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A South Asian Journal on Forced Migration

MIGRANT ASIA

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Migrant Asia: An Introduction

By

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Asia, a rich and complex terrain, has seen commodities, resources, ideas, and people always on the move. As a key region of migrant origin, transit, and destination, Asia offers a varied and complex account of multiple migrations and mobilities that sometimes unfold simultaneously.[1] *Migrant Asia/s*, the theme of this special issue tries to explore the novel disciplinary approach or methodology to understand how migration within, across, and beyond colonial and postcolonial "Asias" has contributed to Asian mobilities and led to multiple border regimes, contests, and conflicts, development trajectories, and displacement.[2]

Asias in Asia: Kaleidoscope of Movements

Can *Migrant Asias* provide the lens to interrogate whether it is more appropriate to study "Asias" instead of the singular "Asia" and understand what constitutes "Asia" as a region? In recent times there have been renewed attempts to reconceptualise Asia as a dynamic yet historically interconnected geographical and cultural formation. The impulses behind these attempts are varied, ranging from challenging the pervasive epistemic Eurocentricity to the global domination of Western markets or even the argument that cultural and philosophical resonances and continuities exist within the region. Some scholars have also argued for adopting the "Inter-Asian" or "Asia as a

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Method" or "Global Asias" lens.[3] While acknowledging that viewing "Asias" as a deimperialising and decolonising project, one must be cautious of the revivalist and imperialist tendencies that can emerge from these intellectual projects and have to be mindful of conceptualising Asia with many interconnected nodes.

Taking cues from the history of the multiple regions that constitute Asia, it is relevant and important to understand how Asia's tryst with developmental politics of resource extraction, cheap labour demands, energy politics, and climate change has the potential to shape future debates on mobility and forced migration[4] and how the conversation around transnational Asia contributes to the making of "Migrant Asia."[5] It is important to ask how one may map connections while recognising differences that exist within Asia in the existing silos of success stories of political, economic, and cultural superpowers. Focusing on inter-Asian migration as a lens of inquiry, it is necessary to ask: What motivates people to migrate within or outside their regions? How do they organise their move? How are these migrants categorised, managed, cared for, or gendered? What degrees of expulsion or acceptance do they face in their home and host society?[6] The Asian history of migration, like in other regions, is influenced by factors as varied as regional histories, colonial conquests, economic policies, structural and environmental considerations as well as the politics of statecraft.[7] The South Asian and Southeast Asian migration to the Persian Gulf countries is a case in point; multiple historical (neo)colonial, geopolitical, and familial logics have led to intense migration and mobility.[8] Further, ethnic and religious conflicts, partition, ethnolinguistic representation in electoral democracy, neocolonialism and the fight for democracy, etc., in the last several decades have displaced millions and "made" refugees of various forms and kinds,[9] not all of whom would sit easily within the classic definition of a refugee as accepted under international refugee law.[10]

Migrant rights are the first casualty as nation states in Asia manage and govern (at times "unruly") migration.[11] Globally, discursive framings within different national contexts often "other" migrants, relegating them to the periphery of the host society and Asian countries are not immune to these discourses. With porous borders, neighbouring regions like South Asia or Southeast Asia have seen multiple flows of humans and non-humans that the increasingly securitising and surveilling nation states find hard to contain.[12] These framings are often used in political discourse, media coverage, and even everyday conversations to justify the othering and stigmatisation of migrants.[13] They indeed have real-world consequences, shaping public opinion and policy decisions that affect migrants' lives.[14] Constructed as potentially threatening to the dominant culture, migrants are marginalised through the politics of language and mediated representation. Prevalent discourses in Asia, as elsewhere, use dehumanising language for migrants, calling them a "flood" or an "invasion," creating distance and fear between migrant and non-migrant communities. But migration is also the harbinger of modernity and transformation in the region.[15] Parallel to this, the use of new media gives scope to migrants for self-representation.[16] Media studies

scholarship on "vernacular creativity" also shows strategies such as TikTok by migrant workers in India as an "everyday form of resistance."[17]

Migrants: An Expansive Complex

Asian mobilities encompass labour mobility, resource flows, borders, border crossing and policing, asylum and asylum policies, in the context of geopolitical anxieties and populist debates on citizenship, media representations of migrants, climatic changes and migration, and historical and contemporary accounts of labour mobilities like indenture in Asia. While there is a recognisable distinction between different categories of mobile groups, in this issue the term *migrants* have been used in an expansive way to include all forms of forced and voluntary cross-border movements.

The theme of this special issue draws inspiration from the Seventh Critical Studies Conference on "Migrant Asias: Refugees, Statelessness, and Migrant Labour Regimes" organised by the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (CRG), in collaboration with the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, and other institutes and organisations in November 2022 in Kolkata. This special issue has some of the papers presented during the conference or were sought by the editors to complement the existing corpus that highlights how the migration of people, ideas, and commodities constituted inter-Asian migration and mobilities. It has three book reviews of works published on the theme to add depth to the ongoing conversation on Migrant Asia. Some of the contributions in this issue offer conceptual insights, while others are field-based reports that narrate the lived realities of migrants. Methodologically, the papers in the special issue are robust, reflecting the diversity of the region within the continent. From situated ethnographies to the use of digital tools for data gathering, papers in the issue use media and content analysis and secondary literature, in addition to providing historical analysis.

Krishanu Bhargav Neog in his article titled "The Migrant as Political Entrepreneur," shows how new media and its underlying logic contribute to political entrepreneurship in the Global South, through the singular case of the political career of Sukur Ali, a Muslim Bengali migrant in Assam. Neog employs concepts like "microcelebrity" and "cringe" within a mediated environment where the dominant discourse treats migrants of East Bengali descent negatively. The analysis of this case also underscores how ethno-linguistic tensions towards East Bengali Muslims in Assam have intersected with the attention-driven dynamics of new media, propelling Sukur Ali into prominence. Initially, Sukur Ali's rise might have been accidental, but his public presence in the media has been met with ambivalence, often reinforcing negative stereotypes of his community among dominant groups while simultaneously increasing his visibility and advancing his political and personal ambitions. Migrants' self-representation in new media as a "political entrepreneur" or what Suruchi Mazumder has elsewhere termed as "professional and entrepreneurial citizen" tends to "expose" the migrant when their cultural practices, language, or religion differs from the mainstream that in turn has the potential to create a sense of alienation among them.[18]

Working class inter-Asian migrants face additional challenges of discrimination and persecution often based on class, gender, race, and religion pronounced by their (asylum) status.[19] In a more complex account, migrants and the local communities may remain in an uneasy truce with no resolution to long-standing questions of residence or citizenship, as a good number of cases in India suggest. India's "northeast" is a case in point, where the insider-outsider debates have strategically received prominence in political and media debates. The migration of the Chakmas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh is one such example—the seeming inability to resolve their citizenship question stands alongside the question of access to land and resources in Arunachal Pradesh. In his paper entitled, "Chakma Refugees and Indigenous People of Arunachal Pradesh: A Field Report on Perceptions," Panjang Aboh and Nani Bath sketch the perceptions of the Indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh in respect of the Chakma refugees who fled the Chittagong Hill Tracts between 1964–69 from what was then East Pakistan. Several questions are posed to various stakeholders, including those in the government, politics, and locals. What is fascinating is that despite Chakmas residing in various parts of Arunachal Pradesh for more than three decades now, the political question of their citizenship remains unresolved. There are a number of vantage points from which to read this paper and the contributions that his research makes, one of which is the latest amendment to the Citizenship Act, 1955, which sets up a quicker route to citizenship in case of, among others, the Hindu and Buddhist immigrants from Bangladesh. Among others, Aboh's paper notes perceptions and opinions on the question of citizenship and deportation. What does citizenship mean for Chakmas, given their long residence in the state? Can they be deported under the existing law? Aboh's survey report is also a good illustrative example of the truism that borders in the South Asian subcontinent have fractured the identities among communities that are spread across the region. Chakmas' claim to citizenship stems from the ethnic ties with the indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh. Additionally, the sites where the identities of communities are also defined and redefined are the borders and borderlands themselves. The paradox here is that citizens and aliens are not defined by any rational policy but are almost always a factor of what community one belongs to.

Border studies are integral when studying Asian migrations.[20] "Recent Histories" of a Porous Border: Mobility Across the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland" by Baidehi Das engages with this question in some intricate detail. Das gives a fascinating account of life at a border village in North 24 Parganas in Bengal with the purpose of going beyond the headlines of the news report of the Baduria Riots of 2017 that reportedly ended a "decades-long communal peace." Her motivations to undertake the research, especially at a border village, were the result of the news reports of riots at the border region coupled with her positionality as a third-generation refugee, the subject was equally personal. Her ethnographically rich paper provides us with the interplay of political, economic, and national security imperatives that underlie how the border village itself, law enforcement agencies, and the local political

actors enable and respond to cross-border mobility. Das's paper is an illustration of how riots are manufactured in current times.

Migration from and within Central Asia also offers a rich tapestry of ideas of citizenship and democracy. An interrogation of Migrant Asia remains incomplete without understanding the ongoing political crisis across the region. In the article "Mitigation, Recovery, and Response: Democracy in Post-Covid Central Asia," Anita Sengupta offers a close analysis of forms of collectivisation across Central Asian states and how each of these forms remains context specific. The specificity of each of these forms of collectivisation shows the limitations of a radical change in the democratic future of Central Asia. Sengupta observes that in Central Asia liberal democracy existed only in Kyrgyzstan and faced protests and challenges in the neighbouring countries. These protests stem from an inherent faith in populist representatives who support direct forms of representation compared to institutionalised forms of representation. This takes us to the question about collectivisation and Sengupta critically examines "the network of relationships" that allows for the "functioning of…social capital" in Uzbekistan. She further examines the critical role of the mahalla or community-based associations that received recognition in the Kazimov regime as a form of self-government. In Tajikistan, non-governmental organisations took a leading role in neoliberal civil society. The traditional political structures exist in tandem with political mobilisation, protests, and lack of economic stability forcing many Central Asian migrants to join the Russian Armed Forces in the ongoing war on Ukraine. Multiple factors contribute to the lack of stability of regimes and even in countries that witness popular protests, it has received less global attention.

Anasma Gayari's paper titled, "A Cosmopolitan Race: Northeast Migrants in Delhi-NCR" focuses on migrants from "northeast" India in the Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR) who are made to negotiate with the "visual regime of racialisation, rooted in the colonial and postcolonial practices of frontier making and racial anthropology." She argues that these racial practices "treat migrants as racial "others" of the city, attracts their labour into the cosmopolitan consumer spaces" thereby showing the significance of understanding borders within borders from the lens of "cosmopolitan race." Unlike the situation in Uzbekistan where the network of existing relationships (especially Mahalla) plays a role in populist politics, Gayari's paper finds a disjuncture between "representation, lived experiences as well as practices of cosmopolitanism among the racialised migrants that reveal the complexity of their subjectivities." She argues that this "disjuncture in cosmopolitanism is far more evident when we consider the entrenched urban division of labour and the segregated housing market where the migrants are positioned against other migrants of the city. While their physical "otherness" is valorised in the capital city's service industries, outside the economic spaces their "otherness" is effectively maintained through social discrimination and violence. By linking these two paradoxical phenomena, this paper argues that cosmopolitanism signals a tendency of neoliberal capital to

appropriate, commodify, and control bodies and cultures of ethnic minorities."

Man Bahadur Karki's report on the challenges faced by Nepali citizens in India, who migrate for work, is a useful contrast to Gayari. In his report on the "Human Rights Challenges of Nepali Migrant Workers in India's Informal Unskilled Sector: A Case Study of the Karnali Region, Nepal," Karki brings out the manifold and intricate motivations behind migration from Karnali region of Nepal to India such as poverty, unemployment, limited access to education and healthcare, political instability, and environmental degradation, etc. The porous border between India and Nepal has facilitated easier movement of Nepali workers into India, without visas or work permit requirements. While migration has served as a crucial source of income for numerous families in Karnali, it has also ushered in numerous challenges. Nepali workers in India often confront exploitation, mistreatment, and prejudice due to their informal status and the absence of legal safeguards. Many endure unfair wages, toil in unsafe environments, and are susceptible to physical and sexual abuse. Additionally, the absence of access to social security benefits places workers and their families in a precarious position in the event of accidents, illnesses, or old age. Karki's report compels one to examine the Indo-Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty that was signed by both countries in 1950. Nepalis arrive in India in huge numbers each year and work in a variety of employment. The policy of enabling Nepalis to work in India does not however always translate into a fair system of work for them.

In a similar light, Gulzina Mamatalievna Daniiarova, in the article "Eurasian Economic Union: Problems and Perspectives of Labour Migrants from Kyrgyzstan to Russia" shows that though the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Treaty between Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan allows labour migrants from member countries to stay in host countries as long as they have an employment contract, the internal laws of the host countries vis-à-vis foreign migrant workers become a deterrent for them. The Treaty does not define a migrant worker; instead, the definition of "worker of a Member State" is fixed as "a person who is a citizen of a Member State, legally located and legally working in the territory of the state of employment, of which he is not a citizen and in which he does not permanently reside." The article highlights the struggle to acquire "registration at the place of residence" after thirty days. The scholarship on the lived experience of labour migrants in host countries is an indication of how "contemporary urbanism" through the lens of labour migrants cannot be understood through "one theory of 'southern' or 'eastern' urbanism, but rather a series of meso level conceptualisations that account for the nature of urban societies in post- or neo-colonial settings."[21] The case of labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan struggling in Russia to find rented accommodation is not different from the case of Enumeration Cards that Tamil Sri Lankans received to settle in "under-serviced settlements," implying a right to reside that does not translate to a right to services.[22]

Mamatalievna, Gayari, and Aboh echo Yiftachel's conceptual separation between displacement and displaceability to foreground migrant lived experiences. While displacement has a violent form (eviction, expulsion, demolition of homes, etc.) "displaceability" according to Yiftachel "refers to the state of being susceptible to involuntary distancing from these rights and resources."[23] In this case, the displaceability is ensured through two legal protections—one that allows the labour migrant to work till there is a valid employment contract but also sharing the burden of registration at the place of residence beyond the initial thirty days. At the same time, the case of Nepalis working in India or labour migrants from Kygrystan in Russia is a clear example of how "the refugee or the immigrant economy is at the heart of global supply chains."[24] Both Asia as a region and Asias within Asia share a complex relationship with "the refugee or the immigrant economy" and other examples include "carpet making by Tibetan refugees in Nepal or Syrian refugees making leather and other garment products in Turkey or Bangladeshi immigrants in India engaged in garment making as in Kidderpore in Kolkata." Samaddar suggests that the refugee economy is a footloose economy.[25]

What makes studies on Asian migration complex is the experience of uneven development across the region. Two papers in this collection bring accounts of not only the costs of economic policies but also how migrants were made. Nirmal Kumar Mahato's article "Climate Migrants, Resource Scarcity, and Sustainability Issue: The Case of Jungle Mahals Region" argues that the environmental policy adopted and implemented during the colonial and postcolonial times not only resulted in migration out of Jungle Mahals but also had a long-lasting impact on the environment with famine, drought, felling of forest areas, soil erosion, increase in dryness, drop in rainfall (resulting also in the loss of traditional access to resources). While the causes and consequences of the colonial agricultural and economic policy in the Jungle Mahals are clear in Mahato's paper, it unwittingly helps the audience appreciate and comprehend the contemporary debates surrounding Adivasi rights and protection of forests, notably as seen in the case of Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. Viewed from this perspective, the contemporary Indian state has only followed its erstwhile colonial predecessor. Mahato, among others, gives us an account of the "historical injustice" that the Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, sought to reverse. And yet, this legislation along with the Forest (Conservation) Act, of 1980 in India, has been diluted to the point of becoming redundant as far as the contemporary forest policy of the Government of India is concerned.

The other article in this category is on the indentured labour migration from Chhotanagpur (covering what is now much of the Jharkhand state in India) to Assam. In addressing the "Coolie Question" in India, during what is considered an "Age of Transition," between the 1930s and the 1960s, Raj Kumar Thakur investigates the continuities and the disjunctures between the colonial and postcolonial state, concerning the workers from Chhotanagpur who had been recruited to the Assam tea plantations under the British rule, as indentured workers. From the derogatory term, Coolie, the

workers' recognition as "Mazdoors," meaning labourers, was coterminous with the rise of trade union movements in independent India. The change in nomenclature however did not make the lives of the three million impoverished villagers who had been recruited and migrated to Assan tea garden between the 19th and the 20th century–since logics of nation-making and development, in postcolonial India, were privileged over the interests of the workers. This was also overdetermined by disagreement about who was an Assamese, and who was an outsider, since of the surplus labour, only the "sons of the soil" could/should be absorbed in the independent tea industry. Thakur then identifies a crucial dichotomy between the need for (forced) migration for the expansion of imperial projects and the use of the same processes of migration to consolidate ethno-nationalist sentiments, a rejection of the outsider, and a stoppage of labour recruitment from outside the state.

     In this special issue, we began with the politics of self-representation of migrants in new media. With the rise of technocratic border regimes especially the "proliferation of new smartphone data extraction (SDE) policies across Europe" and also "the most controversial new measures in European asylum procedures" there have been rising concerns around data justice.[26] Closer home, Shamna Thacham Poyil, and Nasreen Chowdhury, in their work, have shown that the biometric identity registration as a tool "generates quasi-digital identity for stateless Rohingyas, only to monitor them and ensure their continued surveillance within the confines of the host state, so much so that it only facilitates their perpetual existence as a documented refugee within the camp."[27] This scholarship on the digital activism of the Rohingya diaspora indicates how new media platforms are being used to forge digital solidarities. Self-representation of forced migrants using new media technologies as well as the data-based surveillance strategies of nation states across the globe opens up newer challenges for forced migration studies scholars.

     In the last article in our special issue, "Hybrid Ethnography and South Asian Migration Studies," Shamna Thacham Poyil argues in favour of the need for "hybrid ethnography" in South Asian migration studies. At the outset, she observes that it is important to recognise the digital identities of refugees, in particular, their access to digital platforms and the digital inequality that exists among refugees. Taking a cue from existing scholarship on Rohingya refugees and her work, Poyil argues that hybrid ethnography may rescue us from methodological nationalism. It also provides room to move beyond the trap of methodological transnationalism. She proposes that a combination of in-situ fieldwork and digital ethnography would provide a robust understanding of the digitally mediated lives of refugees, as well as the "techno-politics of exclusion" that shows "the embeddedness of technology within the pre-existing politics of refugee recognition."

     In the Book Review section, we have three contributions, as noted earlier. Sayan Kandar reviews, *In the Wake of Disaster: Islamists, the State and a Social Contract in Pakistan* by Ayesha Siddiqi; Ashmita Saha, and Mallika Ghosh Sarbadhikary reviewed the first volume of the Bengali publication *Banglar Partition-Katha: Uttar Prajanmer Khoj* by Manan Kumar Mandal; and the last review by Sipra Mukherjee of *Negotiating Borders and Borderlands: The Indian*

Experience by Gorky Chakraborty and Supurna Banerjee. The issue also includes a brief report by Debashree Chakraborty on the Conference "Migrant Asias: Refugees, Statelessness, and Labour Regimes" organised by Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group in collaboration with the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna and several other institutes in India and abroad. The report is a summary of the discussions and panel presentations that were part of the Conference.

Towards Asian Mobilities

As with any project of the scale and magnitude like migration studies and covering as vast an area as Asia, the *Migrant Asia* project should only be seen as a conversation starter and a work in progress. The question remains: How do conversations around transnational Asia contribute to Migrant Asia? We believe that more remains to be said and heard about the gendered nature of migration and dealt with only subtly in this issue. Care economy, in particular, like transnational domestic workers as caregivers and other forms of commodification of intimate labour, especially mail-order-marriages or participation of poor women in transnational reproductive labour, etc., opens the question of feminisation of labour. While the contemporary multiple crises ridden world has brought to the fore vulnerabilities and developments that help us comprehend our societies, politics, and communities better, geopolitical developments in far-off places do not make Asia immune from its fallouts. Asian migration forces us to rethink how we map geographies in migration studies. Traditionally, research has focused on a one-directional flow i.e., people leaving the developing South for the developed North. However, Asia's vibrant internal migration patterns challenge this simplistic view. Millions move within the continent, driven by economic opportunities, shared cultural heritage, or porous land borders. Studying these intra-Asian flows compels us to consider factors beyond mere distance and national origin. Adopting an Asian lens allows us to map the contours of regional economic blocs and shared cultural identities that foreground migration patterns. This reframing helps move beyond a North-South binary and develop a more nuanced understanding of human movement in a globalised world. Concurrently, it also allows us to see Asia as not merely a region but an agglomeration of regions whose histories and trajectories may or may not overlap.

Notes

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The Migrant as Political Entrepreneur

By

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Muslims of East Bengali origin have very often been a subject of contention and "othering" in politics in the state of Assam.[1] The caste-Hindu Assamese community and others have often labelled them as "illegal immigrants" in the popular political discourse of the state, and "*Bangladeshi Miya*" has taken on the role of an ethnic slur aimed at this community. The usage of such a frame to designate the community has been widespread, and public mural art has even depicted them as encroaching animals and insects to be eradicated.[2] While they have been coping with the discriminatory attitude in recent times there has been some assertion from the community. For instance, a group of young litterateurs from the community has sought to re-signify the term *Miya* with positive connotations through their poetry that speaks of their lived experience of discrimination, animosity, displacement due to land erosion, etc.[3]

The role of new media and media logic in the facilitation of political entrepreneurship in the Global South, especially among migrant populations, is a field that has received sparse attention.[4] This paper is the study of how Sukur Ali, a person of East Bengali Muslim origin in Assam, garnered increasing visibility and individual popularity as he was subjected to the gaze of the hegemonic public eye, albeit laced with ridicule, in the media coverage of electoral politics involving mass electronic media as well as social media platforms in Assam and managed to turn it around towards his own end with varying degrees of success. The host society may apprehend his media performance in the register of cringe, yet such content operates with certain affordances in the new media ecology that enabled Sukur Ali to position his media performances as that of marginalised "other." These performances pushed him into prominence in the attention economy of online and offline public and hybridised its political implications which enabled his position of entrepreneurship. Sukur Ali's case presents us with an opportunity to address and understand how the dynamics of political entrepreneurship are driven by phenomena such as "microcelebrity" and "cringe," in a mediated field where the migrant population of Muslims of East Bengali origin in Assam are often framed in negative terms by the dominant section.

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Subalternising and Politicising Cringe

The ethnolinguistic animosity towards East Bengali Muslims in Assam has dovetailed with the logic of attention economies of new media to propel Sukur Ali towards prominence. It might very well be the case that in the beginning, Sukur Ali's trajectory started as a case of "accidental celebrity."[5] His mediated public performances have been received in a register that is ambivalent, often in the tune of negative stereotypes of his community among dominant sections while garnering him increased visibility and further facilitating his political and other aspirations. The singularity of his case points towards the rise of new subjectivities in figuring the migrant as electronic media and television news channels in Assam covered Sukur Ali and aided his rise to prominence and sometimes such representations overlap with the social media coverages. Sukur Ali used the media as a platform for opinionisation and in the process, himself became a content by generating multiple opinion circles and media content around him on social media platforms, the treatment he received in the comments left by users on YouTube and in the news clips of Sukur Ali uploaded to the official YouTube channels of Assamese news media hints at the genre of evocative content that circulates on the internet, and how certain forms of humour operate through them. His is a story of deep dive into the hybridity of the media ecology that propelled Sukur Ali into prominence evolving through the different facets of cringe internet content, its affective and socio-economic determinants. The dynamics of cringe within the digital media logics and logistics helps us to understand Sukur Ali's position as a political entrepreneur providing a new understanding of migrant subjectivities using media as a unit of data that is open to critical analysis.

Hashtags have emerged as a major methodological tool in locating content on digital media.[6] In this case study "#sukurali" became the key content locator primarily on YouTube and Facebook as part of the purposive sampling to sieve contents that had the highest number of views. In the extant scholarship, metrics such as "views" and "likes" has been considered a productive means of methodologically understanding user engagement with social media content.[7] Some of these were news stories uploaded on YouTube by official, verified handles of Assamese news media channels, while others were videos edited and created from news stories by users. For the sampling purpose, two news channel videos were selected with more than one million views each, and three user-generated videos, each one of which has around 1.5 million views while another has nearly a million views. The comments left under the news videos from the Assamese channel's official YouTube handle were indicative of the user responses to Sukur Ali. On Facebook, "#sukurali" generated the same content as was available on YouTube, and one video was selected which was representative of an ordinary user attempting to get a sound bite/interview from Sukur Ali that could be circulated as funny/hilarious content. A user-generated meme image detailed later shows how memes can make any content such as those of Sukur Ali go viral on social media platforms and become a trending topic of discussion.[8]

The mediatisation of current social and political processes forces us to rethink the role of multimedia artefacts such as images and videos that operate in conjunction with texts.[9] Critical Discourse Analysis, therefore, has taken a turn towards a more multi-modal analysis i.e., taking into account the role of media other than text. These amalgamations of multiple media may sometimes act in conjunction but can also meander toward contrasting meanings. Such amalgamations also often rely heavily on inter-textual references to other texts or broader discourses, as is often the case with content on social media platforms.[10] Critical Discourse Analysis has been quite sensitive to the issue of power differentials that permeate the discursive production of social relations since its inception.[11] It zeroes on the discursive construction of reality, where the ordering of social individuals and groups into hierarchies as the "self" and the "other" as the "insider" and the "outsider" takes place and is embedded in everyday social life as the "truth."[12] Critical Discourse Analysis, therefore, finds wide application in research that deals with dominant and subaltern groups, racism, discrimination, marginalisation, etc. It also helps uncover the associational linkages between certain descriptive terms, negative stereotypes, metaphorical allusions, and certain population groups getting normalised in language and thought (for instance, the use of animalistic metaphors, such as infiltrating rodents and vermin, in descriptions of immigrant and refugee groups).[13] Such an approach allows Critical Discourse Analysis to understand how specific incidents or interactions are framed i.e., how the ordering of social groups and individuals along power differentials and stereotypical allusions takes place in the case of a particular incident or utterance,[14] thus, facilitating an explanatory bridge between the micro or the specific instances and utterances, and the macro or the larger social discourse around a particular issue or area.[15]

Scholars such as Marwick, Tufeckci, Khalikova, and others have framed an understanding of how the branding of oneself takes place online leading to varying amounts of fame; what counts as cringe humour online; how such content circulates online and gains a lot of traction; how the dynamics of celebrityhood occur online; and how "microcelebrity" status can be leveraged towards different ends. Thomas Blom Hansen's work on political entrepreneurs in India acts as a point of departure by showing how individuals from subaltern backgrounds can become prominent in the public spheres as mediators between the state and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, someone who acts as facilitators of welfare resources, securing bureaucratic paperwork, etc. Hansen focused on the capability of such individuals (local "big man") to engage in "sovereign violence" as one of the modes through which they gained prominence in the public sphere among subaltern groups and then used this prominence to act as mediators who "got things done" (as compared to a labyrinthine bureaucratic system). This publicity and prominence could then be leveraged by these individuals to court political parties as viable electoral players who could draw support from population groups.[16] This characteristic of gaining prominence or becoming well-known in the public sphere of political entrepreneurs by unconventional means is reflected in the current tendencies of using media platforms and the trending practices of going viral. Newer forms

of political entrepreneurship by those who do not enjoy significant privilege have emerged since Hansen's seminal work in the field, some that also look into the role of new media and specifically new media platforms. These insurgent modes need not necessarily include any forms of violence and require astute usage of social media platforms to gain publicity.[17] Such individuals can also seem to have the capability to act as mediators between the state, political parties, and subaltern groups. These two bodies of scholarship, on political entrepreneurship and new media, inform the analysis of the case of Sukur Ali.

The Politics of "Othering" in Mass Media: Sukur Ali in Contents and Comments

Sukur Ali is from a socio-economically disadvantaged background and hails from the Assamese district of Dhubri district in Assam which borders Bangladesh. In 2019, he stood for the Lok Sabha Elections from Dhubri constituency at the age of 26 as an independent candidate.[18] He received a little over 9,000 votes, but his media interviews and sound-bites garnered him quite a bit of fame (or infamy). The principal among these media clips is an interview with an Assamese news channel in which he speaks on the Prime Minister in English, which was widely shared on social media handles in Assam and is usually labelled as hilarious or funny. Although he seemed critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) during his media campaign for the 2019 elections, he became a "star campaigner" for BJP in the 2021 Assam Legislative Assembly Election. During this phase as well, he garnered attention for his media interviews. He even made appearances with Himanta Biswa Sarma, the Chief Ministerial candidate of BJP. He has since started a YouTube channel showcasing his visits to various districts and life events (such as his wedding) which has often made its way into Assamese news channels. Media persons and ordinary citizens usually view these sound bites of Sukur Ali, hoping for more humorous content. Ordinary citizens mill around him for selfies and take videos of him speaking. He has been "roasted"[19] by social media personality and influencer Carryminati as well, who is quite well known across the Hindi-speaking part of the country.[20]

Sukur Ali's rise to prominence happened through electronic mass media, Assamese news channels to be precise.[21] A lot of the user-generated content on Sukur Ali features bits that are copied and edited from the news clips of his interviews. This re-mediation, often negative and mocking, is then embellished with sound effects, graphics, and commentary. The interview that is often found online was aired by the news channel *Pratidin Time* in 2020. It was his commentary in English on a variety of topics including the Prime Minister, the then Health Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, and other deliberations that are usually extracted for making these video clips.[22] Videos such as these often have views in the millions.

But as has been mentioned earlier, he has been in the media's limelight since 2019. His coverage by major news channels often involved a cornucopia of background music, slow-motion montages of him walking, etc. Such

dramatisation and eventalisation have become common in vernacular news channels, aimed at evoking affect and attention.[23] Thus, coverage of Sukur Ali's visit to a location where he purportedly seeks to conduct the shooting of scenes for a movie inspired by Bangladesh's viral sensation Hero Alam begins with a dialogue from Salman Khan's film Dabang playing in the background: "*swagat nahi karoge hamara.*" The entire coverage by *Prag News* has a sardonic commentary with a sarcastic tone by the journalist, with commentaries such as "nobody could recognize the diamond among the stones" (referring to his Lok Sabha defeat).[24] *Prag News* also covered his defeat in a college students' union election in Gauripur town of Dhubri in 2019 where he is seen breaking down into tears.[25] The coverage also has interviews of students who stated that they did not consider him to be a serious candidate and more of a "joker." The stylistic components used by the mass media coverage were certainly drawn from the larger memetic cache—background music, laugh tracks, or sound effects—aimed at increasing the "shareability" of the content.[26]

Image.1: "*Dhubri's Sukur Ali to Make "Hero Alom" Inspired Movie!! | Speaks on Political Future,*" Prag News, YouTube, June 23, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3FBSUo_eE8

Such coverage continued after Sukur Ali changed his political stand and switched to supporting the BJP. He immediately seemed to have caught the eye of the Party given his public persona and he was classified as a "star campaigner." His meeting with the Chief Minister was also the cause of much hilarity and was widely transmitted, where he is made to don a *jaapi* (a traditional wide-brimmed bamboo hat) and carry a *bota* (a plaque). He appears clueless while the Chief Minister directs him on what to do, while gently chiding him.[27]

Sukur Ali's framing in the news media and social media did not change, however, after he became a "star campaigner." His primary attraction remained that of a clownish figure who attracted crowds. News channels interviewed him whenever possible on the campaign trail and he did not come out looking good after them. When questioned about the names of India's President and BJP Cabinet Ministers of Assam, he was unable to answer.[28] Yet his visits before the 2021 Legislative Assembly elections drew massive crowds who came to record his speeches and his interviews. Political figures could not draw the same crowds, as the journalists covering these events themselves stated.
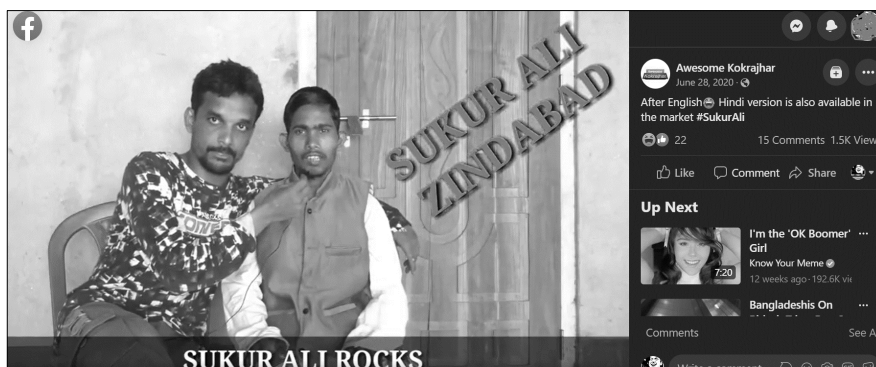
Image.2: "After English, Hindi Version is Also Available in the Market #SukurAli," Awesome Kokrajhar, Facebook, June 28, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/100063788466956/videos/272951487289216.

Image.3: Comments section of YouTube video of a news channel's coverage of Sukur Ali's plan to make a movie inspired by Hero Alom and visit to Samaguri

The user-generated content relating to Sukur Ali prepared by mixing and mashing content from various sources often had stylistic elements that evoked humour and fun using popular internet vernacular. Videos of Sukur Ali speaking English often had the phrase "RIP English" in it. RIP (Rest in Peace)

is meant here to indicate the "death of English," metaphorically providing a cue commonly used on social media platforms to show how the language that was deployed by Sukur Ali is ripe for mockery and humour.[29] It has also been made part of compilations of people speaking bad or improper English or making faux pas. Social media content creators, too, tried to cash in and often interviewed him in English or Hindi, hoping to get higher clicks and views. These were then remediated and transmitted further. The memes on Sukur Ali are in a similar vein. The focus lies on his physical appearance, his funny English, and his lack of knowledge (Image.2). Few of the comments on the videos reveal considerable animosity towards Muslims of East Bengali origin. Some of these comments are outright offensive, while others are pointed and snide in the discriminatory rhetoric. *Miya* is used as a pejorative referent in a few comments, while some of them had outright accusations of "Bangladeshi" as well. Sukur Ali's heavily accented Assamese leads to further suspicions about his nationality. In one of the comment threads, one person calls him a Bangladeshi, and that he cannot even speak Assamese (Image.3). One commenter suggested that Sukur Ali make his Hero Alom inspired movie in Bangladesh, while yet another expresses doubt about whether Dhubri district even falls in Assam (implying it is Bangladeshi, especially as a border district). One commenter uses "Miya kid" as a slur against him, while others engage in phonetic wordplay to call him "*kukur*" (Assamese word for dog) as it sounds phonetically very similar to Sukur. This is a recurring theme across many comment threads. The commentators wished Sukur Ali to be killed, presumably for his temerity to stand for elections in Assam while being unable to speak Assamese correctly. Some commenters pinpoint Sukur Ali's pronunciation errors while speaking Assamese. They point towards his pronunciation of the Assamese word "*bhanga*" (to break) as "*banga*" while talking about estuaries breaking and causing floods (Image.4). Due to his video with Himanta Bishwa Sharma and his role as a star campaigner, some have also referred to him as "*Mama*'s" (Sharma's sobriquet in Assam) "*Miya bhagin*" (Miya nephew).
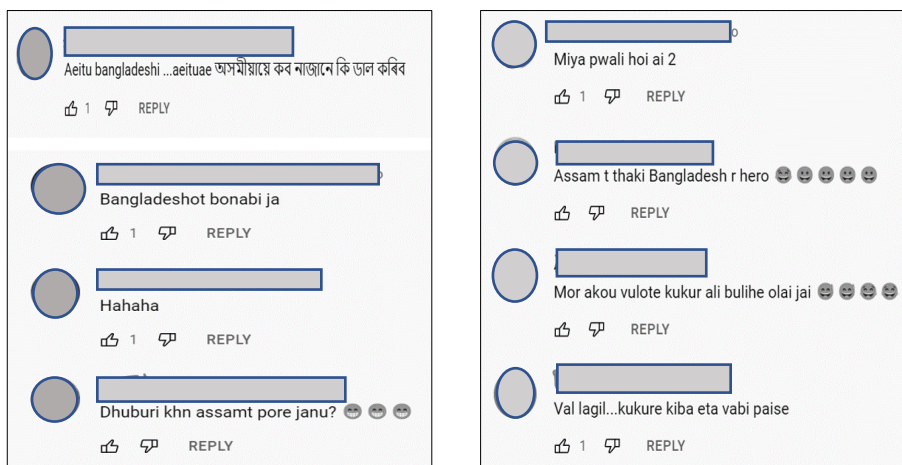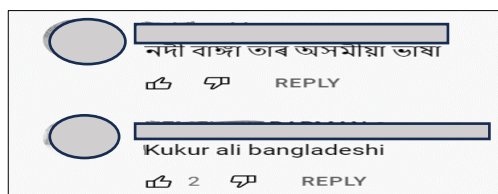

Image.4: Comments section of YouTube video of a news channel's coverage of Sukur Ali's plan to make a movie inspired by Hero Alom and visit to Samagur

Evocative Content and Emotive Circulation

Using the language of othering, like slurs, in the case of Sukur Ali was based on the prevailing ideas of ethnic belonging in Assam. Many comments in YouTube videos of news media coverage refer to him as "*pagol*" or crazy, and somebody who is lacking in intellectual acuity i.e. an idiot. The majority of the comments

are in this vein. This provides a clue to his subsequent "viral" fame and accruing of publicity. Internet content with performances of non-proficient cultural markers such as accents, language, bodily gestures, etc. that deprecates the subject themselves has always been very popular.[30] When such content is sourced from individuals or groups from marginalised communities (in this case, a Muslim youth who is of East Bengali origin in Assam) the emotive reaction of mockery, cynicism, and outright hatred is accentuated. Performances that are considered "idiotic" are widely transmitted through digital networks, gaining ever more attention and emotional investment with each circuitous loop. The economies of emotion and attention are linked here, as the spectator/viewer/user feels a visceral desire to react to such content.[31] News coverage blurs the line between electronic news media and online user-generated mimetic media using stylistic components and elements that are exaggerated when re-mediated, often in a hostile manner, by ordinary users who subscribe to hegemonic discourses of identity. All of this is done to maximise the "eyeballs" or attention that such content can grab.

      In his performances in the mediated roles, Sukur Ali's linguistic delivery is in the form of an English that is considered "broken," and an Assamese that is highly accented given his East Bengali background. Sukur Ali is here performing in a register that draws attention towards him and pushes for his social visibility, for it is in the language of the dominant sections rather than his mother tongue. This is akin to what Homi Bhabha had called mimicry, which can be both "a resemblance and a menace." Someone speaking from a subaltern position has to often speak using the language of hegemonic classes to be comprehensible, even when it is towards the end of subversion or transgression.[32] As the user comments have shown that although Sukur Ali's utterances are comprehensible to the dominant sections yet they are usually dismissive and suspicious of people like Sukur Ali, as belonging to a certain position in the established social order. While this makes him the subject of mockery, it also draws attention to him and grants him visibility in the public sphere which his community is often denied. There is a possibility that these reactions are fuelled, perhaps, by a fear of mimicry of dominant sections, where the supposed "*bohiragoto*" or migrant-outsider is performing in an idiom that is "almost but not quite," an idiom that takes its place in the public sphere.[33]

Hybrid Media Ecology and Attention Economy

The hybridity of the modern media ecology in the case of Sukur Ali is one of the driving factors behind his prominent status in the media. Instead of a strict distinction between old and new media, hybridity considers the logic of one influence on the other and vice-versa, thus reconsidering them in relative terms of older print and electronic mass media and newer digital media such as social media platforms.[34] Traditional media has adapted to and appropriated the newer forms and both are increasingly interdependent and entangled in the artificial intelligence based algorithm-driven milieu.[35] In representing Sukur Ali by mass media news channels they have borrowed stylistic elements and mimetic content from social media with an eye, perhaps, towards shareability

of their news clips through the internet. These news channels also focus on their presence on social media platforms, as news clips of Sukur Ali are regularly updated on the YouTube channels of these television news outlets.

