

# Afghan Communities in Delhi

## A Primer



Written and Illustrated by  
Harpreet Kaur and Gurpreet Kaur







## Afghan Communities in Delhi A Primer

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Research and Text by Harpreet Kaur  
Illustrated by Gurpreet Kaur  
Edited by Komita Dhanda and Surajit Sarkar

### Contributors

Sousan Rezaei, Navid Khan, Santram Antil  
and others who participated in the exhibition  
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Dedicated to the  
Afghan diaspora in Delhi



# Diasporic experiences of Afghans in Delhi

This fictionalised account of Maryam, a young Afghan woman, draws upon the stories of everyday lives from their diaspora in Delhi. Fleeing Afghanistan ten years ago, after her businessman father was shot dead by the Taliban, she arrived in Delhi with her mother and two brothers. Initially the family lived in places like Tilak Nagar and Wazirabad, where it was affordable for Afghan refugees to start their lives from scratch. Since then, she has educated herself and would like to move to the United States or Canada, where many diasporic Afghans have resettled.

The words of this primer emerged from conversations with Afghans in Delhi. The descriptions that accompany them tell about journeys, challenges, fears and hopes to give the reader a sense of what it means to 'be an Afghan' in the city.

This primer is also a kind of 'memory-book'. Anecdotes and experiences common to the diaspora allow us to know them through their own words. The words written in Persian script are in the Dari dialect and English, they are used in the way narrated to us. Together with the accompanying illustrations, these bundles of memory have meanings that give an insight into the unique details that make the life of the community.

The vocabulary of the Afghan diaspora has changed over time, as they encounter new events in their everyday lives. The experiences and ideas behind these words are those that the community would like to share with readers. As their lives change, new words will be added to their language, making this a work in progress.

# From Afghanistan



# To Delhi



# 25

## Words from our Lives You Need to know

The words in this primer are written in Afghan Persian dialect called Dari and English.

Dari is spoken and understood by most of the Afghan population. It is also known as a modern dialect of Persian, which is the standard language used in administration and mass media. Pashto, another dialect spoken and written in Afghanistan, has differences in its vocabulary and phonology.

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Please forgive me  
if my eyes fill with  
tears....

# Afsos افسوس

[Âf.sos] *verb*

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## Regret & Remorse

Some who reached Delhi were forced to leave Afghanistan without informing their family. Even today, parents and children find it difficult to reach out to each other. They do not reveal their situation as an asylum seeker in Delhi. All they can do is pray each day to be forgiven for their decision to flee.

They regret leaving their family homes to escape from Afghanistan and begin the difficult life of a refugee. Leaving familiar things behind cannot be compared with leaving their loved ones. Some have never seen the bodies of those kidnapped and taken to prison. Many Afghans could not even perform a funeral for those who have died. None have forgotten what made them flee.

... every sinner must be punished in a manner befitting the sin. How shall we punish those who dishonour the sanctity of marriage?

“WE SHALL THROW STONES AT THEM !”



# Akhtar Nama اخطار نامہ

[Akh.tar.na.ma] noun

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## A Diktat from the Taliban

The government made Shari'ah based laws mandatory for the people of Afghanistan. Decrees and edicts that regulated all aspects of private and public life were conveyed through radio, posters and notices pasted on the streets and outside mosques. These anti women proclamations were expected to be followed immediately. If anybody was found guilty of violating them, they were taken to 'interrogation centers' in the distinctive Toyota trucks of the Taliban police.

Image: The Great Escape (TV Series) S 1 Ep 1  
Sushmita Banerjee, Escape from Afghanistan (2016)



# Bacha Posh

بچہ پوش

[Baa.chaa poosh] noun

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Afghan girls dressed up as boys

Afghan parents adopt the practice of *bacha posh* meaning 'dressed up and raised as a boy'. This centuries-old practice of disguising their daughter's gender at birth, allows girls to experience the same freedom as boys. At puberty, life for *bacha posh* girls becomes difficult as their biological gender is revealed. Some girls stop going to school because of the harassment. Others face risks to their safety and are constantly humiliated. Families expect girls to dress and behave like women after puberty, but *bacha posh* girls want to continue to experience the freedom of males they have become used to.

Afghan girls in Delhi find various work opportunities to support their families. Self-help groups and NGOs help them find employment, unlike male members who do not avail of these to the same extent. Consequently, the meaning of being a 'girl' has changed once they came to Delhi.

