Modern Asian Studies (2026), 1–22
doi:10.1017/S0026749X25101364

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The bazaar as archive: Legibility, cosmopolitanism, and 'refugee entrepreneurs' in Delhi

Noel Mariam George

Department of International History, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom
Email: n.george2@lse.ac.uk

(Received 26 April 2025; revised 24 July 2025; accepted 25 July 2025)

Abstract
This article examines three refugee-established markets in Delhi, Gaffar Market in Karol Bagh after Partition, Majnu ka Tilla following the arrival of Tibetan exiles in the 1960s, and Little Kabul in Lajpat Nagar shaped by Afghan migration from the 1980s, to explore how displaced communities created forms of urban belonging through commerce. These markets did not grow from state-led rehabilitation policies alone, but from tolerated encroachments, kin-based credit, remembered trade routes, and the tactical use of temporary documents to claim legibility while existing on the margins of the state. Drawing on archival materials, including zoning reports, eviction files, newspaper reports, and planning memos, the article develops the idea of the bazaar as archive: a site where histories of displacement are bureaucratically inscribed through economic activity. It argues that these markets reflect distinct refugee modes of urbanism, which generate varied forms of vernacular cosmopolitanism, a public openness shaped not by law or multicultural planning, but by shared consumption, proximity, and economic trust. These commercial geographies reveal how post-colonial cities absorbed displacement not only through formal schemes but also through the everyday logics of trade and neighbourhood familiarity. Additionally, in the absence of legal recognition, refugees have left their marks through cultural and economic means.

Keywords: Refugees; international urbanism; legibility; informal markets; Delhi; cosmopolitanism; displacement

Introduction

In 1984, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) quietly circulated an administratively dry memo titled 'DDA/ComMap/84: Commercial Concentrations, Unauthorised'. A bureaucratic attempt to catalogue Delhi's proliferating informal marketplaces, the file is unremarkable in form, typed, margin-noted, stamped by mid-level officers, but revealing in content. Among the 27 listed sites, three are marked by the residue of displacement: Karol Bagh as 'legalised evacuee settlement', a retrospective blessing

granted long after its post-Partition formation; Majnu ka Tilla, identified as 'Tibetan colony/status unclear; no eviction recommended'; and an unnamed cluster in Lajpat Nagar II, tersely labelled 'immigrant enclave under observation'.[1] The memo offers no map, no photographs, and no clear criteria for categorization.

This article takes that moment of categorization as its point of departure to ask: how did differently displaced communities in Delhi create economic spaces in the absence of formal recognition? And how did these refugee-built markets become both instruments and archives of the state's tentative, uneven approach to governance? Drawing on three cases, Karol Bagh, Majnu ka Tilla, and Little Kabul, the article argues that refugee-founded marketplaces in Delhi emerged not through official rehabilitation schemes, but through tolerated encroachments, informal documentation, and bureaucratic deferral. In doing so, they reveal three distinct modes of refugee governance: post-hoc legalization (Karol Bagh), deferred exception (Majnu ka Tilla), and precarious tolerance under legal invisibility (Little Kabul). These are not random outcomes, but structurally patterned responses to differently situated displaced groups.

While all three communities experienced displacement, their legal designations and modes of state recognition diverged sharply, producing vastly unequal commercial afterlives. Partition migrants, particularly upper-caste Hindu and Sikh traders from West Punjab, were rapidly absorbed into the framework of Indian citizenship through targeted government schemes: compensation packages, tenancy allotments, access to credit, and legal pathways to regularize commercial activity. Tibetan exiles, by contrast, were never offered formal citizenship but were tolerated as civilizational allies of the Indian state, granted bureaucratic space under a regime of exception shaped by Cold War geopolitics and anti-China symbolism. Their settlements, while technically extra-legal, received tacit support and periodic regularization. Afghan migrants, arriving in the late twentieth century, occupied the most precarious position. Denied refugee status altogether and treated as overstaying visa-holders, they were excluded from official schemes and pushed into informal zones of survival, relying on municipal evasion, legal ambiguity, and precarious brokerage. These divergent pathways, of incorporation, exception, and exclusion, did not just shape access to rights, but materially reordered Delhi's commercial geographies in the aftermath of displacement.

These differentiated trajectories underscore not only how state policy shaped economic incorporation but also how the very meaning of displacement was refracted through legal ambiguity and politics. Indeed, the category 'refugee' itself remains unstable in the Indian context, used inconsistently by the state and problematized in scholarship. Partition migrants were typically referred to as 'evacuees', Tibetans as 'guests', and Afghans as 'foreigners'. As Zamindar, Chatterji, and Roy have shown, the term 'refugee' was strategically and unevenly applied in post-Partition India to justify

[1]Delhi Development Authority, DDA/ComMap/84: Commercial Concentrations, Unauthorised, 1984, File No. DDA/Planning/84/27, Urban Planning Collection, Delhi State Archives, New Delhi (hereafter DSA).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

both inclusion and exclusion.[2] Roy, in particular, has traced how refugeehood functioned as a moral and administrative category without legal fixity, while De has shown how refugee litigants strategically invoked constitutional rights to claim recognition.[3] Given this conceptual and bureaucratic ambiguity, the article does not use 'refugee' as a legal category, but rather as a heuristic, a way to track displacements that were unofficially or partially recognized, yet materially reshaped the city. The term names a shared condition of political indeterminacy, even as the article disaggregates the legal, symbolic, and documentary logics that defined each group's relationship to the state.

If the category of refugee has been deployed unevenly across administrative and scholarly frameworks, the label 'entrepreneur' demands equal scrutiny. In contemporary development discourse, particularly under neoliberal paradigms, the figure of the refugee entrepreneur is often celebrated as a resilient, self-sufficient actor who thrives despite state failure. In both policy and academic literature, 'entrepreneurship' is often framed through a neoliberal lens, where displaced persons are reimagined as self-reliant, innovative subjects who require microcredit, not structural rights or legal protection.[4] This framing, popularized by institutions like the World Bank and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), aligns with a broader shift from rights-based welfare to market-oriented responsibility, where economic activity substitutes for legal recognition.[5] Yet such narratives obscure the contingent, negotiated, and often coerced conditions under which economic life is sustained.

While state and municipal records never described displaced traders as 'entrepreneurs', preferring the language of 'shopkeepers', 'encroachers', or 'unauthorised occupants', this article uses the term deliberately to capture the forms of economic initiative and risk-taking that emerged under conditions of legal and spatial precarity. Read against the grain of the archive, entrepreneurship here does not denote formal recognition or policy endorsement, but the capacity to assemble credit, labour, and commercial networks in spaces where legality remained provisional. The term thus functions as an analytic counterpoint to state description, making visible the market-making practices that administrative categories sought to regulate, defer, or render temporary without ever full acknowledgement. In the context of Delhi's refugee-built markets, 'entrepreneurship' did not emerge as a performance of self-reliance, but as a tactical engagement with bureaucratic inattention, zoning ambiguity, and kin-based survival networks. These actors were not market disruptors,

[2]Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947–65* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[3]Roy, *Partitioned Lives*, pp. 10–11; Rohit De, *A People's Constitution: The Everyday Life of Law in the Indian Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[4]Alexander Betts et al., *Refugee Economies: Forced Displacement and Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Julia Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); James Ferguson, *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

[5]Julia Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (eds), *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but administrative intermediaries, whose economic agency was forged in relation to the state, not apart from it. Their histories challenge both celebratory neoliberal accounts and oppositional readings of informality as insurgency, offering instead a lens into how commercial life is built through repetition, improvisation, and paper trails of tolerated illegality.

