

The Muhajir Exodus of 1920: Remembering the largest 'voluntary' migration from colonial India

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Out of the ongoing Khilafat Movement emerged the *Hijrat* of 1920, a mass exodus of Muslims of different classes from colonial India to Afghanistan. The migration of the *Muhajirin* (plural of *Muhajir*), or Indian Muslim refugees started in April and converged with Ramzan, the holy month of fasting before Eid. The migration became a flood during the months of July and August 1920. Those hit hard by the ravages of the First World War, responded to Hijrat as an act of passive resistance to British colonial authority. Though the emigration was voluntary, it was underlined by socio-economic compulsions. In this sense, the exodus from British occupied India in search of a Sunni Muslim Utopia had a tragic dimension. It was a search for 'soul' in a 'soulless' situation, an attempt to locate the 'heart' of a 'heartless' world. The historical links between India, Afghanistan and Central Asia assumed a crucial focus under these circumstances.

In April 1920, following the Afghan victory over the British Empire, a call for emigration to Afghanistan was given at a meeting in Delhi under the aegis of the ongoing Khilafat Movement. The political perspective of the Muhajirs was shaped by Indian Muslim leaders who tried to connect anti-imperialist orientations of Muslim populations spread across the world with Muslims in India struggling for routes to better conditions of life. In support of post-war Turkey, the centre of the former Ottoman Empire and headquarters of Sunni Islam under attack from Britain and its fellow imperialist Allies, the Khilafat leaders launched an anti-colonial programme. The Khilafat Movement drew heavily on cross-class mass mobilisation. This wider backdrop triggered a mass exit from colonial India as many were convinced that they did not wish to live in a land ruled by hostile infidels. Instead, they sought shelter in a land ruled by a pious Muslim king. The Khilafat leaders put their trust in the promise of the Afghan government to welcome skilled asylum seekers and help them to build a new life in Afghanistan. Initially, the Muhajirs arrived in small batches or *Kafila* of 20 to 30 people but gradually the size of the emigrant groups became very large. Soon the *Hijrat* of 1920 became a movement and nearly 40,000 refugees crossed into Afghanistan. The Muhajirs travelling on foot or bullock-carts were semi-destitute; they consisted of impoverished peasants, traders, students, men, women and children. Many had sold everything they had owned in order to escape post-war hardship in India. According to contemporary observers, most of the people who arrived at the gates of Kabul had nothing -homesteads, land, worldly goods. They were described as illiterate peasants and artisans oppressed by landlords, moneylenders and the British Government. Some students who had completed high school and higher education could be spotted among them. This section established connections with émigré Indian pan-Islamist revolutionaries already settled in Kabul since 1920.

Though the Afghan authorities and the Khilafat leaders had warned that only skilled professionals capable of earning an independent living should proceed to Afghanistan, the masses interpreted the message of Hijrat in a different way. The crop failure of 1918-19 had worsened rural conditions,

making peasants in the Indian provinces bordering Afghanistan desperate. As drowning people clutching at straw, they readily responded to the idea of escape embodied in the Hijrat Movement. Historians have shown that ninety-five percent of emigrants from Sindh were 'labourers', 'loafers', and 'broken men'. The Punjabi emigrants, by contrast, were from the cities. Historians have also pointed out that though the Muslim leaders aroused religious passion at a time of tremendous material anxiety and psychological strain, they failed to give any coherent direction to the movement. Millions were officially classified as followers of Islam in India at the time. Afghanistan was too small to accommodate even a fraction of this population. Initially attempts were made by the leaders to assist those who were leaving. A Muhajirin office was set up in Delhi by the Khilafat leadership. Two reception committees were created in Rawalpindi and Peshawar to receive them. The committees were entrusted with arranging temporary lodging and boarding, and to dispatch the emigrants in small groups to Kabul during the holy month of Ramzan. The Muhajirs were asked to carry as much cash as possible with them. This prompted many of them to sell whatever they owned. Those who could not pay for their own expenses were asked to approach the rich people in their localities. Wealthy Muslims were requested to pay the railway fare of their poor coreligionists up to Rawalpindi as an act of charity. By the end of June, the exodus was a source of anxiety to the Kabul authorities. Advice issued from Kabul warned the emigrants on their way to Afghanistan that transport was unavailable from Peshawar. They would have to arrange their own carriages and carts. Heavy snowfall on the Kabul road and in the city of Kabul itself meant they had to carry bedding and warm clothes. During their long journey, hope echoed through the refugee columns as they sang in chorus: 'For destruction, we do not care. For unhappiness, we do not care. O Friends, come what may, Proceed to Kabul! Proceed to Kabul!' They also mourned their lost homeland: 'Hindu Brothers! Be happy with the joys of the Motherland. Poor Muslims, broken-hearted, are squandering the affection of the Motherland. The Amir (of Afghanistan) is summoning us.' Though this was a misconception on their part, the Muhajirs sincerely believed Afghanistan will be a cradle of Muslim fraternity where they would be free of colonial oppression, live with dignity and prosper. Punjab and North West Frontier had been drained to the hilt as sources of military labour during the First World War. In these provinces, resistance to imperial control was expressed by defiant acts and quiet rejections. At the end of the War, Punjab society had reached a boiling-point. In North West Frontier, resistance took the form of mass migration. A British report suggested that almost the entire population of North West Frontier Province, swayed by the Hijrat Movement and hoped to relocate by seeking refuge in the Afghan territories. As the majority of them were Afghans living in territories conquered by the British colonisers in the course of the nineteenth century, they had no organic attachment to the Durand Line which separated them from Afghanistan.