Image: The Breadwinner (2017)  
Director: Nora Twomey



My horse ran faster  
than the needle of  
a sewing machine.



# Buzkashi بز کشی

[Boosh.ka.shee] noun

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## A national passion

During Nawroz, Afghans in Delhi recall comments like the one on the previous page, during when *Buzkashi* tournaments were played. This national sport was banned by the Taliban from 1996 to 2001. Literally meaning 'goat grabbing', *Buzkashi* is played by sportsmen from all ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Originating from Central Asia centuries ago, the objective of this polo-like sport is to grab the headless and legless animal carcass, circle the field and deliver it to the goal.

Having to maintain both horses and riders makes it an expensive sport and draws wealthy patrons. Beyond sport, *Buzkashi* is also a ritual and ceremony – a test of strength, strategy and courage. For many young Afghan boys, growing up to be a champion *Buzkashi* rider, or *chapandaz*, is a dream. Its memory resides in the heart of every Afghan in Delhi.



I threw my Chadri away because a lot of people started staring at me in Delhi. I was told to switch to the Indian black burqa.

# Chadri چادری

[Chadri] noun

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A woman's cloak covering full body and head

Decorated with hand or machine embroidery, *Chadri* is an ankle length garment made of ten yards of cotton fabric in blue, brown or yellow with hundreds of narrow pleats that are gathered together and then sewn into the cap and a mesh face piece. The *Chadri* was rarely worn in cities, especially Kabul, before the Taliban took power in Afghanistan and made it mandatory. No longer required under the present regime, political instability in Afghanistan makes women wear the *Chadri* as a matter of personal safety.

Many diasporic Afghan women have started to live a completely new life with redefined rules. Yet covering the heads of girls and women of all ages remains an important part of the Afghan *purdah* (veil) culture. The more conservative have adopted the Indian burqa, a slim black cloak different from the style worn in Afghanistan.

But you have not  
had enough regular  
Afghani chai.



# Chai چائی

[Cho.y] noun

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## Tea

Tea culture is an important part of Afghan hospitality. In a regular Afghani household, green tea is consumed throughout the day and in all seasons. Guests are invited to sit inside the house on a *kaleen* (fluffy carpet) which is surrounded by colourful cushions called *tushak*. Unless you are a relative or friend, you will be asked to sit separately from the rest.

The tea is served in traditional *istakhan piala* (small porcelain handle-less bowls). However, in many Afghan households in Delhi, transparent cups are used to serve tea. *Channa* (chickpeas), *mamra* (almonds), *kishmish* (raisins), *khajur* (dates), *kulcha* (bread) and local caramel chocolates are common snacks served with tea. As a popular Afghani saying goes - 'the more sugar, the more honour', thus the first cup of tea is served with an enormous amount of sugar !



Our Indian friends can't sit comfortably on the floor, so we bought sofas for the dastarkhwan.



# Dastarkhwan دسترخوان

[Das.tar.khān] noun

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Table cloth

The *dastarkhwan* is an important part of the collective eating practice of Afghanistan. It is a traditional meal setting on the floor using a long cloth as the surface, on which food ranging from a simple meal to a feast is arranged and around which people sit and eat. It is rolled out only at meal time. Unlike a dining table, a *dastarkhwan* can accommodate any number of people.

The traditional material for the *dastarkhwan* has evolved from patterned plain weaves of natural wool, or *kilim* (carpet) to vibrant floral printed plastic of today. In the past, many Afghani families used to serve food in silverware and porcelain. Living in Delhi has led to adopting substitutes, like local glassware to serve green tea, ceramic cups for milk tea, wine glasses for aerated drinks and thermostat kettles for an endless supply of hot water for chai.

## MOHALLA CLINIC

आपका स्वास्थ्य केंद्र

In the first months after I arrived in Delhi, I got skin rashes. My family could neither afford to take me to a regular skin doctor nor could they buy me any ointment. I was directed to a nearby Mohalla clinic for treatment.