This hybrid ecology also enables non-elite political actors such as Sukur Ali to gain varying amounts of traction in the attention economy online. Attention has emerged as the key resource in today's media ecology and bestows visibility to an individual, a political party or a movement.[36] While the media ecology has become more horizontally structured where non-elite individuals can capture attention, traditional mass media dealing with news has become more invested in presenting spectacle, often blurring the boundaries between entertainment and politics, and the boundaries between the "politician, political pundits, and citizen."[37] There is potential in the spectacular of driving up views and drawing attention towards those who do not possess much clout in the traditional mass media. It can and has been used by political upstarts seeking to disrupt established political parties' dominance, often using social media platforms, which then gains them the limelight in mass media.[38]

It cannot be said that Sukur Ali is engaging in disrupting the establishment but has been successful in drawing attention and enhancing the visibility of his activities through the hybrid media ecology.[39] His community rarely receives any visibility save for being framed as a problem, blamed for illegal immigration, population explosion, land encroachment, etc. Sukur Ali, due to his interviews, the remixes and memes of these interviews, and later self-produced YouTube content, has managed to acquire these key resources of visibility and attention in the hybrid media ecology. It is, however, unclear from his online presence whether he managed to do this on his own will or was an accident. Sukur Ali is a case in a wider sphere where such creation and operation of celebrity logic is a vital part of media operations and celebrities, and branding is quite important.[40]

Visibility is, thus, key to the circulatory practices that sustain online ecologies, and this applies to the political field as well. Sukur Ali has garnered quite a bit of visibility through his video interviews and speeches. Due to a lack of data, it is not possible at this juncture to say whether this was intentional that he turned the adverse publicity he received into a political career even without electoral success. He has used the platform he has received from byte-hungry news outlets to speak of erosion and floods, an issue that plagues much of the region. He has also lent his support to the argument that there is a need for a museum that showcases the culture of the Bengali Muslim community. Such political entrepreneurship has also been seen in other regions of the world. It disrupts the hegemony of dominant groups over political discourses and narratives.[41] In this case, Sukur Ali's very appearance and utterance, while being mocked and reviled, are transgressive in nature, as members of his social strata are usually excluded from media and public spaces.

There is an ambivalence to the visibility that Sukur Ali has received, as it comes couched in stereotypes of mockery. This ambivalence becomes starker when one considers Sukur Ali's case in light of the distinction that Axel Honneth makes between visibility and recognition. While visibility often includes only a bare, elementary cognition of an individual or community,

recognition involves gestures that signal social fraternity and respect.[42] This is hardly surprising, considering that Sukur Ali is operating in a rather ethnocratic milieu where the Muslims of East Bengali origin are marginalised. Ethnocracies emerge when a particular ethnic group exercises a disproportionate amount of control over the socio-economic and political processes as well as the public sphere of a particular multi-ethnic region. Although such territories have democratic features, ethnicity (in this case ethnolinguistic identity) becomes a determinant of popular sovereignty and of many rights and privileges. In this case, it has determined what constitutes a legitimate form of claim-making, and even whether this claim-making is comprehensible in the first place.[43]

Superiority, Exclusion, and Cringe Humour

The humour, in this case, is not always neutral, of course, as there are subjects who are laughing and subjects that are considered abject, objects of mockery. The participatory structure of the content's framing is such that it includes certain spectators to join in the humour, while others might feel excluded.[44] Ryan Milner and Wendy Phillips mobilise existing scholarship on humour to argue that even humorous content that is ironic and playful often leads to the creation of an "us" that is laughing and a "them" that does not, or a "them" that is the butt of the joke and that this is often determined by socio-economic and historical factors.[45] The exclusionary push is more pronounced in certain cases when slurs add to the negative stereotyping. In a lot of comments, one finds references to excerpts of Sukur Ali's words, such as "I am the politics 2021…" or his statements in Assamese regarding floods caused by dams that had broken down. This partial citation leaves enough room for tonalities other than the original statement to be interpreted. These comments parody the original by taking up a very critical, mocking, or cynical tone toward the original utterance.[46]

        The orientation of mockery towards Sukur Ali's lack of proficiency in English and Hindi is not, perhaps, unique to Assam. Social media personalities such as Carryminati, who is known for his vicious, expletive-laden "roasts" of content that is often classified as cringe had made media content on Sukur Ali. Dictionary definitions of cringe often include mention of a corporeal reaction to the viewing of uncomfortable or embarrassing content. Visceral reactions are at play here, too, just as in the circulation of "idiotic" content, and are part of the drive to share them in networks.[47] In cases like that of the content generated on Sukur Ali, the cringe is in the manner of "superiority humour" laced with contempt and *schadenfreude* that allows one to look down upon, from an elevated position, the action of another that is considered to have deviated from established social norms i.e., the proper way of speaking English/Assamese and other actions.[48] Cringe draws strong emotional reactions that mobilise people into an online collective. The collective cringing here is driven by ethnolinguistic fault lines that manifested itself in the comments of the users on social media.[49] similar social media platform groups around the world deal exclusively with cringe content giving spectators the pleasure of watching the content and distancing themselves from behaviour considered deviant or

disgusting. Such groups often consider themselves justified in the mockery of their targets for the violation of prevalent norms.[50]

Cringe in India has a history of being aimed at those belonging to the marginalised sections, and caste and class are often major determinants. This was evidenced in the reaction of the well-heeled middle- and upper-class and caste reactions to content created by rural and disadvantaged users on the short video platform TikTok, which has since been banned by the government for security reasons.[51] As the overt and sly reactions of "Bangladeshi," "Miya" etc., show, there is an element of ethnolinguistic animosity here, and content such as this makes it easier to bring tensions to the fore. The supposed cringe here allows the spectator to disavow the "other" as the other, as not being part of the whole, as a means of shoring up the contentious, fractious, nebulous definition of an Assamese (one of the most cited clauses of the Assam Accord). The comment in Image.3 regarding Dhubri district also reflects the "suspect" for being a bordering district with Bangladesh. Abu Sufyan argues that this has been a result of state doctrine that has privileged notions of a hard boundary between the two nations, founded upon territorial security, prevention of smuggling, terrorism, illegal immigration, etc.[52] This is driven by ethnocratic arguments of sequestering land and resources, rather than focusing on historical ties and cultural affinities that mark the "social boundary" between the borderlands of the two nations. The comments show that such notions of a "hard" boundary with ethnocratic connotations have become a part of the popular social discourse.

There is a "deep story" at play that directs the comments on media platforms and the intersectionality of identity politics. The concept, coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild, alludes to the "feels-as-if" narrative drawn out of the emotional undercurrents of communities that determine what they consider facts and the values they choose to uphold.[53] Here, the deep story is a narrative of an illegal immigrant, a Bangladeshi Miya, the straight-jacket imposed on East Bengali Muslims, their mannerisms, and considered fit only for mockery and an uncouth deviation from the proper comportment of the Indigenous Assamese.

"Micro-Celebrity" and Political Entrepreneurship

The socio-political entrepreneur might conjure the figure of the local "big men," found in the works of Thomas Blom Hansen. These were prominent figures, who "got things done" by wielding considerable sovereignty (and sovereign violence) and mediated the access to resources and state welfare for disadvantaged populations. As Hansen has shown such individuals may often use their entrepreneurial skills in becoming functionaries of political parties due to the considerable following of voters they can muster. They are well-known enough in the public sphere that they can even become elected officials and legislators.[54] Over the past two decades, the scholarship on political entrepreneurs has located a certain shift away from the local "big men" to more professionalised brokers who facilitate access to populations for political parties, NGOs, and others.[55] As such, these figures have always been attractors of attention and visibility in their respective regions.

Sukur Ali gained considerable visibility and attention on media platforms, and enterprise as a political actor based on his status as a "networked microcelebrity," which Tufekci describes as someone whose "attention-commanding ability is based on status, as practiced within and through participatory media but not limited to it, rather than institutional affiliation or membership in political parties in the traditional sense."[56] The celebrity-hood operates very well in the hybrid media ecology as it often blurs the distinctions between politics, popular culture, entertainment, competitive market values, etc. Personal branding and individuation attract visibility and attention. "Microcelebrity" involves a set of practices "in which the audience is viewed as a fan base."[57] Sukur Ali's selfhood or his "networked self," coming from a disadvantaged and marginalised position, is what draws visibility towards him. While the audience of Sukur Ali cannot be called a fan base, they do form an avid viewership. Sukur Ali may not fit the traditional idea of a celebrity as someone who is acclaimed and liked by an adoring fan base, but he is a celebrity as someone whose status invites considerable attention, even if it is negative.[58] It is his personal brand, even as a target of mockery and as someone considered clownish, that draws visibility towards him, in the form of crowds in political party meetings and views, and remixes online.

All of this humour and mockery, however, has not deterred him from continuing to make public appearances or giving interviews in Hindi and English (which continues to be "bad" or lacking in proficiency). As mentioned above, he attracted quite large crowds during election campaigns, something even seasoned politicians may fail to do. His "idiotic" performances have led to him becoming a "microcelebrity" on the internet and to an extent in electronic news media in Assam. Individuals that have acquired such status usually have a "niche" audience, which in this case are largely spectating consumers from Assam.[59] With each cycle of transmission and reaction, the public persona of Sukur Ali becomes more widespread. He has attempted to turn the negative publicity he has received on its head. Ever since his electioneering days, Sukur Ali has been working on his desire to pursue acting and filmmaking. He has a YouTube channel named Sukur Ali Productions with nearly 27,000 followers.[60] The channel hosts music videos and short films made by Sukur Ali and his crew, mostly inspired by Bollywood gangster flicks.

Sukur Ali has also managed to leverage his new-found political celebrityhood to secure a role as a mediator who facilitates access to the state's welfare provisions. This is a role that has been well established historically to be one that political entrepreneurs often occupy. The last time Sukur Ali was in the news was in November 2022 when he was arrested for embezzlement of public funds. He had been serving as the Chairman of the Modati Village Council Development Committee (VCDC) in the Debitola Development Zone. VCDCs serve at the level of village Panchayats in Assam's autonomous Bodoland Territorial Region. Sukur Ali had allegedly misappropriated funds under the *Prime Minister Awas Yojana* meant for poverty-stricken families in the village to construct houses. He was almost assaulted in public by the irate families before the police rescued him.[61]

Sukur Ali's performances are in the register of stereotypes noticeable in one's accent, mannerisms, clothing, etc. This is not a painless process, a presentation of self that is reviled by the dominant sections of society, but yet manages to grab their attention through media logic. Like the different modes of resistance and assertions of dignity by the Bengali Muslim community in Assam, such as the Miya poetry movement, Sukur Ali's case presents an opportunity to look at other modes of presenting the self by an individual of a community considered illegal immigrant, which charts a course that might go beyond resistance.[62] One cannot affirm whether this hypervisibility was an intentional act on his part from the beginning. The architecture of social media platforms are designed to encourage self-branding and self-promotion in various ways, and cases of "unintentional celebritification" are not rare.[63] He has carved a place for himself in the media ecology of the state, in a manner that has not been perceived by the dominant sections to pose a serious threat to the status quo. This has, however, not saved Sukur Ali from being a target of derision and contempt, both along the lines of his identity and for his performances (often for both). It puts Sukur Ali in a location where he performs in an idiom that the dominant section considers stereotypical and fit for ridicule and mockery, but for that very reason cannot help but pay attention to.

Sukur Ali's performances as a Bengali Muslim in Assam are acts of negotiation with the hegemonic gaze of caste Hindu Assamese society provide a window of insight to look into the new subjectivities rising among migrant populations, their sense of selfhood and its expression resulting in entrepreneurial rise providing platforms for some recognition in political and media circles. These assertions, though in a different register, are part of a larger body of political-cultural work from the Bengali Muslim community in Assam that seeks to establish themselves as legitimate parts of the *body politic* of Assam.

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Chakma Refugees and Indigenous People of Arunachal Pradesh: A Field Report on Perceptions

By

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It has been more than fifty years since the migration and settlement of Chakma refugees in Arunachal Pradesh. Despite such a long stay, they have not been accepted by the Indigenous people in Arunachal as one of them. There has been a constant demand for the deportation of refugees from the State by the Indigenous people under the leadership of the All Arunachal Pradesh Students' Union (AAPSU) since the early 1990s. In a society, assimilation among different communities requires a healthy perception towards each other and perhaps the fault line in rebuilding this natural bond of assimilation between these two communities resulted in the non-acceptance of Chakma refugees as part of the Arunachali Society by the Indigenous people. This report is an attempt to know the perception of Chakma refugees and Indigenous people towards each other in the light of a long pending refugee issue. The study is primarily based on empirical data obtained from a field study in which an equal number of refugee and Indigenous respondents have been purposefully selected from eight villages each in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh where a maximum number of refugees are found.

The negative perception of host communities towards refugees around the globe is a well-known phenomenon. The host population often perceives and considers refugees as ungrateful, creating social problems, threats to security, causing environmental degradation, and having an incompatible culture.[1] Like any other part of the world where refugees are found, the refugee issue in Arunachal Pradesh is also to a great extent determined by how indigenous people and Chakmas perceive each other**.** Chakmas along with Hajong and Tibetan refugees are some of the longest-settled refugees in Arunachal Pradesh, living as stateless entities since their migration from

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erstwhile East Pakistan in 1964.[2] Chakmas along with Hajong refugees migrated from erstwhile East Pakistan between 1964–69 and were accommodated in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) by the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Government of India in collaboration with the NEFA Administration. Their original homeland is in the Chittagong Hills Tracts of present-day Bangladesh.[3] Fellow Chakmas who migrated along with Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh have successfully integrated themselves with the host population and settled without any hue and cry in states like Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura, etc., and have become part of their respective societies and States. However, in Arunachal Pradesh, the story is altogether different and Chakmas have not been embraced by the host populations i.e., Indigenous people, therefore their absorption remains problematic as Arunachalis have never approved of their presence in the state permanently.[4] It is imperative to mention here that till 1972, the North East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh) was under the administration of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, with the Governor of Assam acting as the Agent to the President of India.[5] Since the territory was under the administration of the Government of India, it was easy to settle Chakmas without much administrative and legal hurdles and there was no opposition over their settlement as the host population neither had any representation anywhere to voice their concern nor were aware of the future implications and also the area was thinly populated. The host population started opposing only in the post-1972 years or to say post-settlement, especially in the early 1990s.

The host-refugee dynamic in Arunachal Pradesh is largely determined by the perception towards each other. Perception can be understood as how something is regarded, understood, or interpreted. Perception driven by the apprehension of being marginalised in its homeland by the outsiders (refugees) in social, economic, and political spheres is what the Indigenous people of the state are worried about. The Committee for the Citizenship Rights of Chakma and Hajong of Arunachal Pradesh (CCRCHAP) and the Arunachal Pradesh Chakma Students' Union (APCSU) keep on denying such apprehension by stating they are not against the rights and protection given to the Indigenous people of the state but are demanding their basic rights enshrined in law of the land. The AAPSU, however, held the fact that Arunachal Pradesh is a "protected" state under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, and therefore the settlement of the refugees violated the said law and thus the settlement itself was illegal and arbitrary. The CCRCHAP believed that they were forced to migrate to India leaving behind everything in East Pakistan due to the anti-Jumma regime of East Pakistan. They alleged that their people were deliberately targeted by the Muslim majority regime through religious persecution and manmade environmental disasters caused by the construction of the Kaptai Dam. They state that they did not come to NEFA by themselves rather were taken and settled by the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Government of India, and NEFA Administration under the five settlements schemes, and therefore, they are not illegal immigrants or settlers. They also validate their settlement by citing the Indira-Mujeeb Agreement of 1971. However, no such provision was found by the author after going through the said agreement. The

CCRCHAP held the opinion that since they were legally settled by the Government of India in collaboration with the NEFA Administration, after staying for decades, they deserve to be recognized as citizens of India along with other basic rights available to citizens of this country. On the refugee issue, the State Government is inclined towards the demands of the AAPSU and has been requesting the Union Government to deport refugees from Arunachal Pradesh. From time to time, the State Cabinet Ministers, including the Chief Minister, have been giving public statements on the deportation of refugees. However, the Union Government on multiple occasions has shown its willingness to grant citizenship to the refugees in Arunachal Pradesh. The CCRCHAP members too have mentioned on various occasions that the Union leadership has assured them of resolving the issue within the territorial jurisdiction of Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, the Centre and State seem to have different opinions on the issue. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has often voiced for the protection of the rights of the Chakma refugees and has often been alleged by the AAPSU as being "one-sided" in their approach as they have never taken cognisance of the rights and protection of the Indigenous population and rather ignored their genuine apprehension of being marginalised on their soil by the alien population in future. On multiple occasions, the AAPSU has also alleged the Union Government harbouring a "step-motherly" attitude towards the apprehensions and concerns of the Indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh. The CCRCHAP, however, thought otherwise and alleged the Government of Arunachal Pradesh of discriminating against the refugees thereby by not complying with the court's directives. The AAPSU is also being alleged by the CCRCHAP of physical assaults and damaging properties like houses, and granaries of the refugees. The AAPSU on the other hand alleged Chakmas of indulging in criminal activities such as murder, theft, rape, extortion, etc., against the Indigenous people which of course has always been denied by the Chakmas. Since there are allegations and counter-allegations between the refugees and Indigenous people, the perception towards each other remains unhealthy and also proves as a stumbling block on the path of amicable resolution of the issue. It is important to mention here that this unhealthy perception towards each other is driven by the popular understanding of "sons of the soil"[6] versus the "unwanted outsiders."

In this study, an attempt is been made to extract the opinions of both the Indigenous and Chakma respondents to know how they perceive each other and suggest measures that could pave the way for the amicable resolution of the long-pending refugee issue. A total of 190 respondents including 95 respondents each from Chakma refugees and Indigenous people were purposefully selected considering the convenience and purpose of the study. The study was conducted in the four circles of Changlang district inhabited by Chakma refugees and from each circle two Chakma villages were purposefully chosen. These four circles were Bordumsa, Diyun, Kharsang, and Miao and the eight Chakma villages are: a) Bijoypur-I, b) Bijoypur-III, c) Gautampur, d) Dumpathar, e) Milonpur, f) Ratnapur, g) Anandapur, and h) Devapuri. The eight Indigenous villages, two each from four circles, selected for the study are

a) Wakhetna, b) Magantong, c) Dumba Singpho, d) Dumba Mossang, e) Kharsang HQ-I, f) Balinong, g) Neotan and h) Pisi. The refugee respondents are categorised into four groups, namely: a) common people, b) APCSU leaders, c) CCRCHAP leaders, and d) Gaon Buras. The Indigenous respondents comprised of the following groups: a) common people (80 respondents); b) All Changlang District Students' Union leaders (5 respondents); c) Panchayat leaders (5 respondents); and d) Gaon Burahs (5 respondents). From every Chakma and Indigenous village, 10 common people were selected along with 5 APCSU leaders, 5 CCRCHAP leaders, 5 Gaon Buras (Chakma), 5 District Students' Union leaders, 5 Panchayat leaders, and 5 Gaon Buras (Indigenous).

Legal Protection and Perception Towards Each Other

The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 holds an important place in the discourse of refugee issues in Arunachal Pradesh. This was passed by the British Government, and a boundary line was drawn in 1875 between Assam and the North East Frontier (now Arunachal Pradesh) to ensure security and peace in Assam.[7] The boundary line was known as the "Inner Line" and it prohibited the plain people from going beyond the Inner Line without proper documentation/pass. Any non-native who went beyond the Inner Line without a valid pass was liable to conviction with a fine of Rs.100 for the first offense and for subsequent offenses fine up to Rs.500 or simple or rigorous imprisonment for a term not exceeding three months or both.[8] When India gained Independence, the same law was continued under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru and was carried forward by his successors. Therefore, the Indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh under the leadership of AAPSU have always held the opinion that the very act of bringing and settling the non-native Chakmas and Hajongs violated the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, and thus illegal. Citing this law, the AAPSU still holds the opinion that Chakma and Hajong refugees are illegal immigrants and therefore they should be deported back from Arunachal Pradesh either to their homeland or somewhere else.

To understand the awareness of the refugees regarding this 1873 Regulation, the refugee respondents were asked: *Are you aware of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873?* To this question, 39 respondents, out of 80 common people (Chakma) which is 48.75 per cent answered "Yes" and 40 per cent of the respondents said they were not aware of any such regulation or law. 3 out of 5 Gaon Buras (Chakma) were aware of the law and 100 per cent of APCSU and CCRCHAP leaders answered "Yes" (Table.1).

Table.1: Responses to the Question: "Are you aware of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873?"

Respondents	Responses						Total
	Yes		No		No Answer		
	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	
Common Public	39	48.75	32	40.00	9	11.25	80
APCSU	5	100.00	0	0	0	0	5
CCRCHAP	5	100.00	0	0	0	0	5
Gaon Bura	3	60.00	2	40.00	0	0	5

Source: Field Survey, 2022, © Authors

The AAPSU has always believed that the casual decision of the then Governor of Assam to settle the refugees in Arunachal Pradesh (then NEFA) did not take into consideration the legal protection of the Indigenous tribal people and their tradition, culture, customs, and identity.[9] However, the refugee communities do not agree with the opinion and demand of the AAPSU to oust them from Arunachal Pradesh. The interviews also shed light on how refugees view their settlement in NEFA although the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, prohibited the unregulated entry and permanent settlement of non-natives. No Chakma respondents out of 95 agreed with the opinion of the AAPSU. A good number of respondents accounting for 44.22 per cent of the respondents said that their settlement was not in violation of any law as it was done by the Government of India. One CCRCHAP member expressed his opinion in this regard saying,

> When our people were settled in NEFA there was no independent or separate administration of NEFA rather it was under the control of the Government of India through the Governor of Assam. We were settled in NEFA by the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Government of India, in collaboration with the NEFA administration. Thus, the Government of India was the only competent authority to decide concerning NEFA and had decided to settle the Chakma-Hajong people. Therefore, the question of violating the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 does not arise.[10]

Approximately 53.68 per cent had no idea whether their settlement violated the regulation or not (Table.2).

Table.2: Responses to the Question: "Was the settlement of Chakma and Hajong refugees in violation of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873?"

Respondents	Responses						Total
	Yes		No		Do Not Know		
	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	
Common Public	0	0	30	37.50	50	62.50	80
APCSU	0	0	5	100.00	0	0	5
CCRCHAP	0	0	5	100.00	0	0	5
Gaon Bura	0	0	2	40.00	3	60.00	5

Source: Field Survey, 2022, © Authors

Various groups of Chakma respondents in response to the question regarding their perception of Indigenous people in their day-to-day relations with Indigenous people of nearby villages gave a positive image of peaceful habitation. 60 out of 80 common people (Chakma) which is 75.00 per cent answered that their day-to-day relations were friendly, and about 25 per cent of the respondents from this category considered their relations "Neither hostile nor friendly". No respondent answered their relations "Hostile". A respondent from Ratnapur village of Kharsang stated,

> Indigenous people as our brothers and sisters. We have lived together for the last many many years. We use the same roads, sit in the same marketplaces, and also establish matrimonial relations over the years. Hence, our relationship has been friendly.[11]

Table.3: Responses to the Question: "How would you describe the day-to-day relations of your community with Indigenous people of nearby villages?"

Respondents	Responses						Total
	Friendly		Hostile		Neither Hostile Nor Friendly		
	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	
Common Public	60	75.00	0	0	20	25.00	80
APCSU	5	100.00	0	0	0	0	5
CCRCHAP	4	80.00	0	0	1	20.00	5
Gaon Bura	3	60.00	0	0	2	40.00	5

Source: Field Survey, 2022, © Authors

The Arunachal Pradesh Chakma Students' Union (APCSU) also answered in tone describing their relations with the Indigenous people as "friendly". 4 out of 5 leaders of CCRCHAP which constitute 80.00 per cent considered their relationship with Indigenous people friendly and the rest of the 20.00 per cent answered in "Neither friendly nor hostile". So far as Gaon Buras (Chakma) were concerned, 60.00 per cent considered their relations to

be friendly and the rest of the 40.00 per cent answered "Neither friendly nor hostile". (Table.3).

The AAPSU is one of the important stakeholders of the Chakma-Hajong refugee issue in the state and has been leading the protest movements against the permanent settlement of the refugee communities on behalf of the Indigenous people for many decades. For the first time in this protest movement, the AAPSU served a "Quit Arunachal" notice to all the outsiders/non-natives, including Chakma refugees in August 1994, and urged them to leave the State by September 30, 1994. They kept on insisting that refugees have to be deported back to their original homeland (Bangladesh) or should be resettled in other parts of India. They stick to the point that refugees cannot be settled forever in Arunachal Pradesh as the State and its native people are being protected by the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, of 1873. They held the opinion that the said law does not permit non-natives to settle permanently in the northeast frontier State. Since the AAPSU are important stakeholders of the refugee issue in the State and have always been vocal against their permanent settlement, an attempt was made to know what Chakma respondents think about the AAPSU (Table.4). Out of 80 respondents (common people), 72 which is 90.00 per cent considered the AAPSU as hostile to the Chakma community, and 8 respondents which accounted for 10.00 per cent considered the AAPSU as neither friendly nor hostile. Interestingly no respondent from this category considers the AAPSU friendly to the refugees. Out of 5 APCSU leaders, 60.00 per cent consider the AAPSU to be "Hostile" and the rest of the 40.00 per cent answered "Neither friendly nor hostile". Among the 5 CCRCHAP leaders, 80.00 per cent stated the AAPSU as "Hostile" but 20.00 per cent of them answered "Neither friendly nor hostile". Out of 5 Chakma Gaon Buras, 60.00 per cent consider the AAPSU as "Hostile" and another 40.00 per cent said their relation was "Neither friendly nor hostile". No respondent out of the total considered the AAPSU and its attitude as "Friendly".

Table.4: Responses to the Question: "How would you rate the attitude of the AAPSU towards the Chakma Refugees?"

Respondents	Responses						Total
	Friendly		Hostile		Neither Hostile Nor Friendly		
	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	
Common Public	0	0	72	90.00	8	10.00	80
APCSU	0	0	3	60.00	2	40.00	5
CCRCHAP	0	0	4	80.00	1	20.00	5
Gaon Bura	0	0	3	60.00	2	40.00	5

Source: Field Survey, 2022, © Authors

The Indigenous people of the State perceived that once citizenship is granted to Chakma refugees in Arunachal Pradesh, Chakmas from across the international borders will migrate to Arunachal Pradesh to take advantage of citizenship. In such a situation, the State with already a huge Chakma population, would be flooded by hundreds and thousands of Chakmas from outside of India and the situation would arise where the "Sons of the soil" would be reduced to a minority in their homeland. Once they (Indigenous people) are outnumbered by the non-native refugee population, there will be negative social, economic, and political implications for the Indigenous people which most probably would be a disaster for their (Indigenous people) progress and development because there will be competition for already scarce resources and opportunities. Taking into account such perceptions of Indigenous people, a query was made to know the opinion of Chakma refugees (Table 5). To this perception, 92.50 per cent of the Chakma respondents (common people) disagree while 7.50 per cent answered do not know. Respondents who do not agree with this perception believe that under no circumstances they would welcome fresh people from any part of the country or world since they are already facing landlessness issues for both cultivation and residence. A respondent from Devapuri said that "there is no question of welcoming anyone from outside of our State (Arunachal Pradesh) because we (Chakma) have not had sufficient land since our settlement days. Many of us cultivate the agricultural lands of local landowners."[12] No APCSU, CCRCHAP, and Chakma Gaon Buras agree with such a perception. One of the CCRCHAP leaders said that "this perception is wrong. Neither will they come from Tripura and Mizoram, nor outside of India (referring to Bangladesh). In these States, they are citizens as well as ST (Scheduled Tribe) with separate political and administrative setups. Even if they want to come for any reason, we would not welcome them because there is no land to welcome them and also, we do not want to disturb the already fragile relationship between our community and the AAPSU and State Government."[13]

Table.5: Responses to the Question: "If citizenship is given, will it encourage the Chakmas from other states and country (Bangladesh) to migrate to Arunachal Pradesh?"

Respondents	Responses						Total
	Yes		No		Do Not Know		
	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	
Common Public	0	0	74	92.50	6	7.50	80
APCSU	0	0	5	100.00	0	0	5
CCRCHAP	0	0	5	100.00	0	0	5
Gaon Bura	0	0	5	100.00	0	0	5

Source: Field Survey, 2022, © Authors

Citizenship is the core of the refugee issue between the refugees under the leadership of the CCRCHAP and the AAPSU on behalf of Indigenous people. It is important to mention here that even the State Government intends

to resettle the refugees outside Arunachal Pradesh. The question of whether the Chakma and Hajong are citizens of India or not surfaced in a writ petition filed by Khudiram Chakma of Diyun Circle in the Gauhati High Court known as "Khudiram Chakma vs. Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh."[14]. This writ petition was filed against the eviction order issued by Circle Officer, Diyun, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, on February 15, 1984. The judgment was pronounced on April 30, 1992, when the court did not recognize Chakmas as citizens of India. Against this judgment, a civil petition was filed in the Supreme Court of India. The State Government also filed a counter-petition. The former was dismissed and later was admitted under the title "State of Arunachal Pradesh vs. Khudiram Chakma, 1993."[15] Meanwhile, the central government intended to grant citizenship to refugees. Amidst this legal battle, in August 1994, the AAPSU urged refugees and other outsiders to leave Arunachal Pradesh by September 1994. Apprehending the violation of rights and forceful deportation of refugees, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) filed a petition in the Supreme Court. This petition was known by the name "National Human Rights Commission vs. State of Arunachal Pradesh and Another." To deal with the contingency that was arising in the wake of the anti-refugee movement in the State, the Supreme Court passed an interim order in November 1995 in which the state government was directed to safeguard the rights and liberties of refugees by preventing the AAPSU from taking coercive action. In 2007, another civil writ petition was filed in the Supreme Court titled "Committee for C.R. of C.A.A.P. and Ors. vs. State of Arunachal Pradesh and Ors."[16] and the judgment was pronounced in September 2015, in which the State and Union Governments were directed to confer citizenship to eligible Chakma and Hajong refugees within three months. Requesting the Supreme Court to reconsider the said judgment, a Special Leave Petition (SLP) was filed by the AAPSU which was admitted by the same court. Since then the issue of citizenship for Chakma and Hajong refugees is still pending in court.

Table.6: Responses to the Question: "Should Chakmas be given citizenship on humanitarian grounds considering their settlement in Arunachal Pradesh for about six decades?"

Respondents	Responses						Total
	Yes		No		Can't Say		
	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	
Common Public	9	11.25	61	76.25	10	12.50	80
ACDSU	0	0	5	100.00	0	0	5
Panchayat Leader	0	0	3	60.00	2	40.00	5
Gaon Bura	1	20.00	3	60.00	1	20.00	5

Source: Field Survey, 2022, © Authors

Considering the significance of the demand for citizenship by the Chakma and Hajong refugees and the strong opposition by the AAPSU, a query

was made during a field survey on whether Chakma and Hajong should be granted citizenship on humanitarian grounds or not considering their historical plight and settlement in Arunachal Pradesh for about sixty years (Table.6). To this question, 61 Indigenous respondents (common people) which is 76.25 per cent out of 80 answered negative, and 13.68 per cent answered: "Can't Say." There were 9 respondents which accounts for 11.25 per cent of the total respondent group who agreed to grant citizenship to Chakma and Hajong refugees on humanitarian grounds. No District Students' Union leaders agree on this question. The General Secretary of All Changlang District Students' Union (ACDSU) stated,

> We are strongly against the permanent settlement of Chakma and Hajong refugees in our district and State. Therefore, no consideration should be made on any ground. They should be deported out of our State. After deportation, let the Government decide on whether to grant them citizenship or not. Our only concern and demand is they (refugees) should not be settled permanently in the State[17]

Out of 5 Panchayat leaders, 60.00 per cent responded with "No" and the rest of the 40.00 per cent stated, "Can't say". So far as Gaon Buras was concerned, out of 5 respondents, only 20.00 per cent agreed to grant citizenship to Chakma refugees on humanitarian grounds while 60.00 per cent did not want to grant citizenship even on humanitarian grounds and another 20.00 per cent answered: "Can't Say." In aggregate, there was only one respondent who thought that citizenship may be granted on humanitarian grounds and the vast majority of the respondents either were not in support of granting citizenship on humanitarian grounds or were not sure.

Table.7: Responses to the Question: "What is your opinion on the deportation of Chakma refugees from Arunachal Pradesh?"

Respondents	Responses						Total
	Practical		May Not be Practical		Can't Say		
	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	
Common Public	20	25.00	28	35.00	32	40.00	80
ACDSU	5	100.00	0	0	0	0	5
Panchayat Leader	0	0	4	80.00	1	20.00	5
Gaon Bura	0	0	3	60.00	2	40.00	5

Source: Field Survey, 2022, © Authors

Deportation of refugees from Arunachal Pradesh has been the principal demand of the AAPSU and therefore, the non-natives including refugees served a "Quit Arunachal" notice in August 1994[18]. They believe that since the state is protected by the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, the very act of settling refugees in Arunachal Pradesh (then Northeast Frontier

Agency) was in violation of existing law and hence they must be deported from the State. Therefore, a question was asked during the survey to know the opinion of the Indigenous respondents on the practicality of the deportation (Table.7). Out of the 80 common people (Indigenous), 25.00 per cent of the respondents believed that Chakma-Hajong refugees can be deported back to their original homeland or some other States of India whereas 35.00 per cent of the respondents thought that deportation may not be practicable after such a long stay and acquiring private properties in Arunachal Pradesh. The majority of the respondents accounting for 40.00 per cent did not know whether deportation is practicable or not. One of the respondents from Magantong village who thought that refugees could be deported back said,

> If there is a strong political will of both Central and State Governments and want to protect the rights and interests of the people of Arunachal Pradesh, it can be done. There is nothing that a government cannot do, especially when one party is in power at Centre and State.[19]

A respondent from Dumba Singpho who thinks that deportation may not be practical expressed his opinion saying,

> Looking at their villages, houses, agricultural fields, and properties like land holdings, it may not be that easy to deport them. I do not think they (refugees) would agree to their deportation considering their stay for about 50–60 years and properties they have acquired.[20]

All Changlang District Students' Union (ACDSU) are firm in their stand that refugees can be and must be sent back to their original country. However, Panchayat leaders and Gaon Buras are not very sure about deportation.

It is usually perceived that refugees are hostile towards Indigenous people. Hence, an attempt was made to know the ground reality of their day-to-day relations by eliciting information from Indigenous people who live adjacent to the Chakma villages (Table.8). To this question out of 80 common people (Indigenous), 13.75 per cent stated that they have friendly relations with Chakma refugees and 7.5 per cent of the respondents considered Chakmas to be hostile towards them. However, the vast majority of the respondents of this group which account for 78.75 per cent thought that their day-to-day relation with refugees is "Neither friendly nor hostile". Respondents from the All Changlang District Students' Union and Gaon Buras stated that their day-to-day relations were "Neither friendly nor hostile". Among the Panchayat leaders, only 20.00 per cent considered the daily relations of Indigenous people with refugees as friendly and the rest of the 80.00 per cent replied: "Neither friendly nor hostile".

Table.8: Responses to the Question: What/How is the attitude and behaviour of Chakmas towards the Indigenous people in day-to-day relations?

Respondents	Responses						Total
	Friendly		Hostile		Neither Hostile Nor Friendly		
	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	
Common Public	11	13.75	6	7.50	63	78.75	80
ACDSU	0	0	0	20.00	5	80.00	5
Panchayat Leader	1	20.00	0	0	4	80.00	5
Gaon Bura	0	40.00	0	0	5	100.00	5

Source: Field Survey, 2022, © Authors

The AAPSU believes that if citizenship is granted to the Chakma refugees within the territorial jurisdiction of Arunachal Pradesh, many Chakmas from outside including foreign country (Bangladesh) will infiltrate Arunachal Pradesh to take advantage of the citizenship which in turn will pose a threat to the Indigenous people in many ways such as demography, resources, politics, employment opportunities, etc., and the very survival of Indigenous people in their homeland will be at risk. Considering this perception, a query was made from the Indigenous respondents of the study area (Table.9). To this question, 75.00 per cent of the common public (Indigenous)agreed that in case citizenship is granted to refugees in Arunachal Pradesh, Chakmas from outside would come to take advantage of the situation and the rest of the respondents answered: "Can't say". All respondents of the District Students Union and Gaon Buras stated that Chakmas from outside of the State and country will infiltrate Arunachal Pradesh. 80.00 per cent of Panchayat leaders also held the same opinion while 20.00 per cent were not sure and answered: "Can't Say."

Table.9: Responses to the Question: "Would granting of citizenship encourage the Chakmas from other states and countries (e.g.Bangladesh) to migrate to Arunachal Pradesh?"

Respondents	Responses						Total
	Yes		No		Can't Say		
	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	
Common Public	68	85.00	0	0	12	15.00	80
ACDSU	5	100.00	0	0	0	0	5
Panchayat Leader	4	80.00	0	0	1	20.00	5
Gaon Bura	5	100.00	0	0	0	0	5

Source: Field Survey, 2022, © Authors

There is a common understanding among the Indigenous people of the State that if citizenship is granted to Chakma and Hajong refugees in the future within Arunachal Pradesh, they will not stop citizenship but shift their

demand to demand the rights of Permanent Residential Certificates (PRCs) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) status which as of now are not available to them. It is important to mention here that these rights (PRC and ST) are enjoyed only by the Indigenous tribes of the State and are not available to non-native or non-indigenous communities. This question is not imaginary as well in the light of the following statements of the Chakma refugees and cannot be ignored. For instance, then Vice-President, APCSU, Ajay Chakma once said,

> The Primary issue for us at the moment is citizenship and the question of grant of Scheduled Tribe status to the Chakmas will come later. If we continue to face similar kinds of discrimination despite being citizens of India then certainly we will have to ask for other things also.[21]

Another statement that supports the above statement is of the Gaon Bura of Dharmapur, Upendra Lal Chakma which runs as follows,

> CCRCHAP is demanding citizenship, permanent residentship, and APST status together. Once we are given citizenship, other things like APST status, etc., will automatically follow.[22]

Dina Lal Chakma also expressed a similar kind of opinion,

> Citizenship alone will not do. We also need to be recognised as APST without which we cannot have access to land, schools, employment, and other facilities that are enjoyed by the locals.[23]

Table.10: Responses to the Question: "If citizenship is given to the Chakma refugees, do you think they would also demand Permanent Residential Certificate (PRC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) Certificates?"

