

## **Biometrics and the notion of governmentality in Rohingya refugee camps**

Recently the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with the assistance of Bangladesh government issued biometric identity cards to nearly five lakhs of Rohingya refugees sheltered in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar refugee camps. The argument posed is that the biometric credentials is expected to aid the authorities in processing the asylum claims of refugees apart from reducing the instances of arbitrary detention that arises due to lack of adequate documentation. Such datafication of bodies crossing the borders using biometrics possibly would assist the asylum countries to enforce strict policing of territories and ensures targeted delivery of aid resources. But correspondingly it also leads us to re-problematize the nature of liminal governance that is instituted in the administration of camps. Though camps can be normatively considered to be a humanitarian obligation fulfilled by the host countries or asylum states towards the vulnerable refugees, they are implemented as top-down structures of alternate governance carried out in collaboration with international government organisations and aid agencies. This perception often reduce refugees as victims that require protection or as beneficiaries of aid with disproportionate power asymmetry with respect to the camp authorities (Horst, 2006). A similar perspective is reflected in considering refugees as "wasted life" (Bauman, 2004) surviving in a condition of "debilitating dependence" (Adelman, 2008:8). It precipitates an administrative framework that involves various entities such as state governments or INGOs that simultaneously or separately exercising power in the process of carving a humanitarian governance system. It is necessary to analyse the ramifications of introducing biometric registration within the existing patterns of marginal governance or "governmentality" within the camps.

### **Objective of the research and Research Question**

Refugee camps in Cox's bazar shelters are stateless Rohingyas who have been denied citizenship and thereby expelled from the "state-nation- territory" (Agamben, 2008). This statelessness also refutes them a basic set of rights that instils a 'sense of belonging' in them and simultaneously casts them to the "space of exception" in the camps. They live in a "zone of in-distinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical

protection no longer make any sense” (Agamben 1998: 170). The deferment of the sovereign law in the campsite that precipitates the exception also leads to the emergence of “tapestry of multiple, partial sovereignties” (Hanafi and Long, 2010) involving various actors like government of the asylum state, international humanitarian organisations and aid agencies. Thus the presence of multiple actors that administer and govern the camps creates a hybrid institutional structure that defies the conventional state mediated governance structure and instead conjures alternate modes of “governmentalities” within the camp (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 1999; Hanafi and Long, 2010). The Foucauldian notion of “governmentality” acknowledges this plurality of power that emanates from multiple actors like state government and non-governmental organisations (Walter, 2015). Through a detailed analysis of two scholarly postulations-“complex realm of hybrid sovereignty arrangements” (Ramadan & Fregonese, 2017: 950) and the notion of “governmentality” (Foucault, 1991) within the context of empirical case of biometric registration of Rohingyas in refugee camps, we intend to introspect the way in which it impacts and potentially transforms the governance in camps. The following are the research questions that we aim to answer through the course of the research:

1. Using the lens of “governmentality”, how does biometric data on refugees contest/ accentuate the power relations among multiple actors in the “hybrid sovereign” structure of camp governance?
2. How does the biometric registration of refugees impact the delivery and provision of services and aid by the camp authorities to the inmates of Cox’s Bazaar refugee camp?
2. Does biometric registration enable to increase the agency of refugees in camps vis-à-vis the camp authorities?

### **Literature review**

As observed by Agier (2002:321) humanitarian administration entails “management of the most unthinkable and undesirable populations of the planet”. The incessant creations of refugees who flee their homes and cross over the borders pose a challenge to the nation-state’s constant effort to control the population within its territory (Steger, 2013:132). Such desire to manage its population can be considered

to be an aspect of Foucault's "biopolitical" power. According to Foucault (2002:141), biopolitics entails orchestrated steering of power at the biological attributes and behaviour of its population, through which the state tries to ascertain their compliance and efficiency. Such mobility across the border obfuscates the affiliation between nationality and citizenship and thereby complicates the ways in which nation-state governs the biological aspects of its population. Refugee camps, which are spatial confinements that house the 'undesirable populations', characterize a different trait of biopolitics through humanitarian governance that reduces the existence of refugees to 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998:133; Diken and Laustsen, 2005: 86). Camps can be seen as temporary spatial constructs conditioned by the uncertainty of both exclusion and protection (Minca, 2015). Refugee camps in Cox's bazar can be considered to be an "institutional camp" (Maestri, 2017) that are built by government agencies and managed in collaboration with international humanitarian organizations such as UNHCR. This categorization of camp is similar to the "state-enforced camps" which segregates the 'undesirable' refugees from its citizens (Minca, 2015: 91).