स्वास्थ्य ही जीवन है



# Dawakhana دواخانه

[Da.vā.khā.nā] noun

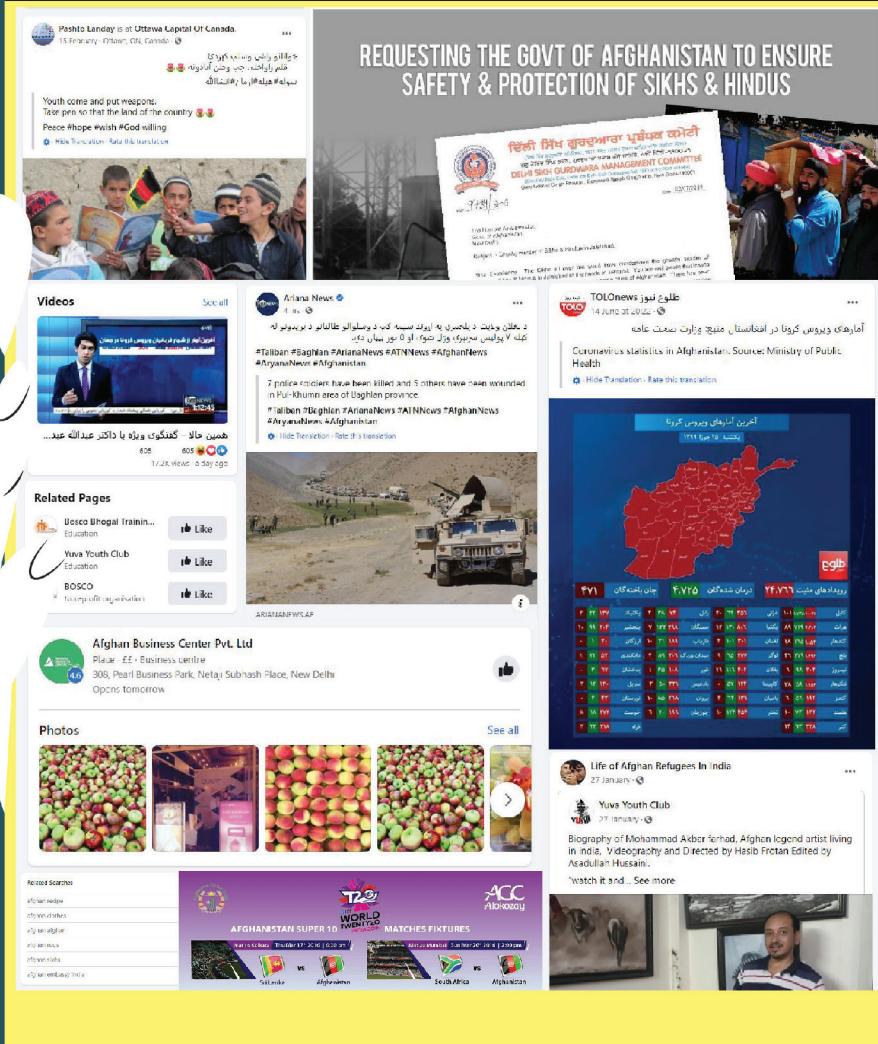
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A place where medical treatment is available

For Afghans in Delhi, local dispensaries and *mohalla* (neighbourhood) clinics provide affordable healthcare. Diasporic Afghans are still not used to the extreme weather conditions in Delhi, especially its heat and humidity. Both men and women have to buy skin care creams and moisturisers sold at the local *darmaltoon* (pharmacy shops).

Even if the treatment is not always affordable, Afghans prefer medical treatment in India to other neighbouring countries due to less harassment by the authorities. With increasing medical tourism in India, other urgent medical needs such as cancer treatment or heart surgeries are also met here.

The billboards and advertisements written in Dari for dental aestheticians, cosmetologists and implantologists in Afghan-inhabited colonies in Delhi reflect a demand for cosmetic surgeries among the upper-class Afghans.



# Facebook فیسبوک

[Feis.buk] noun

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A social networking service

Facebook is the most popular social media platform for urban and educated youngsters from Afghanistan. Their personal Facebook pages are usually filled with content on current security situations, news features about Afghan culture and community, *landay* poetry, *rubab* music, food recipes and politics. The popular Facebook pages for news (including live news) from Afghanistan are TOLO, Ariana, Mili and Khurshid. Facebook pages also provide platforms for collective humanitarian action.

Afghan women use photos of Indian or Iranian pop stars as profile pictures, instead of using their own names and photos. They often post opinions about hijab, religion, women's rights, abortion, sexuality, sexual harassment and domestic violence that are considered sensitive in Afghan society. With growing migration to different countries, a number of handicraft and food blogs inform diasporic Afghans about lifestyle trends. Their popularity is attracting young Afghans to reshape their personal identities.

Sorry, my uncle was home and he did not want you to take pictures. I have some pictures I can share with you over WhatsApp.



