

EDITORIAL

A Glimpse of UK's Refugees

The refugee question was never outside the purview of anthropology's range of interest. In the Indian context, significant studies on the refugees have been made not only by some anthropologists, but scholars from all other social science disciplines, and even literary figures and journalists have written profusely on them not only in English but in regional languages too. This extra concern about the refugees may apply to all countries which are acquainted with the refugee problem by virtue of the fact that at some points of time they had to keep their doors open for the refugees coming to their land with the purpose of finding a permanent settlement. Who is a refugee? The Article 1,1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) states that refugee is 'a person who: prosecuted for reasons of race, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.' From the UK's point of view, there is a difference between asylum-seekers and refugees. Though everybody has a right to seek asylum in another country, for permanent stay asylum-seekers will have to receive refugee status. Those who will not get refugee status are likely to be deported. The majority of asylum-seekers in the United Kingdom do not have the right to work and so must rely on state support. According to Home Office specification, though the asylum-seekers are entitled to housing, they do not have a choice. Cash support is also available, and currently it is set at 40.85 pounds per person, per week, which makes it 5.84 pounds a day for food, sanitation and clothing. Refugees can be resettled to the UK via 'the Mandate Scheme', 'the UK Resettlement Scheme' (UKRS), 'Community Sponsorship Scheme' and 'the Afghan Resettlement Schemes' (ACRS).

The United Kingdom of Great Britain has a long history of accommodating foreign migrants or giving shelter to refugees coming from different parts of the world. But at the present juncture, the whole refugee question has taken a new dimension following a world event of considerable significance, namely, the Ukraine- Russia War to which our attention is immensely drawn because of its long-term effects. The UK Government, from its side, has launched a special scheme for the Ukrainian refugees affected by the war. From both the Homes for Ukraine and Ukrainian family Schemes, it has been gathered that till mid-February, 2023, 161,400 refugees have arrived in the UK. The UK Government statistics have shown that as on February 23, 2023 a total

of 872 applications were received under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme in Sheffield alone, awaiting clearance. Buckinghamshire had recorded the highest number of visa applications from Ukraine (2062) during that period. Besides, Homes have been established in Glasgow, Manchester, Bolton and Rochdale. The Homes for Ukrainian sponsorship scheme provide opportunities to members to host an individual or a group. Under the scheme, hosts are entitled to a monthly 350 pounds tax free payment, which, however, applies to individual only. With no immediate sign of stoppage of Ukrainian asylum-seekers to UK, it is but natural that the number will keep on increasing with almost every day and may continue to maintain this increasing trend till the war comes to an end. Though the Ukrainians had started seeking asylum in the United Kingdom in big numbers, it was Albania which was the top nationality seeking asylum in the UK in the year ending September, 2022 (13,650 applications). Obviously, Mother Teresa's country was not in peace. It has also been estimated that during 2021-22 the Rumanian parents accounted for the maximum number of babies of non-British origin; this year the Indian parents have overtaken the Rumanians. Admittedly, those who were refugees at one time representing different countries of the world will have significant contributions to the future composition of the British population.

It must be acknowledged that the two World Wars of the early and mid- 20th Century, long time before the breaking out of the current war which has been threatening to take World War dimension, had significant impact on refugee migration and Britain also felt the effects of those in no uncertain terms. The collapse of the Ottoman, Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian empires as a result of the First World War created a large number of ethnic, political and religious refugees and stateless persons. Before the Aliens Act came into effect, immigration to and from Britain was unrestricted during peacetime. The idea of refugees might have existed in popular imagination, but it was not reflected in any form of law or in the form of putting some barriers to their unrestricted entry into Britain. During this period, the majority of migration came from European countries having cultural and, in some cases, religious differences between one another. With their arrival, there grew a fear in local mind that the strangers would grab opportunities to work originally meant for them, often by mediating with sympathetic local responses to refugees. Following substantial Jewish immigration, the fear grew into a rhetoric that led to the promulgation of the Aliens Act in 1905. Obviously, the intention was to bring an end to open immigration of the Jewish immigrants to the United Kingdom. It is worth mentioning here that Bronislaw Malinowski was also a victim of this Act. The rise of fascism in Europe, and the actions of Franco's Spain and Nazi's Germany as well as of Mussolini's Italy saw political dissidents, Jews and other persecuted minorities fleeing across and out of Europe. It was estimated that about forty million people were displaced by the Second World War alone, which had prompted the United Nations to create two refugee organizations in the names of 'the United Nations Relief and

Rehabilitation Administration' (UNRRA) and 'the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR). This period saw Britain in a complex relationship with refugees as successive governments attempted to preserve British interests on the one hand and at the same time volunteered to become a cooperative member of the international community, something which it has been following even now. One may get some idea about how quickly the estimation of the motive behind migration changed during the Enlightenment period and even during the French Revolution. The 1789 French Revolution saw some nobles seeking safety in Britain, but they were seen as cowards who had hastily and without any second thought abandoned their country and people.