The Muhajirs left peacefully without displaying any overt resentment towards the colonial authorities; the British government in India was severely embarrassed by their actions. Kabul however proved to be an imaginary dreamland. The road to Kabul became the graveyard of many old people, women and children who were unable to bear the strain of the journey. Despite the harsh conditions of travel, the contempt for colonial authority acted as a driving force. The Kacha Garhi incident, when British troops fired on unarmed emigrants in the outskirts of Peshawar at a point near the Afghan border, seemed to have strengthened their resolve. On 8 July 1920 Habibullah Khan, a Muhajir, was killed by British soldiers. Murder of a Muhajir, and the official colonial communiqué holding the destitute Muhajirin responsible for the incident, increased the momentum of the Hijrat movement in the Frontier. During July 1920, Muzaffar Ahmad and Nazrul Islam, who were yet to emerge as early socialists, published a 'seditious' article by Nazrul in *Nabajug* (New Age), a short-lived Bengali evening daily which they published from Calcutta. Nazrul condemned the shooting of unarmed Muhajirs by the British military police at Kacha Garhi ('*Muhajirin hatyar jonya dayi ke?*'/Who is responsible for the slaughter of the Muhajirin?). They had no idea at the time that a communist party was about to emerge from the ranks of these emigrants within three months.

Afghanistan proved to be a turning point for only a minority of the Muhajirs who came from the ranks of the young intelligentsia.

Those inclined to wage *jihad* against the British were dissuaded by Amanullah, the Amir of Afghanistan. Though his government had successfully defeated the British invasion and secured independence from British semi-colonial control during the Third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919, he claimed it did not have the strength to fight another war with the British who lay like 'a cobra in his neighbourhood'. Instead, he offered cultivable land, employment in various branches of the Afghan Government, and a share in trade and commerce, which some Indian settlers had always enjoyed there. Some of the educated Muhajirin, under these circumstances, started various crafts, schools, dispensaries and assisted in the modernisation of Afghan economy and society. They spread linguistic training of *Pushtu*, the official language of Afghanistan. Some looked beyond Afghanistan, travelling to Soviet Central Asia and Turkey where a segment settled and enjoyed prominent positions. Though the Afghan government had initially welcomed the Muhajirs, the impoverished country neither had sufficient arable land nor adequate material infrastructure to sustain the rural refugees who were in the majority. Soon the scale of migration bred hostility. Anti-refugee reaction among some Afghans led to attacks, including assaults on women. The rural emigrants who survived the journey returned to colonial India in penniless condition and were absorbed into the floating population of destitute labourers in the towns and villages.