Respondents	Responses						Total
	Yes		No		Can't Say		
	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	No. of People	Per Cent of People	
Common Public	77	96.25	0	0	3	3.75	80
ACDSU	5	100.00	0	0	0	0	5
Panchayat Leader	5	100.00	0	0	0	0	5
Gaon Bura	4	80.00	0	0	1	20	5

Source: Field Survey, 2022, © Authors

Therefore, during the field study questions were asked of Indigenous respondents in this regard (Table.10). Out of 80 common people/respondents, 96.25 per cent believed that once citizenship is granted, Chakma and Hajong refugees would demand the PRC and ST status. The All Changlang District Students' Union Leaders have no doubt in this regard. The General Secretary was found stating,

> Once citizenship is granted, a floodgate for other demands, especially as PRC and ST status will automatically erupt and it will further put the Indigenous people's future at risk. Many of our jobs will be snatched by them (refugees)

and many of our people will not get employment as refugees will have rights at par with Indigenous people which means more competition for scarce resources and limited job opportunities.[24]

The Panchayat leaders too felt the same and stated that once they got citizenship, their next demand would be Scheduled Tribes status and Permanent Residential Certificates. In this regard, a Panchayat leader from Pisi village, Miao, said,

> Granting citizenship to Chakma refugees means giving away our rights to them. With citizenship, there will be a huge jump in their enrollment as voters and once they have enough voter strength, they would exert pressure on the government for other rights like ST and PRC and because of their voter strength, the Government could succumb to their demand.[25]

So far as Gaon Buras was concerned, 80.00 per cent agreed to the question, and another 20.00 per cent stated: "Can't Say." There was no respondent (indigenous) who did not agree with the question rather vast majority of the respondents (Indigenous) thought that granting citizenship would lead to demand for the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status and Permanent Residential Certificates (PRCs).

Conclusion

The data of the study suggest that though Chakmas want the Indigenous people to accept them as part of Arunachal Society, however, the Indigenous people seem not ready to accept and embrace them as fellow Arunachalee. A vast majority accounting for 75.78 per cent of refugee respondents considered their day-to-day relationship with the Indigenous people friendly and there was no single respondent who considered their relationship to be hostile whereas only 12.63 per cent of the Indigenous respondents considered their day-to-day relations with Chakma refugees friendly. The majority of the Chakma respondents constituting 86.31 per cent considered the attitude and behaviour of the AAPSU hostile towards people. The same question was asked to Indigenous respondents to know how they look at the AAPSU in relation to Chakmas. To this, they stated that the activities of the AAPSU were necessary for their rights and protection of fellow Indigenous people as accorded by the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873. The apprehension or perception regarding the possible entry of Chakmas from Bangladesh or states like Tripura and Meghalaya, if citizenship is granted to Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh, 93.68 per cent of the refugee respondents disagreed to such anxieties, but when a similar question was asked to the Indigenous respondents, about 86.31 per cent agreed to such apprehensions. Thus, their perceptions and apprehensions are contrary in this regard. The demand for the grant of Indian citizenship by CCRCHAP in Arunachal Pradesh is the core of the refugee issue in Arunachal. Neither the AAPSU nor the Indigenous people of the state are in favour of granting citizenship to Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh. Hence, taking into account the historical plight and their stay in Arunachal Pradesh for about sixty years, a query was made from the Indigenous respondents to know their

opinion of whether refugees should be given citizenship on humanitarian grounds or not. To this, 75.79 per cent of the Indigenous respondents did not want to grant citizenship to Chakmas on any ground, including humanitarian and only 10.53 per cent answered "Maybe." The usual opinion of the Indigenous people and the AAPSU is that refugees should be deported out of Arunachal Pradesh, either to their original country or resettled in other Indian states because the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, which is still in force and does not allow even bonafide Indian citizens to enter without a valid document in the form of Inner Line Permit (ILP) or settle permanently, the settlement of Chakma refugees was in violation of this law and cannot settle make Arunachal Pradesh their permanent abode and thus they will have to leave the State. Now, the bigger question was whether deportation was practically exercisable or not, considering various factors such as the accumulation of immovable wealth in the form of permanent houses, agricultural and settlement lands, businesses, etc. after about sixty years of settlement. To this, 26.32 per cent of the respondents believed that Chakmas can be deported out of Arunachal Pradesh provided there is strong political will of the Government. However, 36.84 per cent of each of the respondents thought that it may not be practical considering their long stay and looking at their villages and thus were not sure in this regard. Regarding the possible demand for PRC and ST status in the future if citizenship is granted in Arunachal Pradesh, 95.79 per cent of Indigenous respondents believed that they (Chakmas) would demand the same, which would be an encroachment upon the legal protection given by the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act of 1873. An attempt was also made to know whether Chakmas were aware of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873. 56.84 per cent stated that they were aware of the said law while 35.78 per cent said they were not aware of the same and the rest 9.47 per cent did not answer the question.

When the question was asked on whether the Chakma settlement violated the said law, 44.21 per cent answered that their settlement did not violate the law rather they were resettled by the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Government of India, under a proper resettlement scheme. A majority of the refugee respondents accounting for 55.78 per cent have no idea in this regard and answered: "Do Not Know." However, the Indigenous respondents including the ACDSU held the opinion that the settlement itself was in violation of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873. They also considered the decision to settle refugees arbitrary because they believed that before settling refugees indigenous people's consent was not taken into account. Thus, the opinions and perceptions of the Indigenous people and the refugees towards each other are contrary and unless this is addressed by both the central and state governments by taking the stakeholders namely, AAPSU, CCRCHAP, APCSU, DSUs of affected districts, and other civil societies representing Indigenous and refugee population on board, it would not be easy to solve the long pending refugee issue. The court judgments are not going to bear much fruit unless the affected parties are on the ground and their grievances are addressed by the governments amicably taking into account the rights of both the parties (Indigenous people and Chakma refugees).

Notes

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[12] Chakma respondent (Common people) from Devapuri, Miao, interviewed by authors, June 27, 2022.

[13] CCRCHAP Member at Gautampur, interviewed by authors, June 29, 2022.

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[15] Supreme Court of India, *State of Arunachal Pradesh vs. Khudiram Chakma*, 27 April 1993.

[16] Supreme Court of India, *Committee for C.R. of C.A.P. & Ors vs. State of Arunachal Pradesh & Ors*, 17 September 2015.

[17] Vice President, All Changlang District Students' Union Member, Kharsang, interviewed by authors, June 13, 2022.

[18] Deepak. K. Singh, *Stateless in South Asia: The Chakmas between Bangladesh and India* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2010).

[19] Indigenous respondent (common people) from Magantong village, Bordumsa, interviewed by authors, July 3, 2022.

[20] Indigenous respondent from Dumba Singpho village, Diyun, interviewed by authors, July 17, 2022.

[21] Deepak. K. Singh, *Stateless in South Asia: The Chakmas between Bangladesh and India* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2010)

[22] Singh, *Stateless in South Asia.*

[23] Singh, *Stateless in South Asia.*

[24] General Secretary, All Changlang District Students' Union, Kharsang, interviewed by authors, June 14, 2022.

[25] Panchayat Leader from Pisi village, Miao, interviewed by authors, May 23, 2022.

"Recent Histories" of a Porous Border: Mobility Across the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland

By

Baidehi Das [*]

I went to Dukhali (name changed) an unfenced border village located very close to Baduria, in Swarupnagar Block, while I was researching the Baduria Riots of July 2017 and its impact on the eastern borders with Bangladesh. This riot was touted by the media as the breaking point of "decades-long communal peace" in "one of the last secular bastions in the country."[1] This excessive conclusion was reached mainly because of two reasons. First, riot as a phenomenon resumed in West Bengal after a very long time and was allegedly the first of its kind to occur as soon as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power at the Centre in 2014. BJP was also beginning to expand its base in West Bengal at the time which further bolstered this inference. Second, the location of the riot at the border immediately traced the communal fissures along the line of Partition and treated it as a point from which history picked up, after a long period of secular slumber, and stagnation. The confluence of these two factors subsequently birthed the "riot-at-the-border" narrative that appealed to my qualms as well. As a third-generation refugee from erstwhile East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh), witnessing and consuming news about escalating communal animosity at the Bengal border influenced me to wonder if this was the beginning of our gradual descent back into the riotous days in the wake of Partition.

I arrived in Baduria and then fortuitously went to Dukhali which eventually became my way to seek a deeper meaning of the event that had been reported till then and how they told a story of certain changes or "recent histories" unfolding along the borders of West Bengal. According to media reports, the communal conflagration in Baduria began on July 2, 2017, after an "explicit cartoon" of Prophet Mohammed was shared on Facebook by a 17-year-old living with his uncle in Mogurkhali ward of Baduria municipality in the eastern part of the North 24 Parganas of West Bengal.[2] The post was allegedly deemed offensive by the local Muslim community, who then launched an offensive on

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their Hindu counterparts. Though Mogurkhali was the epicenter, the riot quickly spread, eventually quaking throughout Baduria block, reaching even the adjoining Basirhat town. The Hindus, though initially shocked began to counter within two days i.e., July 4, 2017. Following this retaliation, the unrest magnified, becoming the most serious communal escalation between the two communities in the state since the 1964 East Pakistan Riots due to the Hazratbal incident. Ironically on July 5, 2017, Baduria was completely calm.[3] Though there was widespread vandalisation, arson, desecration of idols, and property damage, the scale of this riot was still reported to be *low* as the death toll did not exceed one. Later, however, a fact-finding report published by the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism in the same year presented many more cases of deaths and disappearances.[4]

The BJP leaders in West Bengal branded the riot as an attack on the "majority Hindu population" of the state.[5] In this framing, the "surgical metaphor" was readily invoked and implied to connect the present to the past i.e., Partition.[6] All political stakeholders in West Bengal, like, the incumbent Trinamool Congress (TMC) government and the main opposition the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI[M]) were publicly shamed for enabling a tradition of minority appeasement which they held was solely responsible for making religious minorities in the state audacious enough to launch an offensive of this nature. The strategy seemingly worked, especially in Baduria, as the BJP's local chapter recorded a remarkable "surge in membership."[7] Although such a significant consequence left many obvious questions unanswered, it did successfully drive home the premonition of a grand scheme of communal polarisation underway in Bengal. Ironically, even the media reports fell into its trappings as they too began equating the presence of secularism with the absence of communal violence in the state. Scholars have time and again cautioned against such synonymous treatment. Heitmeyer opines that there are subtle ways in which communally coded sentiments between groups cohabiting in a common space often underlie the normalcy of everyday life.[8] This cautioned cohabitation with the suspicious "other" in an atmosphere of carefully curated peace is also what Dipankar Gupta has termed "antagonistic tolerance."[9] The enthusiastic conflation between secularism and the absence of communal violence seemed like a diversion from real efforts to uncover *how* this alleged longstanding communal harmony collapsed so easily. In desperation to salvage the image of a secular Bengal, the entire blame of the riot was passed on to a vague category of "outsiders" without probing into *who* they may be, *where* they may have come from, and *what* the secret to their riotous influence was.

The narrative of the "outsider" that has expanded over the years in scope was my first entry point in this research: Who were these allegedly provocative outsiders? How did they transgress the increasingly militarised Bengal border? How did guarded unfenced borders in North 24 Parganas eventually develop into the *question of entry* and conflict in this region? Taking the case study of Dukhali, this report tries to answer some of the complex questions as to how the "recent histories" of the mobility narrative that had developed in the village since 2014; and how these mutations of movements

have led to the emergence of unique routines and processes of mobility that remain unseen in the *longue durée* of movement (like entry and exit) across Dukhali.

I began my fieldwork formally in March 2020 but had to return after a week due to the declaration of nationwide lockdown due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Baduria was not an entirely unknown territory for me. Before beginning my fieldwork, I had a chance to stay there for a few weeks in November of 2019. At the time, I was working as a research coordinator in an ICSSR project focused on exploring the potentialities of early education institutions across three districts of West Bengal. As North 24 Parganas was one of the three chosen districts, I got a chance to work in a few Panchayats of Baduria for roughly three weeks. Though the schedule then did not allow me to explore Baduria to know it enough for my subsequent work for this research, it did help me make a few crucial administrative and NGO connections whose help I eventually sought to make my initial contacts with the field. NGO Dishari (name changed) helped me access unfenced "outsider entry points" closest to Baduria- like Dukhali- with their volunteers.

Dukhali: Notes from a Mobile Geography

Dukhali is an unfenced border village at "zero point" along the India-Bangladesh border. Geographically it falls on the eastern margins of North 24 Parganas district, in its Swarupnagar Block, and shares border with Satkhira district of Khulna division in Bangladesh. Encompassing the village is an expansive marshland known as the *Bil.* Once consolidated, an uncharacteristically polished Public Works Department (PWD) road presently runs through the center of the *Bil,* splitting it into two halves. The "zero point" is located on the right half of the Bil, which due to the lack of any other visible clear markers sort of blends into Bangladesh. Looking eastwards from the PWD road, one can see another road running parallelly along the limits of the right half of the Bil. This road belongs to Bangladesh. At first glance, this road appears to be the sole way to identify the territorial limit of one nation and the beginning of another. However, white triangles ensconced amongst the rice crop being cultivated on the *Bil* represent the true markers of territorial limits—the ones that the residents presently abide by with utmost caution. Dukhali is a densely populated village. It is divided into two main neighbourhoods— Puberpara and Paschimpara, linked by the PWD road, though shortcuts through dirt roads and alleys parallelly exist. In terms of proximity to the "zero point," Puberpara is closer than Paschimpara. The demographic is nearly homogenous with the dominance of the Namasudra community along with a handful of Muslim families dwelling on the outskirts of Paschimpara. The main source of livelihood in Dukhali is primarily fishing in the *Bil*, agriculture, and poultry farming.

It is difficult to trace a detailed history of cross-border movement through the Dukhali Bil. Therefore*,* "narrative history" had to be gradually pieced together through family histories, colonial records, and the larger history

of Khulna and 24 Parganas. Madhab, a Paschimpara resident and the current patriarch of the village's respectable Sarkar family said that the village was established approximately a hundred years ago to exploit the agricultural potential of the Bil by his ancestors Raghab and Jadab. "Back then, there were only forests beyond the Bil. Our family cleared the forests and started living here." Before that, Dukhali was part of the Khulna district and was partly governed by its Roychowdhury zamindars. Following Partition, after many deliberations, when Khulna was finally handed over to erstwhile East Pakistan, Dukhali, being a region falling on the east of river Mathabhanga, became a part of India.[10] Though this made Dukhali a border by default, till the 1980s, Dukhali remained a non-functional border and despite being a "zero point," never encountered strict bordering practices.[11] Thus movement across the Bil largely remained free and unfiltered. The first Border Outpost (BOP) came up in Dukhali towards the end of the 1980s when the erstwhile consolidated 24 Parganas was bifurcated into North and South 24 Parganas. Before the BOP was set up, Dukhali's checkpoint was set up at three locations: Hakimpur, Amudia-Khalsi, and Sonajhuri. This loose maintenance of border control immediately after Partition could have been a direct consequence of the Standstill Agreement of 1947 whereby the Nehruvian administration decided to let the Bengal borders remain porous to keep the process of trade, property evacuation, and compensation flexible.[12] Though this was proposed as a temporary solution, Dukhali continued to remain a readily accessible gateway long after the Agreement's expiry. Movement continued as before and weekly *haats* (markets) continued to thrive on business brought to it by the traders of Satkhira, crossing the border through the Bil, on feet and carts. Amit, an octogenarian fisherman from Paschimpara, recalled haat days in his youth when carts from Satkhira would hustle through the muddy trails of Dukhali from the crack of dawn to reach the haats on the Indian sides in time for the customers.

Although movement remained unfiltered, cross-border trading through the Bil was still viewed as illegal as Dukhali, unlike Ghojadanga Land Port at present or the older transit Hakimpur, did not fulfill the legal criteria for being a transit for international trading. As a result, these trade practices came to be described as black marketing or *black* for their illegal orientation. Nevertheless, no major steps were ever taken by the government to prevent it. As a result, cross-border trading continued in full visibility, defiantly aware of its connotations with the active participation from the local population of both Dukhali and its neighbouring areas.

Presently, illegal trading across the India-Bangladesh border immediately takes the conversation to cow smuggling. However, in this case, it was not just cows that were traded but also many other everyday items like fruits, vegetables, fresh fish, rice, puffed rice (*muri*), etc., that were part of the traded commodity. This is because agricultural returns were often not enough to sustain families and cross-border trading was much more profitable. Dukhali being one of the impoverished villages of Swarupnagar, heavily depended on these haats for bringing in the much-needed cash flow to the region. During the 2000 India-Bangladesh flood there was heightened agricultural distress in Dukhali, putting the residents in a dire economic crisis. To cope, black transactions became the veritable lifeline

to combat the financial slowdown. As one resident of Dukhali's neighbouring refugee-dominated village Bilpara remarked:"*Tokhon ekhane taka urto.* (Back then, money used to fly in the air)." The economic impact of black marketeering in the region was so intricate that even authorities would hardly make their presence felt to actively prevent it. On the rare occasion that they did, it was enough to be singled out and registered as an exceptional moment in the neighbourhood's history. One such memorable event centered around an accidental "*ilish utsab*" (*hilsa* festival) when the entire hilsa consignment was confiscated from traders by the customs office following a rather unanticipated raid in one of the haats. The raided fish were later auctioned off in the neighbourhood. It is fondly remembered by the residents as a good day as they were able to get their hands on the best quality hilsa at a price much lower than the market rate.

This free-flowing cross-border trade remained uninterrupted even during the brief interlude of the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence (or *Muktijuddho*, as it is popularly known). The movement across Dukhali had even then remained quite open. According to a *Muktijoddha*, a current resident of the Dukhali's adjacent, Mallapara, the Bil formed one of the stations for the *Mukti Bahini* during the War. Watching warplanes fly by and collecting bombshells constitute the childhood memories of many of the respondents who were children back then. Following the War, the problems of the porosity of the border began to be readily recognised by the Indian state, especially due to the mass exodus that followed, on a scale surpassing even the Partition. As the Indian state began to be mindful of its inability to accommodate the huge number of people entering the country, for the first time, the "threat" of refugees was realised and recognised.[13] The setting up of a BOP in Dukhali many years after Partition potentially emerged from this threat. Since the 1980s, Dukhali has witnessed a steady rise in border administration and policing, peaking around 2014, and according to many residents, it increased with the BJP government coming to power at the Centre.

Today, though still unfenced, Dukhali is one of the most heavily militarised regions of Swarupnagar. Time is strictly regulated, and nobody is allowed to access the right half of the *Bil* post after 5:30 pm. "We have permission to shoot anyone accessing the Bil past the curfew," was the curt response of a Border Security Force (BSF) personnel I had a chance to befriend. To further securitise movements across the Bil, the BSF built makeshift towers camouflaged inside backyard gardens, especially those that opened to the Bil. One of these was shown to me by Kamala, a Puberpara resident whose banana orchard was one of the locations chosen for housing a tower. Due to the lack of a fence, it is very difficult to visualise the border at first. To mark the border white triangles are haphazardly placed in the paddy fields in the Bil which one must be mindful of while making their way to work every day. For instance- if one flag is placed closer to the Bangladesh side, the very next one could be close to Puberpara, on the Indian side. Although the cultivators who work in these fields have gained clarity of the border, lapses are common. As one of the Puberpara residents said,

>While working in the field we would often exchange *bidis* (handrolled cigars) with farmers of *odesh* (Bangladesh) or rest under the same tree. After border restrictions tightened, a BSF personnel saw me sharing *bidi* with a 'Bangladeshi' from his post and attacked me. He came over and frisked me to check for drugs and then asked me not to talk to 'those people' again. Now, tell me, the borderline is not even visible to us. We just know that it passes through the middle of a field that we are both tilling, how can we continue to work without exchanging any words with each other?

To further prevent movement across the border and check black marketeering, the muddy village roads were replaced with a 12km PWD road that now runs through the circumference of Dukhali with three strategically placed BSF checkpoints. Every public transport (mostly battery-operated vans locally called magic vans, and autos) from Dukhali is stopped and searched at these checkpoints. Passengers aboard are not allowed to pass without producing valid identity proof cards issued by the Government of India. Public transport on these border roads is allowed only till 5:30 pm after which only the residents of Dukhali are allowed to drive their personal two-wheelers and cycles as their number plates are already registered with the BSF.

According to Dukhali's *Panchayat Pradhan* (leader of the village council), a bus route from the village to Basirhat started operating to ease the transport woes of the residents but it was discontinued within the first month due to an alleged lack of demand. Madhab told me later that the incessant security hassles in Dukhali had made the transport workers reluctant to run a service there. "The situation is such that now even our relatives do not visit," he added. Both the BSF and the Panchayat Pradhan boastfully emphasised several times that unlike before, "cows cannot be seen running through the field anymore in Dukhali," as a marker of absolute stoppage of unwanted movement and trade. Despite the adoption of such extreme securitisation measures to police movements, however, it was not clear how and why Dukhali continued to be seen as one of the main entry points for outsiders. As I will argue now, it turns out that the increase in security is directly proportional to the sustenance and rise of cases of entry through the Dukhali border.

With an agenda to secure the Indian state, the BJP government began an active campaign to urgently fence the porous borders of West Bengal, including its riverine borders as soon as it assumed power at the Centre in 2014.[14] This is because unfenced borders such as Dukhali are often held solely responsible for being convenient gateways for *onuprobeshkaris* (infiltrators) to enter India.[15] According to a news article from 2018, the BJP government's fervent campaigns to sanctify the Indian population through the prevention of infiltrators' entry by focusing on fencing and increased border controls paralleled Donald Trump's frenzy to build a wall at the US-Mexico border.[16] The justification offered in the name of national security, however, was communally motivated as infiltrator was a term designed to solely mark out the Muslim border crossers. The new security regime in Dukhali was also a means to this end. Through its implementation, as existing border was re-bordered with these frenzied "recent histories" in mind.

While working in Dukhali and the neighbouring refugee-dominated settlements, BJP affiliates consistently told me how despite Bangladesh being a "Muslim state," those illegally entering India were mostly Muslims. According to them, better job prospects in India lure Muslim labourers to cross over from Bangladesh. Though there could be a semblance of truth to this- as a relatively better wage structure in India does attract several Muslim migrant workers from Bangladesh- the number of Hindu migrants (mostly belonging to Namasudra and Rajbanshi communities) is much higher in comparison. Speaking to "native" local communities (also belonging to Namasudra and Rajbanshi communities) in at least three villages spread across two Panchayats covering Dukhali and its neighbouring areas, I have only found evidence of Namasudra and Rajbanshi border crossers and settlers who are emphatically categorised as Hindus, especially by the BJP. It is also important to remember that the Muslim workers who cross the border for work eventually also return to Bangladesh. This, however, may not be the case for their Hindu counterparts who cross the border to seek a new home, thereby, becoming permanent settlers in India. These border crossers often do not have the option to return owing to their permanent expulsion due to routine minority persecution in Bangladesh. Providing access to asylum seekers, however, is not a new phenomenon in Dukhali and legal routes were available for the purpose. Before 2014 the asylum seekers had the option to surrender at the Border Observation Post (BOP) and formally appeal for asylum through the challan system i.e., by filling out a challan. However, this system was effectively stopped after the BJP assumed power in 2014 which was in contradiction to the party's longstanding agenda to protect the persecuted Hindu minorities who came from Bangladesh. As an extension of this protection programme, security in Dukhali and the Bil was also tightened and to uphold it further, new, and less lenient companies of BSF were posted in the village during this time. As one resident said,

> Now they do not allow anyone to enter anymore. Currently, no matter what the situation is, the BSF drives the asylum seekers away almost immediately.

I later verified this information with even a BSF personnelwho said,

> Yes, this used to be the rule but now it has changed. We now have strict orders to shoot or arrest anyone we see in the Bil after dark. We do not have permission to let anyone in, no matter who it is or whatever their reasons are.

Contrarian to such intolerance to movement displayed by the BSF personnel, however, in the last decade alone, various settlements inhabited by Namasudra and Rajbanshi communities have come up in villages adjacent to Dukhali. One such settlement is Bilpara which took over an *aambagan* (mango orchard) between two villages in Harighata Panchayat adjacent to Dukhali. From a few sparsely populated shanties of the early 1990s, Bilpara has now assumed the shape of a full-fledged village gradually expanding in size. Interestingly, most Bilpara residents have entered in the last decade through unfenced borders such as Dukhali, some of them in broad daylight

notwithstanding the almost impenetrable security barriers. This seemingly contradictory development not only raises questions about the effectiveness of the increased border controls but more importantly about the potential correlation between it and the rise in incidents of border crossing and settlement.

Postcoloniality of *Haats*: Changing Nature of Black Marketeering

The devastating flood of 2000 changed Dukhali. Though *gorom er dhaan* (the rice crop of summer) was introduced post the flood and continues to be the main crop in the village, it could not provide essential and immediate relief. Having lost their homes, land, and cattle, the residents of Dukhali were looking for ways to recover the losses and start afresh. Agriculture was badly affected, and the soil was still in the process of recovery. In these desperate times, black marketing emerged as the most viable quick-fix recovery for the residents. However, this time the focus was no longer on trading regular everyday items like before. Life had to be rebuilt and the trade of cows seemed like the quickest way to make money. 150–200 cows on a single day could be seen being chased down by their owners in broad daylight through rice fields to get across to the other side. As the cow trade took off, black marketing expanded in scope to include even gold bars and drugs.

   These heightened trade practices *visibly* waned post-2014 with the introduction of stricter controls and the deployment of the new company of BSF. Currently, black marketing is no longer *seen* on the streets of Dukhali. Additionally, the BSF keeps a count of all the domestic cows in the village. Even if cows need to be sold locally between residents of other villages, a very long and arduous process must be followed to safeguard its legalities. "It usually takes us a minimum of one month to sell our cows. We do our dealings now keeping this formality period in mind," a resident of Paschimpara, Sahadev had told me when I first began working in Dukhali. This strict policing of cow trade showcases the success of the new security regime. Accordingly, it was boastfully exhibited by the BSF, Panchayat officials alike and strangely also most of Dukhali's Puberpara residents: "*Goru r jayena, black ekhon bondho* (Cattle trade is no more and black or illegal trading has ended)." The unanimity was perplexing as the end of the black market would imply loss of livelihood for most of Dukhali's residents, especially Puberpara as it was more strategically suited to the trade owing to its greater proximity to the border.

   The veil was lifted by the residents of Dukhali's other neighbourhood-Paschimpara. It was through this subtle difference in the operation of the black market that I understood the geo-sociality of Paschimpara and Puberpara. I first heard about it from a Paschimpara resident, Sahadev whose daughter, Payal was a part-time worker at Dishari. That day, Sahadev was telling us stories of the flood of 2000 and his subsequent social mobility through black marketeering. As the conversation progressed, I enquired about the atypical three-story house of the Panchayat Pradhan which looked more fitting to a posh South Kolkata neighbourhood than Dukhali. It was quite unusual because I knew by then that the Panchayat Pradhan, Sabari Sarkar, was a former Anganwadi worker who

could not have had the means to own a house like that. As I asked, Sahadev's smile turned crooked. In his usual candid way, looking straight into my eyes, he told me, "*Didibhai, tumi ki sotti bhabcho black bondho ekhon? Shob dekhnai. Jar korar shey arale ja korar kore bari kori nise* (Sister, do you think black has stopped? These are all eyewash. Those who can do it have done it in secret and built houses)." Sahadev's remark, thereafter, exposed the reasons behind the cautious air of Dukhali to me, for the first time. From his statement, I discovered that black marketeering has not stopped. What has been contained through increased securitisation is solely its visibility. Additionally, as further engagement revealed, there was a nexus between the Panchayat Pradhan and the BSF to maintain black's invisibility to uphold the illusory success story of securitisation.

Echoing Sahadev, thus, another resident of Paschimpara, Ashok ranted to me about how the visible absence of cows from the Bil and the dirt roads were nothing more than marketing gimmicks employed by the Panchayat and the BSF to project the increased border control as a success story. Ashok's rage stemmed from the daily frustrations he had to live with since 2014 on account of heading one of the poorest families in Paschimpara. Devoid of his source of income from the black market, his family had to depend solely on government grants and the declining profits from the harvest of *groom er dhaan*. He added, "Just because you cannot see it does not mean it is not happening. Times have changed and the black market has too. In our time we used to trade in goods but now they even *trade in people*. You can trade if you start serving the *master* and give away most of your profits as commission." Now, trade in people immediately takes one's mind to human trafficking. Later, however, I received clarity on the practice of trade in people from Tapan, a tailor from Bilpara who had crossed the border via Dukhali to settle down in India at the beginning of 2022. To cross the border, he paid INR4,000 to the *dalal* (intermediary) to get him across. He had to pay this much as he had a lot of luggage with him. Later, when his wife, children, and mother migrated, he had to pay a total sum of INR7,000. Though he was apprehensive about their safety, his family could cross the border in daylight, a special request he had made to his dalal. The transition had been smooth as his dalal on the Indian side had already "taken care of the BSF." Like many others in Bilpara, Tapan too had crossed the border in the hope of a safer life than the one he had back in Bangladesh. He had arranged the money to pay the dalal on either side by selling his house and land in less than a week. "I needed money to start a new life in India and to pay the *dalal*. There is no other way possible," was his very simple explanation. Tapan's incident pieces together a lot of puzzles vis-à-vis the entry of "outsiders" through unfenced borders of Swarupnagar like Dukhali. It also unfolds a new dimension of the black market owing to "recent histories" emerging out of increased security at the Dukhali border. As I discovered, trade in people, or as it is locally known as *dalal dhore dhur pachar*[17] has emerged as one of the most profitable trades in Swarupnagar, as the rapid growth of Bilpara confirms.

Despite the profitability of the business, however, trade in people has not been accepted by many in Dukhali across neighbourhoods. It is also one of the main reasons for the growing antagonism between Puberpara and Paschimpara as the former has more residents willingly or unwillingly involved

in this trade than the latter. The location of the Pradhan's residence/ headquarters in Puberpara further explains the fearful conformity of its residents. The general disapproval, however, stems from the rapid breakdown of cross-border solidarities between the Namasudra communities of the two countries. Interactions between the two sides of the border have always remained unhinged in Dukhali but the monetisation of the movement of people has increasingly created binaries between natives and refugees, *dalals* and *dhurs,* and Puberpara and Paschimpara within a community of people that are already split across two nations. As exceptions to the conformists, Puberpara resident Moloy frequently narrated tales of how he and his friends used to help people cross over when mobility was less constrained. Even before 2014, asylum seekers (mostly Namasudras) seeking legal passage to India would have to wait for hours at the BOP to complete the challan system's formalities. "After seeking permission, we would provide them with food and water." Such stories of solidarities can be further clarified from Rakhal's account. Rakhal hails from one of the first families that settled in Bilpara *aambagan*. Before 2014, he used the Dukhali border to frequent his relatives in Satkhira. According to him, the people of Dukhali were "*experts*" at aiding border crossing,

> Once while returning from attending a funeral at my relative's place across the border, a BSF personnel saw me from a distance. Though he did not see my face clearly, he could figure out that someone was illegally crossing the border. This is mostly enough for the BSF to act. I quickly ran into the nearest house where a woman wascooking. I did not even have to explain myself fully when she asked me to change into *gamcha-genji* (the common attire of men in Dukhali) immediately and smoke bidi in the *dawa* (courtyard), acting as if nothing happened. By the time the BSF personnel came looking I was much too blended with the fabric of Dukhali to draw any attention. Later, she fed me pork curry with rice, and I left when it was safe for me to pass.

Today, this interaction is impossible as increased surveillance has led to a situation where movement can occur solely through prior arrangements in exchange for money.

The monetisation of asylum is, thus, one of the many outcomes of extreme security regimes in the borderlands. This is further corroborated in a 2016 study conducted in the backdrop of the US-Mexico border that showed how increasing border controls proved "counterproductive". Using empirical evidence, the study demonstrates how excessive bordering practices not only failed to bring downinfiltration but also led to the opening of parallel systems to enable it further.[18] Increased border controls, according to the researchers, not only fail to bring down infiltration but in an unfortunate turn of events end up empowering the *coyotes* or intermediaries who shift their base of operation to remoter, more obscure, and porous locations.[19] This, then, makes border crossing a gamble in the hands of the *coyotes* who are empowered with greater control over the fate of border crossers, compromising the latter's safety by making them more dependent and vulnerable.[20] In Dukhali, the Panchayat Pradhan-BSF nexus indicates precisely this form of a coyote network that has made a business out of the plight of asylum seekers - harking back to Ashok's

narration that moving across the border in present-day Dukhali depends on servitude to a certain master. The gradual transition of the black market from household items like vegetables, and cows to drugs and eventually people direct one to reflect upon the unending possibilities by which security mechanisms in the borderlands are exploited to further unauthorised trade in a formalised and organised manner.

Now, when I say Panchayat Pradhan, I must make it clear that I am mostly referring to the position here than any one individual. This is because the position of the officially elected Panchayat Pradhan, Sabari Sarkar, merely holds the position on paper. The real work is carried out by her son, Dipankar, the man Dukhali considered the Pradhan and who in the opinion of Paschimpara was the mastermind behind the second innings of black trade currently operational in the village. An amusing yet telling anecdote from the early days of fieldwork will substantiate her nominal position as Panchayat Pradhan further. When I was asking around the village about the Panchayat's office timings to secure a permit, everyone I spoke to referred to the Pradhan as "*Dipankar er ma*" (Dipankar's mother) rather than by her name. Most of the residents did not seem to be aware of her name. Later, I found out her name from Dipankar himself when he signed my permit, despite having no authority to do that. Doubtful about its validity, seeing the permit get readily accepted by the BSF clarified Dipankar's authorization and further implied the nexus.

Dipankar's steady ascent began in 2012 after he switched from CPI(M) to TMC, peaking in 2018 when his mother, Sabari, won the Panchayat elections. He had contested earlier too but had not won. At the time of fieldwork, he controlled every kind of black market trade through all the borders in Sonajhuri Panchayat, especially the one that occurred through Puberpara in Dukhali. There is a dirt road near his house which is known as the "*goru pachar rasta.* (Road through which cows are smuggled)" that connects Dukhali to Satkhira in Bangladesh. Manipulating his fresh political influence and the new regime of increased security, Dipankar took it upon himself to remodel the black market trade to his absolute advantage which soon turned him into the "master." In the new setup, everyone was allowed to trade in the black market if they worked under him and paid him a sizeable commission. In return, for this commission, Dipankar managed the BSF to ensure both the traders and the trade. That the BSF accepts bribes to enable cow smuggling along the Indo-Bangladesh border is a cliché at this point. However, in Dukhali, there were more ways than bribery to achieve this insurance. Being the son of an aging single mother, Dipankar could establish himself as her protector, a role which he then extended to the rest of Dukhali. This became easier to achieve once his mother was elected Pradhan as it made him the mediator between Panchayat resources and the residents. This almost forced people to accept his position as challenging him could be detrimental to both business and life. As the established guardian, he guaranteed the BSF a peaceful border on behalf of the residents on the condition that they allowed the black market to operate surreptitiously. Keeping his promise, the black market visibly disappeared from the lanes of Dukhali as 150-200 cows being chased across the Bil could no longer be seen, thereby,

giving birth to the security success story that I heard several times during fieldwork.

With the discontinuation of the challan system and Dipankar's ascent, the practice of trade in people emerged through the participation of an increasing number of teenage dalals. Owing to the arrangement put in place by Dipankar, these boys were free to operate as the BSF remained conveniently absent from their designated posts during their maneuvers. This newly achieved insurance not only encouraged many, especially the youth into the profession but also made them disciples of Dipankar, further establishing him as the "master." This centralised regulation of the trade in Dukhali resonates with and has a stark similarity with what Pinzon and Mantilla have termed an Organised Crime Group (OCG) operating in the Columbia-Venezuela border.[21] These OCGs gradually begin to wield social control that allows them a greater degree of immunity to not only carry out these activities but also dictate their terms. In short, they become both the rule makers and breakers in their areas of influence where they curb any forms of dissent.[22] This curbing of dissent is the premium Dipankar charges for the insurance he guarantees the black traders of Dukhali. Thus, as Ashok's testimony indicates, Dipankar monopolised the black market trade by eliminating all forms of traditional autonomy. Today, it is impossible to carry out this trade independently in Dukhali without getting arrested or killed. Initially, many like Ashok in Paschimpara refused to lose their autonomy by working under Dipankar. However, the consequences of defiance were usually heavy. Moloy said, "One fine day the BSF will raid your house and find a pack of ganja and charge you with a drug case. The pack is not yours and you do not know where it came from, but you will not be allowed to give any explanations. If you want to pay them to get out of the case, they will charge you an amount you can only loan from Dipankar which would then compromise your autonomy by default." This system of false allegations or getting charged in drug cases is by far the most feared consequence in Dukhali because these are usually non-bailable offenses. Other forms of punishment include revoking government grants. As the Panchayat is usually responsible for managing and distributing resources among the residents, they cannot help but conform to the dictates of Dipankar.

There is also a lack of autonomy in political expression. Being a TMC member, Dipankar does not allow any political opposition to thrive in the village. Even within TMC, he rarely tolerates challenges to his authority which is why veterans like Moloy are increasingly looking for opportunities to deflect. I too managed to get a taste of Dipankar's control when during one of my earlier meetings with five members of the conflicting faction within TMC, we found ourselves surrounded by Dipankar's disciples who demanded to preside over our conversation. As a result, our meetings henceforth had to be carried out in secret outside of Dukhali and never in the same place twice. As three of the five members I was regularly speaking with lived in Puberpara, they were at greater risk of facing consequences. Moloy was the one with whom I could speak the most as he, owing to having relatives in other parts of Swarupnagar, could easily slip out of the village without raising suspicion. Despite the risks, however, talking to me seemed to give a release to the members of this faction

as continuous silencing had by then turned their dissonance into anger and frustration. Despite my repeated clarifications, they continued to think of me as a journalist and shared in the hope of exposing Dipankar and his dealings.

Conclusion

Since Partition, Dukhali has witnessed its transition from an open border to a semi-porous border. Following a change of the central government in 2014 and the Baduria Riots of 2017, the border was successfully shut off, making it a heavily administered zone for the first time since its creation. Though the border continued to remain unfenced, the inertia of its porosity gradually waned with increasing state presence and control to prevent the entry of infiltrators into India and reaffirm her territorial sovereignty. Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004) argues that to make its presence more distinct, the state often relies on "illegible" local-marginal manifestations of its legible bureaucracy and law.[23] They argue that to retain its control at the margins the state often uses agents from the lowest rung of its machinery and sometimes even private individuals and collectives wielding local influence.[24] By doing this, the state tends to detach itself from its structures of legality, supposedly to better manage the population of the margins under an "aura" of legality rather than sharply recognised legality.[25] In Dukhali, the Panchayat-BSF nexus to control the black market and through it, its residents living at the margins of the state is indicative of precisely this "aura" of legality. It is observable in the role played by the Panchayat Pradhan's son in the village, especially with respect to its complete loss of socio-economic and political autonomy in the post-2014 period. Increased security and subsequent monetisation of asylum further allowed the state to regulate *who gets to come in* and *who does not* through its reliance on local musclemen like Dipankar, which seems to further explain the rationale behind the point of introducing increased border controls in borderlands like Dukhali in the first place.

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter and to maintain the safety of respondents, the names of all the locations and institutions and respondents have been changed by the author to protect their safety and privacy. The research article was presented at the Conference on Migrant Asias: Refugees, Statelessness and Migrant Labour Regimes in the panel on "Seeing Like a State" organised by Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group in collaboration with the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, and several other institutes from November 17–19, 2022.