# Haram حرام

[Huh.raam] adjective

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Forbidden

The Talibs acted as religious police in Afghanistan and used the concept of *Haram* to enforce regulations and moral injunctions on Afghan men, women and ethnic minorities. In case of non-observance, residents were subjected to severe public punishments. Afghans in Delhi remember the shoot-at-sight order as one of the most common methods of persecution.

Here, the Afghan women have the freedom to study, to be employed in various sectors, to wear clothes of their choice, to socialise, to visit places without any male accompanying them. While men enjoy getting new haircuts, trimmed beards and wearing denim jeans. They enjoy television, radio, cinema and social media, all of which were banned in their homeland. However, some of the older generation are not fully supportive of such ways of living.



در دهلی صلح است اما اوضاع مساعد نیست

*Yahan sukoon hain...lekin  
halaat bure hain, acche nahin.*

(There is peace (in Delhi) but our circumstances are not good.)

# Halaat حالات

[Ha.laat] noun

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## Circumstances

Afghans in Delhi describe their adverse circumstance with the word *halaat*. Living in rented flats is very different from the courtyard homes they left behind. The paucity of regular income, lack of monetary resources and employment opportunities, force them into situations which make them vulnerable.

Some see similarities between the constant patrolling by Talibs back home with the periodic visits to the Foreign Regional Registration Offices (FRRO) in Delhi. Surveilled and harassed by the police, landlords also exploit their situation, demanding extortionate rents.

Yet, some Afghans are able to take advantage of entrepreneurial opportunities. Many run businesses of handicraft, dry fruits, fresh fruits, *kesar* (saffron), spices, silver and precious stone jewellery, *ittar* (perfume) and travel agencies. The growth of medical tourism in Delhi has encouraged many Afghans to become *tarjuman* (translator) and medical suppliers.



Locked houses back in  
Afghanistan, so many  
keys (*chabi*) here.

# Jaidaad

جايداد

[Jāy.dād] noun

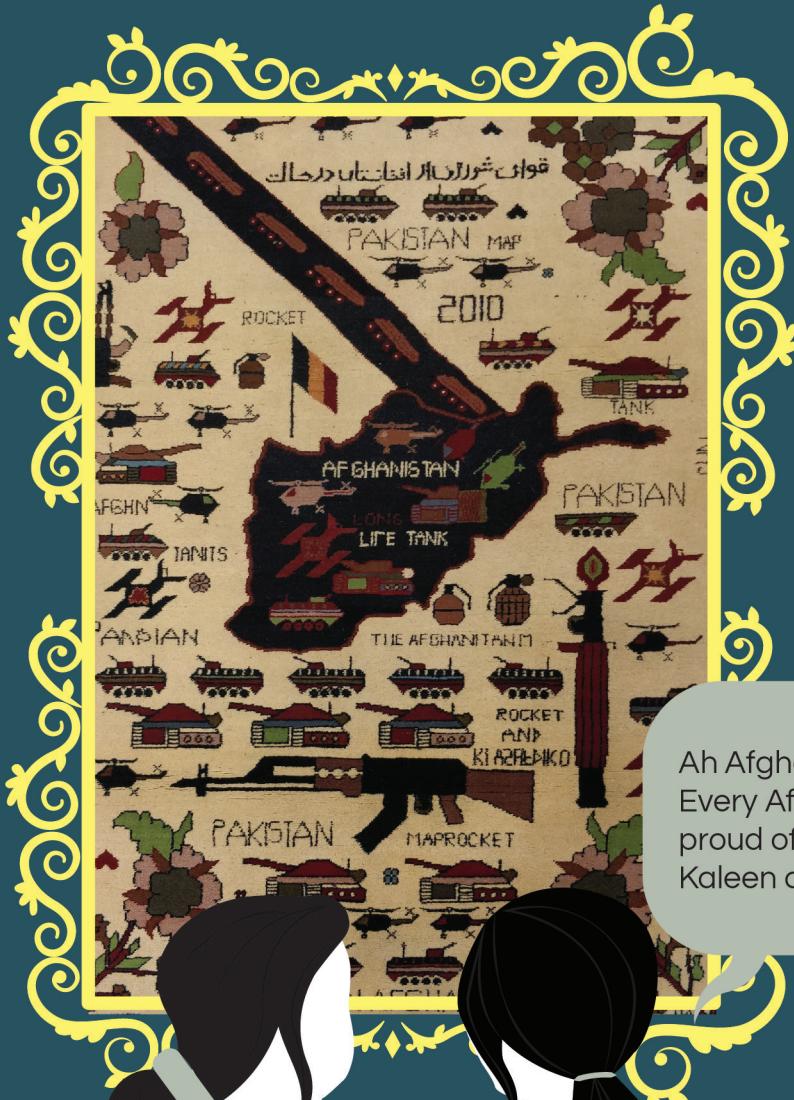
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Assets like houses and belongings