The two primary approaches regarding the analysis of governance in camps consists of Agamben's conceptualization of camps as the "spatialization of exception" and Foucauldian notion of "governmentality". Agamben's approach is characterized by ambiguity arising from the lack of distinction between 'political life' and mere biological subsistence of the individual that causes him to lead a "bare life" in the state of exception (Agamben, 1998; Agier, 2002; Diken and Laustsen, 2005; Giaccaria and Minca, 2011). Deriving from the Schmittian notion of 'sovereignty', Agamben considers sovereign as the one to decide who can be excluded to constitute the "bare life" (Brown, 2010:48). His state-centric view can be considered to neglect both the presence of multiple agencies within the state of exception in camp (Martin, 2015; Ramadan, 2013) and also the possibility and potential of refugee subjects to contest their "bare life" existence in camps (Gregory, 2006; Butler and Spivak, 2007). In contrast the Foucauldian understanding of camps acknowledges the convolution of power emanating from the multiplicity of actors and can be considered to be different from the aforementioned state-centric notion (Lippert, 1999). According to Foucault (1991:102), "governmentality constitutes an "ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections, the calculations and tactics" that permits the use

of power. In other words, power can emanate and flow simultaneously from both state and non-state actors within camps.

Camps are not just spatial confinements instituted for segregation, but simultaneously also a site of biopolitical power. Various modalities of knowledge production occurs in camp sites such as medical statistics, house hold data collection, and census (Maestri, 2017) rendering refugee as a mere passive subject navigating bare life. Introduction of biometric registration and the resultant biometric data should be seen in the light of the aforementioned potential of camp site to produce and disseminate knowledge that is instrumental for biopolitical power. Amongst the plurality of governing agencies in the camp, such binarised data on refugee bodies have significant ramifications. Gates (2005: 38) opines that modern nation-states fixation to identification is explicit in the various novel technological endeavors to hyphenate an identity to an individual body. As an evolved extension, biometrics then “refashion” and “remediate similar anxieties, motives, rationalities, functionalities, discourses, responses” that was associated with earlier identification systems like anthropometry and finger printing (Ajana, 2013: 34). If biometric identification poses refashioned and remediated complexities to the citizen, its introduction in the humanitarian sector opens up a new terrain of complexities to refugee governance in camps.

### **Research Methodology**

The biometric registration of refugees in camps of Bangladesh that is done in three phases is overseen by Bangladesh’s ministry of Home affairs and conducted jointly by the UNHCR and Bangladesh’s Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC)<sup>1</sup>. The first phase was carried out in the Kutupalong camp, makeshift areas around it, Nayapara and the makeshift area of Balukhali extension. The first phase that has been implemented has targeted the registration of refugees in UNHCR managed refugee camps and was completed by January 2018. The second phase has been implemented in the areas along Teknaf and Ukhia and completed by August

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2018/01/18/one-million-rohingyas-get-biometric-registration/>

2019. The third phase of biometric registration was done along the new spontaneous settlements that has emerged along Hakimpara, Thangkali and Jamtoli<sup>2</sup>. Compared to the older camps in Nayapara and Kutupalong, the settlements in Hakimpara and Jamtoli are more recent responses to the continuing influx of new Rohingya refugees after the exodus in 2017. So the first and second phase had temporary make shift structures with officials that were established as the data collection points for biometric registration were refugees voluntarily visited for registration. In comparison, the refugees in new settlements are still on the move and site zoning is still in progress. Hence the third phase, the enumerators and officials undertaking registration visit their shelters individually, meaning that refugees do not have to queue to be registered.

According to UNHCR, data was collected with mobile devices utilizing GPS without network coverage and uploaded automatically to a secure server when a network connection could be established<sup>3</sup>. This has resulted in generation of geotagged biometric data of refugees that is organised according to their time of arrival, location of refuge and the enumerated household data<sup>4</sup>. The collected data is then provided to the Biometric Identification and Management System (BIMS) and inturn linked to Global Distribution Tool (GDT) system. BIMS is UNHCR's principle biometric identity management system that is used globally. Built with Accenture's UISP (Unique Identity Service Platform), it uses all ten fingerprints and two irises from each individual to build a globally available biometric record that avoids multiple registration and data loss<sup>5</sup>. The GDT was launched with BIMS to allow the use of biometrics to verify identities in food and assistance distribution scenarios. The GDT accepts food distribution lists or manifests from a variety of sources and provides

---

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2017/10/23/irresponsible-data-risks-registering-rohingya?utm\\_campaign=recirc](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2017/10/23/irresponsible-data-risks-registering-rohingya?utm_campaign=recirc)

<sup>3</sup><https://www.deccanherald.com/national/east-and-northeast/biometric-cards-issued-to-five-lakh-rohingya-refugees-753366.html>

<sup>4</sup><https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/05/10/when-identity-documents-and-registration-produce-exclusion-lessons-from-rohingya-experiences-in-myanmar/>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.coordinationtoolkit.org/wp-content/uploads/UNHCR-Managing-Information-in-the-Inter-Agency-Context1.pdf>

real-time reporting on exactly who has collected assistance by using a biometric verification with BIMS<sup>6</sup>. The tool facilitates alternative food collectors for the households. The GDT reports also provide detail on which households have been served, and the specifics of exactly which commodities have been distributed. The GDT includes an Android App to help the staff to track admission, and successfully record collection of assistance<sup>7</sup>.