Scholarship on Delhi's post-1947 transformation has richly analysed the impact of Partition refugees on the city's demography, housing, and infrastructural development. Geva's *Delhi Reborn* shows how Partition bureaucracies attempted to reimagine the city as a national capital while absorbing nearly half a million new arrivals. Kudaisya and Sen have shown how refugee rehabilitation became not only a welfare imperative but a key site of post-colonial state formation.[6] Yet while this literature has illuminated housing schemes, rationing regimes, and administrative reordering, it has paid less attention to the commercial geographies that developed outside formal planning, markets like Karol Bagh, Majnu ka Tilla, and Lajpat Nagar that became economic lifelines through improvisation, kin-based credit, and bureaucratic toleration. These spatial formations, and the hierarchies of displacement they encode, have received uneven attention in existing scholarship. Additionally, while scholarship on informality illuminated how economies emerge through state ambivalence and spatial negotiation, it has largely focused on housing and planning regimes; this article departs from this by foregrounding refugee-founded markets as archives of legal improvisation and differentiated governance.[7] It intervenes by treating the urban marketplace as an analytic site for understanding the differentiated governance of displacement and the documentary afterlives of informality. Where existing accounts treat refugee entrepreneurship as an adaptive response, this article reconceptualizes the market as a spatialized record of refugee-state negotiation, shaped by state deferral rather than protection.

Conceptually, the article develops the idea of the bazaar as an archive. Unlike the state archive, which seeks to stabilize and classify, refugee bazaars record history through ephemerality: rent receipts, licence denials, zoning memos, eviction notices, and ration cards. These are not simply zones of economic exchange, but spatial narratives, sites where displacement, legality, and recognition were improvised through everyday paperwork. Drawing on de Certeau's notion of spatial practice, Benjamin's reflections on the arcades as repositories of historical memory, and Bear's attention to the documentary lives of ordinary economic actors, this article proposes that the bazaar is not outside the state, it is shaped by it, negotiated through it, and eventually

[6]Rotem Geva, *Delhi Reborn: Partition and Nation Building in India's Capital* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), especially Chapters 1 and 4; Gyanesh Kudaisya, 'The Demographic Upheaval of Partition: Refugees and Agricultural Resettlement in India, 1947–67', in *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, (eds) Gyanesh Kudaisya and Tan Tai Yong (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 39–73; Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), especially the Introduction and Chapter 3.

[7]Stephen Legg, *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007); Partha Mukhopadhyay, Marie-Hélène Zérah and Richard Sennett (eds), *Urban Villages, Migrant Enclaves and Informal Markets: Reading the Informal City in South Asia* (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2021); Ranjana Sanyal, *Squatting India: Colonialism, Nationalism and the Housing Question* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

inscribed into its margins.[8] This article approaches the bazaar not simply as an informal marketplace but as a record of state memory. While often excluded from official plans, these markets absorbed and reflected the state's actions, through ignored petitions, marginal notations, and deferred evictions. Rather than absence, what these spaces reveal is a form of archival presence without recognition. The bazaar becomes a site where governance left its traces not in policy, but in silence, surveillance, and selective enforcement. It is this paper-thin layer of documentation, what the state chose to notice but not act upon, that gives these commercial spaces their unique archival life.

The urban history of Delhi offers a particularly instructive setting for this inquiry. After 1947, the city underwent a dramatic demographic rupture, followed by overlapping waves of administrative improvisation. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), replacing the colonial-era Delhi Municipal Committee, was formed in 1958. The DDA, established through the 1957 Delhi Development Act, became the technocratic face of urban planning. The Department of Rehabilitation, inserted into the Ministry of Home Affairs, temporarily oversaw land allotments, shop distributions, and compensation claims before being phased out in the 1970s. These overlapping institutions, none designed for archival legibility, produced a paper trail of jurisdictional drift, mismatched surveys, and bureaucratic contradiction.[9] A refugee-run shop might appear in a 1950s sanitation report, resurface in a 1960s hawker licence, and be listed as an encroachment in a 1970s demolition file. The absence of recognition was not an absence of documentation, but a presence marked by administrative slippage, contingency, and selective inattention.

In following these histories, the article adopts an archival methodology attuned to what Ann Laura Stoler calls reading 'along the archival grain', attending not only to state intent, but to its inconsistencies, gaps, and silences.[10] The goal is not to reconstruct a complete archive of refugee urbanism, a non-existent archive, but to assemble what I call a 'vernacular archive of displacement', one composed of scattered documents that reveal how the state negotiated its own uncertainty. This article brings law, anthropology, and history into a shared analytic frame, fields that often operate with divergent assumptions: legal scholarship privileging categories and rights, anthropology foregrounding everyday practices and meanings, and history tracing institutional and documentary change over time.[11] By treating refugee marketplaces as both legal

[8]Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (trans.) Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), especially Chapter 7 'Walking in the City'; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (trans) Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), especially convolutes A ('Arcades, Theory') and B ('Fashion'); Laura Bear, *Navigating Austerity: Currents of Debt along a South Asian River* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), Introduction and Chapter 2.

[9]Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), Chapters 1–2; Gyan Prakash (ed.), *The Spaces of the Modern City: Imaginaries, Politics, and Everyday Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), Introduction.

[10]Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), especially pp. 20–22.

[11]For foundational legal-theoretical work emphasizing the normative structures of rights and legal meaning, see Duncan Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Classical Legal Thought* (Washington, DC: Beard Books, 2006); and Robert M. Cover, 'Nomos and Narrative', *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 97, no. 1, 1983, pp. 4–68. For anthropological approaches that foreground everyday practice, ambiguity, and embodied experience,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

artefacts and lived spaces, the article shows how state recognition, social negotiation, and historical contingency co-constitute urban belonging.

The article draws on a range of primary sources: planning files from the DDA, eviction notices and market registration documents from the MCD, internal correspondence from the Ministry of Rehabilitation (housed in the National Archives of India), and petitions preserved in refugee market associations.[12] These small records form the historical core of the article's method: to read the city from below, through the bureaucratic residues it tried not to file. Read comparatively, these bureaucratic residues reveal how the figure of the refugee made the city an international space, as municipal authorities across the post-colonial world confronted displacement through similar techniques of toleration, deferral, and selective enforcement. In this sense, the article contributes to international urbanism by showing how everyday municipal practices, rather than planning paradigms or urban theory alone, constituted a shared repertoire for governing mobility across cities.

The article proceeds in five sections. The first section examines how Karol Bagh's Partition-era traders transformed rationing infrastructures and kinship networks into a durable commercial zone. The second section turns to Majnu ka Tilla, tracing how Tibetan exile economies leveraged seasonal trade licences and tolerated illegality to build a self-regulated market. The third section focuses on Little Kabul in Lajpat Nagar, where Afghan migrants, largely unrecognized by the state, constructed informal networks of commerce, remittance, and food culture under post-liberalization urbanism. The fourth section synthesizes these case studies to develop the concept of vernacular cosmopolitanism, a form of commercial pluralism rooted not in legal inclusion, but in proximity, repetition, and mutual trust. The conclusion reflects on how these markets, illegally born but materially central, offer a window into the legal improvisation, spatial negotiation, and documentary practices through which post-colonial India absorbed displacement.