When they escaped, many Afghans had to leave valuable assets behind and could carry away only a few objects. Their suitcases and trunks were filled with essentials like bread and biscuits. What if they arrived at night and had nothing to eat and drink? A blanket in case it was cold outside on the streets as they looked for houses?

Today, some Afghans in Delhi have managed to rent out their properties back in Afghanistan. They receive remittances from their properties and these are often done by relatives who stayed back. Since it is not easy to open bank accounts in India, a combination of formal banking and trust-based networks of agents are used for transferring money.

But most families still carry the bundle of keys to their house, in hope of returning.



# Kaleen قالین

[Kah.leen] noun

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Carpet or rug

Renowned for their intricate designs, Afghanistan produces several types of handmade carpets, including felted wool carpets (*namads*), flat non-pile fabric woven carpets (*kilims*), and pile and knotted carpets made from wool, silk and cotton. Wool from sheep and goats is used in patterns with recurring motifs of elephants and flowers. Dyed in natural dyes, Kaleen comes in deep red, blue and black colors, and it takes six to nine months for one high quality carpet to be made.

The War Rug is a unique demonstration of craftsmanship and the history of conflict and invasions in Afghanistan between 1979 and 2001. For its makers, it was a response to the horrific experiences and trauma from those years. Motifs like maps, drones, missiles, Kalashnikovs, tanks, military aircraft and phrases like 'hand bomb' and 'rocket', mark the turmoil of the decades. Since the end of the Taliban regime, these rugs are no longer made in Afghanistan but can be seen in art galleries and with art collectors. Some Afghans in Delhi have them put up in their houses as a reminder of the past.

Image by the authors



Next time when I come to  
Delhi for my surgery, I will get  
you the Afghani mirror dress  
(*firaq partūg*).

# **Kheshawand** خویشاوند

[Khe.sha.wand)] noun

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## Relatives

Afghan homes in Delhi have become transit places for relatives who come here for medical aid or to go to another country. Whenever any Afghan travels to Delhi, they keep their relatives informed through a network of diasporic Afghans.

Since courier rates are very high between Afghanistan and India, these relatives become the vehicle to send and receive goods. Those who come to Delhi bring supplies and gifts such as henna, wedding outfits, quroot (a yogurt snack), musical instruments, handicrafts and caramel chocolates. This network is an important route for many Afghan export businesses between the two countries.



Of water I can't even have  
a taste.

My lover's name, written  
on my heart, will be  
erased.

# Landay لندی

[Lan.dai] noun

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Landays are poems following the rural tradition of oral and anonymous folk couplets, created by Pashtun women in Persian or Arabic. Rooted in the oral culture of nomads and farmers, these are sung during weddings and other communal activities.

A forbidden form for Afghan women during the Taliban regime, the landay has now become their collective voice to talk about love, sexual desires, war, grief, rage, displacement, homeland and separation in subversive ways.

*Embrace me in a suicide vest  
but don't say I won't give you a kiss.*

With the advent of the internet and social media, the content and form of sharing landay has also changed. Many Afghan people now share landay poetry on social media sites.

*How much simpler can love be?  
Let's get engaged now. Text me.*

Landay text from poetryfoundation.org



I cannot tell my father that I am running away from the Talib with my daughters. If they find out, we may not get away alive.



# Meydan Hawayee میدان هوایی

[May.dān hā.way.ee] noun

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## Airport

Selling possessions to buy tickets, getting a passport and visas while avoiding the eagle eye of the Talibs is an exhausting, terrifying yet thrilling experience. In fact, even getting to the airport can be expensive, as official tolls and unofficial extortions at checkpoints have to be paid.

Many Afghans still remember the unnerving experience of waiting in long queues with hundred others to board the Kabul - Delhi flight. Throughout the journey to a city which they have seen only on television and films, they would roll prayer beads (*tasbih*) and silently hope for a safe arrival. As they looked out of the window, it seemed to be the longest two hours of their lives.

