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1. Donkey routes: En route Europe, how Indians visit several countries to create 'travel history'

Introduction

Last year, Serbia had to change its visa rules under pressure from the European Union. This was because the Balkan nation was being used by many, including Indians, as an illegal transit route to Europe.

Serbia's visa-free regime for Indians — along with nationals from Turkey, Tunisia, Cuba and Burundi — was being exploited to get into the bordering Austria, Hungary and Romania, and ultimately to Italy and France. Reason: those travelling to EU countries from Serbia don't require a visa.

In October 2022, Serbia withdrew visa-free arrivals from the above-mentioned countries.



Creating a 'travel history'

The transit phenomenon came to light after European authorities recorded more than 1.3 lakh illegal immigrants in the first 10 months of 2022, many of whom were nationals of the countries allowed visa-free arrivals by Serbia.

In the case of Indians, to show a “considerable travel history” on their passports, the migrants (mostly men of 25-40 years of age, with a major chunk from Punjab) were asked by their agents to enter Serbia after visiting destinations such as Nepal, Dubai and Armenia, so that they came across as genuine travellers to the immigration authorities.



Figure 1 Passengers of a charter plane, grounded in France for four days, on their arrival in Mumbai on December 26.

The recent case of a flight carrying 303 Indian nationals being grounded in France, ahead of its departure for Nicaragua, seems to bring to light a similar pattern — of creating a travel history to come across as tourists to immigration authorities of the receiving country, Nicaragua in this case, even as visa mandate for Indians in the central American country isn't very clear.

Harsh journey, many tragedies

In most such cases, on arrival in the transit country, agents connect the migrants with the so-called 'donkers', or people smugglers, who help them enter their final destination illegally. The donkers charge exorbitant payment for such services. Incidentally, to evade border authorities, many of these migrants are transported in the harshest and most inhuman conditions, not just without food and water, but even gasping for breath, after being asked to hide in cramped containers and delivery vehicles.

One such case had come to light in 2021 — of a young man from Punjab who wanted to go to Italy, and was suggested the transit route of Dubai-Serbia-Romania-Hungary, through which he would have entered Italy in about six months.

He was transported to the Hungarian border from Romania in a delivery truck, tucked in a small box. However, he returned to India ultimately, as he could never reach Italy and was forced to continue working on a farm in Hungary.

A 2009 report by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODOC) on Smuggling of Migrants from India to Europe highlights several cases of such migrants drowning in unsafe vessels, suffocating to death in overcrowded truck compartments and ships, or being victimised by smuggling gangs.

One of the biggest such tragedies was reported in 1996, when 283 migrants, most from Punjab, died when the overcrowded boat they were travelling on capsized in the Mediterranean, near Malta, on their way to Italy.

Those who reach their destination, too, find themselves locked in cycles of exploitation and abuse, which tend to go unreported because of the person's fear of arrest and deportation.

Destination Europe

Out of the records of immigration-related offences examined at the Delhi airport in 2005, 2006 and 2007, almost 47 per cent of them were related to destination countries in Europe. Of this, about 27 per cent were related to the UK. Most cases of irregular migration to the UK were via France, after landing there with a direct visa, or reaching France through an irregular donkey route.

For those headed to the US, the first step in the most popular donkey route from India is to reach a Latin American country. Countries like Ecuador, Bolivia, and Guyana have visas on arrival for Indian citizens. Some other countries, including Brazil and Venezuela, give tourist visas to Indians easily. Nowadays, many first go to Europe, and from there, directly to Mexico.

Definite numbers not available

As such, Indian Missions and Posts do not have reliable data on the number of Indians staying or working illegally in foreign countries. Apart from Punjab, irregular migration is also being reported in high numbers from Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Indian Diaspora

Source: The Indian Express

2. ULFA peace accord: history of its 44-year-long insurgency, peace talks

Why in news?

The pro-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) recently signed a historic tripartite peace deal with the Government of India and the state government of Assam. Here is the story of the outlawed insurgent outfit established in 1979.

