "Din/belief and for the sake of Allah. If a believer feels that s/he cannot practice his/her religion freely then he should migrate to a place where s/he can practice it without any difficulty."* (Chapparban : 2019)

<sup>ii</sup> *Yerida* means "decent", an act of emigration from the land of Israel.

<sup>iii</sup> *Aliyah*, means "ascend" is opposite to "yerida", is immigration of Jews from diaspora to the land of Israel.

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