Let me tell you a folk legend about Kampirak from Afghanistan.

# Nawroz نوروز

[Now.ruz] noun

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## New Year

Nawroz, meaning a ‘new day’, is the first day of the new year in Afghan culture. The celebrations continue for two weeks with gatherings of family, friends and neighbours to observe Nawroz. Traditional meals such as *haft-mewa* (seven dry fruit dessert), *qabuli pilau* (a rice dish) and *samnak* (wheat flour sweet dish) are prepared, exchanged and eaten.

In Afghanistan, it is also known as Farmers Day, when farmers put their best produce on display for people in the city to see. At this time, people go for picnics, to eat together and to enjoy themselves. During the Taliban rule, this festival was banned.

To observe Nawroz in Delhi, Afghan families go for picnics to Lodhi Gardens and other public parks where red-buds grow. At mealtime, seven (*haft*) items whose names start with the fifteenth Persian letter *sin* (pronounced as “seen”) are arranged in the *haft-sin* manner. Those who can, also distribute food and gifts as charity to the poor.



I could not even say a last goodbye to my father. Now I cannot get in touch with anyone there.

# Qabristan

قبرستان

[Qab.res.tân] noun

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A cemetery

There are graves of many Afghan refugees in Nizamuddin's Panjpiran qabristan and Bhogal who could not go back to their country. Their tombstones speak about their yearning for their home country.

هر کس که زندگی خود را بدون عمل به عدالت بگذراند از ذهن مردم گم خواهد شد

*A person who goes through life unfamiliar with the meaning of justice will vanish from the minds of men.*

The cremation of deceased non-Muslims is a difficult task in Afghanistan. By tradition, Sikhs cremate their dead but this was prohibited by the Taliban and cremation grounds were vandalized. The Afghan Sikh minority faced threat and indiscriminate attack at crematoriums. As a result, many did not receive a respectful cremation. Subsequently, the Sikh temples (*gurudwara*) in Afghanistan have built crematoriums beside their structures.

I love spicy street food in  
Delhi, but cannot betray  
quroot, my favourite.

# Quroot قروت

[Qu.root] noun

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Yogurt snack

*Quroot* is a common Pashtun street snack prepared traditionally with fermented buttermilk and dried yogurt (*chaka*), that has been dried in the sun. This was probably developed to preserve yogurt when there was no refrigeration. Salty and sour in taste, thick and hard, it can be eaten as a savoury snack or with other dishes and drinks.

Other common Afghani street food similar to foods in Delhi are Afghani burger (wrap stuffed with meat, sauce and french fries), *mantu* (meat dumplings), *khoujoor* (doughnut pastry), *kulcha*, *murabba* (thick apple syrup), *phirni* (rice pudding), *chapli kabab* (patty with minced beef), *qormah* (creamy curry) and *qabuli pilau* (cooked rice with raisins, vegetables and meat).



I divide my time between Delhi and Kabul and currently teach fifty people. They call me Ustad Gulam Ahmad Khan.

# Rubab رباب

[Ra.bab] noun

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## Musical instrument

Dating back to the seventh century, the *Rubab* is Afghanistan's national musical instrument. Traditionally carved out of mulberry wood, goat skin sound chamber and metal strings, the *Rubab* is also called 'the lion of instruments'. The Indian Sarod is believed to be a development of the *Rubab*.

Classical Afghan music with the *Rubab* is soulful. It is mentioned in many Sufi poems and Sikh Shabads by Bhai Mardana, a companion of Guru Nanak who travelled to Afghanistan.

Afghan *Rubab* players, both men and women, were threatened by the Talibas to stop performing music. Some continue to play secretly inside their homes, while many have moved to live outside Afghanistan, where audiences love listening to the *Rubab*. Some others have chosen to sell their *Rubab* to customers who want to revive its music, or retain it as home décor.



If Uni-Ciar had not sent supplies to us, we would have starved to death in *karanteen* (quarantine). It was the best Ramadan gift.



# **Saazmaan Melal Mutahed Baray Muhajreen**

[Saaz.mān Mel.al Muta.hed Ba.ray Mu.hā.ji.rīn] noun

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UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)

Afghan refugees in Delhi have been struggling to get refugee status, as not having this deprives them of assistance, making these stateless people rely on each other for support, information and guidance. So they turn to connections like the Katawazai, traders from eastern Afghanistan and historically moneylenders to the Indian community. On the other hand, they also seek help from those who work in UNHCR or aid organisations and can direct them to other kind of assistance.