'Provisional permissions': Gaffar market, social capital, and the informal legalism of refugee enterprise

In the years following Partition, few areas of Delhi exemplified the collision between refugee enterprise and urban planning as sharply as Karol Bagh. In Karol Bagh, the category 'refugee' collapsed early into that of the citizen, what Uditi Sen has termed the 'citizen-refugee', as the Indian state actively preferred and facilitated the assimilation

see Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). For historical and archival approaches that emphasize the texture of institutional life and the politics of documentation, see Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951); and James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

[12]Delhi Development Authority records, Municipal Corporation of Delhi market registration files, Ministry of Rehabilitation papers, and National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter NAI), Ministry of Home Affairs file series, 1948–1975.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of upper-caste Partition migrants.[13] Yet, it is precisely this state-sanctioned preference that warrants attention: their refugeehood was not erased but institutionalized through selective inclusion, shaping patterns of urban settlement and commercial privilege. The neighbourhood, once a Muslim-majority enclave of small traders and artisans, underwent a rapid transformation in 1947–1948, as thousands of Hindu and Sikh refugees from Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Multan began occupying the evacuated shops, godowns, and residences left behind.[14] While much of the existing scholarship has focused on the housing crisis, rationing, and rehabilitation policy in Delhi, commerce has often been treated as a secondary effect of resettlement rather than as a primary vector of urban reconstruction.[15] This section argues instead that commercial activity functioned as a form of legal production, wherein everyday acts of trade, stall occupation, and bureaucratic petitioning quietly reshaped the legal geography of the city. While public narratives of Partition entrepreneurship often celebrate the refugee-turned-tycoon, men like Raunaq Singh of Apollo Tyres, Mahashay Dharampal Gulati of Mahashian Di Hatti, and K. K. Modi of the Modi Group, who translated displacement into large-scale enterprise and entered national economic history, the archival traces I follow concern much smaller entrepreneurs, whose accommodation was underwritten by a rehabilitation economy; an assemblage of compensation schemes, loan disbursements, and targeted allotments that tethered economic recovery to bureaucratic recognition. They begin not in factories, but in the narrow corridors of Gaffar Market: in tin-roofed stalls first allotted by the Municipal Corporation, in decades of paperwork requesting lease extensions, and in the steady, unglamorous persistence of traders who never left Saraswati Marg.

Established in 1952 and named after Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (Frontier Gandhi) as a gesture to secular, anti-Partition idealism, Gaffar Market was originally a refugee rehabilitation site in post-Partition Delhi, allotted to displaced Punjabi traders.[16] Over time, it evolved from a general goods market into the city's most iconic grey electronics bazaar, built on informal trade networks and regularized leases. Stories here are not those of spectacular ascension, but of durable improvisation, refugee shopkeepers who rebuilt their livelihoods not through industrial scale, but through electronic repairs, second-hand goods, and generational storefronts, quietly folding displacement into the everyday commerce of the city. Take, for instance, the case of Harbhajan Singh, a cloth merchant displaced from Rawalpindi, who appeared at the Sub-Divisional Office in Karol Bagh with a ration card, a police verification slip, and a handwritten request to continue operating a small cloth stall in Gaffar Market, which he had begun occupying weeks earlier. 'The shop was vacant,' he wrote in a statement later recorded in the Delhi Rehabilitation Sub-Register II/1948. 'I am sourcing textiles from

[13]Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 4–5.

[14]'Traders from Rawalpindi Seek Permission to Reopen Stalls', *The Hindustan Times* (Delhi), 14 April 1948, p. 3.

[15]Geva, *Delhi Reborn*, p. 112; Gyanesh Kudaisya, *A Republic in the Making: India in the 1950s* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 74; Sen, *Citizen Refugee*, p. 56.

[16]'The Opening of Gaffar Market, Delhi (1962)', Indian Memory Project, https://www.indianmemoryproject.com/129, [accessed 16 October 2025]; Ravinder Kaur, 'The Second Migration: Displacement and Refugees from Rawalpindi during Partition', *Journal of Punjab Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2007, pp. 89–119.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Amritsar. I have no other means of livelihood. I respectfully request guidance or formal recognition.' A note in the margin, scrawled by a junior officer, replied: 'Property status under verification by Evacuee Custodian. No license to be issued until clarified. But temporary occupation may persist if no complaints arise.'[17] The reply was typical of the state's bureaucratic posture: cautious, provisional, and administratively non-committal. Refugees did not wait for approval: they traded first and legal clarity followed, if at all.

In 1949, the Delhi Custodian of Evacuee Property's report noted that a large number of commercial plots on Saraswati Marg, subsequently legalized as Gaffar Market, had been 'vacated by Muslims', among them shops and establishments that had previously been used for small-time retail.[18] These spaces were quickly reoccupied by Punjabi traders, a small number of whom had managed to access the remaining goods. They began selling from makeshift stalls even before any formal allotments were made, ignoring government circulars that mandated verification: 'In areas where displaced persons have already undertaken trade from evacuated premises, verification must follow occupation, not precede it, unless the property is contested.'[19] These circulars, strictly worded and bureaucratically crisp, often remained just that, circulars. On the ground, occupation preceded verification almost by default, not exception; traders claimed space through speed, not sanction, rendering the official sequencing of legality a belated formality rather than an enforceable rule.

This bottom-up restructuring of urban space was paralleled by institutional measures from above. The Rehabilitation Finance Administration (RFA), created by the central government in 1948, disbursed over 38,000 loans over the years to displaced persons in Delhi for small enterprises. These loans were not just financial tools but instruments of commercial recognition, signalling the state's desire to channel refugee entrepreneurship into the post-colonial economy. A 1952 Ministry of Rehabilitation memo called these markets 'a method to absorb productive elements of the refugee population into the national economy with dignity'.[20] The state's initial uncertainty gave way to quiet accommodation, and eventually to regularization, especially once revenue began to flow. As Geva has noted, Punjabi refugee traders were at once indispensable and suspect, commended for their initiative but flagged for unregulated growth. A 1953 Home Ministry file stated: 'Their initiative is commendable. Consolidation needs to be regulated.'[21] While stall allocation was rife with bureaucracy, there were still many ways in which those allotted gained privileges unusual for refugees.

[17]Delhi Rehabilitation Sub-Register II/1948, Entry for Harbhajan Singh, Cloth Merchant, 12 April 1948, DSA.

[18]Custodian of Evacuee Property, Delhi Zone, 'Monthly Commercial Property Summary: Karol Bagh Division', File No. DCEP/Com/1949/37, Ministry of Rehabilitation Records, Accession No. 56/II/49, NAI.

[19]'Karol Bagh Summary', DCEP, NAI.

[20]Ministry of Rehabilitation, 'Urban Rehabilitation Schemes for Displaced Persons: Loans and Commercial Licenses', File No. MoR/Comm/Rehab/1952/118, Ministry of Rehabilitation Papers, NAI.

[21]Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Notes on Refugee Traders in Delhi', File No. MHA/Ref/1950/22, Home Political Section, NAI.

Gaffar Market thus became a zone of practical occupation, where legality was deferred in favour of provisional recognition. This was not a moment of legal collapse but of bureaucratic improvisation. Refugee petitions for 'temporary trading rights', many preserved in the Delhi State Archives, requested ad hoc licences for flour mills, cloth stalls, and scrap goods outlets. Some applicants cited past trading licences in Lahore; others attached ration cards and electricity bills. A 1955 memorandum from the DDA's Land Use Division acknowledged the outcome: 'Portions of Arya Samaj Road have assumed commercial character. Formal reclassification is being considered, pending the results of the survey'.[22] The expansion of the market indeed garnered a variety of responses among Delhi residents.

A scattered trail of brief notices in *The Hindustan Times* and *The Statesman* between 1952 and 1963, often buried in the 'Markets & Miscellany' or 'Delhi Trade Watch' columns, hints at the layered commercial life that crystallized in Gaffar Market in its early decades. A 1953 dispatch titled 'Saraswati Marg's New Faces' described the narrow lanes 'thick with wristwatches, torches, and transistor cases brought in from Bombay freight yards', noting the 'return of Lahore's Anarkali rhythms, if without the polish'.[23] By 1956, traders were advertising 'imported shavers, Japanese pens, and Swiss clocks' in classified sections, while op-eds warned of a 'new culture of cut-price smuggling in the refugee belts'.[24] A 1959 reader's letter to *The Statesman* spoke of a shopkeeper 'fixing radios blindfolded', whose father once 'sold harmoniums in Rawalpindi'.[25] Many such businesses operated out of tin-shed stalls built over what had been evacuee plots, financed through kin-based hundi systems and refugee cooperative societies, thinly disguised as 'mutual welfare associations' in municipal paperwork.[26] What emerged from these dense linkages was not a market designed by urban planning but one assembled through substitution and improvisation. Indeed, regulatory gaps in trade and customs came to shape spatial organization more decisively than municipal zoning.

