

"The Kabuliwala represents a dilemma between the state and migratory history of the world" – Shah Mahmoud Hanifi



*Taking Afghanistan as an example, **Professor Shah Mahmoud Hanifi** talks to **Chris Finnigan** about the fundamental questions posed by migration within South Asia. With Rabindranath Tagore's legendary short story the 'Kabuliwala' as a reference, Hanifi explains how religion, culture, commerce and politics have shaped people's experiences of living and moving around South Asia, and what lessons the past can provide for the present.*



Sheepherder in Northern India | Credit: [Unsplash, Daniel Burka](#)

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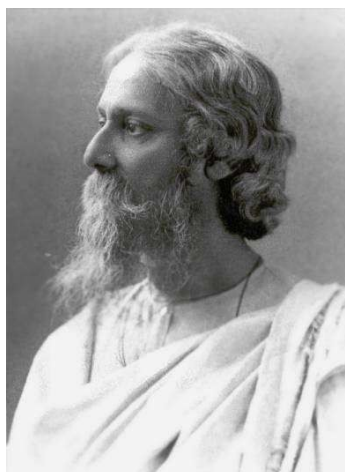
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In Tagore's short story the Kabuliwala is a migrant from Afghanistan living in Kolkata. How should we think of this as an example of migration of Afghans to other parts of South Asia?

The first point is that mobility and migration are very prominent themes in the history of South Asia. By mobility I mean internal, maybe urban to rural, or north to south, and these kinds of movements can be for a variety of reasons: they can be for pilgrimage purposes, cultural, religious, economic, political, trade, and personal. In fact, that was how the Mogul Empire functioned. It circulated administrators through the system to engage and control this movement of people, goods, ideas etc. which means mobility is an anchor theme in South Asian history.

External migration in South Asia can be of two very different types. The first is incoming migrants from outside of the region and the second is outgoing migrants from the region leaving. To discuss either form of external migration we have to discuss where the boundaries of South Asia actually are, and in reference to the Kabuliwala it becomes a question of how Afghans historically fit into India, in other words, is this a kind of natural internal movement or is it a form of migration where an outsider is brought in.

Different disciplines tend to deal with questions of mobility and migration differently. I would say anthropologists probably tend to deal better with internal mobility, such rural-urban and seasonal nomadic movements. Historians tend to more effectively capture bigger pictures, perhaps more globally contextualised migrations. Tagore leaves us with good questions about the cultural place of the Kabuliwala, the location of Afghan identity in relation to the Indian identity, or identities, and how these communities take shape through various migratory and mobility-based practices over the longue duree.



Rabindranath Tagore | Credit: [Creative Commons](#)

Why would the Kabuliwala in Tagore's story leave Kabul for Kolkata over one hundred years ago? What would have been their experience once they had arrived?

There's a reference in the story to the Kabuliwala whose name is Rahman, where he collects, or tries to collect, a debt. Maybe this could be a form of money lending or just delayed payment for a commodity, or one of many other kinds of socio-fiscal transactions. In the story, the person didn't pay up in a timely way and there was a physical confrontation and that's what led the Kabuliwala to end up in jail. Commerce and trade contextualise the story, and a wide variety of commercial transactions were primary reasons why Afghans were found well beyond Calcutta/Kolkata throughout South Asia in the time of Tagore's story.

In fact, in the Kabuliwala story the relationship between the Kabuliwala and the small girl, Mini, is contextualised by the former gifting almonds and raisins to the latter. Indeed dried fruits and nuts (raisins, apricots, almonds, pistachios, for example) were historically key commodities marketed by Afghans in India. And because commercial exchange is a two-way street, so to speak, it is important to remember Afghan merchants also figured into the 'reverse flow' of such as commodities as textiles, tea and sugar from India and South Asia toward Afghanistan and Central Asia.

To historically locate the Kabuliwala in Indian society, it helps to understand when Afghans came into historical view. This is a complex question that involves Islam in important ways, especially the expansion of Islam in South Asia that is routed through geographic Afghanistan beginning with the Ghaznavid Empire about 1,000 years ago. The Ghaznavids inaugurated systematic Islamisation processes in north India, involving Turkic and Persian communities that moved through the area now known as Afghanistan, scooping up local Afghans and funnelling them into South Asia. Thus, the deep history of the Kabuliwala revolves around about a millennium of various types of military, political, administrative and commercial migrations of Afghans into India.



A license to live | Credit: Nazes Afroz & Moska Najib

Most of the 5,000 Kabuliwala that live in Kolkata do not have passports. What would be the reason for this?

5,000 is what the numbers indicate. But what we have to remember, like everything related to Afghanistan, the numbers are always fuzzy. We just really don't know how many people are in Afghanistan right now, so being able to estimate how many left and now live elsewhere is a challenge too. But 5,000 is a good estimate according to the photographers of the [exhibition on the Kabuliwala](#), Moska and Nazes.