UNHCR, pronounced as “uni-ciār” by Afghans, also provides free medical supplies, counselling and hygiene workshops to Afghan women. During the COVID-19 lockdown, they delivered a quarterly quota of rations to Afghan families in some parts of Delhi.



Will we ever get  
Indian citizenship?

# Shahrvand شهر وند

[Shar.vând] noun

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Status of being a citizen of a country

The amended Citizenship Act of 2019 makes it possible for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians facing persecution in their home countries to become Indian citizens.

Manohar Singh, an Afghan Sikh in Delhi and the president of Khalsa Diwan Welfare Society welcomes the Act and claims that it will help them get the citizenship certificate in India. "Many families have been living in Delhi for over two or three decades and have never asked the government for any kind of help. When the Rajya Sabha passed the bill last night, we felt like it was Diwali or Baisakhi for us," he exclaimed.

Citizenship will allow them to travel back and forth freely, and sell the properties and assets that were left behind in Afghanistan. They believe that with citizenship, they will no longer be in no man's land.



You don't look like a 22 year old woman from Badakhshan.

# Tazkera تذکرہ

[Tâz.ki.rah] noun

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Identity card

Launched in 2018, *Tazkera* is the national identity card for Afghan citizens. It is mandatory and has become a key document to access common public services, education and employment opportunities, to buy and sell property, etc. The electronically generated *Tazkera* can be made for any age, gender and ethnicity in Afghanistan. Those living abroad also have the right to obtain a *Tazkera*.

The most remarkable effect of this has been the freedom to choose a desired surname and create nicknames. Traditionally, Afghan ID identified a person by her husband's name, father's name and a Muslim surname. Now, Afghans are choosing names that are connected to cultural, literal or historical concepts, such as *Farhang* (culture), *Khorshid* (sun) or *Meetra* (the god of light).

For additional income, I work as a tarjuman at thousand rupees a day, and my travel expenses are met by the Afghans who come to hospitals here as international patients.



# Tarjuman ترجمان

[Tar.ju.mān] noun

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Translator/ interpreter

Almost every Afghan in Delhi started their earning career as a *tarjuman* for UNHCR or privately for medical tourism providers. Though not well paid, it is a growing job opportunity for both Indians and Afghans. Many learn other languages like Russian, German, Persian, Punjabi, English and Hindi. The income doubles during Delhi winters, with the influx of Afghan patients and tourists who want to go see the Taj Mahal and hill stations of India.

In the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) interviews at the UNHCR, a *tarjuman* is hired to cross check the background information of a person seeking refugee status. Many fake asylum seeking stories have emerged leading to such checks. Government hospitals like GB Pant, AIIMS and Safdarjung, as well as private hospitals such as Apollo, Max, Fortis and Medanta in Delhi are always in need of translators for international medical patients.



Maryam  
00:54

3



Mashallah, both of you look perfect for your mehndi ki raat (henna ceremony).



# Tamas Tasviri

تماس تصویری

[Tá.más tès.vi.ri] noun

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Video call

Online video gatherings during Ramadan, Nawroz, Eid, Afghan independence day and weddings have become a way of virtually connecting with the family and relatives for Afghans living in the diaspora.