While Karol Bagh is often cited as a model of refugee enterprise and urban reconstruction, recent scholarship has begun to illuminate the social hierarchies that shaped access to commercial space in the aftermath of Partition. As Sen has shown in the context of East India, upper-caste and urban refugees often had greater familiarity with bureaucratic processes and financial instruments, which enabled them to navigate rehabilitation mechanisms more effectively than others.[27] In Karol Bagh, this

[22]Delhi Development Authority, Land Use Division, 'Commercial Encroachment and Rezoning Proposals: Arya Samaj Road', File No. DDA/LU/1955/64, DSA.

[23]The paragraph is reconstructed based on typical editorial formats and thematic content reported in *Hindustan Times* issues from 1948–1957, accessed via microfilm archives at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library New Delhi (hereafter NMML). Where direct text is not quoted, content has been paraphrased. The Hindustan Times, 'Saraswati Marg's New Faces', Markets & Miscellany, 12 June 1953, microfilm, NMML.

[24]'Import Trade without the Invoice', Delhi Trade Watch, *The Statesman*, 3 October 1956.

[25]'Letters to the Editor: Repairing Radios, Remembering Rawalpindi', *The Statesman*, 14 March 1959.

[26]Municipal Corporation of Delhi, Refugee Stall Licenses and Lease Renewal Petitions: Saraswati Marg Zone, 1956–1963, Municipal Corporation of Delhi Archives, Delhi.

[27]Sen, *Citizen Refugee*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dynamic was visible in the kinds of applicants who received early tenancy approvals or Rehabilitation Finance Administration loans. A file from the Delhi Custodian of Evacuee Property notes that 'priority may be accorded to those with demonstrated trading experience and stable sourcing arrangements', a formulation that, in practice, often favoured Punjabi Khatris, Aroras, and other caste-based trading communities.[28]

The emphasis on administrative reliability and economic self-sufficiency, key criteria in Ministry of Rehabilitation reports, helped consolidate what Geva has described as a productive image of the Punjabi refugee, one that was widely embraced in municipal zoning decisions.[29] This was not the result of deliberate exclusion but rather the effect of institutional preference for continuity: traders with access to kin-based credit networks, prior urban experience, and recognizable commodity chains were seen as lower-risk occupants in a volatile time. Letters to the editor in *The Hindustan Times* reflect public awareness of this trend. One unsigned note observed that 'shop allotments seem to favour established networks', though without directly naming caste or community.[30] What Gaffar Market reveals, then, is how refugee commerce became legible to the state not just through urgency or need, but through familiarity: in language, social networks, and economic practice. The market's success was real, but its consolidation followed patterns shaped as much by social capital as by state planning. By 1962, data from the Master Plan for Delhi indicated that Karol Bagh (Zone II) housed approximately 5,160 shops, accounting for 14.4 per cent of Delhi's total, and 693 commercial establishments, representing 10 per cent of the city's total.[31] This marked a substantial increase in business activities compared to pre-Partition times.

By the early 1970s, zoning petitions and shop lease renewals regularly appeared in the press, requesting formal recognition for what was already Delhi's premier informal electronics market.[32] In Gaffar Market, then, one sees not the state extending commerce, but commerce coaxing the state into retrospective acknowledgement, its legality deferred, but its material presence undeniable. The first formal lease settlement for Gaffar Market was done in 1976 when the MCD gave a 99-year lease to the shopkeepers on Saraswati Marg. This was part of a programme to regularize markets that had spontaneously appeared after the 1947 Partition and to give legal protection and stability to traders who had set up shop in the area. The leases went on to give the traders a sense of legitimacy and to enable the market to grow into a developing commercial centre of Delhi.

If Karol Bagh reveals the pathways through which refugee commerce entered Delhi's legal and spatial mainstream, the contrast with Majnu ka Tilla could not be starker. There, Tibetan exiles constructed a commercial presence without even the language of legality, through tolerated statelessness, not post-facto recognition. Karol Bagh was ultimately written into Delhi's economic map; Majnu ka Tilla hovered at its

[28]Government of India, Custodian of Evacuee Property (Delhi Circle), Commercial Allotments Register, File No. DCEP/Com/1953/37, DSA.

[29]Geva, *Delhi Reborn*.

[30]The Hindustan Times, 'Letters to the Editor: Shop Allotments and Preferential Access', various issues from 1955–1960, microfilm, NMML.

[31]Delhi Development Authority, *Master Plan for Delhi 1962. Vol. II, Part 2—Economic Base and Commercial Activities* (Delhi: Delhi Development Authority, 1958), p. 29.

[32]'Zoning Requests for Refugee Markets Under Review', City Notes, *The Hindustan Times*, 19 April 1971.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

edge. The comparison, as the next section shows, is less about permanence than about the kinds of bureaucracy displacement makes possible.

Majnu ka Tilla: Exile economies and the architecture of bureaucratic exception (1959–1990s)

After the 1959 Tibetan uprising, the Indian government implemented what was then an unprecedented policy to accommodate refugees, providing land, educational opportunities, and informal protection to tens of thousands of Tibetan refugees. Their symbolic role as agents of a lost homeland endowed Tibetan refugees with diplomatic potential in the context of Indian foreign policy towards China. Unlike other internally displaced people, their presence was geopolitical, a means for India to signal moral leadership while managing their legal status. That symbolic capital bought Tibetans room to assert their culture and religion, even as their integration into civil society was still in abeyance. Although early scholarship has analysed the spiritual, symbolic, and geopolitical implications of this act, more recent scholarship has discussed the economic infrastructures traceable to exile, particularly in urban centres like Delhi.[33] Among the most permanent of these settlements is Majnu ka Tilla, the city's largest Tibetan enclave. While Balasubramaniam and Gupta have examined land claims and the role of the Residents Welfare Association (RWA) in negotiating urban informality in Majnu ka Tilla, their focus remains on legal pluralism and spatial contestation.[34] This article instead foregrounds the economic architecture of exile, showing how commerce, rather than claims, became the primary medium through which legality was deferred and negotiated. Tibetan commercial activity, as this section shows, was tolerated not despite Tibetans' statelessness, but because of the political narratives it allowed the Indian state to sustain.

Unlike Karol Bagh, Majnu ka Tilla had no commercial history to speak of. Its prehistory was religious and residential, a floodplain made sacred by its associations with Sufi and Sikh practices, later desacralized and used by British and post-colonial governments for housing low-income workers.[35] In short, the neighbourhood's commercial life was founded by exiles. Though the land was never formally allotted by the central or municipal government, the site was identified in the early 1960s by the Ministry of Home Affairs as a 'temporary shelter' to be managed in coordination with the Tibetan Welfare Office. It was initially viewed by municipal authorities as an unauthorized encroachment along the Yamuna floodplain, its early structures dismissed as impermanent shelters erected by Tibetan refugees who had, in bureaucratic terms, overstayed their provisional welcome. Importantly, Majnu ka Tilla was not part of India's formal Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy. Its legal standing remained uncertain. A 1965 memo by the North Delhi Municipal Committee talks of 'premises belonging to Tibetan nationals engaged in wool trade', noting that the 'settlement appears religious;

[33]Dibyesh Anand, *Geopolitical Exotica: Tibet in Western Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Fiona McConnell, *Rehearsing the State: The Political Practices of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

[34]Madhura Balasubramaniam and Sonika Gupta, 'From Refuge to Rights: Majnu ka Tilla Tibetan Colony in New Delhi', *kritisk etnografi: Swedish Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 2, no. 1–2, 2019, pp. 95–110.

[35]Narayani Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires, 1803–1931* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

commercial activity not licensed. No action recommended until the Home Ministry direction'.[36] This phenomenon of tolerated illegality, or, more accurately, bureaucratized exception, would become the defining feature of the regulatory life of Majnu ka Tilla.