Yet, the trail also propelled a tiny minority in unexpected political directions. The Afghan government had sent the refugees to Jabal-us-Siraj ('mountain of light' in Arabic and Persian). There, the Muhajirs who had previously served in the British colonial army offered military training to young emigrants. The Muhajirs keen to join the war against Britain led by Mustafa Kemal in Turkey and gain further military training to fight for India's freedom were allowed to leave. During the autumn of 1920, crossing 300 miles of rough terrain, (almost half of the distance covering the Hindukush), they managed to reach Turkestan. Two hundred Muhajirs marched from Jabal-us-Siraj in North Afghanistan to Tirmiz on the Afghan-Soviet border in two groups. They crossed the Amu Darya (Oxus) to enter Soviet Asia. They immediately became embroiled in Britain's proxy war in Central Asia against the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. A large group became prisoners of the British-backed Basmachis, local Muslim rebels fighting Bolshevik power in Central Asia; they had unwisely stepped out of Soviet-held Tirmiz in order to proceed to Turkey. They were rescued by the Red Army under Mikhail Frunze, Soviet Commander of the Turkestan Front. Rafiq Ahmad and Shaukat Usmani, members of this Kafila, later wrote of their ordeal in Basmachi captivity when they were treated as 'infidels' for resisting the British and the solidarity they received from the a-religious Red Army in September 1920. Thirty-six Muhajirs joined a Bolshevik international detachment and fought for the defence of the town of Kirki, a Red stronghold against the Whites. Despite the anti-Bolshevik economic blockade instituted by the British strategists which had generated scarcity, the people of the town were 'jovial' and welcomed them. The Muhajirs were assigned patrol duty on the river front to guard the town. The red army offensive in Southern Turkestan led to the defeat of the Basmachi counter-revolutionaries. The Revolutionary Committee announced general amnesty and within two weeks the peasants among the belligerents became friends of their former enemies. Shaukat Usmani later met one of his captors at the *bazar* in Kirki. The fellow was selling melons. He apologised to Usmani and claimed they had been misled by the *mullahs* and village headmen: 'We know now that the land belongs to us and that we are the real masters of this land.' Usmani's description seems to suggest that the change in the material circumstances had made the melon-seller realise the old power relations were no longer in place. The land belonging to the local landowners and the deposed Amir of Bokhara were quickly distributed among the peasants. The bazar of Kirki was soon flooded with the ex-captors of the Muhajirin. According to Usmani: 'Smiling and friendly, they would now embrace us.'

Meanwhile, M. N. Roy, the nationalist-turned-communist from India, who had reached Russia via Mexico, was entrusted by the local Bolshevik authorities to look after the Muhajirs. Roy and the Bolsheviks had already managed to mobilise deserters from the British colonial army, 'burning with pan-Islamist zeal to fight the British in Anatolia', enlisting them into the Red Army detachments, the first 'International Brigades' of the Bolshevik Revolution. Under his directions, the young Muhajir students from India were enrolled in the Indian Military School in Tashkent. The Muhajir arrivants in Tashkent belonged to different age-groups. They came from Delhi, Lahore, Amritsar and Peshawar. A large number had never received formal education. Though the majority wanted to join the Kemalists in Turkey, a fairly large section were keen to join the Indian revolutionary movement and learn revolutionary techniques from the Bolsheviks. When a questionnaire was circulated among them, Shaukat Usmani (20) replied that his aim was 'to join the revolutionary movement' and Safdar Khan (42) declared that he wished to study the Russian revolution and draw lessons from it for 'a future revolution in India.' A small section was interested in the ongoing social experiment accompanying the Bolshevik revolution. M. N. Roy assessed the situation when addressing a meeting of Indian muhajirs in December 1920: 'You want one thing-to fight the English, although many of you have no idea of how this is to be done. So you are uncertain as to your own future movement.' According to Roy, a committee was formed from the ranks of the Muhajirs so that they could manage their own affairs in a democratic manner. Despite petty intrigues and suspicion of communism, some managed to overcome their initial prejudice against an 'atheist creed'. This led to a split within the Muhajirs. An ideological feud erupted. In the end, the section that had turned left wished to form a communist party despite Roy's insistence that there was no hurry. It was their pressure which led to the formation of an émigré communist party in Tashkent during late October 1920.

The mass exodus during 1920 failed the majority of the Muhajirs. The poor could not attain social salvation. Despite the tragic outcome of their journey to Afghanistan, a revolutionary dimension was added to their movement by a tiny minority. This segment turned to the Bolshevik Revolution and became active in fighting British imperialism. The accounts of these Muhajir revolutionaries indicate they were beset by conflicting moods. They felt nostalgic as they traversed the Central Asian landscape and registered the many connections with India in the historic remnants strewn across Afghanistan and Turkestan. They were also carrying the immediate memory of Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (1919) and other colonial atrocities. At the same time, they became increasingly optimistic by discovering alternative routes to political emancipation from below. As Shaukat Usmani later recalled, they had pleaded for assistance to fight British imperialism and the Afghan Government had failed them; the Bolsheviks did not.

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