From the perspective of World Wars and the level of persecution carried out by the oppressive autocratic regimes at different times, the Jews of all communities probably suffered most, which was no less reflected in their history of migration to different countries including the UK. The persecution of Jewish populations throughout history meant Jewish migrants had also been coming to the UK throughout 18th and 19th centuries. A significant number of Jewish immigrants came from Eastern Europe and Russia after 1881 when Tsar Alexander II was assassinated, which led to Jewish programs on a wider scale. A total of over two million Jewish people left Eastern Europe during that time for the USA, Canada and Western Europe including UK. Jewish immigration to UK was largely concentrated in London and the East End as several Jewish charities and communities already existed there. A section of Jews also found entry into the historical city of York and it was said that some of them committed suicide because of unfavorable living conditions. The history of York, the second earliest city of UK, deserves a special mention. It was witness to successive waves of powerful migrants, most of whom had left their imprints on the city as it stands today. York's history was dominated by the early presence of warring tribes of Anglo-Saxon origin and Normans, followed by Romans and Vikings, who were engaged in bitter struggles for supremacy. When Vikings and Romans were on the saddle, trade and business picked up at a fast pace. But York was primarily regarded as a market town and could not reach the level of an industrial town. One reason could be the lack of stability contributing to lack of peace, which was necessary for industries to grow and flourish. Another reason was the disastrous effect of deadly contagious diseases like plague, black death, which took a toll on York's population. Even at the time York was prosperous under Vikings and Romans, its population did not increase and remained almost constant or showed a declining trend at some points of time. In the mid-19th century, revolutions across Europe in France, Germany, Italy and the Austro-Hungarian led to high numbers of exiles seeking refuge in Britain. These refugees were politically active and included those seeking independence from the autocratic imperial regimes of central and eastern Europe. London became an important centre for politically active refugees. No wonder, it became

the site of several nationalistic and political societies engaged in devising new strategies, new ideas to strengthen the liberal tradition. Many had even ventured to return to their home countries, rejuvenated with fresh ideas and with an ardent desire to install right political climate or a progressive political system back home.

The recent migrants coming to UK as refugees, following post-World War and post-colonial developments, include more people coming from different continents other than Europe, mainly from Asia and Africa, who represent different religious groups and ethnic communities. There are Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Thais, Chinese, Japanese, Mongolians, Arabs, Afghans, Egyptians, Sudanese, Kenyans, Ruwandans, Senegalese, Ugandans, Somalis, South Africans and many others. Latin Americans including Mexicans and Caribbeans could also register their entry with impressive numbers. It may be recalled that after World War II the UK Government offered all Commonwealth citizens free entry into the UK. Taking advantage of it, a lot of people from the Commonwealth countries came to the UK. The first group of such people to come was from the Caribbean. A group of 500 Caribbean people were brought to the UK in 1948 in a ship called *Empire Windrush*. After the ship, they are often known as “Win drush Generation”. During the 1960s, most of the Commonwealth citizens who made their entry into the UK were from India and Pakistan, who could be considered as privileged groups in a sense. Others immigrated for different reasons, some of which were more compelling as there was little choice left for the migrants; many people came here to try their luck to seek better economic opportunities and better living conditions. The cumulative effects of immigration of refugees in different periods of time have left a definite mark on the demographic composition of the country. Together with it, the inter-community relationship and inter-cultural communication pattern have also changed from time to time.

At present, the UK Government's stand towards the refugees has been one of humanitarian concern, to support the people in distress or help those who have been victimized by human crises of untold sufferings. That is why, distressed people from different parts of the world could find a place here. The latest example has been provided by the Sudanese, who were displaced from their country as a result of the prolonged civil war. Interestingly, they have made a request to the UK Government to treat them at par with the Ukrainians because the cause of their displacement-related suffering is almost the same. Barring occasional grumblings or low-key criticism in private from some quarters, Government's overall refugee program enjoys public support. Not only do the refugees receive financial support, they also get material support in the form of free accommodation, free ration and education. The governmental actions provide an opportunity for the country to take pride in its economic strength and monetary power. Now that

the country is not doing that well in the economic front, doubts have been expressed by some about the desirability of continuing with its liberal approach. Just to retain the pride of the nation is it not going to be a costly venture?

Some of the first- generation refugees and their descendants are now well placed in life, holding reasonably good jobs or doing business which pays good dividends and owning comfortable houses. Free education and that too in graded schools has changed the lifestyle of their children. Doing well in the economic front and the assured support of a cohesive community structure have made them politically conscious, the net result of which is more and more public representations having political significance. The pace with which the refugees could establish themselves in public life may give satisfaction to those who are at the helm of governmental affairs, but a simmering discontent among a section of the original British people may not escape the notice of a serious observer. This is not so much because of the growing economic prosperity of the erstwhile refugees, but because of the way they have systematically extended their presence in public places which could hardly be anticipated beforehand. Just one small example may be given. Playgrounds and open spaces of some well-known Sheffield schools were given for holding 'Id' prayers, which had surprised quite a few. In the light of British experience, one may think of 'Refugee' as a transient form made to transform into a viable entity. But as indicated before, doubts persist as to whether there is enough justification for the cost involved behind such a large-scale transformation leading to quick change in landscape and demographic structure. Or is it that genuine humanitarian work knows no justification? But one must be convinced that the humanitarian pursuit adopted here is free from any sort of imposed condition, veiled or subtly designed.

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