The commercial base of the colony was constructed during the 1970s and 1980s, as broader shifts in India's Tibetan refugee policy, including the 1975 revision encouraging 'self-managed economic activity', signalled a permissive climate, even if Majnu ka Tilla itself remained outside formal rehabilitation frameworks. However, governance was internally fragmented. The Tibetan Welfare Office oversaw sanitation, dispute mediation, and infrastructure coordination, while the RWA pursued legal recognition through urban planning channels. The two bodies operated in overlapping but sometimes conflicting domains, one tethered to the exile administration, the other embedded in Delhi's associational politics. This tension reflected a deeper duality between the language of cultural exile and the claims of urban citizenship. Even though there was no law allowing Tibetan markets in towns and cities, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) issued a circular requesting all state governments to maintain 'non-interference in culturally linked mercantile activity', thereby devolving the issue of legality to district administrations, which acted on MEA's directives. Delhi authorities responded with technical ambiguity, classifying Majnu ka Tilla as an 'interim encroachment regularisation' zone.[37] This allowed utilities to be installed on public health grounds without formalizing tenure or triggering eviction. That this model was documented but never stabilized is evident in a 1984 internal technical note from DDA records: 'Preliminary surveys of the Aruna Nagar–*Majnu ka Tilla* tract show approximately 178 retail units engaged in sweater sales, tailoring, grocery, food services, and ritual craft. Plot coverage exceeds allowable floor area ratio, but overall settlement pattern reflects internal order. Zoning non-compliant. Recommend status quo with quarterly review'.[38] In this context, the language of 'order' and 'review' does not indicate an intention to integrate but a desire to defer. This quasi-recognition enabled the market to function, though not in terms of state licences, tax registrations, or land titles. Instead, regulation was internalized. Traders made voluntary levies to the Tibetan Welfare Office, whose responsibilities involved maintaining cleanliness, mediating disputes, and coordinating infrastructure repairs. This was not an account rendered to municipal authorities, but to the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in Dharamshala. The CTA's Department of Home issued an inter-office circular outlining this informal fiscal structure:

> Urban refugee markets operating under district schemes are advised to maintain accounts and submit quarterly tallies. Proceeds must be used for community

[36]Delhi Development Authority, 'Encroachment and Survey Report, Majnu ka Tilla–Aruna Nagar Area', File No. DDA/Comm/Enc/143/84, DSA.

[37]Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 'Circular on Tibetan Mercantile Activity', File No. MEA/Tib/1976/67, NAI.

[38]North Delhi Municipal Committee, 'Memorandum on Tibetan Premises in Majnu ka Tilla', File No. DDA/Encroach/65, DSA.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

maintenance. No fixed taxation rate is enforceable under the current Delhi laws.[39]

This kind of regulation was legally invisible, but bureaucratically negotiated. According to the colony's internal estimation of 1990, the share of woollens and sweaters accounted for roughly 58 per cent of the colony's trade value, followed by food services (21 per cent), religious craft (14 per cent), and guesthouse income (7 per cent). Commodities were routed through trans-Himalayan circuits that connected Kathmandu with Lucknow and Dharamshala.[40] Trade tariffs were missing, in the absence of formal trade licences, but this gap had to be balanced through bribe economies and predictable local arrangements. Stall rents were internally regulated to prevent inflation, while new entrants were vetted by the Welfare Office instead of the market-licensing boards operating in Delhi.

What makes Majnu ka Tilla unique in the wider history of refugee entrepreneurship in India is not so much its commodity structure, but its regulatory architecture. Unlike the licensing regimes that the post-Partition Karol Bagh would extend to Punjabi traders, or the municipal toleration that would be retroactively applied to Burma Bazaar in Chennai, Majnu ka Tilla existed as a market of disciplined exception, enabled by the Indian state, but administered, for the most part, outside it. According to a 1989 MCD survey report, 'Stall sizes are larger than zoning codes allow, but premises cleanliness and body density control indicate self-corrective actions. Advise no demolition until settlement clarification'.[41] This reveals how regulatory discretion was not merely deferred but recalibrated in real time, recognizing Majnu ka Tilla's internal governance as a stabilizing force, where compliance was not legal but performative, and bureaucratic inaction became a tacit mode of recognition. But this regulatory accommodation could not be conceived of without consideration of the geopolitical specificity of the Tibetan cause. Tibetan refugees, as a community that symbolically occupied the space of civilizational ethos, spiritual capital, and Cold War liberalism, enjoyed a cultural immunity that other refugees lacked. This calculus was acknowledged in a memorandum issued by the Planning Commission in 1992: 'The Tibetan commercial enclave in Delhi is a unique case of an unregulated market economy model flourishing without an institutional framework, micro-level, returning to the commune-production approach that modern economic theory has missed. The political conditions are unique and not replicable.'[42]

If Karol Bagh was the case of post hoc formalization and economic nationalism, Majnu ka Tilla is a disciplined exception. It is a market made not outside the law but within its administrative hesitation. It enacts a strange post-colonial modality in which recognition is neither denied nor desperately sought, but staved off for a postponed time; where legality was neither imposed nor countered, merely 'under review'. The

[39]Central Tibetan Administration, Department of Home, 'Fiscal Guidelines for Urban Refugee Settlements', Circular No. CTA/Home/Fin/1986/12, Dharamshala Archives.

[40]Tibetan Welfare Office, Majnu ka Tilla, Internal Trade Estimate and Commodity Survey, 1990, unpublished report, Welfare Office Archives, Majnu ka Tilla, Delhi.

[41]Municipal Corporation of Delhi, 'Internal Survey on Tibetan Markets and Encroachments', File No. MCD/Enc/Survey/1989/9, DSA.

[42]Planning Commission, Government of India, 'Memorandum on Tibetan Economic Enclaves in Urban Areas', File No. PC/Urban/Rehab/1992/2, NAI.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

article now proceeds to wonder about those who stand outside not just of law but of the moral grammar of refuge. This is true for Afghan refugees in Delhi, whose market in Lajpat Nagar, a structure built on overstayed visas, remittance circuits, and unregulated tenancies, was built not out of tolerated informality but out of accrued precarity. Their commercial life, next in line, provides a history of exile without symbolism and commerce without sanction.

Little Kabul: The 'other' market in Lajpat Nagar (1980s–2000s)

Afghan migration to Delhi began in earnest in the early 1980s, catalysed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Afghan migration to India came in three major waves, the first in the 1980s, when urban, middle-class refugees fled the Soviet invasion, most of whom came to Delhi after passing through Pakistan. This included Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Afghan Hindus and Sikhs, some of whom had bureaucratic or artisanal backgrounds but not much experience in retail. The second wave, corresponding to the Taliban regime, was of lower middle-class traders as well as uprooted ethnic minorities who started informal shops in Lajpat Nagar. Most arrivals entered India on short-term tourist, pilgrimage, or medical visas. The Indian state never formally recognized them as refugees. Instead, all waves of refugees were processed under the 1946 Foreigners Act, which granted the Ministry of Home Affairs sweeping discretion over visa renewals, registration, and deportation. In an internal note dated 23 June 1983, the Ministry stated: 'No refugee determination is envisaged for Afghan nationals. These persons are considered overstaying foreign visitors and remain under close visa scrutiny.'[43] This refusal to categorize Afghans within humanitarian frameworks had profound consequences. Unlike Partition refugees or Tibetan exiles, Afghan migrants received no land allotments, welfare access, or institutional mediation. In South Delhi, they leased rooms informally in Lajpat Nagar, Amar Colony, and Bhogal, spaces already crowded by earlier waves of Partition displacement. A report by the Delhi Police (South District), dated 14 January 1986, recorded: 'Seventeen Afghan families observed residing in Bhogal without registration. Commercial activity not observed but suspected. Matter referred to MHA. No response received'.[44] Afghan traders entered the city under the shadow of precarity, not just due to legal status, but due to the absence of commercial regularization. This lack of policy design produced a spatial economy built on circumvention: undocumented tenancies, shared utilities, cash-only exchanges, and verbal agreements. Their exclusion was not marked by overt hostility, but by administrative silence, one that defined the commercial afterlife of Afghan displacement as a practice of negotiated invisibility.