Notes

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[2] Sweety Kumari, "Looking Back, Bengal Fights 'Communal' Tag: Basirhat Riots Lead the Pack, Social Media 'Menace' Under Police Scanner," *The Indian* Express, December 31, 2017; Sayandeb Chowdhury, "Why is the BJP Communalising West Bengal Instead Offering it Good Governance?" *The Wire*, July 6, 2017; Shoaib Daniyal,

"A Facebook Post was All it Took to Undo Decades of Communal Harmony of a West Bengal Town," *Scroll*, July 14, 2017; Mukherjee, "BJP Gains."

3 Daniyal, "A Facebook Post."

4 Amaresh Misra, Irfan Engineer, Neha Dabhade, Mohammad Jalaludin, Nasim Choudhary, Kingshuk Chakroborty, "Baduria and Basirhat Fact Finding Report," Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, 2017, https://csss-isla.com/fact-finding-reports/baduria-and-bashirhat-fact-finding-report/.

5 Sweety Kumari, "Looking back, Bengal fights 'Communal' tag: Basirhat riots lead the pack, social media 'menace' under police scanner'." *The Indian Express*, December 31, 2017.

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11 Noel Parker and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "Picking and Choosing the 'Sovereign' Border: A Theory of Changing State Bordering Practices," *Geopolitics* 17, no. 4 (2022): 773–77.

12 Debdatta Chowdhury, *Identity and Experience at the India-Bangladesh Border: The Crisis of Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2018), 6–8.

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14 Saibal Gupta, "India to Fence Over Water to Stop Immigration from Bangladesh," *Times of India*. August 24, 2014.

15 N.S. Jamwal, "Border Management: Dilemma of Guarding the India-Bangladesh Border," *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 1 (2004): 5–36; Dibyendu Mondal, "Bengal's Cow Smuggling Business is Drying Up," *The SundayGuardian*, June 11, 2017.

16 Ipsita Chakravarty, "On the Fence: Fluid and Ever Changing, the Indo-Bangladesh Border Defies the Idea of a Neat Boundary," *Scroll*, January 20, 2018.

17 *Dhur* is a Bengali interjection used to express disturbance. It is a derogatory term used to define a border crosser from Bangladesh. The word emerged from the armed robbery menace that plagued Dukhali before it got its BOP. These robbers came from across the border to not only rob people but also to damage property that they could not steal. As a truck shop owner, Kalpana from Puberpara recalls, "Our house was robbed thrice. Twice it was at my maternal home in Paschimpara and once here. At this house, the robbers not only took away everything, but they also threw away the food that was left over from the previous night's dinner. They did not want to leave anything for us." Much after the robbery phenomenon had died, the term has survived and has been extended to define immigrants from Bangladesh, including asylum seekers. The relatively better socio-economic growth rates among the immigrant population, sometimes cause annoyance among the locals which further affirms the "*dhur*" rhetoric. At present, '*Dalal dhore dhur pachar*' (crossing borders using intermediaries) has emerged as a booming black market business that aids immigrants and asylum seekers to cross the border by paying intermediaries.

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19 Douglas S. Massey, "The Counterproductive Consequences of Border Enforcement," *Cato Journal* 37, no. 3 (2017): 539-554.

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[21] Viviana García Pinzón and Jorge Mantilla, "Contested Borders: Organized Crime, Governance, and Bordering Practices in Colombia-Venezuela Borderlands," *Trends Organized Crime* 24 (2021): 265–81.

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Mitigation, Recovery, and Response: Democracy in Post-Covid Central Asia

By

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Post-pandemic Central Asia has been challenged by the ineffectiveness of state response in the face of the Covid-19 crisis, excessive bureaucracy, and lack of public confidence in the state in the backdrop of a harsh winter and chronic energy crisis. The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing issues of lack of health infrastructure, an unstable economy unduly reliant on remittances, based on fluctuations in oil prices and restrictive human rights bringing into question citizen's rights to justice and democracy. Temporary security measures put in place to handle the crisis mostly remain in place while the possibility of the emergence of a viable civil society remains nascent in urban settings and practically non-existent in traditional rural locations. All of this would ideally amount to sufficient anti-establishment sentiments to create fertile grounds for the emergence of popular movements and populist sentiments in the region. The "crisis of political representation" and narratives of lack of good governance combined with the mismanagement of the pandemic, however, defined public response to the government only in Kyrgyzstan. Here, the crisis of representational government led to the emergence of a populist leader Sadyr Japarov, during the pandemic, whose idea of a strong Presidential government proved more attractive in terms of ensuring accountability and reflecting the voices of the people. There was also some change in the perception of sections of the youth in Kazakhstan, for instance, who for the first time questioned the results of the Parliamentary elections of 2021. Subsequent developments like the loss of majority by the ruling party in the Kazakh parliamentary elections of 2023 were significant as was the realisation of exaggerations in stereotypical understanding of centralised governments as being most effective during times of crisis.

However, the continuation of existing regimes in all states except Kyrgyzstan, given that the post-pandemic situation seemed to have all the possibilities of anti-establishment movements, raises certain questions about what triggers support for protests and popular movements across societies and under what conditions they are successful in realising them. In Central Asia,

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liberal democracy made a formal appearance only in Kyrgyzstan where it has been challenged by popular protests, even before the present one, where Sadyr Japarov and his supporters defied the existing government. What happened in Kyrgyzstan was a classic case of a crisis of representational government, where there is a loss of faith in institutionalised forms of representation and therefore a tendency to vote for populist representatives who support more direct forms of representation. However, this challenge assumes multiple forms and is the result of manifold possibilities. Principle among them is lack of citizen participation which is generally assumed to be the result of a lack of trust in associations and institutions. As Samaddar argues, "the problem then is not then how to represent people in power but how to make the people an organic and coherent collective."[1] But how is this coherent collective formed and defined? This article argues that while the process of formation of the collective has certain generic requirements these encounter complexities that are specific to the societies where it is being formed and defined. It is this that truly defines the possibilities of the emergence and success of the myriad forms of popular movements that challenged established regimes and a move towards a more "just" society.

To understand this in the Central Asian context it is necessary to examine the network of relationships among people that allows for the functioning of a society, or social capital. In the generic Western understanding, social capital, which leads to greater interaction and awareness of social issues and greater citizen participation in public affairs, eventually results in the formation of a civil society. Strong networks therefore result in nurturing and encouraging civic engagement and create the possibility of social movements and movements of protest. In Uzbekistan, particularly in the post-Soviet context, most citizens were part of civil society organisations which in turn would have implied greater involvement in civic affairs. However, here, this direct correlation between civic engagement and political pluralism was questioned with the institutionalisation of the civil society form typical to Uzbekistan, the *mahalla*, and the understanding that the institution had become an instrument for the state.

In Central Asia, the transition to democracy that civic engagement was assumed to herald, has itself often been critiqued for the challenges it faced and for the state narrative that the orientalist form of civil society was different from the liberal Western one. Sabina Insebayeva argues that the dense network of social interactions, that is institutionalised through the mahalla in Uzbekistan for instance, has allowed for the socialisation of the people into norms, values and practices that are compatible with the existing system of governance. This she argues, has happened over several generations and has resulted in the legitimisation of existing systems of governance.[2] The "Uzbek path of development" that the post-Soviet state espoused translated to an understanding of the state as the principal reformer espousing an evolutionary form of development and movement towards democracy. The focus was on stability and ensuring the safety of the state and its people. In all of this, the mahalla acted as the interlocutor between the state and the people. And since the perception of reality is determined by social interaction, which in the Uzbek

case happened via the institution of the mahalla, it was also instrumental in defining the political sustainability of the existing regime.[3]

This was complicated by complexities like citizenship and youth involvement in the new nation states. The Arab Spring encouraged examination of similarities in terms of governance, economic development, corruption and wealth gap in their respective societies in the Middle East and Central Asia. Similarities were particularly evident in terms of the youthfulness of the population, encouraging ideas of the possibility of a challenge to the present governments in Central Asia. However, the way in which the post-Communist youth in the region adjusted to the newer notions of citizenship impacted the nature of collective action.[4] Since the states did not gain independence as a result of political struggle, there was neither large-scale conflict nor movements of people, except for some Russians who initially moved back to Russia. What happened, was simply a readjustment to thinking of themselves as members of an independent state. Participatory politics could have induced them to think of themselves as members of an independent state but with the exception of Kyrgyzstan none of the states moved to a Parliamentary form of government. The rule of law did not allow space for any political participation or the creation of political communities. Democracy was managed by the ruling elites, who were the old Soviet ruling elites, as per their own definition of what democracy should be in their societies. Questions of identity were left largely unanswered and in turn, this meant the continuation of either attachment to clan or kin-based relationships or neighbourhood associations that took the form of the mahalla, which in turn was institutionalised by the state.

This domestic dynamic has largely been backgrounded in any understanding both of the nature of democracy and opposition to it, in the region, which is analysed largely in terms of a geopolitical matrix, that has always encompassed a combination of power politics and local elite interaction. An understanding of Central Asian society itself and how notions of justice and democracy are interpreted in Central Asian societies is often lost in the conundrum of vacillations between Russia's continuing political influence and China's emerging economic one. However, a deeper understanding reveals not only the significance of kinship and clan ties and local interactions as significant in determining both the structures of governance and the opposition to it but also the innovative ways in which the ruling elites dealt with these oppositions. A combination of social structures that support *hurmat*, or respect for elders and legitimising state policies that project security and development as the immediate necessity rather than democracy has meant the delegitimisation of opposition and continuation of autocratic regimes. This article, therefore, begins with an understanding of the civil society discourse in the region with a focus on Uzbekistan where regime continuity has been a given factor of politics since Independence. It then moves on to examine two instances of protest in two of the most stable states in the region, one in Uzbekistan and another in Kazakhstan, that challenged existing regimes and the counter-narratives through which these were managed by the ruling regime. A key difference between the two is that Kazakhstan has powerful bureaucratic elites with economic interests whereas Uzbekistan has a security sector that wields

substantial power with its commercial sector. However, in both, a second generation of post-Soviet leaders had promised a "New" state where the voices of the people would be heard, an assurance that remained largely on paper. The final segment looks into a combination of external factors, including security backing from Russia and economic assistance from China, that has allowed for regime continuity.

The Discourse on Civil Society and the Transition to Democracy

In traditional Central Asian societies, the *masjid*, the *choikhona* and the *bazar* which was a part of the neighbourhood or the mahalla had been places of discussion among the community and therefore also potential sites for the launching of social movements. It was these that were the precursors to the modern notions of civil society in the region. The mahalla in particular gained credence in both official and non-official narratives in the region in the post-Soviet context. In Uzbekistan for instance, the official state slogan "from a strong state to a strong civil society" was interpreted as reinventing traditional structures of self-governance within the parameters of a constitutional state. The way in which this would be defined, however, assumed a particular Uzbek form with the core idea of establishing a constitutional democratic state and open civil society as expounded by independent Uzbekistan's first President Islam Karimov, since the establishment of the state in 1991. The civil society discourse in Uzbekistan assumed the state to be an arbiter of competing interests, including non-state ones from trade unions to social movements. However, there is an emphasis on a difference between Western and Eastern notions about civil society that essentially emphasises the reformist role of the state in contrast to discourses from Eastern Europe where civil society is accepted as an alternative to the state. The Uzbek discourse derived from Karimov's viewpoint that the break with the Soviet apparatus offered a way to rethink the past and revive cultural heritages including traditional civil society institutions. Here, there was a reflection of Eastern philosophy and values that determined an understanding of peoples' aspirations towards social justice. However, there is also recognition of the fact that universal values of democracy, justice, equality, and freedom need to be incorporated into the discourse though the form it assumes would be determined by the knowledge and wisdom inherent in Uzbek society. Similarly, there is an emphasis on the fact that the clear distinction between the state and civil society which is a distinctive part of the Western discourse may not essentially be workable here since it is a strong state that creates the conditions for the flourishing of civil society.

According to Murad Ismailov, for Karimov, democratic processes were determined by certain laws and where civil societies were concerned, he identified a clear knowledge of local political realities within which eastern traditions of democracy and civil society are formed. These include a mature political culture at the grassroots level that is capable of imbibing democratic traditions and a clear understanding and articulation of the difference between

Western notions of "individualism' and Eastern understanding of "collective" culture. This definition resulted in debates among Uzbek theoreticians where scholars like Sharifkhodjaev argued that civil society can only emerge where there is political and ideological pluralism, where individuals are considered free and equal and can act in an atmosphere where legal and moral norms are not violated. This provides the binding forces of the social fabric and promotes social, cultural, economic, and familial ties.[5] For Karimov however, civil society makes sense only within the process of democratisation and as such the two are closely interconnected. Democracy is determined by active citizen participation and while the legislative basis for this participation has been set up, citizens need to appreciate their right to participate in the management of the state. While the relationship between democracy and civil society is accepted, Karimov argues that democracy itself can flourish only when there is a healthy opposition. Unfortunately, according to him, this is yet to develop in Uzbekistan. However, as part of the process of democratisation this would emerge in time. Secondly, Karimov asserts the value of free mass media in the making of a truly democratic society. Here also, the Uzbek mass media has not been successful in fulfilling its role and identifying critical issues. However, Uzbek political analyst Farkhod Tolipov notes that this definition does not take note of the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* democracy in the state.[6] Such gaps are evident for instance in the formation of the party system, an essential element of the civil society, where in reality the process of formation of an independent party is problematic. And this in turn impacts the legislative process. The relationship between the state and civil society in Uzbekistan, however, would necessarily need to take note of the traditional nature of civil society in the region.

In Uzbekistan, civil society took the form of the mahalla, a neighbourhood of community-based associations that survived the Soviet period and continues to exist in the region. In post-Soviet Uzbekistan, the mahalla was recognised by Karimov as a unique indigenous form of local self-government that was the bedrock of Uzbek civil society. In the period of transition, the mahalla acted as the social organisation that filled the social vacuum.[7] The mahallas helped shape local government, contributed to the development of a cope of respect for elders and promoted ideas of mutual help, teamwork, and hospitality.[8] Timur Dadabaev argues that the mahalla or the neighbourhood represents one of the few effective traditional organisations that creates a common identity for members of different groups based on shared residence and common problems. However, he argues that throughout the history of the institution, there have been attempts to manipulate these institutions for political expediency.[9] In pre-Soviet times the mahalla was an institution that worked on customary norms and an informal basis. They were smaller groupings of residences where there was information sharing and voluntary support. The mahalla included support groups like *gap*, *guzar* and *chaikhana* as institutions of social networking. In addition, there was the institution of *khashar* which provided voluntary mutual support in times of ceremonies or emergencies. In addition, the mahalla performed civic duties, collected taxes, and enforced order. While the mahalla administration retained

a certain level of independence in pre-Soviet times, but with the Soviet takeover of the administration the mahalla was reduced to providing support to the community and a means of dialogue between the communities and the Soviet system. On the one hand, the mahalla was co-opted to provide socialist propaganda and on the other, there were attempts to reduce its influence over the society.

This changed once again after Independence. The mahalla was identified as one aspect of the unique culture of the Uzbek people and as a means of inculcating traditional values and cultures. Later the mahalla was used to stabilise inter-ethnic relations and manage tensions due to declining living standards and post-Soviet anxiety.[10] The mahalla was also institutionalised and the *aksakals,* or community leaders were elected and approved by the city councils and as a result, an informal institution assumed a more "official" status. In the late 1990s, the increasing radicalisation of society resulted in the neighbourhood watch systems being established and sponsored through the mahallas. Mahalla functions were later extended to semi-official functions like registration of residents, hosting house and apartment owners' associations and acting as the medium of communication between the government and the citizens and with residents on behalf of the government but they have no financial independence. This complicates their position as they often seem to be acting on behalf of the government rather than the residents and as such residents see little distinction between the government and the mahalla which was traditionally an entirely informal institution.[11] Alisher Ilkhamov notes that the lack of a vibrant civil society is due to the imposition of a surrogate national ideology based on patriarchal values and monopolisation of national symbols to justify the structures of the ruling regime. This ideology is based on the myth of a national history of the nation and the self that has resulted in ethnocentric views. This has been a systematic effort on the part of the government rather than any effort at building consensus. He then goes on to argue that in Uzbekistan civil society should not be equated with social capital. The availability of social capital and strong social ties does not essentially mean the existence of a vibrant civil society. In fact, the very opposite. The social capital available in mahallas and kinship groups has not translated to engagement in the public sphere. This has meant that there has been no transformation of social networks into social movements and social action with the objective of social change.[12]

As in most post-Soviet states, transition has been the abiding theme in Uzbekistan over the last twenty years with the assumption that the transition would be from a command economy to a market economy and from authoritarianism to democracy. However, the transition is hardly ever a linear process, particularly in states like Uzbekistan where the political elite remained in place and were able to transform their political power into advantages for their immediate family, clan, or regional factions. It has been argued that Uzbek politics has been dominated by weak formal state agencies and disproportionately influential informal institutions. Historically, regional and clan affiliations played a prominent political and economic role. Uzbek identity in public and private life is traditionally determined by an individual's belonging

to five distinct geographical areas that make up separate provinces: Tashkent, Samarkand, Ferghana, Surkhandarya-Syrdarya, and Khorezm. During the Soviet period, members of the Samarkand-Tashkent clans established dominant key economic and political positions Because power and wealth are interlinked, and they developed reputations as the country's major oligarchs. The lower tier is made up of oblast governors, wealthy industrialists, landowners, and informal power brokers. Leaders of these lower tier groups are subordinate to those in groups linked to major oligarchs. Analysts argue that in post-Soviet Uzbekistan patronage groups are based on regional affiliations, as was the case during the Soviet period; Mirziyaev is said to represent the powerful Samarkand clan, Azimov and Ganiev the Tashkent clan, and Inoyatov the Surkhdarya clan. However, as Akhmed Said argues, the reality is far more complex and fluid. Regional affiliations do play a role in Uzbek politics however, patronage groups are now built on several factors, including individual loyalty to officials, common pragmatic interests, regional ties, family ties, and professional ties. In a clear sign of pragmatism, Uzbek officials maintain their membership with multiple patronage networks to hedge their bets and defend their economies and political resources.[13] All this in turn translates into social contracts that tend to renew regime stability and inhibit actions against the state.

The civil society discourse has differed in states like Tajikistan, where the NGOs assumed the role of neoliberal civil society as the state transitioned from Soviet Communism and faced a prolonged civil war. As such, the NGOs became symbolic not just of Western developmental aid but also intermediaries in a process of civil society induced peacebuilding. According to Karolina Kluczewska and Payam Foroughi, development agencies in post-Soviet Tajikistan offered a space for the action of the Soviet era *intelligentsia* and members of former Soviet structures such as *Komsomol* or *Zhensovety* by incorporating them and teaching them new skill sets that would provide an opportunity to be part of the regional and international network of NGOs. They also offered them a new value system and its associated rhetoric which included the ideology of a neoliberal civil society replacing the vacuum brought about by the collapse of the Soviet system.[14] However, they argue that this experiment with inculcating aspects of neoliberal civil society did not succeed since it had targeted only one group, the local Soviet activists who were then expected to share and support these ideas among the central and local governments and the people at large. Also, as financing for the NGOs was reduced due to a combination of international and domestic restraints it became apparent that the role of NGOs as neoliberal civil societies had been closely linked to the material benefits that they were able to distribute. However, with the reduced influence of Western funded NGOs, the space for local activism on apolitical issues is on the rise.[15]

Popular Protests, Social Aspirations, and Regime Continuity

Any narrative of popular protest in the region that is identified as Central Asia today should begin with a reference to the romantic endeavours of Enver Pasha and Ibrahim Beg, and their band of Basmachis, who waged a guerrilla war in

support of the disposed Emir of Bukhara and Khiva against the advancing Soviet troops. The fortunes of this popular revolt, fluctuated between 1918–33 as most elements of it had either been neutralised by the death and capture of leaders or by Soviet concessions in social and religious matters. It is interesting because the cause they supported was not anti-establishment. In fact, they wanted to preserve the Emirate against the advance of what is generally acknowledged as a modernising force that was in favour of redistribution of land and water rights from the landowners or the *beks* to the people. This combination of disposed feudals, clergies and tribals nobilities continued to obstruct Soviet efforts till about 1930 when they lost popular support which signalled the end of Basmachestvo.[16] The Basmachi revolts along with the protests of 1916 against the draft remained the only recorded popular protests in the region till the reforms initiated by President Gorbachev's policies unleashed popular forces across the Soviet Union.

These mostly centred around economic grievances and inefficiency but also reflected aspirations for the renewal of national traditions and languages. High prices, unemployment, inadequate housing, and consumer shortages were some of the causes of the disturbances. In Kazakhstan, in July 1989 there were protests against the high prices charged by the cooperatives run by the immigrants from the Caucasus and demanding their expulsion.[17] Similarly, rumours that Armenian refugees were being settled in Tajikistan caused disturbances in the winter of 1990 about the stress that this would cause on the already limited housing situation.[18] In fact, a wide range of professionals (the Kazakh Writers Union), environmentalists, (the Green Front in Alma Ata) and other groups were formed with a range of objectives including national rejuvenation, a focus on national languages and demands for greater political and economic freedom.[19] *Birlik,* the nationalist front in Uzbekistan had among its demands agricultural reforms, the creation of textile industries, control over local resources, reform of language policy, reinstatement of old Uzbek names, and a revival of Uzbek history and culture among others. There were similar groups in the other republics including *Rastakhiz* or resurrection in Tajikistan, the Alma Ata Popular Front in Kazakhstan, and *Ogzibirlik* in Turkmenistan. In addition to domestic issues, these popular fronts also grappled with how to deal with issues regarding their transnational historical connections including pan-Turkism.[20] However, while significant in the transitional stage they failed to develop a vision for the type of society they hoped to create and were reduced to becoming appendages to the Soviet system.

The movements for a revitalised civil society in Uzbekistan, for instance, began in the post-1985 period when certain crucial cultural, ecological, and social issues were addressed. During this period of transition, the CPUz (Communist Party of Uzbekistan) had to contend with the emergence of two organisations: *Birlik* and *Erk*. An examination of the programme of these two organisations shows that most of the issues addressed here were later appropriated by the Independent Uzbek state and the ruling party the PDP (People's Democratic Party). However, even in Uzbekistan marginalisation of these forces has been attempted. This is evident from the fact that even an independent evaluation of the activities of these organisations is difficult as they have been declared illegal

and as such no official press or newspaper documents their activities. Writings that document the multiparty nature of the state, they are cited only after detailed reports on officially recognised parties. An interesting example of this is an article in the *Obshyestvyennie Nayuk v Uzbekistane*. The article points out that the Uzbek state today grants the right to democratic participation and formation of associations. Pluralism is now an accepted part of the state. It then goes on to talk of the rights accorded to the People's Democratic Party and the *Vatan Tarakki* to choose their candidates for elections. The election platforms of both are recorded in detail which includes that of a "strong state with a humanitarian policy." Other parties like the Social Democratic Party and the *Adolat* are also examined. It then only incidentally mentions the formation of two other political parties and the development of the movement *Khalk Birlik* In the post-Soviet context, the challenges of moving away from the remnants of the Soviet system including the command economy and political institutions resulted in alternatives that often challenged the regimes. These principally included movements that aimed at social/economic/ecological issues like the Nevada Semipalatinsk anti-nuclear movement. However, most were unsuccessful in instituting change, the exception being the popular movements in Kyrgyzstan. Two protests that were exceptions also failed to institute change. A combination of the continuation of elite Soviet leadership supported by security structures and business elites ensured both continuity and stability which remained undisturbed by mass protests in Andijan (Uzbekistan) in 2005 and Zhanaozhen (Kazakhstan) in 2011.

The Andijan incident proved to be somewhat of a watershed both in terms of the opposition to the state as well as in the way the events were interpreted by the state. The incident, a popular protest against the arrest of 23 local businessmen, that led to a jailbreak was portrayed as orchestrated by a trained (and foreign-aided) group of terrorist/criminal elements who were attempting to destabilse the state and was dealt with by opening fire on the protestors. In the aftermath of the incident, a booklet was published from Tashkent that summarised the statements and responses of President Karimov to the local and international press about the Andijan events of May 12–13, 2005. Entitled, *The Uzbek People Will Never Depend on Others,* the booklet sought to provide an explanation of the Government's actions during the incident and show that this incident had nothing in common with the "revolutions" that had led to changes in governments in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. Examining President Karimov's account of the events of May 2005, Nick Megoran argues that four key themes have been deployed in the narrative to delegitimise the government's opponents: terrorism and criminality; inauthentic Uzbekness and deviant masculinity/religiosity; constitutional illegitimacy; and the subversion of the scientific laws of the state.[21] What remains common with most writings of the President in the post-1997 period is the portrayal of the image of a "nation under threat."

On the one hand, the rhetoric sought to rally popular feelings of patriotism and on the other, international legitimacy for state violence. Suda Masaru argues that to counter the imagery of development and the threat of radical extremism as well as international criticism of uneven human rights, the state

identified the transition to democracy as a "target" to be achieved eventually at some future date. Civil obedience was identified as an essential element along with freedom in civil society.[22] Since the late 1990s, there has been a shift in President Karimov's sense of the geopolitical identity of Uzbekistan, from a self-confident polity at peace with itself and its neighbours to a besieged island of civilization in a sea of anarchy that threatened to submerge it. Nick Megoran notes that the portrayal of "a nation under threat" was reflected in Presidential writings, media reports and even in popular culture. The rhetoric was aimed at both the domestic audience who are urged to maintain public order to allow the state to move towards a path ruled by democracy and at the international audience who are informed that the inability of the state to do so would be due to the threat faced by the state because of external extremist forces. The first channel that inculcated a sense of danger was the Presidential writings themselves. The same geopolitical visions were conveyed through the national news media (*Halk Sozi*) which presented opposite images of a happy and prosperous Uzbekistan in contrast to consistent images of neighbouring states as spaces of chaos. There is also the suggestion that the chaos in the neighbourhood is threatening to engulf Uzbekistan. State narratives in the aftermath of the protests, therefore, are equally significant in terms of understanding regime continuity.

The aftermath of the Andijan events however did not affect the "image" of a state. Nor did it hinder Uzbekistan's international legitimacy as a state with enormous geopolitical significance. On the other hand, there is a continuing state effort to foster a more progressive image. One such effort is through government allocation of funds for sports youth programmes. It is argued that this is impelled by the desire to keep the Uzbek youth occupied and apolitical and to foster a "positive international image of Uzbekistan." This according to some is an effort to promote through sports an image of themselves as a progressive, modern country as well as regional power.[23] Similarly, the *Millennium Development Goals Report* (2015) argues that despite all challenges posed by an unstable economy Uzbekistan was able to maintain a balance between the most important key development goals, i.e., ensuring rapid economic growth through structural reforms and improving the welfare of all strata of the population. It goes on to argue that because of this balanced development paradigm, the country has on the one hand seen the rapid development of technical, technological, and financial foundations required for long-term and stable economic growth. On the other, there has been a steady reduction in poverty including the most vulnerable groups and an overall improvement in standards of living. This however remains questionable given the large volumes of labour migrants to Russia.

Similarly, in 2011 a limited protest by disgruntled oil workers in the town of Zhanaozhen (Kazakhstan) transformed into a broader labour movement which became an embarrassment for the government. Their demands for higher pay and a greater participation of their union in the government were typical of such protests but unique in Kazakhstan where a tacit political arrangement had meant that protests were largely unknown. The demands were largely ignored, and leaders identified and subject to swift reprisals. A crackdown that resulted in unarmed protestors becoming the targets of security

forces, however, meant that the carefully cultivated image of the Kazakh state where stability and higher than the regional living standards were accepted in return for regime continuity was brought into question. While security narratives allowed the Uzbek ruling elite to manage protests in Kazakhstan a developmental narrative that emphasises that regime instability results in issues of development have extended regime continuity. Situated in the heart of Asia, the most persistently pursued goal for Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev since the country gained independence in 1991 has been to promote integration at various levels not only within Central Asia and the former Soviet space but also within global markets and institutions. Nazarbayev's intense support for globalisation partly results from his perception that Kazakhstan would benefit from enhanced ties with other countries and organisations. In the economic sphere, greater integration would allow Kazakhstan and other neighbouring states to better exploit their natural resources and pivotal location. Kazakhstan's ability to realise its potential as a natural crossroad for east-west and north-south commercial trade depends on reducing obstacles to the free flow of goods and peoples among the Eurasian nations. Deeper economic integration would also make these countries more attractive to foreign investors and enhance collective leverage with external actors. In the security realm, greater integration would provide Kazakhstan with room to manoeuvre among the great powers active in the region and reduce the risks of becoming a pawn in the emerging great power condominium. There is emphasis on the fact that instability provides opportunities for external meddling and conflicts can spill across borders, either directly or through refugee flows that discourage international capital markets from investing in the region.

The success of legitimising politics in Uzbekistan has meant that after 2005 the ruling regime faced contestation in the peripheries only in 2022. In Uzbekistan, protests broke out in Karakalpakstan in July 2022 against proposed changes to the Uzbek constitution that would have adversely affected its right to secede from Uzbekistan and removed its "sovereign" status. Karakalpakstan is today an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan. However, it was not originally a part of Uzbekistan. During the Soviet period, control of the territory occupied by the Karakalpak people was transferred a total of three times in slightly less than a decade. The Karakalpaks were first granted a titular territory in 1925. Then the Karakalpaks were administratively separated between the Uzbek SSR and the Kazakh ASSR and awarded the status of Autonomous Oblast. In 1930 the Karakalpak AO was transferred to the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. In 1936, it was joined to the Uzbek SSR and given the status of Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. The Republic of Karakalpakstan has its constitution and laws but these are subservient to the Uzbek state. Chapter 17 of the Uzbek Constitution contains six articles that deal directly with the legal status of Karakalpakstan. The first article states that the sovereign Republic of Karakalpakstan is part of the Republic of Uzbekistan and that the sovereignty of the Republic shall be protected by the Republic of Uzbekistan. The second article states that the Republic shall have its own constitution which would be in accordance with the constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan. It is also clearly stated that the laws of the Republic of

Uzbekistan shall be binding on the territory of the Republic of Karakalpakstan. The constitution also allows the Republic to secede based on a nationwide referendum held by the people of Karakalpakstan. It guarantees that the territories and boundaries of the Karakalpak Republic shall not be changed without the consent of the Republic and that it has the right to determine its administrative and territorial structures. While in reality, the legal and administrative structures in Karakalpakstan are subordinate to the central government in Tashkent. It is interesting that in the large numbers of new writings on Karakalpakstan it is referred to as the *National Republic* of Karakalpakstan, an interpretation of the reality, which may well, be at variance with that of the Uzbek state. Thus, there may well be different levels of interpretation of current history, as well as resentment about unequal development in the regions away from the center. This is particularly evident, once again in the Karakalpak region as the proximity to the Aral Sea has meant that the area has been worst hit by the environmental changes affected by the shrinking of the Sea. While this was once again interpreted in terms of "forces from abroad" aiding efforts to destabilise the state, the protests were induced by dire living conditions more than simply the status of the Republic. However, they were "managed" by security forces whose actions belied the promise of President Mirziyoyev's "New Uzbekistan" where the voices of the people would make a difference.[24] Good governance and liberal democracy along with a focus on public grievances to strive towards economic and social justice were the stated goals of what was supposed to have been a responsive government in the post-pandemic era. Interestingly, a combination of external factors, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the conflict in Ukraine and its social and economic fallouts including reverse migration and a more engaged China has meant regime stability and reduced tolerance for alternatives.

Good Governance, Liberal Democracy, and Populism

A combination of external factors in the post-pandemic era once again raised questions about the manoeuvrability of the states given their high-level engagements with both Russia and China in May 2023. The fact that the conflict in Ukraine did not play out the way it was predicted meant that for most observers of Central Asia, its fallout was anticipated to be adverse both in economic and security terms. The fact that most of the states were part of the Eurasian Economic Union and had deep economic and social ties with Russia was assumed to signal further economic chaos which in turn would call for political and social unrest and possibilities of protest. However, for the most part, these predictions proved unwarranted as the conflict opened avenues for both foreign businesses and skilled labour to move into the region from Russia and created labour opportunities for Central Asians as more Russian men were drawn into the protracted conflict. While few from the region actively sought a quick fix in Russian citizenship by joining the Russian side, others were drawn into the conflict, either because of the monetary aspect or occasionally support of the Russian position.

Post-pandemic recovery inevitably involved emerging vectors of foreign assistance, consequent foreign influence, and disputes about intrusions into national sovereignty. China, for instance, packaged aid as "gifts" reflecting the Chinese nation's tradition of internationalism and its ideal of universal harmony. Projected in terms of South-South cooperation, these have been accompanied by a narrative and an evolving set of practices that stress the parity of relationships that beguile reality and aim at creating influence. Challenging universal principles of democracy and human rights as Western, it has also supported local interpretations of democracy that converge with her own understanding and serve Chinese interests. While the pandemic had questioned China's role in the region the generally accepted position is that the Russia-Ukraine conflict would act as a strategic enabler of a shifting power balance where China would once again emerge with a clear advantage. Trade with the Central Asian states expanded to USD70 billion in 2022 and increased by 22 per cent in the first quarter of 2023. In the China Central Asia Summit, Xi'an China pledged CNY26 billion ($3.8 billion) of finance and grants to the region as a parallel summit of G7 leaders in Japan debated on how to control Chinese coercive diplomacy.[25]

While this advantage is being measured in economic terms, Beijing's tacit support for restraining anti-regime activism remains an undocumented factor exacerbating the uneven human rights record in the region. There is also the general understanding that Central Asian elites tend to be pro-Chinese while anti-China sentiments are rampant among people who see no advantage in the investments. The lack of local employment opportunities in Chinese-funded infrastructure projects has been a constant cause of concern. Along with this, border settlements made by Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been questioned for ceding land to the Chinese under pressure from Beijing. The counterargument by Kazakh authorities claimed that these were useless tracts of land which were uncultivable and had no mineral reserves. This faced opposition from critics like Murat Auezov and his democratic platform *Azamat* in Kazakhstan, who along with others like Olzhas Suleimenov and the anti-nuclear Nevada Semipalatinsk movement and other ecological movements like *Tabigat* questioned the border agreements and settlement of issues like the sharing of water from cross border rivers, the Ili and Irtysh.[26] The Chinese Question has in recent times become an economic one where Kazakh economic interest groups in the metallurgical and agricultural sectors have petitioned for the protection of the social interest of workers engaged by Chinese firms. Concerns have also been raised about local textile and weaving industries that have suffered in competition with Chinese products and about the drain of resources like minerals and gas. While largely unstructured, the opposition has extended to issues like migration where the immigration of Chinese workers on the borders has raised concerns.[27]

The post-pandemic context was also affected by global concerns around the withdrawal of American troops from the neighbourhood and apprehensions about increasing Russian influence, followed by the fallouts of the Russia-Ukraine conflict impacting the region as a whole but also bilateral relations among individual states. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has been the

most definitive incident to influence the course of developments in post-pandemic Central Asia with the conflict impacting what had been worst hit by the pandemic, the economy. Instability in the global economy, and unstable prices for oil and agricultural produce meant concerns about inflation. Russian ban on the export of Ukrainian grain to members of the Eurasian Economic Union further exacerbated these concerns. There was some recognition by Russia that excessive pressure on the region, given the state of the economy, would be counterproductive. The states, for instance, were not required to recognise the two provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk or show support for the Russian "special operations" but enough that they remained neutral and not supply weapons and equipment to Ukraine which states like Kazakhstan suspended almost immediately. However, to a very significant extent, there has been Central Asian support for Ukrainian sovereignty among the people and this has irked Russia even though the governments have shown reduced tolerance for anti-war propaganda and negative media reports of the conflict.

This balance, while fragile, however, could not endure the Russian announcement of partial mobilisation, forcing the Central Asian states to take a more decisive stance. Mobilisation caused two problems for the region. With the announcement in Russia, large numbers of Russians began to cross borders into neighbouring states, and it is estimated that in the first week, as many as one hundred thousand arrived in Kazakhstan alone.[28] On the other hand, Central Asian migrants in Russia were encouraged to join the army with offers of good pay and a fast track citizenship. This caused alarm, as the prospect of armed fighters trained in the Ukraine conflict returning to the region became a possibility. All states issued warnings to nationals that fighting abroad was a criminal offence. This was complicated by the fact that many held dual citizenship which raised legal ambiguities regarding their status as veterans or criminals depending on the state concerned and also regarding their status as prisoners of war in case they were captured.

The large numbers of Russian migrants also raised issues. In an interesting reversal of trends, there has been in recent months, a significant migration of Russian men to Georgia, Armenia, and the Central Asian states with the Russian announcement of a compulsory military draft for men in the course of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. For decades the movement used to be in the reverse with Central Asian men travelling to Russia and Moscow for work. As the movement of Russians was restricted across European borders, the significance of the open Eurasian Economic Union borders became apparent. Since the beginning of the war, thousands of Russians had already inundated states like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The announcement of the compulsory draft exacerbated it with chaos at the Kazakh-Russian borders and cities flooded with *relokanty* that posed problems for the locals.[29] The migration narrative was reversed when local landlords evicted Kazakh families for affluent Russian tenants and local workers were replaced with skilled Russian migrants. While the scale of this displacement is yet to be quantified, this has polarised local societies.

Most sympathise with the Russian migrants on a personal level but are wary of Putin's future actions. Those more accommodating are being accused

of colonial mentality and the fact that for years the reception of Central Asian workers in Russia has been less than welcoming. Government positions have been more restrained in balancing traditional relations with Russia with support for the migrants. Most have declared that as signatories to the CIS, they would need to extradite Russian nations if they were on the international wanted lists. There is also the understanding that this is a short-term migration and that eventually the migrants will relocate to other regions within the former Soviet space. However, the recent US warnings that Kazakh banks and companies would face sanctions if they were found to be aiding Russian individuals and companies by helping circumvent sanctions and getting access to dual-use technology, has meant that the "financial services companies have said that it will not, as of April 27, assist Russians and Belarusians in trading on the KASE in non-Kazakh tenge-denominated securities issued by foreign companies."[30] However, in a move that is being noted as a "deferral" to the Russian President, all five Central Asian Presidents attended the Victory Day Parade in Moscow on May 9, 2023. For most, it was a last-minute decision and a change from 2022 when none of them had attended. There are also stricter residency rules being implemented in states like Kazakhstan, with undocumented persons being allowed to stay for a maximum of ninety days.[31] In states like Uzbekistan, this is restricted to fifteen days without relevant papers.

This recent migration has come at a time when the maelstrom of domestic and international conundrums including the January 2022 Street protests in Kazakhstan, and spiralling public violence was firmly controlled by a combination of domestic and Russian troops garnered under the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Kazakhstan is therefore in an unsettled state. Economic and political uncertainties loom on the horizon. Probably no country is experiencing greater anxiety about the Ukrainian conflict and the deterioration of EU-Russian relations. Both subjects threatened to reduce some of the pillars on which the Kazakh President built independent Kazakhstan. The country's economic sovereignty is in question and there is a general impression that Astana now is an unwilling participant in the Eurasian integration process with the recognition that changing course will not be easy. In Kazakhstan apprehensions about the possibility of Russian aggression is acute and there is a history of ultranationalist Russian sentiments about northern Kazakhstan. The Russian reaction and the arguments used to question the Ukrainian borders were seen by many as being those that could be used to justify a similar intervention on Kazakh territory. In fact, northern Kazakhstan has been as present in Russian ultranationalist rhetoric as the Ukrainian territory. This is part of the reason why the economic integration with Russia arouses suspicion among significant sections of the Kazakh population.