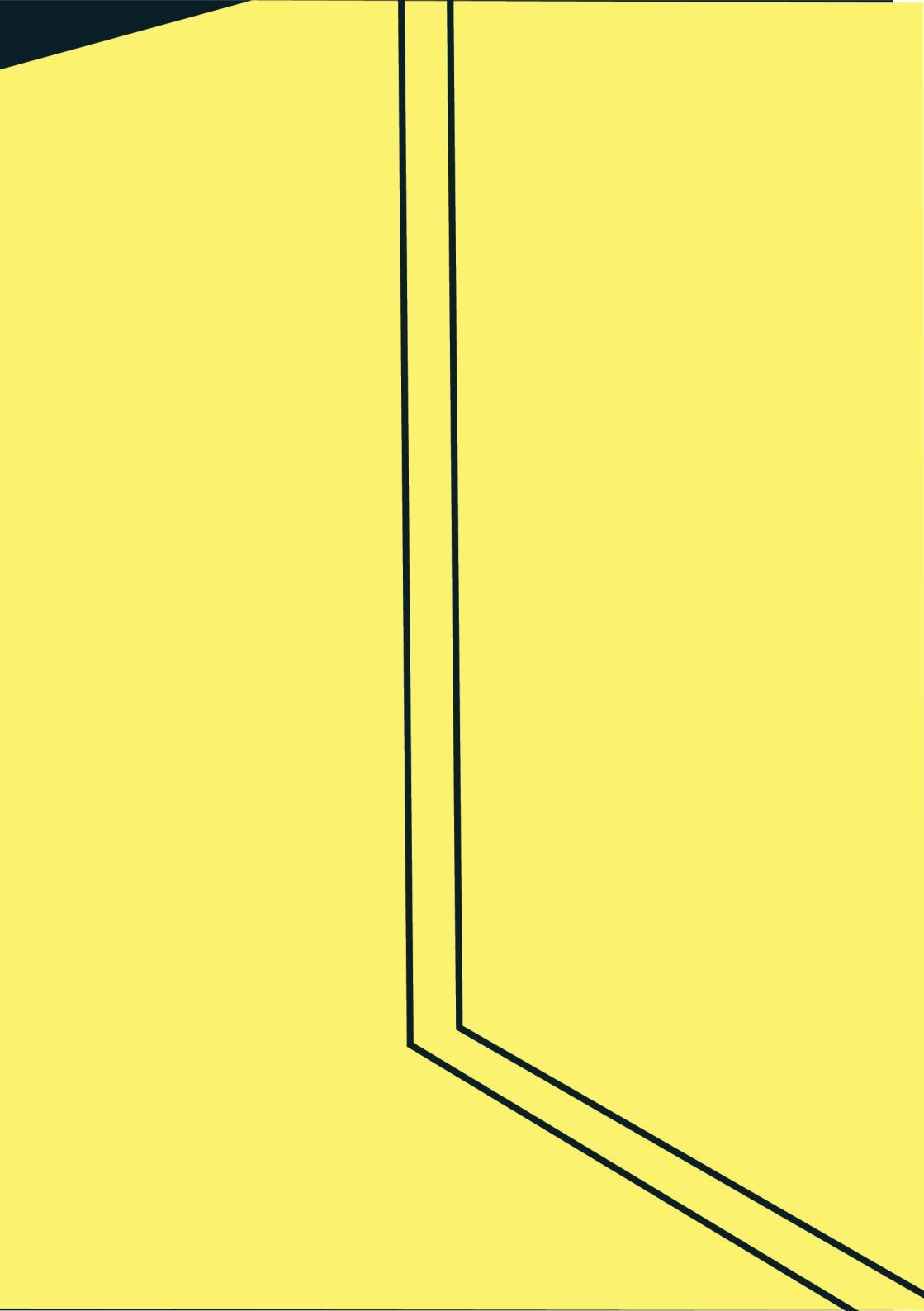
Video calls have become the vehicle for scattered communities to sustain themselves, nurture friendships and connections though they are physically apart. Afghans mostly use Viber, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger for this purpose.

11000 Afghans came to Delhi.

1000 Afghans have gone back.

Many remain undocumented.

Estimates by Afghan residents in Delhi, 2021



## About the • Centre for Community Knowledge •

Centre for Community Knowledge at Ambedkar University Delhi is an interdisciplinary research centre that studies living communities and their diverse oral and culturally embedded knowledge. The Centre collaborates with communities to include new sources, practices and discourses in expanding our knowledge about diverse communities living in the city of Delhi.

As a Centre engaging with oral and experiential knowledge, our interest has been to recognise the different lived histories of the residents of the city. This primer is an attempt to show the life experiences of a small diaspora community in Delhi, who in their own way contribute to the making of the city.

This primer is a design collaboration between researchers, illustrators and the oral history method of the Centre. Through visuals and words, this primer interweaves the memories of the past and practices of the present day Afghan community in Delhi.

## • About the authors •

### Harpreet Kaur

Harpreet has graduated from Ambedkar University Delhi. During her M.Des thesis, she worked with Afghan refugee communities living in Delhi. Her work is guided by a strong belief in design as a problem-solving tool to recognize and form relationships between ideas and reality. She loves travelling to unexplored places with her camera and sketchbook, and is deeply interested in material culture and oral history. She is mildly obsessive about food and dogs too!

### Gurpreet Kaur

Gurpreet is a graduate of National Institute of Fashion Technology, Kangra. A graphic designer obsessed with aesthetics, she lives in alternate realities and can spend hours cuddling her dog. She cannot start her day without having her cup of tea, and is an incurable Korean web fan and a shopaholic.