Lajpat Nagar evolved from a 1950s Partition-era refugee resettlement colony into a mixed-use commercial hub, with the area around Bhogal Market and Amar Colony, where Afghan-run shops emerged in the 1980s, gradually earning the name 'Little Kabul' by the early 2000s as its culinary and cultural footprint became locally distinctive.[45] By the late 1990s, a loose cluster of Afghan-centric commerce had

[43]Ministry of Home Affairs, Correspondence Regarding Afghan Nationals in India, File No. F.11/27/83-F.I, NAI.

[44]Delhi Police, South District Surveillance Records, Report dated 14 January 1986, DSA.

[45]N. Rajan, 'No Afghan refugees in India: Refugees and Cold War politics in the 1980s', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 5, 2021, pp. 851–867.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

emerged, centred on three or so bakeries, six to eight tailoring units, and roughly 15 or more informal food stalls. Shops bore hand-painted signs in Dari and Pashto, often accompanied by English transliterations like 'Kabul Bread House' or 'Herat Tailor Master'. In the 2000s, a further, third wave of Pashtuns and returning Gulf expats broadened Afghan commercial activity, particularly in food, tailoring, and remittance services. Most had no established merchant lineage, but a handful of wealthy Sikh and Hindu families, which commerce had drawn to Kabul, helped lay the groundwork for the established shop networks. Some traders began importing goods semi-formally through friends travelling from Dubai or Peshawar, using courier networks that specialized in 'unmanifested cargo'. Commercial life, though highly visible, remained undocumented, relying entirely on trust, cash, and neighbourhood-based reputation economies.

For instance, a letter sent from a group of shopkeepers on Feroze Gandhi Road, Lajpat Nagar II, addressed to the Office of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate of South Delhi arrived in April 1994. The letter, typed in stumbling English and signed both in Dari and Hindi, requested the regularization of 13 petty businesses, dry fruit stalls, tailoring shops, a bakery, and two unlicensed restaurants, run by Afghan nationals who were 'residing in Delhi on medical visa and under human need'.[46] The accompanying photocopies were of expired visa pages, unsigned tenancy agreements printed on blank paper, and a shared electricity bill with handwritten notes marking each tenant's individual contribution. No file number was assigned. In the left margin, a clerk wrote in pencil: 'Foreign nationals; beyond jurisdiction'.[47] The letter was then folded and put in a miscellaneous folder marked 'Pending:No Action'.[48] The letter demonstrates how the Afghan economic presence, while visible on the ground, became bureaucratically deflected, rendered administratively illegible and politically inconvenient. Yet behind the scenes of formal recognition, an informal market started to emerge through improvisation.

Unlike Partition refugees in Karol Bagh or Tibetan exiles in Majnu ka Tilla, Afghans were never offered formal rehabilitation schemes, welfare offices or institutional recognition. Their presence was bureaucratically invisible, their commerce diplomatically inconvenient. Legal architecture did not offer a sturdy means for inclusion. The 1946 Foreigners Act gave the Ministry of Home Affairs full power over the admission and residence of foreigners. Afghan migrants, the vast majority of whom arrived on short-term medical or pilgrimage visas, were classified as overstayers rather than as displaced people. Pointing in turn to its own 1997 reply to a parliamentary question, the Ministry of Home Affairs stated bluntly: 'Afghan nationals in South Delhi are not under any central registration scheme for refugees. Any enforcement action has to be carried out under existing immigration statutes.'[49]

But enforcement never came. Rather, a parallel infrastructure was built. Tenancies were arranged by informal brokers, often Punjabi landlords who themselves had been

[46]South Delhi Sub-Divisional Magistrate Office, Letter from Afghan Shopkeepers on Feroze Gandhi Road, File No. SDM/South/Enc/1994/12, April 1994, Sub-Divisional Magistrate [South] Records, New Delhi.

[47]South Delhi Municipal Office (SDMO), Letter from Afghan Shopkeepers, 1994.

[48]SDMO, Letter from Afghan Shopkeepers, 1994.

[49]Ministry of Home Affairs, Parliamentary Reply on Registration of Afghan Nationals in Delhi, 1997, File No. MHA/Ref/Del/97, NAI.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Partition refugees; Afghan tenants were charged 30–50 per cent more than the market rate based on 'foreign risk'. Electricity and water were culled from shared meters, and the usage was divided per floor or unit, tallied in spiral notebooks. Lease agreements were notarized affidavits that, at times, did not even have names. A Lajpat Nagar officer wrote in a note, during a police station inspection made in 2001:

> Premises occupied by Afghan nationals, possibly without documentation. Businesses appear peaceful and do not attract public complaints. Ownership unclear; tenancy verbal. Advised to maintain a quiet watch. No eviction action.[50]

Afghan businesses operated with no internal levy system, no welfare documentation, and no mediating office. Economic life survived through cross-border hawala networks, diaspora remittances, and a tenuous understanding between tenants, landlords, and municipal non-intervention. A South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) memo from 2003 designated Afghan-run businesses 'temporary guest activity' and advised 'quiet resolution via time-based visa enforcement'.[51] Yet the market grew. Restaurant menus included kabuli pulao, mantu, ashak, and quroot; tailors sewed embroidered perahan tunban for weddings and other religious occasions; dry fruit stalls sold pistachios and pine nuts, smuggled through Amritsar or Dubai. There were no cashless transactions. There was no such thing as business registration. A Delhi Jal Board file from 2002 observed: 'Water complaint received from local councillor. Site visited. Commercial use was verified but lacked entry in the municipal tax register. Residents uncooperative. Matter postponed'.[52] A field note recorded in 2006 by a UNHCR liaison officer includes an interview with a bakery owner near Amar Colony: 'In India, our status is not legal, not illegal. It is, what do you call it?—on the mercy. The landlord says, Don't worry, the police are known. But you still live like the wind. Any day they say go, you go.'[53] This invisibility extended to paper. Unlike Karol Bagh, where refugee traders amassed licences, petitions, and registration slips, or Majnu ka Tilla, where ledgers and welfare tallies documented economic activity, Little Kabul left few inscriptions. Its survival depended on evasion rather than recognition, negotiated not through legal exception but through spatial discretion and municipal silence.

Historiographically, Little Kabul unsettles established frameworks. Whereas Karol Bagh models the absorption of refugee commerce into the structures of the state and Majnu ka Tilla stands as a disciplined exception ruled by deferred legality, Lajpat Nagar's Afghan market exposes a third modality: commerce without sanction, subsisting by way of procedural neglect. This is neither the regulated informality of Bhan nor an insurgent version of urbanism as defined by Roy. Nor is it the humanitarian containment space theorized by Malkki and Agier. It is more contingent, a subsistence

[50]Police Station, Lajpat Nagar, Inspection Note on Informal Afghan Premises, 2001, File No. PS/Lajpat/Encroach/01 (unprocessed), Delhi Police Archives.

[51]South Delhi Municipal Corporation, Memo on Afghan-Run Businesses in Lajpat Nagar, 2003, File No. SDMC/Enc/03/271, DSA.

[52]Delhi Jal Board, Internal Note on Commercial Water Use in Lajpat Nagar II, 2002, File No. DJB/ComUse/2002/14 (field file, not digitized), Delhi Municipal Water Records.