Being aware of such reactions in a televised interview with a local channel *Khabar* on August 26, 2014, the then President of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev said, "If the rules set forth in the agreement are not followed, Kazakhstan has the right to withdraw from the Eurasian Economic Union. I have said this before and I am saying this again. Kazakhstan will not be part of organi[s]ations that poses a threat to our independence."[32] Apprehensions are not unfounded as Moscow's immediate response showed. On August 28, 2014,

in response to a question at the *Nashi* youth nationalist movement, President Putin questioned the historical legitimacy of Kazakhstan as a state, insinuating that it was a "Soviet error" and indicating that an overwhelming majority of the Kazakh population was committed to the strong relations with Russia and staying within the Russian sphere (*Russki mir*). However, he did not clarify where the conviction about the will of the majority came from. 24 per cent of Kazakh citizens are ethnic Russians, concentrated in the north of the country that shares a border with Russia. Till date, Kazakh Russians have little interest in secession, and it was generally assumed that they are well integrated within the new Kazakh state. At that point, the Kazakh Government opted for a discrete response and announced the celebration of the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh state in 2015. However, events in Ukraine have indicated the capacity of inter-ethnic issues to divide society.

It is in this context that the fact that for the first time in thirty years, the CSTO led by Russia had been called to action at the request of the Kazakh President is significant particularly because he then publicly acknowledged its role in restoring order. This raised questions both about Kazakh sovereignty and whether civil unrest in one part of a country, fuelled by rising energy prices warranted action that could be called upon only in case of armed external aggression. The protests were interesting in that there was no political party or platform behind the mobilisation of the people who gathered to protest fuel and commodity prices to begin with and then moved on to demand the removal of the corrupt government. There were no banners, no leaders leading the protests, no symbol of resistance and was spontaneous heterogenous street activism closer to the Gezi Park protests than the Colour Revolutions familiar to the region. Anti-elitist and anti-establishment to begin with they suddenly became violent and a target for harsh reprisals. Following the restoration of order, President Tokayev called for the installation of a revamped political system for what he termed *Jana Kazakhstan* or New Kazakhstan which would reflect the voices of the people more effectively. The first anniversary of the clashes coincided with the realisation that the proposed changes were largely on paper. In reality, any individual or group critical of the government stood a very slim chance of entry into the political space. And it is still the elite leadership and not the voting public who determine whether a person continues to hold his legislative position despite several allegations of serious crimes against his close family politicians like Zhiguli Dayrabayev can hold on to their posts in the newly elected Kazakh Parliament.[33] Despite changes in leadership and relative progress towards greater responsiveness to public concerns in some states like Kyrgyzstan, authoritarian tendencies remained in place.

The sweeping reforms implemented by President Japarov, most notably a constitutional change that reverted to the Presidential form of government, which had existed in Kyrgyzstan before 2011 and his disregard for the rule of law has meant that his once popular image as a reformer has been brought into question. Japarov had risen to power based on his support for the nationalisation of the Kumtor gold mines and the protests and demonstrations that were organised for nationalising the mines. The mines account for about 12.4 per cent of the state GDP making the making ownership by Canadian

Centerra Gold a point of contention in the state.[34] Chinese ownership of mines like Chatkal has also led to protests against exploitative mine extraction and Japarov's support for these demonstrations led to his popularity. Along with this, his agenda to deal with corruption in the bureaucracy and induce them to donate money had created a support base that had allowed him to come to power as a populist leader. Given that Kyrgyz's economic situation had suffered during the pandemic with a devalued currency and an external debt that meant that a large part of the GDP had to be used for debt payments these populist moves led to acceptance of his style of governance. However, his inability to tackle real issues of governance and border clashes with Tajikistan for instance in Batken in April 2021 that led to over fifty deaths raised questions about his performance in other areas like debt reduction as well. Japarov's success was based on a popular understanding that the Kyrgyz system was so mired in corruption that the only way to rescue it would be through a strong leader backed by popular support who would overhaul the system even with a temporary disregard for the rule of law. It was believed that once this was achieved the former system based on the rule of law would be restored. However, Japarov's recent actions against any criticism from civil society and his attempts to control the narrative in the mass media have raised questions about his real intentions. His inability to navigate the pandemic, economic and border crisis could well signal another mass protest.[35] Japarov's anti-elitist stance and his insistence that he belonged to the common man and was keen on addressing their issues had become critical in his rise as a populist leader. The waning of this image could well signal a return to the parliamentary form or the emergence of an alternative leader.

Conclusion

Limited largely by the restricted issues that they addressed, socio-economic difficulties, electoral fraud, restrictions on rights or endemic corruption, popular protests in the region have largely failed to stimulate political change to any significant extent. Regime survival has been ensured through a process of domestic political structures, patterns of global interaction and strategies against the diffusion of the rhetoric of protests. Highly sensitive to the possibility of change most protests have been curbed by pre-emptive actions to ensure regime survival. The protests in the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, in Kazakhstan among oil company workers in Zhanaozhen, and in Tashkent demanding compensation for houses that had been demolished, remained largely restricted to those directly affected and rarely involved any political leadership or even large segments of the youth. Rarely did they expand into becoming national issues that affected the states as a whole. In the exceptional instance that they did, like the protests in Kazakhstan in 2022, they were challenged by a combination of domestic and external forces. The role of external support for the regimes has also impacted the lack of success of popular protests as there has been support for the stability that the ruling regimes ensured in a region that has been geopolitically identified as unstable

and prone to conflict. On the other hand, given the limited economic potential of the region, there has been reduced interest from the global community in the domestic events that have been managed with Russian support. The possibility of change in the collective consciousness is also limited by paternalistic social norms and supported by institutionalised social structures like the mahalla. Yet, as Erica Marat argues, regimes based on elite networks rather than institutions are inherently unstable creating possibilities of protests given the growing capacity for self-organisation in the region.[36] All of these leave questions about the possibility of regime change and the impact of social mobilisation in the future open to various possibilities. Given the history of previous experiences of protests, one is left to grapple with the prospect that these may portend the nature of mobilisation for the future as well where strategies to contain popular demands ensure regime stability.

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A Cosmopolitan Race:
Northeast Migrants in Delhi-NCR

By

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Cosmopolitanism in the Neoliberal Period

In a newspaper article, Mayank Austen Soofi, a popular photojournalist based in Delhi, describes the presence of a small Manipuri business in an urban village in South Delhi as the existence of a "barely acknowledged cosmopolitanism."[1] In popular tabloids, the localities in Delhi such as Humayunpur and Munirka, where migrants from the Northeast live together, have been represented as cosmopolitan *mohallas*, meaning neighbourhoods.[2] Duncan McDuie-Ra, who has made important contributions in the study of Northeastern migrants in Delhi, furthermore, observes a "pan-tribal" cosmopolitanism among the migrants.[3] He argues that their enactment of "tribal" cosmopolitanism is a way of contesting archaic racial stereotypes by distinguishing oneself from host population or the "Indian mainstream." Although McDuie-Ra's assessment is rich in analysis, yet it effects a reductionist objectification of migrant identification as he consigns their cosmopolitanism to enactment of stereotypes through global Christian culture, English language, Korean Wave, and Western fashion and music.

Such generalising representations, in both popular media and academic writings, have a tendency to obscure the contested and shifting nature of identities and belongingness in urban spaces and overlook the daily struggles and violence that migrants have to undergo in the city. As art historian Wu Hung argues, "cosmopolitanism…is far from a harmonious state of being produced by a desire for all-inclusiveness. Rather it is fundamentally a reality forced on the city; it encompasses contesting spaces, intentions, and attitudes that the city cannot escape."[4] Thus, this paper attempts to critically investigate the lens of cosmopolitanism that is often used to represent migrants from the Northeast region in Delhi. Such cosmopolitanism attributed to the migrants from the Northeast emanates from their racial and cultural otherness from what is generally considered as India "proper" or the "mainland." Along with the

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spatial relegation of the migrants in cosmopolitan *mohallas* or neighbourhoods, their typecasting into certain skill sets in consonant with the needs of the neoliberal labour market add to their further "otherisation" as racial outsiders.

In the first section of *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels contended that cosmopolitanism is a dominant class ideology that led to the destruction of national industries, literature, and civilizations in the hands of a single oppressive regime of production.[5] In the neoliberal era, global cosmopolitan regime is a radicalisation of Anglo-American ideology of liberal internationalism. As Peter Gowan argues, this new cosmopolitanism "proposes a set of disciplinary regimes—characteristically dubbed, in the oleaginous jargon of the period, 'global governance'—reaching deep into the economic, social and political life of the states subject to it, while safeguarding international flows of finance and trade."[6] For instance, in order to attract foreign capital, culture and traditions of old cities have been ruthlessly erased by urban planners and real estate developers to give them a world-class cosmopolitan appeal. The neoliberal counterpart of the cosmopolitan bourgeois travellers of liberal modernity are the immigrants, refugees, diasporic people, exiled or displaced populations who essentially constitute the "problem" rather than the heralds of multiculturalism.[7] Yet, unlike the modern cosmopolitan elite, the legal status and sociocultural identity of the non-elite cosmopolitans are constantly put into question while local social practices and daily politics maintain their "otherness." Cosmopolitanism, however, cannot be simply derided as an ideological instrument of capitalism or neo-imperialism, because a cosmopolitan world vision continues to be a necessary normative paradigm. Hence, there is a need to distinguish between descriptive and normative cosmopolitanisms, or between "new liberal" cosmopolitanism, which is based on exclusionary market fundamentalism, and "democratic" cosmopolitanism that is based on the project of inclusivity.[8] Contemporary scholars of cosmopolitanism have, therefore, advocated for plural understandings of cosmopolitanism(s) in lieu of a single Western idea of abstract universalism.[9] While scholars have variously used the concepts of vernacular, working-class or ordinary cosmopolitanism to conceptualise the practices of sociability from below, the notion of subaltern cosmopolitanism brings together these various conditions of "subaltern subjectivity where alternative cosmopolitan imaginations are rooted."[10]

The central contention of this paper is that there is a fundamental disjuncture in representation, lived experiences as well as practices of cosmopolitanism among the racialised migrants that reveal the complexity of their subjectivities. This paper argues that the same visual regime of racialisation, rooted in the colonial and postcolonial practices of frontier making and racial anthropology that treats such migrants as racial "others" of the city attracts their labour into the cosmopolitan consumer spaces. The disjuncture in cosmopolitanism is far more evident when we consider the entrenched urban division of labour and the segregated housing market where the migrants are positioned against other migrants of the city. While their physical "otherness" is valorised in the capital city's (Delhi) service industries, outside the economic spaces their "otherness" is effectively maintained through social discrimination

and violence. By linking these two paradoxical phenomena, this paper argues that cosmopolitanism signals a tendency of neoliberal capital to appropriate, commodify, and control the bodies and cultures of ethnic minorities. These twin processes of violent commodification and reinforcement of racialisation are, however, contested by migrants' own normative practices of cosmopolitanism. Their understanding of cosmopolitanism is based on their aspirations of the city, beyond the commodification of their "otherness" and thin identification with global popular culture as suggested by McDuie-Ra. This paper notes the emergence of a "pan-Northeastern identity", as suggested by several scholars, as one such practice of migrant cosmopolitanism that holds the possibility for a new politics of solidarity and belongingness but with its own racial limitations.[11]

This paper is an extension of the fieldwork conducted from October 2019 to October 2021 that was resumed in May 2022 and was in progress at the time of writing this article. The fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2021 included both in-person and online interviews of 22 migrants (14 women and 8 men) from the Northeast who work in various service sectors in Delhi such as aviation, call centres, shopping malls, and hotels. Data from the ethnographic study that resumed in May 2022 entails in-depth interviews with around 80 interlocutors in a call centre located in Noida, Munirka village, and Humayunpur. The interlocutors included migrants from the Northeast, employers, co-workers, property brokers, and landlords among others. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section provides a brief genealogy of the "Northeast" as a racialised category from colonial and postcolonial to urban cosmopolitan constructions to contextualise the process of racialisation. The second section problematise the cosmopolitan constructions of the migrants and discusses the disjuncture and everyday violence faced by the migrants in the neighbourhoods perceived as cosmopolitan. The third section looks into the subaltern practices of cosmopolitanism among the migrants through the emergent "pan-Northeastern" identity and flags some of its major limitations.

The "Northeast" as a "Race": From Colonial and Postcolonial to Cosmopolitan Constructions

Just like the concept of race, the directional name "Northeast" of India is marked by projects of colonialism and nationalism and, according to Sanjib Baruah, do not evoke any "historical memory or collective consciousness" in a primordial sense.[12] In colonial accounts, the frontier region between Bengal and Burma, along with other areas in the Himalayan region, such as Nepal and Bhutan, were often referred to as the "Mongolian Fringe" despite the clear presence of people with non-Mongoloid features such as the caste Nepalese and the Bengali.[13] The Mongoloid race, as applied to the populations of East and Central Asia, holds the status of inferiority and degradation in European racial hierarchy. Hence, the Mongolian Fringe of the Northeast came to be perceived as a backward geographical space inhabited by incorrigible and savage tribes who were biologically and culturally distant from the Indian mainland.

On the pretext of the incorrigibility and backwardness of the frontier, the colonial government had enacted a series of protective laws, such as the Inner Line Regulation (1873), that were inherited by the postcolonial state.[14]

The directional name was made official through the formation of the North Eastern Council (NEC) in 1971 under the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region to act as a statutory advisory body for the eight states in the region. Sikkim became the eighth state under the jurisdiction of the NEC after the North East Council (Amendment) Act 2002. Along with the legal and administrative structure, postcolonial India also inherited the unabashed racialised gaze towards the Northeast which led to the continued seclusion and isolation of the region from the rest of the country. India's first Home Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel famously wrote to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru about his apprehensions of the "pro-Mongoloid prejudice" and the potential for trouble in the region in the wake of Indo-China conflicts.[15] The official racialised gaze accompanied racial policies, such as the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958, for the severe securitisation of the region to contain potential troubles. As Papori Bora notes, "[y]ears of militarised violence through counter-insurgency operations have 'othered' the region as an internal enemy, accentuated by notions of cultural difference, which has also established a form of military racism."[16] This blend of colonial and postcolonial racial gaze and security-oriented policies have constituted the people of the Northeast as "incomplete national subjects" by maintaining an "internal" form of colonialism.[17]

An increased out-migration from the region to the urban mainland since the early 2000s has generated a shift in the construction and constitution of the "Northeastern" from backward tribals to cosmopolitan service workers. Unofficial estimates suggest that there are around 9–11 lakh migrants from the region in Delhi NCR as of 2023.[18] If we compare it with the estimates from 2011, the number of migrants has increased about fivefold.[19] A study estimated that about 96 per cent of the Northeastern migrants are young people between the ages of 15–30, implying that the mass out-migration is a fairly recent phenomenon.[20] The trends in the data suggests that the phenomenon of mass labour out-migration from the Northeast region is characteristically an event of post-Liberalisation period, before which out-migration occurred on a much smaller scale and was limited to the political and educated elites.[21]

The construction of the "Northeastern" as a race is rearticulated in the urban mainland under new political economic conditions. As Ranabir Samaddar examines, migrants and refugees in the postcolonial age are absorbed in the labour market "as per the requirements of the global supply chains of commodities and labour."[22] Migrants from the region now find themselves positioned in the demand for labour in the booming neoliberal service sector and the segregated urban housing market. The twin process of liberalising and urbanising Delhi into a world-class metropolis since the 1990s has led to the emergence of status-driven upper class and middle class consumerism. Air-conditioned consumer spaces like shopping malls, luxury hotels, up-market restaurants and cafés, and so on "promotes the 'foreign' as superior to the 'domestic' and, in turn, reflects and creates aspirations of 'success' as being

embedded in global identities."[23] Racially profiled by their yellowish skin tones, epicanthic fold, and high cheekbones, the Mongoloid looking migrants from the Northeast, whose faces and physical aesthetics do not seem to embody Indianness, became the vehicles of these global identities, aesthetics, and aspirations as service providers.[24] Their sartorial choices are considered to be Western or Korean, and their disposition and demeanour are suitable for professional soft skills training that prepares them to endure volatile working environments. As they live away from their families in the search for career and livelihood, the young migrants, both men and women, are seemingly ready to dedicate themselves to odd-hour jobs, such as graveyard shifts and 24/7 work environments in the call centres, and on-call duty in the airlines' industry.

The 2014 report by the M.P. Bezbaruah Committee notes: "There are many establishments which prefer to employ people from the North East with their oriental looks and knowledge of English. The people from the North East have a reputation for sincerity and reliability. The general impression is that they are ready to work for less remuneration."[25] Besides corporate training agencies, the Central Government schemes have also begun to make inroads into the remote areas of the region to tap the presumed potential of Northeastern youth in hospitality, Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO), aviation, etc. especially under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), the flagship scheme of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship.[26] In 2019, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology proposed a scheme to incentivise the establishment of the BPO industry in the Northeast region that would employ the youth in customer care jobs.[27] Under the neoliberal market regime, skill training is imparted to young underprivileged workers for low wage service sector jobs to craft them as suitable self-driven and pliant worker-citizens.[28] As Kikon and Karlsson argues, the cosmopolitan refined Northeastern face is the very commodity that the recruitment agency sells to the neoliberal hospitality sector.[29] State led initiatives of establishing corporate training institutes in the Northeast, therefore, signal the attempt at moulding a racialised population by essentialising their phenotypic difference as soft skills and mobilising their out-migration in the mainland cities and abroad. In the Indian service economy, the bodies of the un-Indian Mongoloid service workers, thereby, undergo racialisation to generate ethical and aesthetic values for consumerist cosmopolitanism. This commodified otherisation that entails a shift from the colonial trope of the savage or incorrigible tribals to the well-dressed pliant workers, has granted them access to the neoliberal urban spaces and forged a niche for them in the emerging new service sector.

A cosmopolitan status is then conferred upon localities and neighbourhoods where the migrants are accommodated. A weekly tabloid report on Northeastern localities in urban villages of Delhi claims, "Delhi is truly cosmopolitan."[30] Delhi's urban villages, also known as *lal doras* (which were so called because they were separated from the agricultural lands with *lal doras,* which means red chords), like Munirka, Humayunpur, and Kishangarh in the South, and Indra Vihar and Vijaynagar in the North, are erstwhile agricultural settlements owned by Jat and Gujjar communities that have become home to thousands of migrants from the Northeast. Despite the onslaught of

urbanisation in the capital city through the entry of global consumer culture and real estate projects, the urban villages have managed to preserve the look and character of villages through kinship-based networks such as *Khap Panchayat* and vernacular forms of capitalism.[31] The increasing visibility of Mongoloid migrants in these urban villages and their placemaking practices through the setting up of petty businesses like grocery shops and restaurants over the years have transformed these urban villages into Northeastern localities or, as popularly called, Northeast ghettos. This small-scale entrepreneurialism of the migrants has attracted daily customers and clientele from neighbouring upper class gated communities, such as Safdarjung Enclave, Vasant Kunj and Defence Colony, who come to these urban villages to savour exotic, peculiar Northeastern food that one can experience "without having to travel abroad."[32]

Disjuncture and Violence Behind Cosmopolitan Mohallas

The packaging of racial and cultural diversity for the consumer market tells us little about the accommodation of migrants in the host society and whether there is an actual sense of sociability in these neighbourhoods. The shock of visibility of the young Mongoloid migrants in the city, the sudden exposure to their cultural practices, and their aesthetic valorisation in the neoliberal job market have not always been received as cosmopolitan. There is indeed a stark disjuncture in the racialised migrant experiences of urban cosmopolitanism—between their inclusion in the urban labour market and their constant exclusion from the imaginings of a hegemonic national community. As Stuart Hall revealed, people who are significantly different from the majority, those who constitute "them" rather than "us", are frequently exposed to a "binary form of representation": good or bad, cultured or primitive, ugly or exotically attractive, repelling or desirable and so on.[33] The spectacle of cosmopolitanism associated with Northeastern migrants is couched between the extremities of desire and repulsion that has led to layered forms of racial, cultural, and sexual violence.

Racial insecurity and alienation have pushed Northeastern migrants to cluster together in urban villages that "act as spaces of arrival through which migrants access the new urban setting,"[34] Yet, the local customs and mores of these villages continually put their civility, morality, and nationality into question and pressure them into a continuous process of negotiation and conflicts with the dominant local communities who consider the culture of the migrants as a threat to their own. Harsh Phogat, a local property owner and a former Resident Welfare Association member of Humayunpur opines,

> People from other states have stopped renting apartments in this place. This is because Northeasterns who live here roam around the entire night and create a ruckus. Both boys and girls start around midnight, get drunk and kick around the standing scooters, and scratch the cars. [35]

This paradox of cosmopolitan *mohallas*, where the entry of a group of migrants leads to the moving away of tenants from other states due to the

alleged civil nuisance created by the new tenants, further entails the exclusion of other racialised migrants.

> Africans used to live here in the nineties before Northeastern people arrived. But we did not allow them to stay any longer because they sell drugs and do online fraud activities. Now they live around Uttam Nagar where the rent prices are cheaper and where locals are not aware of them. [36]

Both African and Northeastern migrants are typecasted through the language of race and dominant Indian morality, yet both communities are pitted against each other in the urban housing market competition.[37] Behind the "exclusive enclaves" where people of ethnicities huddle together is in fact the spatial segregation of races who face quotidian racial exclusion. Select neighbourhoods are earmarked for migrants belonging to different ethnicities where minimal contact for basic economic transaction is maintained with the local populaces, which is far from cosmopolitan co-existence. Beyond these clusters their mobility is constricted as they have limited access to other parts of the city as Angela, a 29-year-old airhostess from Dimapur, explains,

> It is only in Northeastern localities where we feel comparatively safer. If we go to other parts of the city, we face more discrimination. When I went to West Delhi to attend a colleague's wedding, I felt gawked at by everyone. A friend from Manipur was looking for a room in that area to be closer to her office, but she had difficulty finding one because she is a Northeastern and they do not allow non-vegetarians. [38]

Migrants are involved in everyday conflicts with the Jat, Gujjar, and Punjabi landlords regarding rent prices, moral policing of their food habits and dressing style and surveillance of their lifestyles. In 2005 the Delhi Police issued a controversial pamphlet containing "Security Tips for North East Students/Visitors in Delhi" asking migrants to avoid preparing "smelly food" such as bamboo shoots and *axone,* and, if they must, they were advised to do so "without creating ruckus in neighbourhood."[39] Northeastern diet has long been controlled or prohibited in other spaces that are considered to be liberal or cosmopolitan. While canteens or messes in university campuses in Delhi have special days in a week when they serve South Indian, North Indian, Punjabi, and sometimes even Chinese food, Northeastern food is rarely a part of such multicultural performative practices.[40] Multinational BPO companies that hire Northeastern youths have cafeterias that provide a plethora of Indian and non-vegetarian foreign cuisines including Mexican, Italian, and Japanese but would strictly prohibit Northeastern food. Jessica Kamei from Manipur, a 28-years-old senior customer care executive in a call centre in Noida, shares,

> Our trainer, who is from Assam, was planning to open a Northeastern stall in our office cafeteria but the authorities did not allow him. Because a majority of the employees are Northeasterns, they were probably afraid that opening a Northeastern stall would be a huge loss to the other stalls. They did not even allow a Nepali man to put up his momo stall outside the office building where

you will find many *chole bhatura* and *kulcha* stalls. They apparently chased him away after two days.[41]

The paradox of urban cosmopolitanism is that the ethnocentric dietary policing of the Northeastern migrants is shelved and sidelined when it comes to profiting from their exotic food and culture. Local landlords have capitalised on migrant food and culture through commercial rent from Northeastern restaurants, groceries and garment shops that throng these very neighbourhoods where locals and racial migrants cohabit. The valorisation of migrant bodies and their cultural practices is, thus, carried out in terms of the framework of cosmopolitanism offered by consumerist multiculturalism that is controlled by the tradition, mores and economic needs of the host societies. Ethnic practices and habits are permitted and endorsed only so long as it is packaged and made palatable as cosmopolitan commodities for those possessing the privileges of wealth and social capital to extract profit from it or indulge in it as exotic experiences. Yet, when migrants observe their own ethnic habits and practices as a part of their daily lifestyle, it is seen as a transgression of civility.

The apparent Western or Korean orientation of their clothes and fashion become a pretext of deducing racist perceptions about their sexuality and morality even in workplaces that value their expertise in grooming. Richard, a Manipur-born Associate Manager of Human Resources at a call centre in Noida expresses his concern about Northeastern women's sartorial choices in his office,

> Because I am an HR person, many people come to me and complain that Northeastern girls wear too short and revealing clothes. What can I say? It's their life, their rules. But one has to be cognisant of dressing modestly in workplaces.[42]

Jessica, who had been working in the same company was quick to refute the singling out of Northeastern women,

> The working environment is very casual here. You can see the managers, directors, men, or women from the mainland also do not follow any dress code. They also wear baggy clothes or short dresses and have tattoos on their arms.[43]

The tragic murder of Nido Taniam, the 20-year-old student from Arunachal Pradesh, transpired on the pretext of racist comments on his hairstyle and clothing. The three local men who murdered Taniam in a racial altercation had "mocked him for his longish, styli[s]ed, dyed hair, effeminate clothing, and East Asian physical features (by reportedly calling him "*chinki*")."[44] The racist perceptions regarding Northeastern fashion and sexuality are also ingrained in state institutions as the controversial 2005 Delhi Police pamphlet reportedly had insensitive and racist injunctions pertaining to the "revealing" or "scanty" dressing sense of Northeastern women.

Subjected to constant surveillance on what they eat, dress, and consume, Northeastern migrants are also stigmatised for their jobs in the cosmopolitan industries. Workplaces like call centres, shopping malls, hotels and airlines, where young men and women work closely during odd-hours, are popularly imagined as erotically charged spaces "that encouraged licentious behaviour on the part of young people beyond the disciplining gaze of parents and community members."[45] On the Facebook page of Helping Hands Society, an NGO for Northeast migrants, Robin Hibu, a highly revered Indian Police Services (IPS) officer from Arunachal Pradesh, posted about the "FLIGHTS OF FANCIES of some NE air hostesses."[46] The original intent of the post was perhaps to alert Northeastern women about the vulnerabilities of living in the city and about the working conditions of the airlines industry. However, a greater part of the post was a ruthless stigmatisation of feminised service jobs, exemplifying the double patriarchal control over Northeastern women who, as Hibu writes, seems to be lost in the "ephemeral flight of fancies of midair life."

This commodification of the migrant's otherness is also manifest in a stark racialised division of labour that can be observed in the neoliberal service economy. While the servers and front desk workers in restaurants and cafés of the city are visibly Mongoloid or Northeastern, the platform delivery workers are predominantly from mainland states such as Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh.[47] The Mongoloid migrants from Northeast, whose bodies and food habits are deemed profitable and aesthetic for global capital and middle class consumption practices are glorified as cosmopolitan. And groups whose presence are reminders of the unwanted remnants of old customs and traditions and are deemed anti-cosmopolitan, such as poor migrants from Bihar and West Bengal, including the non-Mongoloid migrants from Assam, are pushed to the un-aesthetic, un-cosmopolitan underbellies of the city such as squatter settlements.[48]

The racial fetishisation of Northeastern migrants have resulted in actual incidents of violence against Northeastern women. According to a survey conducted by Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research, Jamia Millia Islamia, about 81 per cent of women from the Northeast faced various forms of harassment in Delhi which included harassment by landlords, verbal abuse, heckling and molestation.[49] Several of my women interlocutors have shared that even in the broad daylight they faced heckling on the streets and were asked "*Rate kitna*? (How much do you charge for sexual services?)." Jessica had experienced a similar incident near Humayunpur village gate around 1:00 PM in the afternoon of August 2022. A young man, who appeared to be in his 30s, halted in front of her in a BMW car and solicited sexual services.[50] Jessica's experiences further tell us about how Northeastern women experience sexual harassment even in workplaces,

> Eve-teasing Northeastern girls is very common in our office. I have seen the trainers and team leaders trying to cosy up to the girls and touch them inappropriately…One day our floor manager came up to me to ask what I liked to do on the weekends and tried to invite me on a date. The guy is even married with kids…we cannot complain because we cannot provide proof of

such gestures, and we have to act nice to them because they are the ones who decide our monthly incentives.[51]

The perceptions about their promiscuous morality and hypersexual nature are then utilised to make justifications for the mental, physical, and sexual violence against the Northeastern migrants. They are presumed to be easy-going, as Jessica's landlord Devender Singh tried to condescendingly explain to us,

> Out of a hundred, ninety-nine Northeastern girls consume alcohol, but in our community probably only two or three girls. That is the reason why they (*molesters*) think you are easy, and alcohol is the reason for such incidents.[52]

In serious instances of violence, Northeastern women are presumed to be soliciting sex or have an active sexual life as exemplified by a 2009 verdict of the 2005 Dhaula Kuan rape case of a young woman from Mizoram.[53] The racial logic of sexual violence is that Northeastern women are already hypersexual and, hence, "impenetrable" or that rape does not count, and authorities such as the police and college administration impose cultural and moral rules upon them through continuous surveillance.[54]

Subaltern Cosmopolitanism: A Pan-Northeastern Identity

As Shail Mayaram argues, there is a need to draw a line between cosmopolitanism as a descriptive category and a normative category, between the cosmopolitanism of the democratic activists and that of the global corporate interest, because in a descriptive sense even terror and violence are rendered as cosmopolitan.[55] Neoliberal capitalism works to selectively absorb, control, and confine migrants as cosmopolitan or uncosmopolitan subjects. However, it also generates conditions to shape new identities and solidarities, fostering normative practices of sociability. Migrants contest their otherisation as passive neoliberal cosmopolitan subjects by actively creating meaningful cross-cultural human interactions. Rishi, a 27-years-old customer service associate from Nagaland, posed me the question,

> A metropolitan city by its nature is cosmopolitan and everyone living in the city experiences cosmopolitanism so why are Northeasterns exceptionalised?[56]

In a neoliberal city that remains invested in creating and recreating divisions for profit extraction, migrants seek that inclusivity among those with shared experiences of marginality. The normative elements of cosmopolitanism are already evident in scholars' suggestion of an emerging pan-Northeastern identity. By subverting the earlier inferiorising connotations of the geopolitical term Northeast, migrants in the new urban settings have rearticulated the term through self-identification.[57] The identity is subaltern and cosmopolitan as it embraces people of other racialised communities by defying geopolitical and

cultural confines, such as migrants from Ladakh, Darjeeling, Nepal, Myanmar, and Tibet.[58] They co-create common places and common identity through cohabitation, business partnerships, and civic associations with communities "with no shared collective consciousness" or communities with whom they have historically antagonistic relations at home. After completing his graduation from Delhi University in 2016, Rishi opened a made-to-order garment shop in Kamla Nagar locality of Delhi's North Campus with his friends from Manipur whom he met in college.

> I have become accustomed to other cultures of Northeast only after coming to Delhi. We connect because we come from the same far-off region, and share similar cultures, and taste buds. But…I (also) have North Indian friends and co-workers, and my roommate was from Bihar. Luckily, they have always been kind to me, and I have never found myself separate from them. I have learned a lot from them.[59]

As a migrant, Rishi's understanding of cosmopolitanism is in line with the cosmopolitan identity defined by sociologist Ulrich Beck as "the self-understanding of persons who, while they have ethnic and cultural roots, are aware of themselves as having crossed and continuing to cross between groups, being influenced by experiences and encounters with other cultures, ethnicities, genders, and circumstances, and who are never firmly entrenched and wholly enclosed in only one group."[60]

Born in Diyun, Arunachal Pradesh, Raju is a third-generation Chakma refugee, who runs one of the busiest *laphing* (a Tibetan snack that has become popular among migrants) stands in Humayunpur. The Chakma community has been facing state-sponsored discrimination and racial profiling since they migrated to India after facing communal violence and displacement in Bangladesh.[61] Raju claims,

> I am an *original* Northeastern because I was born in Arunachal Pradesh, but we are not considered as citizens there; they still perceive us as refugees…This is why people of our community go outside the state to seek a living. In Delhi it is different. People from different tribes of Arunachal and other Northeastern communities visit our stalls, they are our friends.[62]

Raju's embodiment of complex identities is a testimony to the complex politics of belongingness, indigeneity, and citizenship in the Northeast. The assertion of his identity as a Northeastern in Delhi, while being a prayer for citizenship, is an illustration of how the acute sense of power relations between communities gets softened when they move away from home. Such practices of mutual coexistence have the potential to transgress established legal and political barriers between people. Raju's legal status as a refugee did not bar him from membership and involvement with the Northeast Association of Humayunpur, which is a collective of small business owners and residents from the Northeast.

Cosmopolitanism based on this pan-identity, however, also remains fragile and contested as urban coexistence may be informed by the dynamics of

regional politics at home. Northeast continues to be rife with ethnic clashes and identarian conflicts which led some scholars to put the tangibility and purpose of this identity into question.[63] The large-scale communal violence that has erupted in Manipur since May 3, 2023, between the Meitei and Kuki-Hmar-Zomi communities had immediate repercussions in Delhi. In a student locality of North Delhi, a group of Kuki students, three girls and six boys, were allegedly surrounded by a mob of thirty Meitei boys who snatched their phones, assaulted the boys, and threatened to rape the women.[64] Kim Singson, a Kuki student, who was present during the incident expressed her dismay over the violence spreading in Delhi,

> We were very shocked because we thought that people who have the privilege to come to Delhi for education would understand; we did not expect any violence to happen at least in a student area like North Campus…At a metro station, some random Meitei men had asked for my friends' ID cards when they heard them talking in Kuki. The next day, a Meitei guy called the police complaining about my Kuki friends. At that time my friends were just chatting outside the college after their exams were over. The police came and scolded the guy instead as there was no sign of threat, but it shows that probably the Meiteis in Delhi are also scared.[65]

Kim and her friends' experiences show that racial profiling can also occur within the migrant community for reasons that are informed by local politics at home. Moreover, not all people in the Northeast share the stereotypical Mongoloid phenotype, for example, caste Nepalese, Assamese, and Bengalis, or people with mixed parentage, who might blend in with the mainland Indians, escape racial profiling and may even be considered as outsiders within the migrant community. For instance, in a sports week organised by the Northeastern students at the University of Delhi in April 2023, a team that majorly consisted of young men from Assam were jeered as "Outsiders! Outsiders!" by the other Northeastern state team as they did not fit the physical stereotype of Mongoloid Northeastern.[66] The competitive environment of sportsmanship gave way to underlying racial exclusivity within the migrant community. There are other marginalised groups in Northeast India who do not fit the standard trope of the cosmopolitan Mongoloid migrant and face worse forms of racial profiling and labour exploitation in Indian cities, such as Bengali-speaking Muslims who are routinely discriminated as suspect citizens or "illegal immigrants" both within and outside the Northeast.[67] Racial politics is both the common and dividing subject between Mongoloid and non-Mongoloid Muslim migrants because, while both groups face otherisation and labour exploitation through racist ideologies, both groups are differentiated through racist indigenous politics in the region.[68] If the urban pan-Northeastern community can encompass people beyond geographical borders in mutual experiences of racial prejudice, it should also embrace other racialised people from the region. This normative vision already exists among the pan-Northeastern associations. Following the incident at North Campus, student bodies in Delhi called for collective attempts at resolving the conflict, as a statement by the North East Society of a college in Delhi University reads,

It is important to remember that peaceful reconciliation of all conflicts should be the ultimate goal rather than resorting to violence and aggression. Northeast India is a celebration of cultural diversity, and communal strife has no place there…As a community, we must work together to promote peace, understanding, and mutual respect, and to reject any attempts to create divisions based on religion, ethnicity, or any other differences.[69]

It is necessary for these pan-affiliations to acknowledge the fragile and ephemeral nature of the pan-identity and power relations that exist back home because, as Craig Calhoun argues, democratic cosmopolitanism thrives on discursive engagement and deeper recognition across lines of differences rather than overcoming those differences.[70]

Conclusion

Cosmopolitanism is, thus, a tendency of neoliberal capital to appropriate, commodify, and control bodies and cultures of communities that come from marginal socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The neoliberal cosmopolitan construction of the Northeastern migrants creates and sustains archaic and new forms of prejudices and biases while perpetuating discrimination and violence. Social groups whose bodies, cultural norms, and practices are deemed profitable and aesthetic for global capital, multicultural politics, and middle class consumption are glorified as cosmopolitan. The un-Indian physical appeal and their exotic cultures are valorised as enhancing the cosmopolitan aesthetic of the city, whether in the service industries or commercial alleys of the urban villages. However, when the migrants observe these same cultural and traditional habits as a part of their everyday existence, it is viewed as a transgression of tradition and morality. This cosmopolitanism is, thus, essentially a process of commodification of the migrants' racial otherness and their perceived hypersexuality that has resulted in further discrimination and various forms of racial, sexual, and physical violence. Furthermore, their own cosmopolitan practices in the form of an emergent pan-Northeastern identity further reveal the complexities of their agency that contest their cosmopolitan objectification. The new form of subaltern solidarity opens up the avenue for a new politics of belongingness but has some inherent limitations and contestations. Critical investigations of the everyday practices of sociability and the study of how different migrant, refugee and/or host populations coexist, therefore, hold the potential to reveal not only the complicated nature of insider-outsider politics but also bring to light emergent subjectivities and complex locations of agency in neoliberal cities.

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Human Rights Challenges of Nepali Migrant Workers in India's Informal Unskilled Sector: A Case Study of the Karnali Region, Nepal

By

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The open border between India and Nepal allows nationals of both countries to travel freely to the other country and live and work there. A significant number of Nepali migrant workers, especially from the Karnali region, go to work in India's informal unskilled sector every year, which includes domestic work, agriculture, and small-scale manufacturing.[1] Migration from Nepal to India has been a historical reality. Nepalese people started migrating to India after the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816.[2] Traditionally, Nepalis have worked in India, both as part of its famed Gorkha regiments and the civil service, in the private sector as security guards, as domestic workers, and as manual labourers in mines, tea estates, and dairy farms.[3] According to Chandan K. Mandal, it is estimated that between 1 to 3 million Nepalis work in various parts of India, with many employed in informal sectors such as agriculture, construction, hospitality, and security.[4] Recently, there have also been the twin phenomena of many student migrants from Nepal to India and of second-generation Nepali migrants in India taking up various white-collar professions there.[5] The International Organization for Migration (IOM) conducted a study on the socio-economic and financial profile of migrants stressing seasonal and long-term migration to India highlighting the lack of data, vulnerability of workers employed in the informal sector, and problems relating to remittance transfers and lack of social security coverage.[6] Although remittances of the Nepali migrants working in India play an important role in the subsistence of their families back home, the impact is far and wide, and yet there is a lack of adequate data on its actual positionality in Nepal's economy.[7] Various studies have shown that men practise unsafe sex while working in Indian cities and often become infected with Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) which they pass on to their partners back home. Similarly, Nepali women and children are

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trafficked to Indian brothels, circuses, and mines. Prospective migrant workers to third countries also use India as a transit to reach their destinations, in breach of Nepal's laws regulating foreign employment[8].