Roots in Assamese anxieties

Assamese people have their own, unique culture and language, and a strong sense of identity. Starting in the 19th century, however, as the region's tea, coal and oil economy attracted migrants from all over, the indigenous population started to feel insecure. This was further exacerbated by the Partition, and the subsequent exodus of refugees into the state from the erstwhile-East Pakistan.

The competition for resources skyrocketed, resulting in a six-year long mass movement. Eventually, the Assam Accord, seeking to "find a satisfactory solution to the problem of foreigners in Assam" was signed in 1985.

However, amidst all this, a group of more radical thinkers, led by Bhimakanta Buragohain, Arabinda Rajkhowa, Anup Chetia, Pradip Gogoi, Bhadrashwar Gohain and Paresh Baruah formed ULFA on April 7, 1979.

Four decades of bloodshed

The founders of ULFA wanted to establish a sovereign Assamese nation through an armed struggle against the Indian state. For over 44 years, this 'struggle' has been chequered with kidnappings and extortion, executions and bomb blasts, leading to tragic loss of life in Assam and beyond.

At the same time, the Indian state's response has also been unsparing. In 1990, the Centre launched Operation Bajrang, leading to the arrest of 1,221 ULFA insurgents. Assam was declared a 'disturbed area', President's rule was imposed, and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was invoked.

The government has also allegedly supported certain factions of ULFA, which has almost always been plagued with differences of opinion. In 1992, one faction, later christened as Surrendered ULFA (SULFA), offered to surrender and engage in dialogue with the government. Later, SULFA would allegedly carry out "secret killings" of ULFA insurgents and their family members, on behalf of the state government.

Yet, the ULFA has survived, in some part due to help from outside India. It still has camps Myanmar, and previously had camps in both Bangladesh and Bhutan. Lying deep in jungles and hilly areas, these camps act as launchpads for cross border operations, as well as shelter after the fact. Insurgents also use them as training bases for new recruits.

ULFA has links to other insurgent outfits in the Northeast and Myanmar, as well as Islamic terror outfits like Harkat-ul-Jihad-e-Islami, and Al-Qaeda. Paresh Baruah, ULFA's self-styled military chief, reportedly met Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks.

It also has links to Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), which has reportedly trained ULFA insurgents in the past. ULFA openly supported Pakistan in its monthly newsletter Swadhinata during the Kargil War.

Towards peace

In 2005, the ULFA formed an 11-member 'People's Consultative Group' (PCG) comprising noted intellectuals and Jnanpith awardee author late Indira Raisom Goswami. The committee mediated three rounds of talks before the ULFA walked out of the discussions and unleashed a new wave of terror.

Some ULFA commanders like Arabinda Rajkhowa, 2008 onwards, would again strive for peace talks with the government. However, Paresh Baruah was staunchly opposed to talks, and consequently "expelled" Rajkhowa from the outfit in 2012. The Rajkhowa-led pro-talk ULFA faction also "expelled" Baruah, paving the way for the last major split in ULFA. While Baruah floated his own ULFA (Independent), the majority of the outfit joined the peace talks under Rajkhowa.

The pro-talks faction, in 2012, submitted a 12-point charter of demands to the central government, which was finally responded to earlier this year. This was followed by a round of discussions between Rajkhowa's faction and the Centre in April, and the tripartite peace agreement recently.

An incomplete peace?

"This peace deal is certainly a step in the right direction and will contribute to the peace and development of Assam.

While it is not clear on how "complete" the deal is, as major question marks remain on how exactly it would work out. Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma has said he is keen on engaging with the anti-talks faction as well, but Baruah remains steadfast on his demand for Assam's sovereignty.

Yet, after signing the agreement, Union Home Minister Amit Shah was confident that a "complete solution" had been negotiated. "This tripartite agreement is the beginning of a new age of peace for Assam," he said.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

Source: Indian Express