[53]UNHCR Liaison Office, Delhi. Field Notes on Afghan Informal Settlements, 2006. On file with UNHCR South Asia Regional Office (not publicly available).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

infrastructure that exists because the state never formally notices it long enough to dismantle it. Afghan commerce in Lajpat Nagar unfolded in makeshift, dispersed, and fluid nodes. Shops operated out of back rooms, converted balconies, semi-residential corridors, and rented frontages leased from Punjabi or Jain owners. There was no singular marketplace, no recognized mandi, no municipal mapping. Rather, commerce diffused across sectors: restaurants clustered near Bhogal, tailoring units near Amar Colony, and grocers hidden in residential basements. This was not a bazaar in the architectural sense, but a 'bazaar-effect', a patchwork of transactions that mimicked a marketplace without ever becoming one. It is this very dispersal that made the Afghan economy invisible to planning authorities and unsanctioned by the state, surviving not through concentrated presence but through spatial modesty and administrative slippage. A draft memo from the Planning Commission in 2004 captured this position: 'Official inclusion of Afghan economic units in urban Delhi runs the risk of unintended precedents for non-documented persons. Better managed through sectoral tolerance'.[54]

What is most remarkable about Little Kabul is not its qualitative visibility, the food, the signage, the language, but its administrative thinness. There was very little buffer in the market, no documentation, and no afterlife in files. It survived not on account of whether it deserved to, but because the paper trail ended before it reached the eviction order. It uncovers, then, the baseline of post-colonial refugee rule: not exception, but abeyance.

'Refugee' markets and the production of vernacular cosmopolitanism

Even as refugee communities negotiated the state's tentative accommodations, through provisional licences, tolerated illegality, or bureaucratic evasion, they also collectively participated in producing a commercial cosmopolitanism in Delhi that operated outside formal citizenship. In Karol Bagh, Punjabi traders rebuilt pre-Partition commodity circuits, with textiles from Amritsar, spices from Sialkot, iron from Jalandhar, not only to restore livelihoods but to invite the city's new consumers into spaces that felt modern, legible, and open. The historiography of displacement has traditionally framed refugees through the binary of inclusion and exclusion, asking whether displaced populations are legally recognized, administratively tolerated, or institutionally neglected. As discussed, much of this literature, especially within refugee studies, has been shaped by the paradigms of rights, humanitarian containment, and citizenship-based recognition. In the urban context, scholarship has frequently positioned refugees as either encamped subjects or peripheral squatters, structurally excluded from the economies and planning imaginaries of the modern city. However, recent global research has begun to complicate this view. Scholars have argued that refugees also participate in the making of cities, not only through occupation of space, but through labour, commerce, and the creation of informal

[54]Planning Commission, Draft Memo on Afghan Commercial Activity in South Delhi, File No. PC/Ref/Afg/2004/4, NAI.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

publics.[55] This history, in turn, challenges dominant models in both refugee studies and urban informality. Whereas scholars like Malkki and Agier have highlighted the camp as a space of humanitarian containment and political erasure, refugee entrepreneurship illustrates how long-term exile can also produce economic autonomy, if not legal finality.[56] Nor does it fit uneasily into dominant paradigms of South Asian urban studies, which often frame informal economies as inherently oppositional or insurgent. Though there was a wrangling to criminalize urban poor settlements, as Roy and Bhan have pointed out, the refugee markets in Delhi were not necessarily criminalized, they were bracketed bureaucratically.[57] They did not function through resistance but through compliance, cohabitation, and cultivated invisibility. This article has attempted to trace how displaced groups, despite lacking formal recognition, generated economic spaces that were open to diverse publics and inscribed into the commercial life of cities like Delhi.

Additionally, refugee markets in post-Partition Delhi were not simply zones of subsistence or informal self-help. They were engines of vernacular cosmopolitanism: spatial forms that mediated refugee presence through commerce, not through law. Their success cannot be attributed solely to the state's rehabilitative apparatus, nor were they the result of internal community self-organization alone. Rather, they emerged through what might be called a triangulated infrastructure: of state toleration, refugee innovation, and everyday engagement with Delhi's wider public. This section turns to that third axis: the role of non-refugee publics, consumers, and neighbours in animating these markets as cosmopolitan spaces. These markets were not enclaves of ethnic retreat, nor merely zones of subsistence, they were places of vernacular cosmopolitanism, demarcated not by the borders of legal imperatives or multicultural platitudes, but by the quotidian enactment of economic interdependence. That is, they permitted encounters across difference without demanding either assimilation or legal citizenship, grounded instead in the shared idiom of trade. In Karol Bagh, Majnu ka Tilla, and Little Kabul, refugee markets attracted an eclectic mix of Delhi's people: middle-class shoppers, wandering students, landlords, inspectors, and tourists from across the globe. In each case, the cosmopolitanism happened not from above, but in the post-colonial city as an improvisation at ground level through commerce, negotiation, and a common interest in proximity as opposed to provenance.

The story of Karol Bagh's transformation from a Muslim-majority residential quarter into Delhi's commercial artery was not just one of refugee ingenuity; it reflected urban demand, public participation, and the affective legacy of shared urban memory. After Partition, thousands of Hindu and Sikh tradespeople from West Punjab settled in and on the evacuated properties and reconstructed bulk commodity circuits that had previously run from Rawalpindi to Chandni Chowk. Although limited formal licences and credit facilities were offered by the state, most significantly by the Rehabilitation Finance Administration (RFA), these initiatives lagged behind

[55]Loren B. Landau (ed.), *Urban Refugees: Challenges in Protection, Services and Policy* (Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, 2014).

[56]Michel Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

[57]Ananya Roy, 'Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2005, pp. 147–158.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the pace of a fast-moving reality. As early as 1952, *The Hindustan Times* was printing letters about Arya Samaj Road as 'a market of many tongues and tastes, where the shopfronts change but the rhythm of the bazaar remains'.[58] The sentiment was repeated in a 1954 editorial that cheered 'the punctuality of Punjabi traders and the lure of Lahore-style tailoring', a small but significant indication that the aesthetic and cultural logics of West Punjabi commerce had been transported to a new life in Delhi.[59] This was a kind of cosmopolitanism grounded in retail pragmatism. The traders did not advertise themselves as refugees; they marketed cloth, dry goods, shoes, and tins of ghee. Their stalls were not licensed to indicate legality but to indicate dependability; many were adorned with hand-painted signs of names like 'Lahore Cloth House' or 'New Amritsar Stores'.[60] Municipal files, such as the DDA's 1955 zoning note, recognized the reality: 'footfall suggests long-term viability'.[61] Refugees were not integrated into the city by either humanitarianism or state planning; they were integrated by the repetition of transactions, by relationships of trust, and by the cumulative familiarity of the shopping experience. In this sense, the cosmopolitanism of Karol Bagh was not performative, it was habitual.

If Karol Bagh's vernacular cosmopolitanism was comparable in form to that of social mobility (continuity and familiarity), Majnu ka Tilla's was analogous in function to cosmopolitan hunger of many varieties, the desire for the worldly, represented as the exotic, aestheticized, and ultimately routinized. Tibetan émigrés who settled in the Aruna Nagar floodplain from 1960 onwards never received formal land ownership, nor were they entitled to rehabilitation schemes under India's Tibetan policies, which were focused largely on rural settlements. But they were tolerated, first as spiritual exiles who had cast in their lot with India's civilizational diplomacy and, later, as economic actors travelling with a 'spiritual', self-regulated, and culturally distinct market. By the late 1970s, shops in Majnu ka Tilla were selling sweaters and prayer flags, noodles and thangka paintings, and semiformal guesthouse services. Delhi's college students, foreign tourists, and professional classes discovered in the settlement an unthreatening difference, foreign, but reassuringly familiar. *The Hindustan Times* survey covering the New Delhi Municipal Council area commented that 'retail activity in Aruna Nagar exhibits a cartridge type of self-containment with regular but external footfall from Civil Lines, Kamla Nagar and St. Stephen's College'.[62] These visitors were not following the Tibetan political scene, they were purchasing sweaters and momos. But the act of coming, returning, and endorsing spoke to a sort of transactional cosmopolitanism, calcified not in political solidarity but in repeated consumption. The market's legal murkiness (no licences, no tax IDs) was handled via what might fairly

[58]The Hindustan Times, 'A Market of Many Tongues and Tastes', Letters to the Editor, 5 April 1952, microfilm, NMML.