We intend to use a mixed methodology comprising of both primary and secondary research. We have undertaken library research, that is, secondary data collection to know about the various theoretical dimensions of camp on which we have built our postulation concerning biometric registration in refugee camps of Cox's Bazaar. We have suitably contextualised, integrated and critically evaluated various secondary sources like books, journals and articles so as to explore and estimate the broader topic of our research question. We intend to undertake a field research of the camp authorities of various designations, employees of the humanitarian agencies like UNHCR and Rohingya refugees in two sites of Cox's Bazaar camps- Kutupalong camp from the first phase and Teknaf from the second phase. The duration estimated for fieldwork in each site is 15 days and we intend to complete the field work by August 2020. Primary methods used for empirical research in the field would involve semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with the camp authorities and INGO staff to gather information on mechanisms of coordination that is used in camp governance, the actors and methods used in gathering biometric data of refugees and plausible scenarios of data sharing. We also intend to undertake informal interviews with inmates of the refugee camp to understand their receptivity and concerns towards biometric registration.

## **Bibliography**

Diken B and Laustsen CB ,(2005).*The Culture of Exception: Sociology Facing the*

---

<sup>6</sup><https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/7/5b3f2794ae/joint-bangladeshunhcr-verification-rohingya-refugees-gets-underway.html>

<sup>7</sup><https://datajusticeproject.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2018/11/wp-refugees-borders.pdf>

*Camp*. London: Routledge.

Foucault, M.,(2002). The subject and power. In: Faubion J (ed.) *Power: Volume 3: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*. London: Penguin, pp.326–348.

Agamben G., (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Horst, C., (2006). *Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya*. New York, Berghahn Books.

Adelman, H., (2008). Protracted Displacement. In: Adelman, H., *Protracted Displacement in Asia: No Place to Call Home*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, pp.1-28.

Agier, M., (2002). Between War and City. Towards an Urban Anthropology of Refugee Camps. *Ethnography* 3(3), pp.317-341.

Hanafi, S. & Long, T., (2010). Governance, Governmentalities, and the State of Exception in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Volume 23 ( 2), p 134–159

Foucault, M., (1991). Governmentality in G. Burchell, C. Gordon, P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in governmentality*, Harvester Wheatsheaf: Toronto , pp. 87-102

Ramadan, A. & Fregonese, S.,(2017). Hybrid Sovereignty and the State of Exception in the Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 107:4, 949-963,

Walters, W., (2015). Reflections on migration and governmentality *Journal Für Kritische Migrations Und Grenzregimeforschung*, 1 (1), pp. 1-3

Minca, C.,( 2015). Geographies of the camp, *Political Geography*, volume 49, pp. 74-83

Maestri, G., (2017). The contentious sovereignties of the camp: Political contention among state and non-state actors in Italian Roma camps, *Political Geography*, Volume 60, pp. 213-222,

Diken, B. & Laustsen, C.B., (2005). *The culture of exception. Sociology facing the camp*, London :Routledge

Giaccaria, P. & Minca, C., (2011). Topographies/topologies of the camp: Auschwitz as a spatial threshold, *Political Geography*, 30 (1), pp. 3-12

Martin, D., (2015). From spaces of exception to “campscapes”: Palestinian refugee camps and informal settlements in Beirut, *Political Geography*, (44) , pp. 9-18

Ramadan, A., (2013). Spatialising the refugee camp, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38 (1), pp. 65-77

Gregory, D., (2006). The black Flag: Guantánamo bay and the space of exception in *Geografiska Annaler. Series B: Human Geography*, 88 (4), pp. 405-427

Butler, J. & Spivak, G.C., (2007). *Who sings the nation State? Language, politics, belonging* , Seagull Books, London New York Calcutta

Lippert, R., (1999). Governing refugees: The relevance of governmentality to understanding the international refugee regime, *Alternatives*, 24 , pp. 295-328

Gates, K. (2005). Biometrics and Post-9/11 Technostalgia. *Social Text* 23: 35-53.

Ajana, B. (2013). *Governing through Biometrics*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.