This administrative problem of the absence of passports has historical roots in the progressively rigid borderisation of South Asia. The end of the kind of mobility we read about in Tagore's short story begins in the 1920s and 1930s. At this time, of course, there are new international and global circumstances that leave the British restricting the movement of many mobile and migratory peoples in South Asia while facilitating the global circulation of other groups such as martial and agricultural castes. During the time of Tagore's story, individuals were moving back and forth between India and Afghanistan less easily because of the policies of the British-installed and subsidized Afghan Amir Abd al-Rahman Khan, as exemplified by the Durand Line of 1893 between Afghanistan and British India. Administratively they would still have been able to move much more easily in the late-nineteenth than in the early 20th century when Afghans faced increasing numbers of restrictions about where they could go and what they could do in British India. British Indian disarmament policies and pasture taxes were huge points of contention with migratory Afghans who were subjected to increasing forms of colonial surveillance and coercion as their mobility was increasingly limited.



Mini's Kabuliwala | Credit: Nazes Afroz & Moska Najib

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Was Kolkata the main destination for Afghan migrants before the British began restricting the freedom of movement in South Asia?

If we look at the demography of the migrants in the first instance a lot of the historical records are of individual males, not in a family unit, but of individuals moving into India for seasonal labour and commercial opportunities. There were two types of Afghan labourers: those going back and forth biannually, and others that that settled more or less permanently. Well-established communities of Afghan 'Kabuliwalas' were found well beyond Calcutta, in other places, such as Bombay/Mumbai that was another primary urban location where large numbers of Afghans have settled

In that sense, it's good to recognize that over the long term, there's been multiple kinds of Afghan communities formed throughout South Asia in large cities, regional or provincial capitals and market centres, and indeed in lower-tier small towns and villages – whether that means bringing family members with them or intermarrying with local women. Intermarriage can lead to questions of citizenship and state paperwork that speaks to the importance of how people textually experience the modern state, and how documents and lack thereof can structure social and spatial arrangements for migrant and host communities in important ways.

How visible would these Afghan migrants be in Mumbai?

Historically quite visible. Mumbai had a big industrial base for textile production and the Pathan Chowkidars of the Girangoan mill district in Mumbai loom large in the city's social history and heritage landscape. In Mumbai, the Kabuliwalas would have been seen as security guards for these mills.



In a distant land | Credit: Nazes Afroz & Moska Najib

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They wouldn't be ostracised or seen in a negative way?

Well in general, yes, Afghans have a bit of a cultural 'other' disposition in India. They are perceived as outsiders, which may indicate that indeed Afghanistan is apart from India in a cultural sense. I'm not sure I'm in a position to generalise about this, as there's so many of these communities in the south, for example in Hyderabad, and in the northern foothills of the Himalayas, in Dera Dun, for example. Their experiences will be very different. I think it's also important to remember never to generalise about Afghanistan because of its huge diversity. So we need to appreciate the multiplicity of economic and social niches that various groups of Afghans had in various locations to appreciate the complexity of the historical experiences of Afghans in India beyond Tagore's story about a single Kabuliwala in Kolkata or the Mumbai mill Pathans. In fact, it's important to reference the elephant in the room that involves the almost free interchange of references to Pathans, Afghans, Pashtuns, Rohillas, Kabuliwalahas, etc. as if they form a single community across vast units of time and space.

What do these historic stories of migration of Afghans across South Asia, and particularly in this case India, symbolise? What can they teach us about migration in 2018?

The experience of the Kabuliwala speaks in the contemporary period to how most states really are just not good at managing migration through their territory. The Kabuliwala represents a dilemma between the territorial ethos of the nation state and the migratory history of the world that has been predicted on mobility and connections and cultural hybridity – things that nations and nationalism are somehow afraid of for whatever reason.

What's really important is in fact that these mobile groups aren't inherently 'troublesome people', 'criminal tribes', or the kinds of people that should be perceived as 'anti-state populations'. Tagore's story and the experience of Afghans in India more broadly doesn't have to be seen in problematic terms as one entirely predicated on strangeness, difference, otherness and violence. By maintaining their culture – traditional forms of dance, traditional forms of eating, clothing – and at the same time adopting elements of local musical, sartorial and culinary cultural options, the Kolkata Kabuliwalas show us when distant peoples come together and cultures meet and change it doesn't have to be a negative or threatening thing for members of either group.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

[Read an interview with Moska Najib](#), the photographer of [From Kabul to Kolkata: Of Belonging, Memories and Identity](#), which will be exhibited at the Brunei Gallery at SOAS until 15 December 2018. Admission is free. Open: Tuesday – Sunday: 10.30 – 17.00, Late night Thursday until 20:00. Closed: Mondays and Bank Holidays



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