[59]The Hindustan Times, 'Tailoring and Timekeeping', editorial, 14 July 1954, microfilm, NMML.

[60]Ibid.

[61]Delhi Development Authority, 'Zoning Status for Zone II (Karol Bagh)', DDA/LandUse/55/ZoneII, 1955, DSA.

[62]The Hindustan Times, 'Retail Footfall in Aruna Nagar Shows College-Driven Pattern', City Notes, 18 March 1984, microfilm, NMML.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be termed 'aesthetic compliance': the market was clean, self-regulated, and visibly ordered. It was illegal, but it was legible, and thus tolerable. That left a commercial enclave whose success depended on public engagement, not policy accommodation. In this space, statelessness did not impede commerce, it was its mode of being.

Little Kabul, in Lajpat Nagar II, is perhaps the most extreme model of commerce devoid of citizenship, or even embraced exception. Afghan refugees came throughout the 1980s and 1990s, first to escape a Soviet invasion, and then the Taliban, frequently on expired medical or pilgrimage visas with no formal refugee classification. There was no welfare office, no rehabilitation board, no plan from the state. And yet, by the early 2000s, a recognizable Afghan commercial ecology had taken root: bakeries and tailoring shops, dry fruit stalls, and kabab houses, all clustered around Feroze Gandhi Road. The shops had no signs at first and sometimes were run from basements or converted balconies. But they had a steady stream of customers, including Punjabi landlord and Muslim neighbours, Jains from Amar Colony, and curious food tourists. In a 2003 column in *The Times of India*, this fragile yet vivid presence was captured: 'Here, food takes you to a different country. It's the kabuli pulao that speaks for itself.'[63] This was not a state-sanctioned market, it was one tolerated by silence, sustained by consumer demand, neighbours negotiating, which in turn transformed the city bit by bit. The Afghan traders were not asking to be included; they were asking to be allowed to endure. Their cosmopolitanism was neither curated nor planned, but emerged through the affective memory of taste, smell, and familiarity. It was not the bazaar that made the refugee visible, it was the public that made the refugee's business sustainable.

In all three situations, what surfaces is a pattern of vernacular cosmopolitanism, ordered not by law or through multicultural policy, but by commerce. This cosmopolitanism was not aspirational, nor liberal, it was hardwired into the logics of survival, trust, and repetition. It was generated not by official planning, but by the day-to-day: a shawl purchased, a kabuli pulao eaten, the return to the shop that did the best tailoring. These markets were each inscribed into the city's public fabric, not despite their legal ambiguity, but because of it: situated differently within Delhi's administrative imagination, Karol Bagh formalized, Majnu ka Tilla deferred, Little Kabul ignored, they took on lives and temporalities of their own. This article thus reorients the analytical frame. Rather than asking how refugees were integrated or excluded by the state, it asks how refugees helped shape Delhi's urban identity, through trade and through encounter, not law.

Conclusion: Refuge, commerce, and the archive of the displaced

This article has traced three refugee markets, Karol Bagh, Majnu ka Tilla, and Little Kabul, not simply as sites of economic activity, but as registers of the post-colonial Indian state's fragmented strategies for managing displacement. India's differentiated commercial afterlives of displacement reflect the uneven scaffolding of state support: Partition refugees were assimilated as citizens and embedded within rehabilitation

[63]The Times of India, 'A Taste of Kabul in Lajpat Nagar', feature column, 23 April 2003, microfilm, NMML.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

economies; Tibetan exiles, geopolitically strategic, found pathways to economic flourishing despite legal ambiguity; while Afghan migrants, viewed primarily through a security lens, navigated far more precarious commercial terrains, yet still carved out entrepreneurial niches within the city's margins. Each emerged under radically different political, legal, and symbolic conditions, yet all were shaped by a common dynamic: the refusal of the state to 'decisively' integrate, exclude, or recognize. In this vacuum, displaced communities transformed commerce into a form of urban claim-making, and the market itself into a documentary apparatus, one that stood in for legal rights, welfare access, or formal residency.

The refugee bazaar, in this telling, is not informal. It is para-formal. regulated through zoning evasions, expired visas, and semi-recognized permits; and documented through rent slips, police memos, and letters that were received but not answered. If Karol Bagh showed how refugee commerce could be folded into state categories after the fact, and Majnu ka Tilla demonstrated a model of spatial autonomy through administrative deferral, then Little Kabul revealed the lower limits of recognition: a market sustained only by silence, rent, and resignation. Together, they offer a typology of what we might call graduated legibility, the degrees to which refugee presence is permitted to appear in official space without becoming fully incorporable within it. This article also suggests a historiographic expansion: to treat markets as archives, not only of economic life, but of legal non-recognition. In this mode, the bazaar becomes not a by-product of exile, but one of its primary sites of negotiation, where sovereignty is deferred, citizenship improvised, and presence asserted through trade.

This article has traced how refugee commerce, whether sanctioned, tolerated, or entirely unrecognized, has contributed to the making of urban India in ways that exceed the language of legality or rehabilitation. In Karol Bagh, Majnu ka Tilla, and Little Kabul, we see not only markets but modes of urban belonging that function independently of formal citizenship. These are not simply stories of entrepreneurial resilience; they are stories of vernacular cosmopolitanism, an everyday, sensory, and transactional openness forged through food, fabrics, prayer, and footfall. Refugees did not merely seek shelter; they created publics. But if this article recovers the historical architectures of refugee-made cosmopolitanism, it also opens the door to a larger, as yet underexplored, paradigm: what does it mean to study cosmopolitanism from below, not as ideology or elite practice, or even as policy, but as a street-level social formation? What forms of solidarity, exclusion, and mutual recognition arise in these commercial encounters? To pursue this, scholars might move beyond state archives and turn to multi-modal ethnographies, neighbourhood-level visual records, zoning litigation, and even platform-based economies that document how markets gain trust, reputation, and integration. Oral histories, too, if carefully contextualized, can capture the micro-textures of cohabitation: not grand narratives of citizenship, but the minor, repeated negotiations that define city life. Studying refugee cosmopolitanism in this way demands methods that are as layered, multilingual, and atmospheric as the urban histories they seek to tell. In short, what lies ahead is not just a refugee history of commerce, but a commercial history of cosmopolitanism, refracted through displacement.

Finally, this framework opens space for comparative work beyond Delhi and India. In Karachi's Bohri Bazaar, Nairobi's Eastleigh market, and Kuala Lumpur's refugee

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enclaves, displaced populations have long produced durable commercial zones amid legal uncertainty. Each of these markets invites a similar set of questions: how does commerce mediate the state's gaze? What infrastructures of survival emerge in the absence of a formal refugee policy? And what does the state choose to see, and not see, when legality is produced from below? To return to the central claim: these refugee markets are not marginal. They are central to understanding how cities absorb, stratify, and govern displacement, not through humanitarianism or rights, but through the quiet accommodations of economic life. They are not exceptions to the rule of urban planning; they are its other face. In post-colonial India, it is often not the law that determines who may stay, but the stall that stands undisturbed.

Acknowledgements. I first began thinking seriously about refugees as historical actors through the work and teaching of Sonika Gupta. Her research on Majnu ka Tilla, and her insistence on treating refugee spaces as sites of everyday governance rather than marginal exception, laid the intellectual ground from which this article emerged. I owe a profound intellectual debt to Taylor Sherman and Bérénice Guyot-Réchard, whose training shaped the way I think as a historian. Their close and generous readings of my work gave me the confidence and clarity to write this piece. I am also deeply thankful to Suraj Alexander and Nevin George, whose steady support and thoughtful provocations sustained this article through its many drafts.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Cite this article: George, Noel Mariam. 2026. 'The bazaar as archive: Legibility, cosmopolitanism, and "refugee entrepreneurs"in Delhi'. *Modern Asian Studies*, pp. 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X25101364