The Karnali region in Nepal, originally comprising five districts in the western part of the country, was reconstituted by expanding its jurisdiction over ten districts after the new Constitution came into effect in 2017. It has long been one of the poorest and most underdeveloped areas of Nepal.[9] The region has traditionally relied on agriculture as the primary source of income. However, with limited arable land, the agricultural sector has been unable to support the growing population.[10] As a result, many people from the Karnali region have migrated to other parts of Nepal and India in search of work. The migration of workers from Karnali to Indian cities, particularly in the states of Punjab, Haryana, and Delhi, has been a major phenomenon for several decades. According to a study conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2012 which was published in 2014, an estimated 50,000–100,000 people from the Karnali region were working in the informal sectors of Indian cities.[11] These workers are mostly engaged in construction, domestic work, and manual labour jobs, and are often employed through informal channels, without any formal contracts or social security benefits. According to a report by Nepal's Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Security, an estimated 700,000 Nepali citizens go to India for work every year.[12] However, specific data for the number of people from the Karnali region who go to India for work every year is not readily available. A study conducted by the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM) in 2016 found that out of the total migrant workers from Nepal to India, around 38 per cent were from the western region of Nepal, which includes Karnali.[13] It is important to note that the actual number of Nepali migrant workers in India is likely higher than official estimates, as many workers migrate through informal channels without going through government registration processes. Migrant workers from Nepal can formally register for work abroad at the Department of Labour, Government of Nepal. The workers travelling to the Middle East and other countries go through the government registration process. In the case of the Nepal-India migration corridor, there is no such process at the border to register people moving across on either side. So, there are only estimates and no one knows the exact number of Nepalis in India and vice versa. As per recent evidence, nearly 8 million Nepalese citizens live and work in India.[14]
Despite this, many Nepali migrants in India remain outside the scope of foreign labour policies and state coverage, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The issue of cross-border workers between Nepal and India is an under-studied area. Nepali migrant workers in Indian cities like Delhi are primarily employed in the informal sector, with many working as unskilled and semi-skilled labourers.[15] Most of the literature discusses challenges faced by Nepali migrant workers in India, including low wages, poor working conditions, exploitation, and discrimination, with women being particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence and harassment. Some literatures also touch upon the legal and policy frameworks in India and Nepal related to the human rights of migrant workers.

In such a background context, this report focuses on assessing the human rights challenges faced by Nepali migrant workers from the Karnali region in India's informal unskilled sector. The fieldwork was conducted in Jajarkot, Dailekh, Kalikot and Surkhet districts in the Karnali Province from February 5–March 24, 2023. We began with an analysis of existing legal and policy frameworks related to the human rights of migrant workers in India and Nepal from December 2022–January 2023. In the first week of February 2023, we visited the government agencies based in Surkhet (headquarters of Karnali province) and local stakeholders from the field districts were contacted via telephone for the preparation of the primary data collection before an in-person visit. After the initial preparations, we began with the in-depth interviews from February 5–19, 2023 with returnee migrant workers from India and other local stakeholders in Surkhet and visited the Kalikot district from February 20–March 5, 2023, and Jajarkot from March 6-18, 2023. In the last week of fieldwork, we once again spent some time at Surkhet from March 19–24, 2023. This qualitative research involving in-depth interviews with fifteen Nepali migrant workers from the Karnali region and ten key informants, such as community leaders, government officials, and civil society representatives to gather data on their socio-economic characteristics and experiences of human rights challenges generated suggestive empirical evidence of the challenges faced by migrants in cities of India. All interviews and empirical data reflected in this study were used with the consent of the migrants and their identity is concealed as a safeguard for the respondents.

Fifteen returnee migrant workers from Karnali region were interviewed to understand their experiences of work and stay in India. They were engaged as unskilled labourers in India's informal economy. The respondents, ten males and five females were either seasonal or long-term migrants in India and returned or stayed back home during the time of interview in Surkhet, Jajarkot and Kalikot districts. In general trend, male Nepali migrant workers make up a larger proportion than females. The age of the respondents ranges from 22–67 years, with an average age of approximately 38 years. Many of the respondents (nine out of fifteen) were between the ages of 30–50, and only one respondent was over the age of 60. It is worth noting that the gender and age of the migrant workers have a considerable impact on their experiences and challenges in the informal unskilled sector in India. For example, there were some responses from younger workers who shared they were more vulnerable to exploitation, while older workers did not share about the vulnerabilities as such, but they shared about additional health and safety risks because of their age. Similarly, female workers shared concerns about discrimination and gender-based violence compared to male workers.

The human rights challenges faced by Nepali migrant workers in India's informal unskilled sector are widespread and varied. Among the fifteen interviewees, nine respondents reported going to Gujarat, Dharchula in Uttarakhand, and Mumbai (three to each location), four to Shimla, one to Gadwal, and one respondent to Chandigarh. They stayed in these locations for a minimum of six months to seventeen years. It is important to note that the length of stay in India has a significant impact on the experiences and challenges

faced by Nepali migrant workers. Migrants who have been in India for longer periods may have established stronger social and economic ties. On the other hand, workers who have been in India for shorter periods may be less familiar with the local culture and legal system. Four respondents reported going back home once during their stay in India. One respondent reported going back home seven or eight times during their stay of five years in India. Most of the respondents visit their homes once in one to three years. They said it is not possible for them to frequently travel back because of the financial burden and workload. The frequency of visits back home also affects the social and economic well-being of Nepali migrant workers. Those who visit home more frequently shared that they have stronger ties with their family and community, which has provided them with more social support and a sense of belonging.

Challenges Faced by Migrant Workers

The available literature on Nepali migrant workers in India elucidates the challenges faced by them like discrimination and lack of protection from the government. For example, Kumar and Chaudhary discuss the impact of India's Covid-19 lockdown on migrant workers, including those from Nepal.[16] Media reports like "Nepalese migrant workers rush to India" by Spotlight Nepal and "Nepali migrant workers start returning to work in India" by New Indian Express both report on the return of Nepali workers to India after the Covid-19 lockdown.[17] According to Kumar and Choudhary, migration is a significant social process and the oldest action against poverty, however, there has been a significant difference in the migration process of developed and developing countries. For example, in India migration is more induced by push factors like unemployment, regional disparities, family movement, marriage, natural calamities, etc., while in developed nations migration responds to pull factors like prosperity, safety, freedom, etc. They argued that the fundamental and economic rights of the domestic migrant workers and other labourers guaranteed by the labour laws of the Indian Constitution were breached extensively during the lockdown and that the state policies during the pandemic worsened the condition of the domestic migrant workers.[18] The Human Rights Watch World Report 2021 mentions that Covid-19 lockdown in India in 2020 disproportionately hurt marginalised communities due to loss of livelihoods, lack of food, shelter, health care, and other basic needs.[19]

There are several key issues and challenges faced by Nepali migrant workers in India including discrimination, lack of protection from the government, and difficulties in sending remittances back to their families in Nepal. The lack of legal protection and redress mechanisms for Nepali migrants in India has been a long-standing issue, with many advocates calling for stronger policies and measures to protect the rights of these workers.[20] The low levels of industrialisation in Nepal and stagnancy in the agricultural sector have led to out-migration to India as an inevitable consequence, making livelihood dependent on remittances an important aspect of Nepal's economy.[21] Suggesting a roadmap for a self-sufficient economy and showcasing best practices for migration and rural development, the IOM in 2016 proposed the

Homestay Initiative by Migrants and Families project and presented findings on climate change and migration at a National Conference on Migration in Nepal in 2016.[22] Many Nepali migrants had difficulty accessing healthcare services in India due to a lack of insurance, low wages, and not having an Indian identification card.[23] Other deterrents included unsupportive employers, discrimination at healthcare facilities, and limited information about the locations of healthcare services. The partnership between the Nepali and Indian governments, migrant support organisations, and relevant stakeholders should be strengthened to improve access to healthcare for Nepali migrant workers in India.[24] During the field interview, the respondents reported that frequent travel was costly and time-consuming and reduced the amount of time available for rest and leisure. Furthermore, workers who are unable to visit home frequently experience isolation and loneliness, which could exacerbate mental health issues. The type of work performed by Nepali migrant workers in India's informal unskilled sector can have significant implications for their human rights. The respondents worked as kitchen helpers, waiters, sweepers, domestic household workers, drivers, security guards/watchmen, wage labourers in road construction or as porters, and other informal wage labourers to support farming or industries. For instance, workers who are engaged in physically demanding jobs, such as carrying heavy loads or working in road construction, reported that they were more vulnerable to injury and health problems. Similarly, workers who are employed in low-paying jobs, such as daily wage labourers or sweepers, shared that they experienced economic insecurity and had difficulty meeting their basic needs. Additionally, workers who were engaged in jobs with long working hours or limited breaks experienced mental stress and fatigue. The long working hours reported by some of the respondents are a human rights challenge for Nepali migrant workers. Few respondents shared the experience that the long working hours resulted in physical and mental exhaustion, leading to an increased risk of workplace accidents and health issues. The long working hours affected the workers' quality of life by leaving them with little time to rest, spend with family, or engage in leisure activities. Many of the respondents also reported differences in pay between them as migrant workers and local workers, with the latter receiving higher wages for the same type of work. The majority of the workers were paid less than INR500 for their work. The average pay scale reported by the respondents is low compared to the minimum wage standards in India. The low pay scale indicates that Nepali migrant workers are exploited and underpaid in the informal unskilled sector, leading to an income gap and poverty. The low income can also be a barrier to accessing necessities such as food, shelter, and healthcare. Therefore, policymakers should ensure that Nepali migrant workers receive fair wages, which would enhance their standard of living and contribute to their well-being. Many respondents reported receiving low wages and facing human rights challenges, such as exploitation, not receiving pay on time, unequal pay for the same work, physical and sexual abuse, and lack of access to healthcare. It is essential to promote policies that create formal employment opportunities for Nepali migrant workers, which can improve their working conditions and lead to higher wages.

The living conditions at the workplace were not very satisfactory for some of the respondents. The most common response was that they worked in an open space, which was not ideal. A few respondents mentioned that it was fine, while one said that it was good but not the best. Two respondents specifically mentioned that the conditions were not good, with one stating that there were issues with heat, toilets, and drinking water. Based on the responses provided, it seems that the respondents have worked in a variety of settings, including inside houses, open fields, and offices. Most of the respondents have worked in open fields, while a few have worked solely inside houses or office spaces. Some respondents have worked in both inside and open-field settings. The living conditions at the workplace appear to have been a challenge for some of the migrant workers from the Karnali region who worked in India's informal unskilled sector. The conditions of the residence of migrants varied widely. Some had to live in cramped quarters, with six or seven people in one room or temporary shelters made of tarpaulin. Others lived in small old houses or makeshift rooms, while some were given tin shelters that were hot and lacked facilities. Some workers reported having to put up their tents or pay cheap rent, while others had better living conditions. It is important to note that many of the workers had to adjust and adapt to whatever they could find or afford, and the quality of their living conditions was often tied to their economic situation. These living conditions indicate the lack of proper infrastructure and support for migrant workers in India's informal unskilled sector.

These responses suggest that Nepali migrant workers in India face a range of human rights challenges: (a) Exploitation by brokers and contractors who take the commission and don't pay fair wages or pay on time; (b) Difficulty finding good jobs and being paid according to the work done; (c) Unsafe and inadequate living conditions; (d) Language barriers and discrimination by police and employers; (e) Violence, theft, and sexual exploitation; (f) Lack of access to healthcare and justice; and (g) Risky work and dangerous working conditions. These challenges highlight the need for better protection and support for Nepali migrant workers in India to ensure that their human rights are respected and upheld. Out of the fifteen respondents, only two reported experiencing abuse or physical violence. One respondent mentioned that the contractor beat them up and made accusations, while another reported having a bad experience with their boss. The other thirteen respondents said that they did not face any physical abuse, although some of them mentioned that it is a common problem for Nepali migrant workers in general. Based on the responses of the fifteen participants, it can be concluded that verbal bullying or violence is a common experience among immigrant workers. Six respondents reported experiencing verbal bullying, while two others reported that it happened at their workplace. Some respondents mentioned verbal bullying by contractors accusing them of mistakes when such situations arise.

Nepali migrant workers experience various forms of discrimination in India. The respondents complained of not receiving proper wages for labour or work according to their skills, being discriminated against, and abused by locals, facing non-payment of wages on time, labour exploitation, dismissal without reason, overworking, problems with sitting and eating, abuse of women, and

not being allowed to rest. Additionally, many workers reported being robbed or beaten by the police without reason, and not receiving necessities for living. There were also instances of contractors not paying for work done, cheating workers, and not providing treatment when sick. These experiences highlight the urgent need for policies and interventions that protect the rights of migrant workers and ensure their fair treatment and well-being.

Nepali migrant workers are looking for government interventions from both Nepal and India to improve their situation, especially an improved legal process that ensures workers receive proper compensation for their work and protection from discrimination and abuse. A majority of the returnee workers are still not sure about the right kind of suggestions or policy framework that should be adopted to improve their overall quality of life and work while they migrate to India to be absorbed as part of its labouring force. The migrant rights and the rights of informal workers are weak both in India and in Nepal. And "it is essential to promote policies that create formal employment opportunities for Nepali migrant workers in India" or that there should be employment opportunities in Nepal itself, or "to send only qualified and skilled workers to India." But it is important to note that, comparatively, the migrant workers from Karnali than any other provinces in Nepal are going to India because they cannot find jobs in their region which has the lowest number of job opportunities inside the country, and because it's easy to cross the border at a relatively low cost. It is also important to note that these migrant workers are using their agency to decide to do this to get some income despite the many challenges and problems they face during their stay in host locations. Many Nepali workers from the western part of Nepal returned to India after the Covid-19 lockdown due to a lack of job opportunities in Nepal, and there is a need for greater attention to the rights and well-being of Nepali migrant workers in India.

Role of the Stakeholders: The State and the Civil Society

Ten stakeholders were interviewed representing civil society, government officers and journalists who have closely observed or worked on the issues related to Nepali migrant workers to India and all of them said that migration of workers from the Karnali region to India for labour is a common and well-known phenomenon and some of them had seen or heard about it since childhood, indicating that it has been happening for a long time. One interviewee even mentioned that they have lived in India for many years and have extensive knowledge about the matter. This suggests that the issue of migrant workers from the Karnali region is not a new one and has been a part of the social and economic landscape of the region for a long time. These civil society members and stakeholders reported that they were often reported about the violation of basic human rights such as the poor living conditions of migrant workers from Nepal in India. Some respondents mentioned that the working conditions and living spaces are "deplorable," "worse," and "not good." The local civil society members were concerned with the widespread issues of labour exploitation, discrimination, violence, and inadequate access to basic needs such

as food, shelter, and healthcare. The lack of legal protections and accountability for abuses also exacerbates these challenges, leaving workers vulnerable to mistreatment and exploitation. In the opinion of respondents, governments, organisations, and individuals need to work together to address these issues and ensure that the rights and dignity of all workers are respected and protected.

Civil society organisations emphasise raising awareness about human rights abuses, minimising discrimination faced by Nepali migrant workers in India and working towards creating a safer and more just working environment for them. All the local stakeholders believe that it is the responsibility of the central government and the employers to ensure that these workers are treated fairly and with dignity and that their basic human rights are respected. Still, these respondents could not suggest concrete suggestions. The suggestions were very vague such as stakeholders recommended that the Governments of Nepal and India should make legal provisions to ensure the safety of migrant workers. One of the important suggestions that came from the local stakeholders was to arrange to listen to the complaints of migrant workers. Few respondents highlighted the need to allow only skilled individuals to work in India. But they were silent about issues such as the open border, easy access to the market, job opportunities and the push factors of the Karnali region. Three respondents suggested that "the open borders should be closed, and workers should be allowed to go to India only after a labour agreement between the two countries has been made." This suggestion is very controversial because the current border and free travel arrangements between Nepal-India do not allow favourable conditions to impose such strict policies that might curtail the human rights of people and force them to make choices even worse than the options that are currently available for them. The common voice among the respondents especially the government officials focused on raising awareness among stakeholders about the human rights of migrant workers. Most of the representatives of civil society organisations highlighted the need for workers to be informed about the possible difficulties and obstacles faced by both the Indian and Nepalese people while working in the informal sector in India.

It is encouraging to see that both countries have enacted laws aimed at protecting workers from exploitation, ensuring fair wages, and regulating recruitment agencies. Additionally, both countries have ratified international conventions related to labour migration. Yet there are gaps in the implementation and enforcement of these laws, and many migrant workers continue to face exploitation and abuse. These laws aim to ensure that workers receive fair wages, are not exploited or bonded, and are protected from discrimination. The Nepali government has enacted several laws to protect the rights of its migrant workers, including the Foreign Employment Act, the Foreign Employment Rules, and the Labour Act. These laws aim to regulate and facilitate foreign employment and ensure that Nepali migrant workers are not exploited or mistreated in the destination countries. The Minimum Wages Act of India (1948) mandates a minimum wage for all workers in India, including migrant workers.[25] The law sets minimum wage rates for different occupations and provides for the enforcement of wage payments. The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of India (1976) prohibits the practice of bonded

labour in India, including the exploitation of migrant workers. The law provides for the identification, release, and rehabilitation of bonded labourers and sets penalties for employers who violate the law. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of India (1986) prohibits the employment of children under fourteen years of age in hazardous occupations, including those in which migrant workers may be employed.[26] In Nepal, the Foreign Employment Act of (2007) regulates the recruitment and conditions of employment of Nepali migrant workers.[27] The Act requires recruitment agencies to be licensed by the government and to provide workers with a contract that includes details such as wages, working conditions, and duration of employment. The Act also prohibits recruitment agencies from charging workers excessive fees and from engaging in fraudulent practices. The law also mandates pre-departure orientation and training for migrant workers, as well as the establishment of a welfare fund to provide compensation for injured workers and families of deceased workers. The law is set for all types of foreign labour migration, but it remains silent about the special conditions of the Nepal-India migration pattern. Almost all migrant workers from Nepal to India in the informal sector do not need to have paperwork/documentation and such formalities. In addition to these laws, both India and Nepal have signed and ratified various international conventions related to labour migration, including the International Labour Organization's Migration for Employment Convention (Revised) and the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. Despite these laws and conventions, many Nepali migrant workers continue to face exploitation, abuse, and discrimination in India. This is not specifically targeted at Nepali workers only, but in general, all workers in informal sectors in India face such a challenging situation. This suggests that there may be gaps in the implementation and enforcement of existing laws, as well as the need for additional measures to protect the rights and well-being of migrant workers.

In general, governments, recruitment agencies, employers, and civil society organisations all have important roles to play in protecting the rights of migrant workers. The migrant workers in Nepal-India's informal sector most of the time are not required to pass through such official channels, which makes it very difficult to translate the human rights ensured by Nepali laws for Nepalis foreign migrant workers. Even though, weaker, the Indian legal framework provides safety in its own standards through the employers. Ensuring the protection of the rights of migrant workers is a complex and ongoing process that requires sustained efforts and collaboration with multiple stakeholders as it is essential to ensure that migrant workers can work in safe and dignified conditions, with access to fair wages, social protections, and the right to be free from exploitation and abuse.

Conclusion

The reasons for migration from Karnali to India are multiple and complex. Factors such as poverty, unemployment, lack of access to education and healthcare, political instability, and environmental degradation have all

contributed to the migration trend. Additionally, the open border between India and Nepal has made it relatively easy for Nepali workers to enter and work in India, without the need for visas or work permits. While migration has provided an important source of income for many families in Karnali, it has also brought several challenges and risks. Nepali workers in India often face exploitation, abuse, and discrimination, due to their informal status and lack of legal protections. Many workers are not paid fairly, work in hazardous conditions, and are vulnerable to physical and sexual violence. Furthermore, the lack of access to social security benefits, including health care and pension, leaves workers and their families in a precarious situation in case of accidents, illness, or old age. The responses suggest that Nepali migrant workers are looking for government support to improve their situation and ensure that they are treated fairly and with dignity while working abroad. The specific challenges faced by Nepali migrant workers may vary depending on the city they are working in, due to factors such as local labour laws, cultural norms, and economic conditions. It can be concluded that while there are several legal provisions in place to protect the rights of migrant workers, there is still a need for stronger enforcement of these laws and greater awareness among workers regarding their rights. The main obstacle towards human rights law enforcement for Nepali migrant workers in India is the lack of awareness among workers due to the absence of any formal migration and record-keeping process. Most of the time, these workers are invisible, and their rights either can be secured by themselves or through the employers in India abiding by the existing legal frameworks in India. There is also a need for greater collaboration between the Governments of Nepal and India to ensure that migrant workers are treated fairly and provided with adequate protections and benefits.

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Eurasian Economic Union:
Problems and Perspectives of Labour
Migrants from Kyrgyzstan to Russia

By

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Today, migration affects over three million people in the Kyrgyz Republic and will remain a significant economic and social factor in the foreseeable future. Every fourth household in the country i.e., around 26 per cent has at least one labour migrant.[1] High rates of unemployment, low wages, political instability, and corruption in the public administration system of Kyrgyzstan have negatively affected the external labour migration of citizens. According to the latest official data around 1,118,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan work in foreign countries: 1,063,000 in Russia; about 30,000 in Kazakhstan; 20,000 in Turkey; 10,000 in the USA and Arab countries; 6,000 in Germany, Canada, and Italy; and more than 5,000 labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan in South Korea. In addition, 76,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan cannot enter Russia because they are on the "blacklist." The share of labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan to the Russian Federation is 80 per cent, and Kazakhstan is in second place with about 15 per cent.[2]

Part of the labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan to Russia work in the black economy, and even within the Eurasian Economic Union, there are difficulties with the legalisation of their employment, which means their significant vulnerability to the employer. The Eurasian Economic Union Treaty between Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Armenia came into force in January 2015, with Kyrgyzstan joining in August 2015. The Treaty provides for the free movement of goods, people, services, and capital. Migration between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan makes up a small part of the labour migrant flows, and therefore the provisions for the free movement of labour are not particularly controversial for these three countries alone. However, the accession of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan had a visible impact on the labour markets in Russia.[3] The total number of labour migrants in the EAEU is estimated at 1,647,000 people.[4] Most of them work in Russia. About a million of them are citizens of

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Kyrgyzstan, about 300,000 migrants belong to Armenia, and the rest are citizens of Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Eight years have passed since Kyrgyzstan became a member of the EAEU. One of the main goals of Kyrgyzstan in joining this Union was the free movement of labour. According to the Treaty, labour migrants can stay in the host country as long as they have a valid employment contract.[5] The Member States shall cooperate and coordinate policies in the field of labour migration within the EAEU, as well as assist in the organised recruitment and attracting employees from one Member State to another.[6] Changes in legislation in Russia liberalised employment conditions for foreign migrants. For example, since 2015, Kyrgyz migrants do not need to get a patent to work in Russia or work permission. Despite all the positive changes, the protection of labour rights of migrants working in Russia remains outside the area of priorities in the EAEU. The facilitation of employment documentation is not accompanied by the establishment of protection mechanisms against unscrupulous employers. Family members of working migrants from Kyrgyzstan to Russia are in a vulnerable situation and there is no comprehensive format or financing mechanisms for their adaptation and integration. Children of working migrants do not have full or open access to Russian schools. The problem of retraining and requalification of working migrants remains outside the sphere of priorities of the EAEU.

Within the framework of the EAEU, the basic rights of workers are enshrined in the founding Treaty. The Treaty plays a backbone role in integration and is the starting point for the development of a common labour market. Article 1 enshrines the implementation of four freedoms within the EAEU necessary for building a common market, viz, freedom of movement of goods, services, capital, and labour. One of the goals of the Union enshrined in Article 4 of the Treaty is the desire to form a single market for goods, services, capital, and labour resources within the Union. Issues of labour migration are regulated by Section XXVI of the Treaty which consists of only 3 Articles. It is important to consolidate several concepts in Article 96 of the Treaty. Labour activity is understood as an activity based on an employment contract or activity for the performance of work (rendering of services) based on civil law contract, carried out on the territory of the state of employment in accordance with the legislation of that state. The EAEU Treaty for the first time extended activities to workers not only under an employment contract but also under a civil law which significantly expanded its scope of legal regulation in terms of persons. The Treaty does not use the concept of a migrant worker; instead, the definition of "worker of a Member State" is fixed which means a person who is a citizen of a Member State, legally located and legally working in the territory of the state of employment, of which he is not a citizen and in which he does not permanently reside.

Based on the provisions of Articles 97 and 98 of the EAEU Treaty the following rights of the workers in the Union are guaranteed:

1. **Free implementation of labour activity without considering restrictions on the protection of the national labour market:** Article 97 of the Treaty prohibits Member States from establishing and applying restrictions through legislation to protect the national labour market, except restrictions to ensure national security and public order, in relation to the labour activity carried out by the workers of the Member States, the type of occupation and the territory of residence. The wording of this Article, at first glance, is aimed at providing migrant workers from the Member States with a labour regime equal to the labour regime of citizens in the state of employment. But in reality, it is about maintaining the possibility of applying measures to protect the national market at the will of the state. Workers of the Member States are not required to obtain a work permit in the state of employment. However, the Treaty maintains that migrant labour working in a Member State other than their own will be governed by the legislation of the state of employment.

2. **Recognition of education documents:** The state of employment recognises the education documents issued by educational institutions of the Member States, without carrying out procedures for the recognition of documents on education. The rule of not having to recognise documents of education does not apply to engaging in teaching, legal, medical, or pharmaceutical activities in another Member State.

3. **Simplified procedure for staying in the territory of the state of employment:** Within 30 days from the date of entry into the territory of another Member State to carry out labour activities or employment, citizens of a Member State and family members are exempted from the obligation to register. If this period of stay is exceeded, these citizens are required to register in accordance with the law of the host state. It is important that the Treaty establishes the right of the worker in the event of early termination of an employment or civil law contract after the expiration of 90 days from the date of entry into the territory of the Member State of employment without leaving the territory of the Member State of employment within 15 days to conclude a new labour or civil law contract.

4. **Simplified entry procedure:** Citizens of a Member State, when entering the territory of another Member State, use migration cards. However, if the period of stay does not exceed 30 days, citizens can enter the territory of a Member State using one of the valid documents that allow border control authorities to mark the crossing of the state border. In this case, they are exempted from using a migration card.

5. **Offset of labour (insurance) experience:** The length of service of workers of the Member States shall be counted in the total labour (insurance) length of service for social security (social insurance). This rule does not apply to pensions. Pension provision for workers of the Member States and family

members is regulated by the legislation of the state of permanent residence, and by a separate international treaty between Member States.

6.   **The right to social security:** Migrant workers from the Member States and their family members are treated as equals in social security rights with citizens of the state of employment. However, the agreement does not apply to pensions.

Article 98 also establishes several other rights, like the right to join trade unions, the right to receive information from the employer regarding the procedure for his stay, and the conditions for carrying out labour activities, etc. Children of an employee of a Member State staying with him in another state of employment shall have the right to attend pre-school institutions and receive education following the legislation of the host state where they are employed. Workers have a general duty to comply with the legislation of the state of employment, respect the culture and traditions of the peoples of the state of employment, and bear responsibility for offences committed in contravention of the legislation of the state of employment.

The most difficult problem faced by labour migrants is registration at their place of residence. Citizens of an EAEU Member State who arrived for work activity or employment in the territory of another Member State shall be exempt from the obligation to register (registration) for 30 days from the date of entry. In the case of stay of a national of one Member State in the territory of another Member State for more than 30 days from the date of entry, these citizens are required to register (registration) in accordance with the legislation of the State of entry, if such obligation is established by the legislation of the state of entry.[7] The migrants and their family members may be in the Russian Federation without registration for up to 30 days. The Russian system of registration at the place of residence, which replaced the Soviet *Propiska*, seriously impedes not only the development of migration processes within the EAEU but also complicates the free flow of labour within Russia itself. The main problem is renting housing, as apartment owners are very reluctant to register foreign labour migrants in their living space, who, in turn, cannot officially register because of this. Moreover, there are no systemic associations of trade unions in the EAEU, and the trade unions themselves do little to protect the labour rights of both local and foreign workers. If labour migrants do not register on time at their place of residence, they cannot use any of the opportunities created by the union, in other words, they will join the group of illegal migrants.

A whole series of difficulties and problems, including corruption, have arisen around the registration, which has a controlling rather than a reporting nature. In November 2018, criminal liability was introduced for illegal registration of migrants in non-residential premises. Previously, the law applied only to owners of so-called "one-size-fits-all" apartments, where several thousand migrants were falsely registered in some cases. The amendments have now removed the phrase "residential premises" and extended the liability to owners of "accommodating" offices, all non-residential premises, including

warehouses, factories, offices, and apartments. According to the survey, carried out by Tyuryukanova E.V. in 2010, the youngest women migrants from the CIS countries were Kyrgyz migrants (average age 31 years), and the oldest migrants came from Georgia (average age 41 years). [8] The results of our survey are in line with these figures. Respondents by age: 18–24 years around 34 per cent; 25–30 years around 33.3 per cent; 31–35 years around 14.7 per cent, 36–44 years around 10 per cent; 45–55 years around 8 per cent. The majority of migrants are between 18 and 30 years old. For 72 per cent of the respondents, the main reason to migrate was economic. 67.3 per cent said that remittances were essential as the earned money would be sent over for household expenses. Other reasons for migration include housing construction (42 per cent), saving money (36.7 per cent), children's education (31.3 per cent), repaying loans (20 per cent), and marriage and funeral ceremonies (10.6 per cent). Earning money in Russia does not always satisfy migrants. When asked: "Are you satisfied with the money you earn in Russia?" they would answer the most important is to buy the most necessary things and save the extra money (58.7 per cent); buy the most necessary things but cannot save money (21.3 per cent); buy only necessary things (7.3 per cent); there is not enough money (12.7 per cent).

According to Article 98 of the EAEU Treaty, the section on migration contains a provision on the right of the worker to the unhindered transfer of funds. This right is of great importance not only for remuneration for the work of an employee but also for the life of a family/household in the country of origin of the migrant. It is violated without any agreement with the countries concerned and without even coordinating the restrictions introduced with the EEC of the EAEU. Thus, in April 2019, the Central Bank of Russia introduced limits on the amount of monthly transfers (within 30 calendar days) from Russia to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.[9] There is no supranational body that would have the right to cancel this decision of the national institution and punish it for this violation. Therefore, the problem was submitted for discussion at the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council of the Heads of Government of the EAEU countries.

Within the framework of the EAEU Treaty, the Member States shall mutually recognise documents on education issued by educational organisations without having to pass the procedures established by the legislation of the country of destination. Under the legislation of the Russian Federation labour migrants following appropriate procedures as directed by law may be admitted to teaching, legal, medical, or pharmaceutical activities respectively. The rights of taxi drivers coming from Kyrgyzstan should be highlighted. Drivers from Kyrgyzstan can exercise their national rights in Russia, which is an advantage over migrant taxi drivers from other countries. As for the literacy of migrants in Kyrgyzstan, most of them around 32.9 per cent have special secondary education, 28 per cent have higher education, 20.7 per cent have secondary education, and 14.6 per cent have not completed higher education. Unfortunately, in most cases, the level of educational qualification of the migrants does not allow them to get a good job in their profession. When they first arrived in Russia, 19.3 per cent of migrants said the biggest problem was finding a job. To overcome this situation, migrants continue to work willingly

in any job. Migrants from Kyrgyzstan are widely involved in the cleaning sector; every fifth migrant from Kyrgyzstan works there.[10] This lowers the social status of migrants and undermines their self-confidence. Many migrants say that they are depressed but are used to the pressures of life. In general, 39.3 per cent of Kyrgyz migrants work in the cleaning sector, 18.7 per cent work in the service sector, 18 per cent in trade, and 16.7% of migrants do not do any work. At present, all listed sectors of employment are "spheres of risk" due to the peculiarities of labour relations in these types of employment, and the absence of legal channels of labour migration makes their situation even more precarious. In the event of a conflict, many migrants (about 48.7 per cent) rely on the assistance of the Russian consulate in the country; 2 per cent know about the existence of non-governmental organisations and rely on them; 44.7 per cent rely on friends, relatives, and acquaintances; 4.7 per cent on independent lawyers, attorneys.

According to the research, 81.7 per cent of respondents have children. Not all took their children to Russia. About 47.8 per cent left all their children in their homeland and 40.6 per cent took all their children with them. 11.6 per cent of respondents have one of their children left at home. There are instances where children do not live with their parents since as labour migrants, they cannot properly take care of their children in Russia (36.2 per cent) and it is difficult to work with their children in Russia because their parents want to earn money (this reason was mentioned by 29.8 per cent of parents). Many migrant parents do not want to take their children out of school (17 per cent), and due to the higher cost of childcare in Russia (17 per cent). These children living apart from their parents had to face serious difficulties due to lack of parental supervision and control, especially when the father or mother or both are absent. Children of labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan do not have the same access to education. Admission to kindergarten is more difficult than school admission. 39.6 per cent of children of junior age go to kindergarten, and 35.8 per cent of children do not go to kindergarten because their parents had difficulties in enrolling them in kindergarten. Another 7.5 per cent of the respondents reported that not all children of junior age go to kindergarten, and 11.3 per cent of respondents said that their children do not need kindergarten. As a rule, the lack of registration and the lack of places in kindergartens are the main obstacles to admission to kindergarten.

Access to school for school-aged children is better with 84.7 per cent of children going to school. Children of 15.3 per cent of parents do not go to school. 72.5 per cent of school-aged children had problems entering school and kindergartens. All of these problems are related to the lack of registration of the child from abroad at the place of residence, which is necessary for electronic enrollment in the school, and the lack of vacancies in schools located near the family's place of residence. According to experts, children from Kyrgyzstan have better access to schools. In general, Russian schools treat children from Kyrgyzstan well. This was noted by approximately 80 per cent of parents while 5 per cent of parents showed disapproval. It should be noted that parents who were not working officially had a significantly higher level of negative attitudes toward their children at school (around 7 per cent). Due to

poor knowledge of the Russian language, or inconsistency of knowledge with the level of the class in which they are suitable by age, children who are not citizens of the Russian Federation are admitted to Russian schools with a loss of 1-2 years of education. In the near and medium term, it can be assumed that the number of children from Kyrgyzstan in Russian schools will gradually increase, as migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia is feminised and such migrants are increasingly coming to Russia with their families or marrying and settling in Russia.

The access to medical services by labour migrants in the country of employment has not been fully resolved in the EAEU. EAEU citizens who legally work in Russia, have a valid employment contract and taxes paid by the employer, and have free access to Compulsory Health Insurance (CHI), on an equal basis with Russian citizens. However, competent authorities in Russia do not advertise and systematically disseminate information about free CHI among labour migrants from the EAEU. Russian insurance companies also do not inform labour migrants from the EAEU about the possibilities of free medical care. Migrants from Kyrgyzstan are not aware of their right to receive a CHI in Russia. Previously migrants were well informed of the free medical services, this has not yet been observed about CHI. In Russia, only labour migrants have access to CHI and do not cover their family members. About half of the parents (47 per cent) take their children to doctors for prevention or visit the doctor only when it is necessary (45 per cent) as medical policy is expensive and not all migrant parents can afford it. Families with several children are in a difficult situation.

Changes in Russian legislation in 2015 liberalised employment conditions for labour migrants from the EAEU. According to the opinion of 45 per cent of Kyrgyz migrants, the changes have greatly facilitated their employment. According to 31 per cent, it has become a little easier for them to find a job. Only 8 per cent of the surveyed Kyrgyz people believe that the changes did not help them find a job, and another 5 per cent indicated that there were no changes in employment. It has become easier for Kyrgyz migrants to get a job because employers prefer to hire citizens of the EAEU so that they pay less tax. 13 per cent is kept the same as citizens of Russia. As labour migrants tend to seek employment through diasporic connections, this sometimes puts them at risk, leaving them vulnerable to fraud without considering the option of formalising a contract. Nowadays, they use the services of intermediaries from their diaspora and formalise fake employment contracts for registration. No one pays any taxes unless there are contracts in place. This leads to very bad consequences. Labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan to the Russian Federation have to face several problems especially as they are not well aware of the migration legislation of either the Russian Federation or the Kyrgyz Republic, which directly affects their legal status, employment opportunities as well as conditions for social adaptation, which leads to illegal migration. The socially unprotected migrants, on the one hand, formed the social basis of ethnic criminal groups, and on the other hand, quite often become victims of conflict squabbles. Under these conditions, Kyrgyz labour migrants complain about non-payment of wages and harassment by employers

from Russia. 32.9 per cent of respondents said they have no employment contract. Some migrants consider there is no need for an employment contract (10.3 per cent); for a few the employer does not deem it necessary (20.5 per cent); a few had recently got a job and did not have the contract yet (2.6 per cent); while others did not think about it (10.3 per cent); many thought that everyone works the same way (43.6 per cent); many works with new client/customer each time (10.3 per cent); familiarity with the employer was also a cause for not going into the contract (3.2 per cent). Migrants do not understand that such a decision creates many problems for them. If there are violations by the employer, such as non-payment of wages, ordering additional work in addition to the work assigned, violence, use of force, etc., they will lose the opportunity to defend their rights in Russian courts. In 2019, the Department of External Migration under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic received 255 complaints on non-payment of wages amounting to RUB45,064,500 to 833 citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic. As a result of the activities carried out by the employees of the Department (visits and negotiations, correspondence), the above citizens were paid RUB12,455,400.[11] If migrants knew the migration law of the Russian Federation, they would not make such a decision. 64.7 per cent of migrants are not fully aware of Russian law; 12 per cent of migrants do not know; 23.3 per cent of migrants have information on the law.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation has an electronic database informally known as the "black list" which contains data on foreign citizens whose entry into Russia has been restricted. The list includes persons who worked without filling out the necessary documents, exceeded the period of legal stay, or violated Russian migration legislation in any other form. Among the citizens of the EAEU Member States, the largest number of entry bans were issued to citizens of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan even before the accession of both countries to the Treaty on the EAEU. To date, the situation with the inclusion of labour migrants from the EAEU in the "black lists" remains unstable and acute. From 2014 to 2016 The Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs issued 145,218 entry bans against citizens of Kyrgyzstan, of which 55,018 were lifted in the same period. 51,578 citizens of Kyrgyzstan out of 90,200 remain on the "black list" and the entry ban could only be lifted upon judicial review. Since November 2018, based on the results of bilateral negotiations between the Presidents of Russia and Kyrgyzstan, citizens of Kyrgyzstan who were banned from entering Russia can return after checking themselves against the database on the website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation. Citizens of Kyrgyzstan who violated the migration legislation of Russia and continued to stay on its territory had the opportunity from October 16 to December 10, 2018, to freely leave the Russian Federation and return to their home state. In 2023 there were about 76,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan on the "black list" of which only about 47,000 people fell under the amnesty.

Employment of migrants of Kyrgyzstan in foreign labour markets reduces the overall level of unemployment in the country, positively affects the financial position of their families, and contributes to the achievement of

individual goals of development of the Kyrgyz Republic. Foreign labour migrants get acquainted with the culture of other countries and peoples, acquire foreign languages, adopt new technologies, and professional skills, and establish new contacts.[12] Money received by labour migrants abroad is positively influenced by the social structure of Kyrgyzstan, increasing the middle class, and, accordingly, reducing the category of the poor and the very poor. The positive results of leaving their homeland, determined by the migrants themselves, show that the money they earn is mainly spent on food (9.3 per cent), education of children (34 per cent), and improvement of housing conditions (68 per cent). The business experience gained by the migrants abroad has a positive impact not only on migrants themselves and their households but also on the economy of Kyrgyzstan. Entrepreneurship is a hope and a positive future for this country, as it opens up opportunities to reduce the outflow of the economically active population of Kyrgyzstan to the Russian Federation.

Currently, there is a significant migration flow from EAEU countries to Russia which includes highly qualified specialists as well. As a result, Russia receives a category of migrants with new cultural traditions that require their adaptation to new living conditions. According to experts, the improvement of the migration situation in the country can be facilitated by the socialisation of migrants due to their success in the professional sphere, the opportunity to occupy work niches that correspond to their capabilities, and the development of the system of training specialists in popular specialities. At the same time, there is a psychological and sociocultural problem of adaptation of migrants. This process has a two-way effect. The perception of migrants by the local population plays an important part. In general, according to the opinion of the surveyed migrants, the local population of the Russian Federation looks favourably on Kyrgyz people. For example, almost two-thirds of respondents (61 per cent) say that the local population treats them well, and a quarter (26 per cent) said that they would have a neutral attitude. A few respondents said that the local population treats them with hostility (5 per cent), and there are more registered workers (7.3 per cent) than undocumented workers (4.4 per cent). The latter, Kyrgyz people who work officially are more local than those who work informally. They found that they worked with residents and were in direct competition with them for jobs, so they often felt discriminated against. Labour migrants with high-quality skills who are much sought-after in the working sector in destination countries (although they are a minority in number when considered the bulk of labour migrants from a country) often obtain permanent residence after receiving the required positions and higher wages in the host country, since the average monthly salary of Kyrgyzstan cannot meet their needs. The difference in wages between Kyrgyzstan and Russia, therefore, should be addressed to solve the problem of migration of skilled workers.

The dependence of the family on remittances leads to serious risks for the socio-economic security of the country. Therefore, the Government of Kyrgyzstan should seriously consider the possibility of reducing dependence on migration. One way to reduce emigration is to create new employment opportunities in Kyrgyzstan through foreign direct investment which will reduce the outflow of citizens and allow them to earn a profitable income in

the state, thereby reducing family dependency on remittances. Kyrgyzstan needs a qualitative improvement in education. Currently, higher education is a formal process that has nothing to do with future employment. According to the National Statistical Committee, more than 33,000 specialists graduate annually. Annually more than 70 per cent of university students graduate in humanities (economics, law, management, education).[13] Kyrgyzstan needs technical specialists for the development of the energy complex, mining sectors, as well as agricultural specialists (these sectors are a priority according to the national strategy). Graduates generally cannot find a job in their speciality and are forced to look for vacancies in other countries. There is a need for qualitative transformation of educational processes in the Republic and an increase in the number of highly qualified personnel who will be in demand in the labour market. Initiatives should be taken to improve investment through legislative measures to protect the interests of investors and consider the possibility of attracting investments from EAEU countries which will create additional jobs thereby reducing the level of migration.

At present, there is an urgent need to develop and implement a coordinated migration policy for the EAEU Member States. To this end, state and interstate bodies should develop and implement common programs and foster cooperation in every possible way in the field of regulating migration processes. It is necessary to intensify the development of the interstate legal framework in the field of migration regulation. Particular attention should be paid to the issues of ensuring the freedom of movement of labour in the territory of EAEU countries to reduce the problem of illegal labour migration. Within the framework of EAEU, it is necessary to eliminate any manifestations of discrimination against citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic when moving and finding employment on the territory of the Member States of the Union. The entry of the Kyrgyz Republic into the EAEU created good conditions for labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan to stay and find a job. For the effective deployment of labour resources, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic needs to intensify work on the development of an effective migration policy. State authorities should develop cooperation in the field of regulation of migration processes. New socio-economic relations in the migration sphere should serve the interests of all EAEU countries. In the coming years, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic should direct the main part of measures to regulate migration processes to reduce the level of spontaneity of external labour migration of the population. It is necessary to learn the benefits of integration into a single labour market. For the Republic, the need to create and implement long-term measures to send excess labour abroad, to implement a policy of attracting cash transfers of labour migrants for the development of the national economy of Kyrgyzstan, has become of particular importance,

Migration flows from Kyrgyzstan require proper regulation and a move away from spontaneity. Kyrgyzstan and Russia are introducing necessary mechanisms for managing the migration process to fully utilise the potential of external labour migration. For example, the Government of Kyrgyzstan created the National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018–2040, as well as the Development Program of the Kyrgyz Republic as "Unity.

Confidence. Creation" for the period 2018–2022. In January 2021, the President of Kyrgyzstan signed a Decree "On taking measures aimed at improving the migration situation." Speaking about the prospects for migration policy in general for the entire EAEU and in particular the migration relations between Russia and Kyrgyzstan, it is important to note that there is a need for the initiative to create an electronic labour exchange information portal that would incorporate everything related to the labour markets of all five EAEU Member countries. The "Eurasian Electronic Labor Exchange" project is planned to be implemented in the future. However, the "Work Without Borders" search system is now operational which is the first joint digital project in the Eurasian space that started in 2021 and is the basis for the implementation of a larger project to create a common electronic labour exchange information system.

The present Russia-Ukraine war has a negative effect on the country's economy particularly on migrant remittances. It also influenced the fate of migrants as they were drawn into this conflict. Since the beginning of the armed conflict in Ukraine, local media have written about at least fifteen natives of Kyrgyzstan who died. At least four of them were serving sentences for crimes committed in Russian prisons.[14] The Russian authorities recruit migrants from the region and send them to the conflict zone to fight or restore destroyed infrastructure. Despite the high risks involved and warnings from the authorities of the Central Asian countries hundreds or even thousands of migrants are still working in the occupied lands. Most are involved in rebuilding destroyed cities like Mariupol and Donetsk, while others are digging trenches and collecting corpses on the front lines. Women work in military hospitals, canteens, and factories in eastern Ukraine. Job advertisements are published on major websites like Headhunter, Avito, or regional resources, as well as distributed through social networks, migrant communities, or directly through advertising placed by construction companies. Employers promise to cover travel expenses to Ukraine, as well as provide workers with housing, food, and overall expenses. Monthly salaries range from $2,000–3,300, much more than what migrants can earn in Russia. It sounds tempting in words, but in practice, in the occupied regions of Ukraine, migrants face the same problems as in Russia like insanitary conditions, lack of heating, rude treatment by employers, etc. There are many reports of migrants being underpaid or not being paid at all. Not to mention the fact that now these people are under the threat of criminal prosecution in Kyiv or their native countries as they are being considered as accomplices of Russian aggression. There were cases when frustrated migrants tried to leave Ukraine, but Russian border guards forced them to return to the front line.

Russia remains the main destination for labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan. The geographical proximity, good knowledge of the Russian language and culture by the inhabitants of the region, and the urgent need for workers in the Russian economy keep Moscow in Kyrgyzstan's migration orbit. The simplified procedure for obtaining citizenship by highly qualified workers like doctors and engineers from the former Soviet Republics adds to the attractiveness. The economic cost of the war on the one hand limits

opportunities in Russia but with large numbers of ethnic Russians moving out of their country to escape mobilisation and draft, opportunities are opening for migrants. While evaluating these optimistic possibilities, one needs to look into the profile of Russians leaving the country and the skills of migrants from Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, news of Kyrgyz and Tajik migrants being encouraged to join the war efforts and being returned in body bags may restrict the movement. This would not of course have any significant impact on female migrants for the moment. However, it would be interesting to know the areas in which the female migrants work (for men it is mainly construction and transport) and whether they move as parts of families or as single individuals.

Conclusion: Constraints and Recommendations

The existing system of recruitment with the help of compatriots perpetuates informal employment practices and preserves the vulnerable position of migrants, and protecting their rights becomes more difficult. In the event of conflict situations, labour migrants in Russia have little chance of protecting their labour rights through the courts, in an official way. Since Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015, procedures for legal residence and work for migrants and their family members have been simplified, and access to health care and education for children has improved. However, since most Kyrgyz migrants remain undocumented and those who migrate legally often do not have a written employment contract, they cannot exercise these rights and therefore remain very vulnerable. Laws, policies, and practices regarding migration, both in Kyrgyzstan and in the main destination countries, do not yet incorporate a rights-based approach that is gender and age-sensitive. Unfortunately, most migrants from Kyrgyzstan do not sign employment contracts due to a lack of legal literacy. As a result, they are discriminated against and tortured by their employers and are forced to adapt. Thus, labour migration in the conditions of the single market of the EAEU has become a stimulating factor for the economies of all Members of the alliance. The Government of Kyrgyzstan believes that labour migration is a positive factor in reducing unemployment and reducing social tension. This allows citizens to leave their country to work to support their families through remittances. Considering the problems faced by migrants in the host country, it can be concluded that the Member States of the EAEU still have a lot of work to do to improve the management of immigration relations. As for the migrants from Kyrgyzstan, despite the current difficulties with work and housing abroad, their number continues to increase. Because the domestic labour market does not create new jobs for them at home and the number of unemployed is increasing every year. Although within the framework of the integration association, the possibility of free movement of labour was announced, it must be understood that there are many restrictions on the actual implementation of this possibility. There are still differences of interest between countries that import labour and countries that export labour.

Summing up the results of the study, we can say that the processes of labour migration in the post-Soviet space have undergone great changes over

the past few decades. Eurasian integration has become an incentive to create a completely effective mechanism for managing labour migration. The benefits of creating a union include: simplifying migrants' access to new labour markets, increasing the level of their social security, and legalising a significant part of the migration flow. It is these aspects that contributed to the intensification of migration exchanges between the EAEU Member countries. At the same time, we must not forget about problematic issues in the migration sphere of the EAEU, which require solutions that do not allow full use of the potential. Points that need to be addressed usually include the lack of joint programs of the Member States, in our case, Russia and Kyrgyzstan, according to professional training, language training programs, and most importantly, the lack of an established mechanism for the organised recruitment of migrant workers, and preparation of their employment process in their home country. As practice shows, the necessary infrastructure and information are lacking to implement these tasks. However, further cooperation between Member countries can overcome the existing imperfections. The dynamics of migration processes from the Kyrgyz Republic to the Russian Federation generally reflect the positive nature of labour migration. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, labour migration plays both a positive and negative role. As noted earlier, the active remittances of migrants to their homeland make a significant contribution to the GDP of Kyrgyzstan; migration, in essence, reduces the number of unemployed in the country, which has a positive effect on social stability in society. However, it posits risks for society such as dismantling the institution of family, loss of landed property of the migrants in their homeland, etc. For Kyrgyzstan, external labour migration brings both great benefits and potential dangers. It is necessary to advise labour migrants to get a legal job and to improve their basic knowledge of the migration law of the host country.

The Kyrgyz Republic should stress pre-migration activities i.e., explain the importance of legal employment to labour migrants from the Kyrgyz Republic to the Russian Federation, create information work on issues of medical care, stimulate the creation of a training system for labour migrants in the Kyrgyz Republic before departure. It is appropriate to create a special pre-departure training program for migrants, which includes language training, a short legal course, cultural studies, a country studies course, and a course on general life skills necessary for a good life in the EAEU country chosen for migration. It is also necessary to protect the rights of labour migrants, organise the labour force, exchange information on vacancies, license private employment agencies, and develop the housing rental market. For some Kyrgyz migrants, the problem of the "black list" has not yet been resolved. There is still a risk that migrants will be included in such lists. These issues should be resolved in a short period of time. Improving information about the processes of labour migration in the EAEU will reap positive results. Reporting their current problems through mass media, creating periodical TV and radio programs about migration processes in EAEU on central TV and radio channels of the Kyrgyz Republic, using social networks (mainly Instagram and Facebook) and messengers (mainly WhatsApp) to spread knowledge about orderly and safe migration practices will help in a better transit of migrants and

a life of dignity in the host countries. The Kyrgyz Government should bring regulations for the centralised collection and analysis of statistics and results of studies on labour migrants from the Kyrgyz Republic, including family members of labour migrants (conducted within the Kyrgyz Republic, as well as in the Russian Federation). Development of a special Internet service for Kyrgyz citizens in the Russian Federation, including children who go there with their parents who are labour migrants, to learn the Russian language. Learning Russian (and with children) can include fragments of Soviet and Russian cartoons, films, songs, and fairy tales, which allows migrants and their children to learn Russian and get acquainted with Russian culture at the same time. It is considered appropriate to create such applications for mobile phones (smartphones) and personal computers.

The Eurasian Economic Commission should try to develop separate regulatory legal acts that will establish a legal mechanism within the boundaries of the EAEU for easier labour movement. Active involvement of primary and secondary vocational education institutions for training and retraining personnel in new joint projects within the EAEU can become an important component of the new policy in terms of educational migration. For example, there is talk of training and retraining of working professionals in EAEU countries. In the case of financing educational programs from a special fund, new specialities would be introduced, and training and retraining for working with new technologies, new materials, etc., would be organised. In addition, the money transferred by the families of labour migrants for the education of their children at home would also be re-directed to occupations relevant to the labour market of the EAEU, and the coordination of structural changes in the education market of the EAEU and orientation to the training of personnel in the required professions would be the financial responsibility of the EAEU. It is necessary to introduce modern digital technologies in the field of employment within the EAEU. The Russian Federation should also strive for the creation of specialised structural units/departments responsible for accounting and maintaining statistics of persons who arrived from the EAEU to carry out labour activities in Russia. A change in the registration system is necessary. In Russia, statistics on taxes paid by migrants should be prepared and migrants to be allotted a Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN).

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Climate Migrants, Resource Scarcity, and Sustainability Issue: The Case of Jungle Mahals Region

By

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In the Jungle Mahals climate crisis, resource scarcity, migration, and sustainability issues are inextricably interrelated transforming a resource-rich region into a climate-sensitive region in colonial and postcolonial times. According to Christopher Hill, the relationship between migration and the environment during colonial times remained a critical factor. In 1874, Richard Temple, who was assigned to provide famine relief for the Bengal Presidency, proposed and encouraged permanent migration to the cultivable wasteland available in the region as a solution to the famine problem. However, his decision lacked the foresight of the complicated realities of ecological entanglements that influenced the peasants' decision to migrate either permanently, seasonally, or not to move at all which was based on variables such as the distance of the available wasteland from their current permanent residence, disease conditions prevailing, the familiarity of the environment and types of arable land offered for peasants, etc. All these factors guided the peasants to migrate permanently or temporarily or not take any decision to migrate.[1] Jean Drèze studied the Famine Codes in the late nineteenth century in the context of ecology, politics, and survival which was shaped by colonialism.[2] Vinita Damodaran explained the 1897 Chota Nagpur famine in the context of ecological degradation, forest reservation, and the occurrence of famine.[3] Mike Davis linked the food crisis and hunger of the late nineteenth century in non-European parts of the world to the combined effects of capitalist development and climatic change (in turn caused by El Niño) and faultlines of social cohesion.[4] In pre-colonial Orissa, as Biswamoy Pati argued, the migration of Brahmins from the Sambalpur-Raipur region to the interior Kalahandi region was linked with the peasantisation of the Adivasis which was associated with feudalistic development and social stratification. Due to forest devastation, forest restrictions, high rent, and sporadic drought and famines in

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colonial and postcolonial periods, the Adivasis of Kalahandi plunged into the crisis-ridden system. He traced the origin of the crises in landlessness, migration, indebtedness, and dacoities in the 1970s to policies in the pre-colonial regime.[5] Labour migration in colonial India has been relatively dependent upon land relations, patterns of land use, nature of resource utilisation, environmental policies, the crisis of agrarian economy leading to institutional breakdown affecting the family structure and climate crisis, etc.[6] Sometimes environmental migration, for example among the Rebari pastoralists in western Rajasthan, was a planned survival strategy owing to drought and famine.[7]

The Jungle Mahals have been studied through the lens of caste politics, language politics, agrarian movement, folklore, and identity assertion of the Adivasi communities, role in the national movement,[8] the cultural transformation of forestry and politics in Bengal,[9] state's domination over forests, mines and people, etc.[10] Ranabir Samaddar argues that "[e]nvironmental crises in Indigenous belts of habitation in India show why in place of a push and pull framework a relational framework may be more fruitful to understand colonial migration."[11] This approach is relevant in understanding the migration process of Jungle Mahals where large-scale deforestation has caused massive soil erosion, reduced soil fertility, and siltation of ponds. Denudation and cultivation of short-life annual crops in the region have increased dryness and decreased moisture in air and soil, causing a drop in rainfall and ultimately inviting aridity and desertification. The Forest Department and landlords have usurped the traditional forest rights of the Adivasis. In this way, the sustainable economy of the tribal people was permanently destabilised and the districts such as Manbhum and Bankura became drought prone i.e., scarcity would be inevitable if rainfall dependant single crop (paddy) failed. Resource scarcity resulted in the depletion of biological resources. People were forced to leave in search of work and food. Therefore, the resource-rich Jungle Mahals became a region of resource scarcity and climate-sensitive region as a result of unsustainable environmental policies. Kyle Whyte rightly points out that "colonialism is itself a form of anthropogenic climate change."

Conjecture of Crisis: Agrarian Intervention, Deforestation and Destabilised Ecology

The term Jungle Mahals loosely implies the south-western part of Bengal comprising the hill areas of Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia, West Midnapore, and Jhargram districts of West Bengal (Image1). During medieval times, the term Jungle Mahals was well known. During Akbar's reign, this region was a part of the Circar Goalpara. In 1722, this area was transferred to Chakla Midnapore under the rule of Bengal Nawab Murshid Quli Khan and came under the East India Company in 1760. Though there was no administrative unit called "Jungle Mahals" between the period 1760–1805, in around 1805, the district of Jungle Mahals was formed comprising the parganas and mahals such as Katlas, Habila, Jhalda, Jharia, Jayapur, Mukundapur, Kismat Nwagarh, Kismat Chaontly,

Torang, Tung, Nagar Kaisi and Patkum. In the Burdwan district, Senapahari, Shergarh, and Bishnapur (except the police jurisdiction of Kotulpur, and Balsi
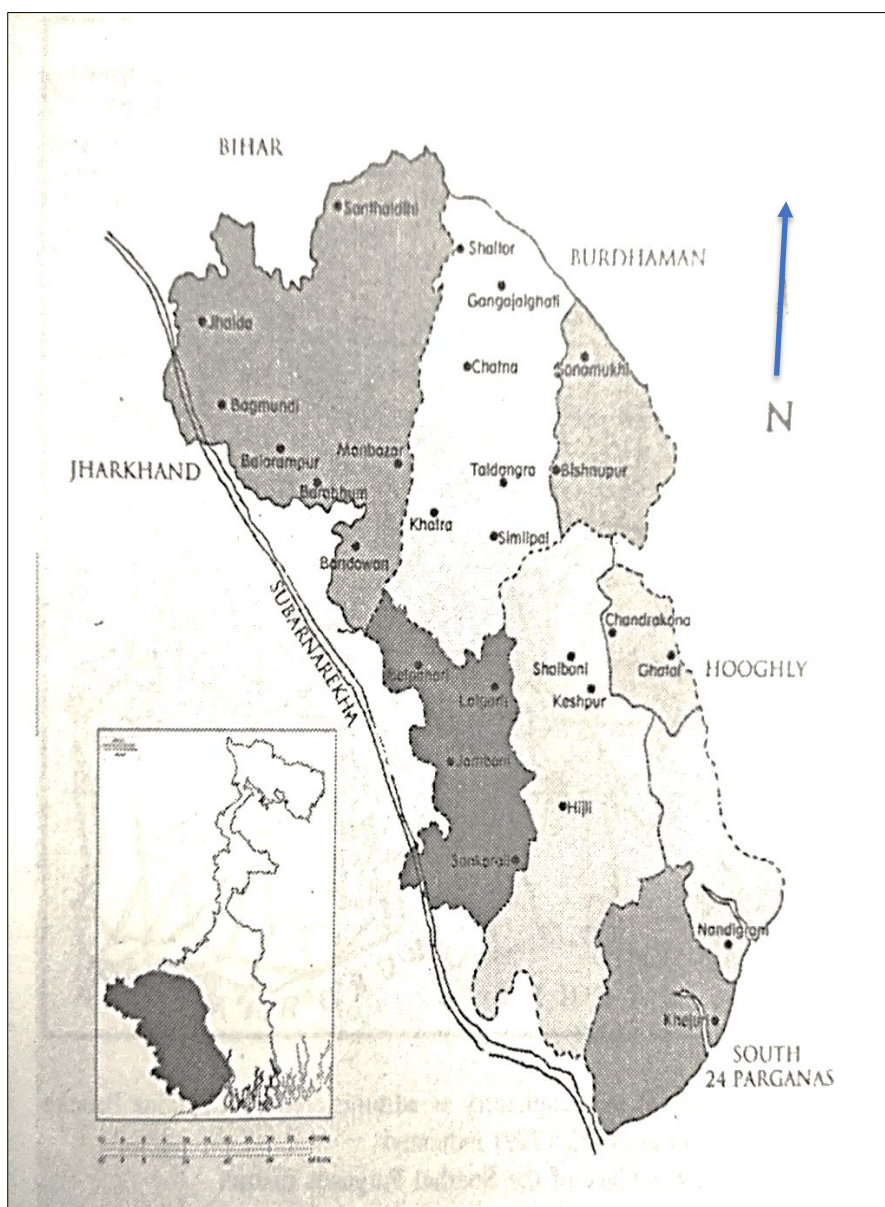

Image1: Territory of the Jungle Mahals Tentatively Drawn based on the Areas Then (1805) Within the District., Suchibrata Sen, *The Santals of Jungle Mahals Through the Ages* (Kolkata: Ashadeep, 2013), iv.

Pargana) were included in the Jungle Mahals. Chhatna, Barabhum, Manbhum, Supur, Ambikanagar, Silapal, and Bhalaidiha from Midnapore were made a part of the Jungle Mahals.[12] In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the Jungle Mahals covering the forested region of southwest Bengal were considered by the colonial British administration as a "zone of anomaly" i.e., a geographical area with an "impenetrable hilly jungle" whose people are "extraordinarily primitive" making this region unique and different valleys and plains.[13] Though the district existed up to 1833, this forested/woodland region of southwest Bengal is still culturally known as the Jungle Mahals. The name indicates that the Jungle Mahals area was once densely forested consisting mainly of *sal* trees and the isolated residual hills and undulating lands were covered with various types of trees like *asan*, *kend*, etc. Just as in Chotanagpur, the *mahua* tree was of critical importance to the Adivasi communities, these trees hold the same importance in the Jungle Mahals.

The Jungle Mahals region is inhabited by Adivasi and semi-Hinduised communities and has less Brahmanical influence. As the region is predominantly forested and hilly, it was traditionally not inhabited by the upper caste Hindu population. With its biodiversity, the Jungle Mahals was of importance to the Adivasis as it offered sustainable living providing for their material needs of living and livelihood as well as their ritual worlds and culture circumscribing this biodiversity. Forest for them is a way of life. From this man-nature relationship, a symbolic and symbiotic construction of nature was formed.[14] The forest not only provides them with a livelihood but also the foundation for their kinship relations and their spirit world. The Adivasis used various types of forest resources as nutrient supplements under normal conditions. During times of famine and drought, food supplements sourced from forests became the sole source of their diet. Most forest-dwelling communities had excellent knowledge of the forest environment and therefore, they did not face any drought or famine like the lowland population.[15] Valentine Ball reported that different Adivasi communities were dependent on forest products. Along with plant specimens, various animal species add diversity to the Adivasi diet.

From the late eighteenth century onwards and the first half of the nineteenth century, colonial intervention engendered a process of transformation in Manbhum, which led to major ecological degradation as forests were considered an obstacle to agriculture, and "the whole policy was to extend agriculture"[16] and cultivable land at the expense of forest resulting in large-scale deforestation and exterminating dangerous predators.[17] H. Coupland mentions the paying of "rewards…for the destruction of 3 tigers and 79 leopards."[18] With the extension of the railway system, large quantities of logs of *sal* were required to make sleepers for the railway and the forest of Jungle Mahals became the resource frontier.[19] By the first decade of the twentieth century, Purulia was connected with Asansol, Sini, Chakradharpur, Kharagpur, Gomo, Jharia, and Katras. In 1908, a narrow-gauge rail line of 2'-6' was constructed linking Purulia with Ranchi. Coupland reported that this line "afford an outlet for the grain and jungle products of the western portion of the district."[20] Timbers were also required for shipbuilding. The opening of the

main line of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway through Kharagpur and Jhargram in 1898 had a profound impact on the forests of the region. The introduction of railways made areas in the interior more accessible. As the forest products could be transported to distant places by railway, there was a sudden increase in the supply of these products.[21] Pallavi Das rightly notes, "[a]s railway construction and operation expanded to facilitate increased trade, the railways' timber demand on the forests increased causing deforestation. The railways depended directly on the forests for their sleeper and fuel supply."[22]

Deforestation was carried out by two groups of people: a] the Indigenous zamindar (landowner) who recruited Indigenous people on different forms of contract, notably *nayabadi* (new tillage) and *junglebary* (land tenures), and b] the colonial ruler who employed European companies to collect forest product especially wood, such as Midnapur Zamindari Company. Deforestation opened crop fields for cultivation as well as valuable timber. From 1883 onward, the Midnapur Zamindari Company took on lease forest land from the Zamindars and sold the timber for shipbuilding and the production of railway sleepers. In the wake of agrarian intervention and forest destruction came environmental deterioration. In 1863, G.E. Gastrell noticed the environmental degradation of the Bankura district,

> What about half a century ago, was thick jungle and waving plains of grass, is now almost a sterile and barren waste. Wherever the land was fit for cultivation, it was ploughed up. The successive rains have washed away the soil of uplands and have left only a bed of *kunkury* earth on which nothing will grow.[23]

This resulted in a dramatic change in the land use pattern on account of the agrarian intervention and forest clearance in the Jungle Mahals. In Manbhum, agrarian expansion was extended up to the far remote and hilly region of Bagmundi.[24] In 1907–8, 58 per cent of land in Birbhum district came under net crop area and 22 per cent was fallow, only 12 per cent of its area remained free from cultivation and 8 per cent of the land was categorised as "cultivable wasteland other than fallow."[25] Between 1924–32, 69 per cent of the area was under cultivation, 17 per cent was designated as fallow land and 14 per cent of the area remained unavailable for cultivation. In 1946–47, 65 per cent of the land was under cultivation, 25 per cent was categorised as fallow, and 10 per cent area consisted of non-cultivated land. In 1958–9, the cultivated area increased to 74 per cent, 6 per cent became fallow land while 4 per cent and 16 per cent respectively were categorised as "other cultivated land including forest" and "not cultivated category land." The district Birbhum consisted of only 3 per cent land area under forest cover in 1964.[26] British "agrarian conquest" led to large-scale deforestation and increased landlordism in rural Chotanagpur.[27] Colonial authority was gradually superimposed on the feudal authority of the Rajas. The British recognised the tribal chiefs as landowners (zamindars), imposed a new taxation system (including rent to be paid in cash, excise, and other levies), set up markets, and developed trade.[28] Thus, the British agrarian system led to the spread of different kinds of land tenure which extended

horizontal stratification.[29] Chiefs or Rajas of Manbhum were transformed into zamindars, and new intermediaries "emerged from among the holders of jungle clearing tenures in the nineteenth century."[30] Sub-infeudation also occurred through the creation of different types of rights over the village during this period.

Environmental change occurred in the wake of the colonial agrarian system and forest destruction. In 1855, Henry Ricketts reported the total absence of trees in Purulia town.[31] In 1863, Major J. Sherwill and Captain Donald McDonald described the landscape as "hilly, stony and broken," and "[t]he soil is poor."[32] According to Vinita Damodaran, "in the case of Chotanagpur, the story of environmental degradation cannot be so easily challenged."[33] This process can be viewed from different perspectives. Deforestation caused huge amounts of soil to be eroded by rainwater that got deposited onto the riverbed which in turn reduced its depth.[34] The shallowness of the river increased the turbidity of its waters, making it contaminated affecting the health of the forest dweller Adivasis, in particular the Savars and Birhors. The Adivasis lost their traditional rights in the forestland by the end of the 19th century. The landlords started to extract illegal jungle fees.[35] Due to increasing debt bondage, the peasants and even the *mukaridar* were obliged to mortgage land and tracts of jungle. In the fiscal district (Pargana) of Barabhum, the Watson Company started to collect rents from *raiyats* for *mohua* and *lac* trees. As Radhakanta Ghosh, Assistant Settlement Officer of Manbhum writes: "Before that, these rents were unknown in the Pargana. The *laha* (lac) producing trees were in the *baris* (uplands near the house) of the *raiyats* and had been planted or were being grown by the *raiyats*. It was most inequitable to extract these rents. The Company also introduced an equally unjustified 'jungle cess'."[36] The traditional jungle rights of the *raiyats* and *ghatwals* (local constables) were thus encroached upon. Cases of bondage by debt began to spread rapidly in Chotanagpur. Peasants were forced to borrow money from landlords or moneylenders to meet their daily needs.[37] The condition of the ghatwals of Barabhum was deplorable. In the words of an Attestation Officer: "If these men are deprived of their *raiyati* rights over their lands and are made liable to ejectment by the new coming Ghatwal their case will be very hard, as in these days of hard competition for lands these men will no longer find a place for them in that country and will be forced to migrate to *poorob desh* [the tea plantations in Assam]."[38]

With the deterioration of the forest ecosystem, Indigenous people were deprived of various food supplements. The impact on the forest dweller Adivasis was severe due to the paucity of food. In 1880, Valentine Ball pointed out that "the reservation of forest tracts, which prohibits the inhabitants from taking a blade of grass from within the boundaries, has resulted in the people being cut off from these food sources throughout wide areas, and many have been forced to migrate as a consequence to other regions, not yet included in reserves, where they can continue to supplement their scanty cultivation with the productions afforded to them by nature."[39]The remarkable pressure eventually drove forest dwellers to be involved in crime to collect their staple food. Having become ecological refugees, they no longer had the potential to

survive through drought and famine. Hunter noted: "General droughts have occurred in Manbhum district within the memory of the present generation in 1851 and 1865. The latter of these was the most severe."[40] After the 1860s, famines occurred in 1874, 1892, 1897, 1904–5, 1906–7. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, scarcity became a common phenomenon, as reflected not only in colonial reports of the period but also in Indigenous songs,[41]

> *Baro mas Akal,*
> *tero mas sakal*
> *O Raja!*
> *Ki khayen kataba jiban?*
> *Panchet pahare ache ek gachha bel*
> *sei khayen katale jiban.*
>
> [Scarcity for twelve months
> It seems like thirteen.
> Oh Raja (king)!
> How are we going to get food for subsistence?
> There was a *bel* [wood apple] tree,
> loaded with fruits on Panchet Hill
> We could subsist on its fruit.

The sustainable economy of the Adivasis was permanently damaged due to inappropriate agrarian intervention.[42] Chronic occurrences of famines in Manbhum and Bankura had important connections with anthropogenic environmental change in the colonial and postcolonial periods. The region became vulnerable to climate change. The unsustainable policy of the state and big business destroyed the forest and natural resources. Sustainable Development is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present whilst safeguarding earth's life support system on which the welfare of current and future generations depends."[43] Though valuing the present and disregarding the future is relevant for the poor societies in the Global South, this is not true for Adivasi societies who have deep ecological traditions, and their values coexist with nature.[44] Therefore, the sustainability debate is at the center of Adivasi heartland.

Migration in the Colonial Period

The Jungle Mahals region, which was a forested region, became draught-prone due to the introduction of monoculture and commercial forestry. Adivasis initially tried to adjust wholly to single cropping but when crops failed, scarcity was the inevitable outcome and it only deepened with time. In search of food and alternative livelihood, people were forced to migrate. Further, the development of three types of capitalist enterprises, i.e., coal mining, tea plantations, and textile in eastern India by the end of the nineteenth century created demands for male labour. In the jute industry that developed in Calcutta and surrounding areas, 14–16 per cent of women labourers were hired because it did not require special skills for women. In coal mining areas of Ranijang and

Jharia family labour was preferred and 27–28 per cent of women and children were engaged in the 1910s and 1920s. In the case of the tea plantation, women were employed in tea plucking as they were considered stable and cheap labour. Therefore, for long-distance migration, male labourers were the principal migrants.[45] Due to food scarcity and price rise the Santals, Dhangars, and other Adivasis from the western frontier of Bankura, migrated in 1875 to the tea gardens of Assam and Cachar. Large numbers of people migrated in 1877–8 from Purulia, Bankura, and Santal Parganas to Raniganj. Attracted by job opportunities at the coal mines at Raniganj, local iron and stone industries, and pottery industries, large numbers of Santals and other Adivasis migrated in 1883–4.[46] Bradley Birt notes in 1910, "Manbhum is the land of the cultivators, collie, and the Bhumij Kol – the cultivator pursuing the dull round of daily life and fighting with each recurring season the battle of existence" and many people migrated to the tea gardens of Assam and Bengal in "hope of better wages, or by difficulties or scarcity at home, or perhaps the victims of the threats, promises, or persuasions of a recruiter who was not to be denied."[47] If the paddy season was bad, then the fear of scarcity at home was one of the most powerful inducements to seek well-paid labouring jobs elsewhere. Scarcity at home was one of the variables for the fluctuation in migration.

In the year 1900, the year of scarcity, the total number of migrants from the Manbhum district was 65,190 but in the normal year of 1901 total number of migrants was 30,777.[48] The contemporary periodical, *Mukti*, reports that the condition of the villages kept deteriorating continually with the passing of the days. Poor people, under starved conditions, migrated elsewhere every year. Chotare Desmaji wrote: "*Dekoko then nalhalk ocalak kana…ona iate Jom bante onte note rengec jalate onte noteko chir chaturak kana.*(There is no food at home; people have to go in search of a job…due to excessive impoverishment people are compelled to migrate)."[49] On the verge of food scarcity, the construction of railway networks and roads opened a way out of the distressed situation as avenues of new employment opportunities.[50] Thus, Purulia became the "best-known gateway of Chotanagpur for the travellers, the push-push and the coolie."[51] Through the Ranchi-Purulia road, many of the coolies migrated to the tea gardens of Assam and Bengal in the hope of more wages or to escape the difficulties and scarcities at home or being victims of threats.[52] Adivasi songs reflect the phenomenon of labour migration.[53]

> *Hasi hasi prem fasi*
> *Mahajane paralo,*
> *pat tular namniye*
> *Assame te chalalo*
>
> [The money lender cheated us
> and sent us to the tea gardens in Assam
> in the name of employment.
> Certainly, those money lenders benefited
> by sending poor people to Assam gaining commission.][54]

A steady stream of migrants from the district emigrated mostly to the tea gardens of Sylhet, Cachar, and Assam on the one side and Darjeeling and the Duars on the other. Those who went to the former were bound to work for a term of a year. Those who went to the latter place were all free labourers. A large number of Kols and Oraons emigrated to Calcutta and Sundarbans where they settled permanently.[55] The supply of coolies fluctuated under various circumstances (Table.I). The opening of coalfield in Gobindapur, and Giridi and railway lines led to the decline of labour migration.[56] In the districts of Bengal, except Ranchi, the proportion of emigration was very high in Bankura district and increased to 4.37 per cent in 1901. Many Adivasi people of Bankura temporarily migrated as agricultural labourers to the eastern districts such as Hooghly, Howrah, and eastern Burdwan. The migrating labourers called the eastern lowland districts as *namal* in comparison to Bankura and Manhum. Many people migrated to Manbhum and Burdwan in search of work in mines.[57] Labour migration decreased in Manbhum due to the opening of coal mines while it increased in the Bankura district.

Table.I: The Fluctuation in Emigration

Year	Emigrants
1900	65,190
1901	30,777
1909	15,492

Source: H. Coupland, *Bengal District Gazetteers*: Manbhum Statistics (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press,1911), 70–1.

Due to the opening of coal mines in the Asansol Division, Burdwan attracted migrants from the Bankura district who came in search of work in the coal mines and for agricultural activities, and to Hooghly and Calcutta for agricultural activities. Emigrants from Midnapore moved into Hooghly, Howrah, 24 Parganas, and Calcutta to work the mills and factories as unskilled labourers. Jute and cotton industries surrounding Calcutta opened up job opportunities and labourers came from different districts. In the late 19th Century, the labourers who came to Burdwan for employment were sent to the districts of Assam, Cachar, and other districts. Santals of Birbhum and Burdwan were seasonal migrants. The Annual General Report of Burdwan Division of 1878–79 shows that seasonal migrants from Midnapore to Howrah engaged in brickmaking and tank digging. In 1875–6, people from Bankura, Birbhum, and Manbhum immigrated to the Sundarbans to cultivate the new lands. The expansion of railways accelerated the labour movement.[58] Temporary or seasonal migration occurred in Burdwan, Birbhum, Hooghly to other fertile eastern districts. Many Adivasi people permanently migrated to the Sundarbans areas. Migratory routes linked the places where employment was readily available.

In the nineteenth century gendered pattern of migration appeared. In inter-district seasonal migration, more individuals and groups of women labourers migrated than male labourers. However permanent migration occurred when rural resources became scarce. Women alone could migrate when they were denied household resources. The women who found migration as another way of survival were widows, childless women, deserted wives, wives in unhappy marriages, and women entering illegitimate sexual relationships.[59] Tea planters of Assam primarily preferred family migration from the Adivasi belts of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa where drought and famine occurred periodically. Tea planters preferred captive labour through *arkatis* and Garden Sardars who were licensed labour contractors received fees and costs for supplying labour.[60] From Manbhum 5,500 men and 12,000 women emigrated in 1891.[61] Females emigrated not only for economic determinism but also for their crumbling position in the patriarchal family.[62] Women who were also influenced by labour contractors (*arkatis*) to emigrate. Thus, women were perceived as victims of emigration. A *jhumur* song by Dina Tanti describes how a woman with her family became captive and was sent to the tea gardens of Assam,

> *Chati chuti diye more samkaralo dipu ghare*
> *Lekhailo amar sat puruser nam*
> *hai re lampaita Shyam fanki diye bandu chalali Assam.*

> [The *thikadars* (contractors) misguided me
> with their clever, cunning, and deceptive advice
> putting me in a dark room.
> They had noted down seven generations.
> This debauch had compelled me to go to Assam.][63]

Another song reflected the disillusionment of a migrant woman,

> *mane chilo Assam jabo*
> *jora pankha tangaiba*
> *saheb dila amay kadaleri kam*

> [I had that desire to go to Assam.
> I would be the owner of two decorated fans.
> But the Sahib gave me the work of digging.][64]

Another song reflects their hard work and also warns that those who would go to the jungles of Assam would not return to their home. The song is as follows,

> *Amra duti ma biti dine raite cha kuti*
> *kutite bahe gham*
> *adham Dinanath bhane, je jabe Assam bane*
> *ar na firibe nija dhame*

> [We are mother and daughter two in number.
> We work in the tea plantation.

> While working we are sweating.
> The poor Dina Tanti tells
> the man who would go to Assam
> would never return to his native land.][65]

In the *Sanjibani*, Dwarkanath Ganguly and Ramkumar Vidyaratna described the decades of 1870s and 1880s as the traumatic incidence of sexual harassment of coolie women in the Assam gardens by Europeans which became a symbol of colonial domination and exploitation.[66]An Adivasi woman Sukurmoni, Budhan's wife migrated from Manbhum District to Assam along with her family was sexually harassed by a British Officer Webb in April 1884 and finally, the Santal lady died. When this sexual harassment case was referred to Calcutta High Court, the verdict was against the British Officer. But Governor General Lord Ripon was unable to comply with the Court's verdict as the Europeans were beyond its purview and revealed the British supremacy and their "un-British rule" in India. This was a very specific incident which raised a big outcry in public opinion in Calcutta.[67] This incident reflected that Indians were not treated as equal to the Europeans.

Different types of abuses have been documented in the labour recruiting system. O'Malley reports of fraudulent recruitment of coolies for Assam by free recruiters as a common practice. In 1907, large numbers of coolies were recruited in the tea garden under free emigration. Many cases of abuse occurred in this system.[68] It has been reflected not only in the official accounts but also in the indigenous songs. The Assam Labour and Emigration Act (Act of VI of 1901) was passed to check the abuses of the recruiting system. To supply coolies many recruiters and their agents used force and fraud. In this way, many unfortunate labourers had been taken off to Assam against their will.[69] Manbhum, the headquarters of Chotanagpur, was easily connected by rail with Assam and eventually became the chief rail station through which practically all coolies recruited in the Division and the Native States adjoining migrated, and the control of emigration to the Tea Gardens played an important role in the district administration. According to Act of 1901, the Deputy Commissioner and Senior Deputy Magistrate became the ex-officio Superintendents of Emigration both for the districts of Manbhum and Singhbhum. Recruitments through licensed contractors and recruiters known as the *arkati* system started mainly under Chapter IV of Act VI of 1901. In 1908–09 five contractors and sixty-four recruiters held licenses. In the same year, 1532 coolies with 389 dependents were registered and put under contract.[70]

Migration in Postcolonial Times

The process of migration from Purulia, Bankura, Dumka, and Purbi Singhbhum to more fertile regions like Barddhaman expecting assured work continued even in the postcolonial period. In the early 1970s, an additional summer rice crop (*boro*) was introduced. After acquiring power in 1977, the Left Front government adopted agrarian reforms energetically in its early years, in

particular the registration of sharecroppers, land ceiling and land redistribution, *Panchayati Raj*.[71] During this period, smallholder cultivators were beginning to consolidate. Many of them were actively involved in the political parties within the Left Front coalition. When they gained profits from agriculture, they began to invest in groundwater irrigation. It was more attractive in rural areas where the British rule faced less challenges in implementing the irrigation programme. In the early 1980s, new *boro* crop and other high-yielding varieties of crops were rapidly expanding. New agricultural technology was also introduced from 1980 to 2000. In Barddhaman district, because of these changes large numbers of manual workers were required for the planting and harvesting of rice which had to be done by hand.[72] According to Ben Rogaly seasonal migration in West Bengal is not just an effective response to the cycle of indebtedness. Workers from the border regions of Bihar and West Bengal and from elsewhere in West Bengal have a long history of converging on the south-central part of the state for seasonal agricultural work. With the increase in rice production in West Bengal in the 1980s and early 1990s, employment opportunities were created for potential migrants in rice cultivation and harvesting for a season which is likely to be continuous (i.e. a month to six weeks for the same employer) rather than sporadic. It is significantly better paid than working for employers in migrants' home areas. At the end of the season, migrants are paid a combination of a daily allowance of rice, accommodation, and fuel, in addition to a lump sum of cash. It has become common for migrants to return home with a lump sum of several hundred rupees.[73] In the Purulia district, due to a lack of irrigation facilities farmers relied on a single rice crop and most of the year it required very few paid workers. For the transplanting (the exact timing of which depended on the start of the monsoon rains and was therefore relatively unpredictable) and for harvesting, only local workers were sufficient. Thus, employment opportunities in Purulia varied from periods when labour was urgently needed to periods of transplanting and harvesting which fluctuated on the arrival of monsoon. The two busy periods, transplanting in June–August and harvesting in October–December, coincided with increasing migration possibilities for local workers and there was no seasonal in-migration in the district. During harvest daily wages were a maximum of Rs.12 per day.[74]

Most of the studies of migration, like Rogaly's, dealt with the economic aspect of migration and the environmental aspect has not received adequate attention. After Independence, there is continuity rather than a rupture in environmental degradation. The lateritic soil continued to be infertile and progressed towards continuous deterioration assoil lost its potential to absorb moisture from rainfall. The decades of 1961–70, 1971–80, and 1981–90 were identified as dry periods.[75] Each year nearly 50 per cent of different categories of land was dangerously eroding.[76] The availability of a higher proportion of wasteland, and lower fallow or cultivated land increased the cost of agricultural operation.[77] As the prospect of agriculture is not good, the requirement of the agricultural laborer is meager. Less agricultural productivity and deforestation resulted in a nutritional crisis that started in the colonial period pushing the migratory trends in Purulia. West Bengal District Gazetteer mentioned that the "[p]rospect of agriculture being such, it largely failed to attract any sizeable

immigration. On the contrary, it caused a more or less equal volume of emigration, thus offsetting the effects of emigration."[78]

There is a clear similarity between the condition of the Dumka region and Jungle Mahals. Nitya Rao and Kumar Rana in their study argue that deforestation has exacerbated the migration of both men and women. Due to the modern developmental policies, whether the building of big dams, taking over of forest and agricultural lands for industrial enterprises, or restrictions on the local population regarding the use of forests and common property resources, local women and men had lost control over their basic resources. As a result of deforestation, women had to walk long distances for fuel, non-availability food items to supplement their diet, such as greens, berries, mushrooms, etc., and lacked opportunities to earn a little extra income through the sale of tooth twigs, leaf plates, green mangoes and so on. Cultivation of a single rainfed crop could sustain them for three to four months. As the sources of irrigation were not well developed in the area it was hard to facilitate double cropping for all. Thus, it made survival difficult, and they were forced to enter the labour market, whether locally or as migrants.[79] In his anthropological study, Dikshit Sinha has shown that the Kherias of Kulabahal village in Purulia district named 139 items of food from which their sustenance came. But later the food items were attenuated, and the supply became infrequent.[80] During my field study at Sidhatairn village of the Kherias, an old Kheria man Kalipada Savar told me that most of the foods were no more available during his father's time.[81] The agony of nutritional crisis has been reflected in the songs of the Birhors.[82]

> *ban badar hare lila,*
> *sikar bakar furain gela,*
> *pakh pakhur paowa haila dai*
> *pet ache pit ache, meya ache chela ache*
> *bal eder kemene bachai?*
>
> [Forest had been captured,
> so, there is no root for food and medicine.
> It is too tough to get animal species.
> Ihave a body and stomach.
> I have a wife, sons, and daughters.
> How could we live on?]

In his novel *SindureKajale*, Saikat Rakshit has described that many girls who belong to the Kamar-Kumor-Baouri-Kurmi group left their homes and took up work as labourers in mines, tea gardens, and agricultural lands in the eastern region.[83] He also mentioned that attracted to a popular folk love song of a bonded labourer Srikanta, a Kurmi lady Bhadari fell in love and they left their village and went to Magra in the Hoogly district to get a job in a brick factory as a *rejakhedia* (men who make bricks are known as *khadia* and woman, *reja*).[84] Here the *rejakhedia* sustains his life like a machine. They are involved throughout the day in brickmaking. At night they prepare their food and have a drink. One night when Srikanta had taken a huge gulp of drinks with his

colleagues the then *Munshi* (supervisor of the brick factory) tried to make this situation for being intimate with Bhadari.[85] Sexual harassment is a common phenomenon and "women having to spend one or more nights at labour marketplaces and travelling without kin, are more likely to be harassed by employers and contractors,"[86] but here Bhadari was harassed despite Srikanta's presence.

According to the Census of 1961, 16.4 per cent of the population of Purulia migrated to other districts of West Bengal and 33.03 per cent migrated to other states. Multiple small emigration of 47,101 persons from Purulia to other districts [Table.2] were enumerated in the 1961 Census with 13,984 going to the districts of Bankura and Burdwan and a total of 34,527 migrated to contiguous districts of West Bengal.[87] Migration from one district to another takes place temporarily or seasonally from time to time. At the time of census operation which falls on the first March all the harvesting of the monsoon crop is over. The large-scale movement took place from the districts of Purulia, Bankura, and Midnapur to Burdwan. Together, it amounted to 50,345 of the 68,285 immigrants to the district from within the state.[88] More than 10,000 persons were reported migrating from Purulia in the Census of 1961 [Table.3].

Table.2: Inter-District Migration, West Bengal, 1961

Migrants to Districts	Migrants from District: Purulia
Darjeeling	208
Jalpaiguri	123
Coochbihar	53
West Dinajpur	25
Malda	200
Murshidabad	245
Nadia	245
24-Parganas	3,883
Calcutta	3,848
Howrah	1,153
Hooghly	2,334
Burdwan	13,984
Bankura	18,641
Birbhum	527
Midnapur	1,632

Source: J.D. Gupta, "West Bengal and Sikkim, Vol-XVI, Part-I Book-I, General," *Census of India 1961*, 329.

Table.3: Migration from Purulia to Bankura and Burdwan

Streams	No. Persons Involved
10,000 persons or above but below 25,000 persons	——
From Purulia to Bankura	18,641
From Purulia to Burdwan	13,984

Source: J.D. Gupta, "West Bengal and Sikkim, Vol-XVI, Part-I Book-I, General," *Census of India* 1961, 329.

Conclusion

Migration from the Jungle Mahals is a narrative of exploitative capital in the anthropocentric patriarchal parochialism of the Empire. The economic determinism of the colonial rule to preserve the forest through institutionalising the Forest Department on the one hand was commercializing the forest commodities that have for centuries provided a sustainable livelihood to the forest dwellers. Their sacred groves were utilised in the making of the Empire undoing their traditional rights to the forest and forcing them into the chains of the "Empire of Hunger" resulting in large-scale migration either permanently, seasonally, or temporarily. With anthropogenic climate change accentuated by the agrarian policies of the colonialists, migration became a natural process. The developmental programmes of the government failed to recover and restore the lost ecosystem. In postcolonial India, as Vinita Damodaran says, an alternative developmental model is required to replace the failed science and industry-based model based on the traditional knowledge of the forest dwellers.[89] With the revival of some of the Adivasi traditional values and customs, livelihood security can be ensured, and Adivasi migration can be checked.

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Coolie Question in the Age of Transition, 1930s to 1960s

By

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Right after the abolition of slavery, the indentured labourers were posited as an alternative to slave labour.[1] If seen from the viewpoint of British imperialism, 1830s was both a tumultuous and an eventful decade. It saw the Opium War, the end of East India Company's monopoly over China trade, the discovery of tea forests in Assam, and the cultivation of tea under the British flag, whereby Assam was transformed into the "Empire's Garden" and integrated into the colonial economy and tea after a series of experiments was transformed into a global beverage.[2] Tea being a labour-intensive industry required a continuous source of labour supply. The initial experiments with local Chinese labour and local natives failed to yield the desired result.[3] Low wages followed by long hours of work proved detrimental to the interests of the natives. Very soon, these workers refused to work and disappeared, and it became difficult to trace them. Given the challenges of retaining local labour, the answer was found in the distressed peasants and tribals in the Chotanagpur region. The abolition of slavery had already opened the gates for recruiting the distressed peasants and tribals from Chotanagpur. By this time, for the overseas plantations, Chotanagpur became the labour catchment area.[4] Now, the recruiting companies lined up in these areas to employ labour not just for overseas plantations, but also for Assam plantations. The planters "fetishised" these "jungli"/"primitive" migrant labourers, and the recruiting companies competed for the hard-working "primitive" hands, who came to be categorised as coolies.[5] In the utilitarian visions of the British Empire, coolies who were recruited on contract both in overseas and Indian plantations was an answer to slavery.[6] Coolies represented a racial as well as a hierarchical understanding of the body, whereby both the capitalist class and the colonial state, marked an identity on their body by labelling the recruited workforce as coolie and denigrating their task as menial.[7] Gradually, with rising competition among recruiters and with the rise of diverse industries in the subcontinent, the labour catchment areas broadened. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the coolie recruiters from Assam extended their dominion beyond Chotanagpur and began

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recruiting from Bihar, Bengal, Central Provinces, United Provinces, Madras as well as Bombay.[8] The moment the peasants and tribesmen were recruited all of them were categorised and clubbed as coolies.

After almost a hundred years of successful experiments with imported coolies and after transforming tea into a global commodity, when the British Empire along with other empires started disintegrating, the coolie question was posed once again in diverse ways. While in the 1830s and 1840s, the coolie question was posed in the interest of the Empire, from 1930 onwards, the coolie question was posed within the frame of transition from empire to nation. In the context of India, from 1947 onwards, i.e., after India gained formal independence, the coolie question was posed within the frame of a would-be industrialised nation and the place of coolies within the new nation. Viewed from the context of coolies, how did decolonisation impact the coolies? Some historians have tried to see decolonisation as an event/rupture and there are others who see it as a process.[9] Although the scholarship on decolonisation has been entangled as well enriched with different perspectives emerging from metropolitan,[10] international[11] and as well peripheral and regional studies,[12] it has failed to include coolie within the debate of decolonisation. What did it mean to be a coolie in the decades of transition from "empire" to "nation"? This paper brings in both the tea industry and coolie at the centre stage and enquires on how the decades from the 1930s to the 1960s impacted both. Tea and coolie were two important components of the British Empire that shaped its longevity.

Driven by the zeal for modernisation, the new nation accelerated the process of industrialisation. One might then ask: Did it allow a free hand to the tea planters to increase production? Did the new nation tighten its grip on the tea industry? How did the acceleration towards production impact the coolies? How did the transition from empire to nation impact the coolies? How did the new nation perceive the coolies? What did it mean for the coolies when the emphasis was put on the industrialisation of the nation? Did it lead to an increase in income of the coolies and ensure their consequential upward mobility? In the overall biography of the Indian nation, the decades from the 1930s to 1960s was crucial as these decades saw transitions in the identity of coolies and provides a lens to understand how the new nation engaged on the larger questions of social justice and social welfare which has a lasting impact on the workers employed in the tea industry in Assam.

The decades from the 1930s to 1960s also help us locate, how the presence of the coolies in Assam was constructed as a liability. Terms such as retrenchment, surplus, deficit, transfer, and repatriation added negative values to view the coolies as a liability and when deployed as rhetoric, it helped in the consolidation of Assamese identity and the germination of ethnicist ideas in the politics of Assam and forced the coolies to negotiate their identity within this framework. As a result, terms such as migrants and migration acquired negative idioms not just in policymaking but also in the larger domain of politics of the region. Although coolies were integral to industrialisation, they were forced to sacrifice for the larger good of both the region and the nation. In the transition from empire to nation, the social, political, and economic rights of the coolies

became peripheral. Their political disenfranchisement was followed by social and economic marginalisation.

After the withdrawal of the British Empire, the Indian administration acquired a quasi-federal structure with two distinct administrative operational zones functional at the Centre and at the State level. Therefore, the coolie question was raised, discussed, and debated at two levels which were often at variance with one another. The discussions in the Constituent Assembly Debates on whether the coolies should continue to be viewed as Depressed Class (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) and the subsequent steps of the state government in categorising and placing the coolies in the Other Backward Class is one the most visible examples of this variance. These discussions and negotiations between the nation, region, and the coolies open a critical discourse of continuities and disjunctures with colonialism. The paper has four sections. The first section shows the position of the tea industry in the decades of transition. The second section discusses how the new nation state visualised the coolies. The third section critically engages with the idioms of politics by evaluating the discussion around migration and migrants and the negotiation attempted by coolies. The final section draws conclusions on the nature of the state and its ideological leanings.

Change or Continuity?

Any enquiry on whether there was decolonisation of the tea industry, and the nature of change or continuity of the British empire cannot be made, if one fails to evaluate the volume of tea trade in the years before and after Independence and the nature of ownership of the tea industry. It is only when we analyse these aspects, one can draw conclusions on how Independence impacted the tea industry.

In 1951, the share of tea in terms of total commodity export from India was 13.51 per cent.[13] The global percentage of Indian tea production in 1939 just before the Second World War-was 37.7 per cent of the total tea produced in the world. This share increased to 53.6 per cent in 1947 and by 1954 it declined to 38.9 per cent.[14] This change in India's contribution to the global production of tea can also be partially attributed to the reorganisation of Indian territorial boundaries whereby one of the tea producing districts, i.e., Sylhet was transferred to East Pakistan. The reorganisation of the subcontinent certainly had an impact on the decrease in the volume of tea production. Despite this decline, India still produced around 39 per cent of the tea in the world, which was higher than in the pre-war years.

As far as ownership of the tea industry was concerned, the original capital for creating this industry came mostly from the United Kingdom. It took the shape of a sterling company in the United Kingdom that owned the share in India. Even after Independence, the predominance of sterling companies continued. The companies located in London had agents or secretaries in Calcutta who carried out the policy laid by the Board of Directors.[15] Details on shareholdings of the company in 1939 reveal that 88.1 per cent of the total share was of non-Indian companies and 11.8 per cent was of the Indian Companies.[16]

In 1954, the foreign share was reduced to 77.7 per cent and the Indian share increased to 22.3 per cent, i.e., almost an 11 per cent increase in the share.[17] By 1955, thirteen leading agency houses in Calcutta controlled over 75 per cent of the tea production in India. Thus, in terms of ownership, the foreign share was still dominant. In 1955, there were five types of management under which tea companies were administered and controlled, namely: a) sterling companies, b) rupee companies controlled by non-Indian managing agents, c) rupee companies controlled by Indian managing agents, d) controlled by board of directors and, e) proprietary and partnership concerns. Out of these five managements, the share of the sterling companies was dominant as they accounted for 54 per cent of the total production of tea in India and 50 per cent of the total acreage of areas under tea cultivation.[18] In 1954, the estimated capital invested in tea was Rs.113.06 Crore out of which Rs.40.51 Crore was Indian capital and Rs.72.55 Crore was foreign capital.[19]

In the context of decolonisation, the question of foreign ownership was time and again debated in the Parliament as well as in the Legislative Assembly and by the early 1950s the nationalisation of the industry became a consistent demand of the political parties. The demand for nationalisation was raised by the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Praja Socialist Party (PSP). These parties demanded that these tea industries should be managed as a government concern so that the ownership and sale of tea could be managed by the government which would give due share to the labourers and labour interest would be represented in the management of the industry.[20] The demand for nationalising the tea industry by CPI and PSP was feared by the Indian Tea Association as the "Red Resolution." Quite opposed to this, it was argued that the "Government of India and the state governments had adequate control over the affairs of the industry and more than adequate share in sale proceedings of the industry."[21] Therefore, the Government of India resolved that it had no intention of nationalisation of the tea industry. In 1955, when the nationalisation of the tea industry was once again discussed in the Lok Sabha, the Minister of Commerce and Industries, Moraji Desai told the House to "throw out the resolution" and was severely critical of the theoretical notions of nationalisation.[22] In rejecting the resolution, he said "if the tea industry was nationalised, the country would have to shell out Rs.181Cr as compensation—an expenditure it could ill afford particularly at a time when the government was inviting foreign capital to invest more."[23] Interestingly, if one looks at the ideological underpinnings of the Indian National Congress, the party which was in power during the discussions on nationalisation, the rhetoric of nationalisation of industries and the drain of wealth was at the core of its politics during the anti-colonial struggle. The entry of the masses into politics during the 1920s and 1930, when Gandhi led political movements, the idea of non-cooperation and civil disobedience based itself on the question of nationalisation and putting an end to the drain of resources from the Indians to Great Britain. However, the discussions in the Parliament and the position held by Moraji Desai reveal that India was economically dependent on foreign capital, and it was not in a position to shell out money as compensation to the capitalist class.

Even though the idea of nationalisation of the tea industry received a rebuttal in the Parliament, it continued as an undercurrent in the political discourses of the country. Away, from Delhi, the drum beats of decolonisation were also heard in the Legislative Assembly of Assam. In the early 1960s Khagendra Nath Barbaruah, a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Assam moved a resolution for the nationalisation of the tea industry of Assam. His proposal received immense criticism and was rejected in the Assembly. It was argued that the nationalisation of the tea industry would be of "no use to anyone" and the tea Industry was "fairly well controlled."[24] It was also stated that "direct management by the government will not serve any real or substantial benefit and the talk of nationalisation of tea will have adverse effects on the 'morale' of the industry."[25] Gradually with the pressure exercised by the ethno-nationalist groups in Assam and the demand that foreign capital was not allowing indigenous capital to flourish (which later took the form of the Assam Movement), in 1970, the Government of Assam decided to send a plea to the Central Government and appealed for nationalisation of the tea industry. However, a year later, this proposal was rejected because the tea industry was "efficiently managed."[26] The two decades after Independence did not bring much change either in terms of ownership or production of tea. Although the call for nationalisation of the tea industry received popular support in Assam, the government both at the central and state level was consistent in rejecting nationalisation.

Nation and the Coolie

Although the debate on nationalisation of the tea industry failed to challenge the dominance of foreign capital, the rhetoric of nationalisation surely had an impact in turning labour into a political question. In the nationalist discourse, coolie labour working overseas as well as in Assam was visualised as a form of slavery that was nurtured by the British Empire. The experiences of overseas indentured labourers and the cases of abduction/kidnapping of women were read as national wounds, and coolie women working out in the open field was visualised as a loss of honour. The campaigns by the nationalists against wife murders in Caribbean islands, and for seeking consent from guardians before a single woman can be recruited for Assam plantations were very much embedded in this nationalist idea of recovering the honour of family in particular and nation in general.[27] The transition from empire to nation further enriched these sentiments. For the coolies of Assam, the decades following Independence were indeed, a phase of transition. The transition began as early as the 1940s. Although the colonial state was utilising all its manpower and resources to garner support for the Second World War, the trade unions in India ensured that the labour question was not ignored and exercised pressure on the colonial state to conduct enquiries and assess their condition. Although the arrival of the trade union in Assam was late, as soon as they were allowed to enter the tea gardens, the trade union leaders realised the lack in terms of assessing and determining the conditions of labour.[28] Therefore, in 1943 the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) demanded a detailed enquiry on the

labour conditions in Assam.[29] It also pointed out that the Government of India lacked the machinery to ascertain the facts related to the condition of labour in Assam. The demand led to a tripartite labour conference held in 1943 recommending the necessity to set up machinery to enquire about the questions of wages and earnings, employment and housing, and social conditions of labour. The findings of the investigation committee were to be utilised for initiating a policy of social security for labour. As a natural response to the recommendations of the tripartite conference, a year later, in 1944, the Government of India appointed a Labour Investigation Committee to carry out a detailed investigation.[30] The Committee, headed by D.V. Rege, submitted its findings in 1946 and observed that even as late as the 1940s the plantation labour industry was not protected by any labour legislation. Therefore, the Committee recommended legislation in the form of a Plantation Labour Code.

Very soon, this suggestion was adhered to by the Government of India.[31] Within a year, it set up the Industrial Committee on plantations which deliberated on the framing of a Labour Code for regulating the working conditions in the plantations. In January 1947, once again a tripartite tea plantations conference was held in Delhi. The participants agreed that there should be separate legislation to regulate the conditions of plantation workers. A memorandum which set out the outlines of plantation legislation was prepared and placed before the second session of the Industrial Committee on Plantations held in March–April 1948. Some proposals were accepted, and the rest were discussed at the first session of the Standing Plantation Committee held in September 1949. Subsequently, in the third session of the Industrial Committee on Plantations in November 1950, the rest of the proposals were discussed.[32] A year later, the Plantation Labour Bill was introduced in the Parliament by the Minister of Labour, Jagjivan Ram. He recognised the fact that despite being the biggest organised industry in India, the tea the colonial government had not done enough to regulate the conditions of labour in the tea industry as there were very few legislations.[33] Thus for Jagjivan Ram, the Plantation Labour Bill was a departure as it had several features that were beneficial for the labourers. He discussed some of the features that would help protect labour life, such as inspecting officers, surgeons, maternity benefits, provisions of crèches, supply of drinking water, housing accommodation, and measures such as regulating the working hours and prohibition of children below twelve years to work in the tea plantations.[34] After some revisions and discussion, the Bill was adopted by the Parliament on October 15, 1951. The Bill is known as the Plantation Labour Act, which since 1951, regulates the contract between the employers and the employees in the tea plantation industry in Assam. Thus, one can see that in the vision of Independent India, the recommendations of the Rege Committee served as the foundation on which the edifices of the labour legislation were laid. Moreover, the trade unions ensured that the government despite being occupied with World War, was pressurised to form a committee so that the labour conditions in plantations could be assessed. Thus, if the Rege Committee's recommendation served as the foundation for labour legislation, the idea emerged out of the interventions by trade unions, principally the AITUC.

Another intervention of the AITUC was on how the workers should be perceived in Independent India, and should the new nation continue using the term coolie. If one looks at the usage of the term coolie, throughout the British Empire, the term used for the indentured labourers was coolies. The nationalists saw the coolies as akin to slaves and critiqued the government on several fronts ranging from loss of honour to disease, death and low wages. From 1870 onwards, the humanitarians, nationalists, and missionaries began articulating on the exploitation of coolies by writing fiction, articles, plays and poetry.[35]   Overall, in the nationalist imagination, coolie was a victim of colonialism, who had to be rescued. The term coolie began to be seen as derogatory with pejorative meaning. With the coming up of the trade union, the criticism was further intensified. One of the trade unions, especially, the one led by the Communist Party of India (AITUC) counted workers as the proletariat who would lead the revolution. They went with the logic that all workers had to be united if the revolution had to be turned into a reality. To unite the workers working in all formal and informal sectors (although the initial thrust was on the formal sector) they deployed a new term for the workers and called them mazdoor. This wave also touched the tea belts of Assam and the major trade unions, namely: the AITUC and the Assam branch of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) expressed their reservations on the usage of the term coolie. This was also an opportunity for the nationalists to rescue the coolie from the framework of empire and rename them within the utilitarian framework of the nation. Going by their recommendations and reservations expressed, the Government of Assam, stopped the usage of the term coolie in official documents and was replaced by mazdoor and labour simultaneously.[36] Moreover, it is also interesting to note, that in 1949, the Government of Assam created a labour department, thus giving legitimacy to the term called labour. Since 1949, the trade unions of both the CPI and the INC began using the term Mazdoor. The fact that Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha uses the term mazdoor to designate the workers of tea plantations is an example of how the INC tried to mobilise the workers under the terminology of mazdoor.[37] Moreover, one cannot ignore the fact that the Government of India was also keen on abolishing the term coolie as it was a marker of colonial legacy. In 1949, the Ministry of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations, South Africa, submitted a memorandum to the Government of India to abolish the usage of the term coolie and replace it with either "bhai" or "porter." It was also emphasised that the abolishment of the word coolie in India would "help the prestige of Indians living abroad."[38] Recognising the importance of this memorandum, and the fact that it concerned the prestige and dignity of indentured labourers living abroad, the Government of India in June 1950, immediately though a press note appealing to all government sectors to stop the usage of term coolie and replace with the term *mazdoor, bhai, or porter*.[39] This change in the temperament of the Indian state in renaming the coolies as mazdoors marks an important step in the transition from empire to nation. It allowed the nationalists to regain the lost honour, by rhetorically honouring the coolies and renaming them as mazdoors. Now, in the perception of the nation, the workers were seen as independent citizens who through their sweat and

blood would toil for a new and industrialised India. The usage of the term Mazdoor was a rhetorical answer to a political question. An answer that fitted well into the frame of making the workers sacrifice and toil for would be industrialised India.

Another step towards decolonisation of the figure of the plantation workers was done by the state government through the Census to placate ethnic sensibilities. In the Census of 1951, the Government of Assam placed the tea and ex-tea garden workers in the category of Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This was a complete reversal of the earlier categorisation done by the colonial state and even in the contemporary, this step of the state government leads to political outbursts. If one looks at how the tea garden workers were classified in Census reports by the colonial state, one gets to see a contrasting picture. In the Census of 1921, the tea and ex-tea garden workers were enumerated and placed in the category of "Depressed Class"[40]; while in the 1931 Census, they were categorised as "tea garden cooly caste"[41]; and in the 1941 Census, they were enumerated as "garden tribes" and were included in the category of Scheduled Tribe.[42] Thus the official vocabulary to describe the tea and ex-tea garden workers in the Census between 1921–41 was subjected to continuous naming and renaming from Depressed Class to Scheduled Tribe.

The above reshuffling created further confusion in the Constituent Assembly Debates. When the reshuffling was pointed out, the Government of Assam ensured that such mistakes would not be repeated and in the next Census the categorisations "will be just and equitable."[43] Unfortunately, the Government of Assam in the Census Reports of 1951, enumerated the tea and ex-tea garden workers as "Tea Gardens Tribe" and placed them in the category of OBC which included the Gonds, Mundas, Khonds, Oraons, Santhals, Savaras, and Pans.[44] The Government of Assam was guided by the local arithmetic of the ethnic mobilisations and by placing the plantation workers in the OBC category, it tried to appease and avoid conflict with the ethnic groups.[45] Thus, with a stroke of a pen, the Depressed Classes became the members of Other Backward Class and tea garden workers were marked as outsiders. The Census of 1951 was based on the assumption that to be a member of the Scheduled Tribe, ethnicity and indigeneity would be the deciding factors. By marking tea garden workers as OBC, the state government closed the doors for negotiation by the tea garden workers to get recognised as Indigenous and ethnic groups and permanently labelled them as migrants. This step taken by the Government of Assam went on to shape the resentment amongst the youths, political representatives, and intelligentsia of the tea and ex-tea garden workers. In the later years, it led to ethnic polarisation in the politics of Assam, when the tea and ex-tea garden workers kept pressing for their inclusion in the category of Scheduled Tribe.

The discussions in the Constitutional Assembly Debates also ignored the question of whether labour should be viewed as a political category and whether they should have a guaranteed political representation. The Constitution of India did away with the provision of recognising the "interest groups" as a political category.[46] If one looks at the provisions of the Government of India Act of 1935, there used to be several interest groups that

had political representations in Legislative Assemblies. For the plantation labourers, there were four seats, i.e., three in Assam Valley and one in Surma Valley. These seats were known as Labour Constituencies. In these seats, only those persons who were plantation labourers were allowed to contest elections. If one looks at the provincial elections which were held in 1937 and 1946, one gets to see the election and representation of labour leaders from these reserved Labour Constituencies. In 1937, Bhairab Chandra Das from Jorhat constituency (Sibsagar District), Bideshi Pan Tanti from Doom Dooma (Lakhimpur district), Binod Kumar J. Sarwan from Thakurbari (Darrang district), and P. Parida from the constituency of Silchar (Cachar district) were elected.[47] However, since these provisions were abolished by the Constitution, in the first assembly election in Assam which was held in 1952, the tea garden labourers had to fight elections from general constituencies. This meant that for labourers to represent their interests, they had to associate and affiliate with the existing political parties. Parties like the Indian National Congress and Communist Party of India and in later years Bharatiya Janata Party began picking candidates and through their organisational skills, they selected and backed leaders who would fight elections from amongst the tea garden workers. The fact that the tea garden population was of significant number meant that these big parties could not ignore the question of choosing candidates from amongst the tea garden workers, but now the tea garden workers had to rely on the networks and organisational skills and objectives of big political parties. In the process, they had to sacrifice their demands for the larger interests of the political parties. Thus, for most workers, the road to politics was closed leading to political disenfranchisement. In 1957, some members of Assam Cha Sramik Sabha tried to persuade the tea and ex-tea garden workers to organise and agitate for the reserving seats for labour in both the Legislative Assembly as well as in Parliament.[48] But the demand failed to garner a popular appeal and most leaders who were elected in the Legislative Assembly never raised this as a legitimate demand. Thus, if one evaluates the decades of the 1940s and 1950s from the point of view of coolies, they were indeed renamed as mazdoors, but the mazdoors were denied political representation. By doing so, the new nation placed them at the mercy of regional and national political elites.

Political Idioms in the Age of Transition

Ever since the coolies were imported to Assam, the notion of utility was dominant. While the natives were categorised as "lazy" and "unfit" for work, the labourers imported from outside the state of Assam were seen as hard-working and fit.[49] Migration shaped imperialism, and labour migration shaped the development of the tea industry. During the heydays of colonialism, the recruiters ranging from *arkatis* in the 1860s to *sardars* from the 1870s onwards operated in the labour supplying districts and targeted the impoverished peasants and tribes living in the far-flung areas of Chotanagpur, Bengal, Orissa, Central Provinces, Bihar, United Provinces and also Madras and Bombay.[50] If one looks at the trend of migration, between 1873–1947 more than three million coolies were recruited and transported to Assam,[51] and continued even

in the years after Independence, but the region played a decisive role in shaping the volume of migration. The new nation continued with the utilitarian ideas by laying stress on industrialisation that would lead to modernisation. National progress was now to be measured by evaluating the level and extent of industrialisation. As a result, the Government of India decided to map and measure its functional industries so that steps could be taken to accelerate production and reform the necessary sectors. Keeping this in view, a commission was constituted for the plantation industry which was known as the Plantation Inquiry Commission. The Commission in its report submitted in 1956 deliberated on how productivity could be increased and therefore, it emphasised proper training, ways to decrease the cost of production, and how surplus labour could be regulated by resorting to measures such as family planning and repatriation and by retiring the workers.[52] It laid stress on making labour more willing, loyal and enthusiastic so that a robust industrialised nation could be made and the national economy could be strengthened.[53] The observations of the Plantation Inquiry Commission clearly show that the policymakers were guided by notions of progress and development at the cost of labour. The eagerness to develop and expand the tea industry meant that the greater good of the nation depended on increased industrial production. In this utilitarian view, the flow, mobility, and employment of labour would be determined not just by the demands of the industry, but also by how the politics in the region visualised the workers.

As far as regional politics is concerned, ever since the publication of the Census of 1921, the debate around who was an Assamese and who was a foreigner has become a dominant theme in civil society. The numbers quoted in the Census sharpened the politics of exclusion and led to ethnic polarisation.[54] The tea garden workers along with Bengali Muslim peasants were described as invaders who were occupying land and changing the demography of Assam.[55] These debates added fuel to the already existing debate on Bengali versus Assamese language, and now the Assamese nationalists saw the presence of migrants as a threat to the "nascent Assamese nationality."[56] Thus, in Assam, within the umbrella of anti-colonial and nationalist struggle, an ethnic polarisation began. Very soon, the rising figures of unemployment in Assam, which was not unique to Assam alone, were cited and the immigrants were seen as invaders eating away resources, and in the changed political circumstance, the coolies became a liability. It was argued that tea gardens were full of surplus labour.[57] The regional leaders debated on who constituted the surplus labour, who would stay in Assam, and who would be repatriated to their home districts. Both in the utilitarian visions of the Indian state which is evident from how the Plantation Inquiry Commission members recommended retirement and repatriation of the surplus labour, as well as with the rise of ethno-nationalist trends in the 1940s and 1950s, workers were either treated as resources or as a liability.[58] These developments suggest that the binary of indigenous versus outsider became a dominant trend in the political discourse of Assam.

Although the flow of labour to Assam continued till 1960, there was a significant shift towards recruitment of local than outside labour. Between 1930–50, 6,15,000 labourers were recruited from outside the state of Assam

whereas 13,59,000 local labourers were recruited. The share of local labourers saw a considerable increase, i.e., 54.74 per cent in comparison to outside labourers.[59] One should also note that the rise of local labourers was mostly because many workers who were imported to Assam had made the decision to stay back. The labourers who stayed back and whose contracts expired came to be known as time-expired labourers who lived in villages in the vicinity of the tea gardens.[60] These labourers used to work as temporary labourers in the tea gardens during the plucking season as the demand for labour during this season was high.[61] It is these settlers who used to work as temporary labourers in tea gardens, who became a subject of debate and were counted as surplus labour in the vision of the region.

Thus, although migration was integral and structural to the expansion of the empire, it now became a problem in the frame of the nation. Now, in the phase of transition from empire to nation, it was argued that migration led to an increase in surplus labour. Ever since 1930, migration has been seen as a problem within the political discourse of Assam. With rising trends of unemployment, the political debates revolved around the notion of surplus labour. The provincial leaders attached negative value to migration, and it was repeatedly emphasised that Assam did not have the capacity to absorb those labourers whose contracts had expired. The trend of repatriation of the labour force to their home districts was on the rise, and in the years between 1937–38 to 1947, 1,82,000 labourers were repatriated to their home districts.[62] After Independence, the process was further intensified. Moreover, the political debates in Assam were more about absorbing the sons of the soil than about absorbing those who were from outside. Thus, the binary of "indigenous" versus "outsider" was another important trend that one gets to see during the phase of decolonisation. In the years between 1947 to 1958–59, 3,04,000 labourers were repatriated.[63] The share of labour repatriation, therefore saw a 39 per cent increase in the decade after Independence when compared to the decade before Independence.

The Government of Assam was forced to respond to the rhetoric of indigenous versus outsider debate and from 1950 onwards it deliberated and held discussions to ban recruitment of labour from outside the state of Assam. Both in the popular vocabulary and the idioms deployed by the political class, terms such as immigration and immigrant acquired negative meaning in independent India and attempts were made by the state government to persuade the workers to migrate from gardens with surplus labour to those gardens which were labour deficient.[64] Moreover, the discussions above also revealed how surplus labour was given the option of repatriation and in the years following Independence, there was a considerable increase in repatriation of surplus labour to their home districts. Furthermore, as migration was read as a problem, the state government restricted the entry of immigrant labour and "forced the tea estates to employ the surplus labour in the estates and villages."[65] The Government of Assam repeatedly emphasised that the recruitment of labour from outside Assam should be stopped and in 1960 the recruitment of labourers from outside the territory of Assam formally came to an end.[66]

Closing the gates of migration and attaching negative value to migration was the first victory of ethno-nationalist dimensions of politics. The rhetoric of sons of the soil versus outsiders went on to shape the regional and national politics of Assam. The current polarisation over the National Register of Citizens should not be seen as a surprise but rather a culmination of a Malthusian gaze of politics. The phase of decolonisation should therefore be read as a phase that sowed the seeds of ethno-nationalism, whereby both the figure of the migrant and the process of migration was seen as antithetical to the flourishing of the region. The politics over labours, migrants, and migration clearly revealed that the Malthusian gaze of reading the population as a "problem" was at work.

Independence was followed by the closing of many tea gardens one after the other and many tea garden workers were laid off without getting any remuneration. Starvation and unpaid work became the norm for the years ranging from 1950–60.[67] Even in the years after 1960, many tea garden workers continued to be laid off. According to an official report of 1954, more than 90 per cent of the workers employed in tea gardens were in debt.[68] Between 1952–53 around eighty-four tea gardens were closed rendering thousands of workers jobless (of which only six were reopened in the Cachar district).[69] The government appealed to the workers that once the prices of tea would rise, they would happily restore the minimum wages, and therefore requested the workers to make sacrifices in this hour of crisis.[70] Not just wages, even ration was stopped. To resolve the crisis of denial of minimum wage, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) in 1951, requested the government to take over the unutilised lands in the tea gardens and distribute them to the tea garden workers.[71] But very soon, in 1952, the APCC argued that the recruitment of tea garden labourers from outside the state of Assam should be immediately stopped as it was creating pressure on land. On May 30, 1952, the APCC adopted the resolution and requested the government not to distribute land to tea garden workers and instead give it to only those people who were "bonafide agriculturists."[72] Thereafter, the APCC gave the slogan of employing the sons of the soil in higher grade positions in industries such as tea, coal, oil and river transport.[73]

The workers did not remain mute spectators to this change. Resistance became the norm, and in the years between 1955–59, there were more than a hundred strikes in Assam and Surma Valley.[74] Resistance was the tool through which the workers negotiated. Most of the demands ranged from wages, bonuses, and compensation for cutting rations.[75] The Government of Assam panicked and labelled the strikes as "lawlessness." Police were deployed heavily to check the "lawlessness" and the "menace of the red flag."[76] Thus, instead of resolving conflict, many protestors were arrested and put behind bars. Moreover, the government formed committees and sub-committees to check the signs of lawlessness and kept the question of wages, bonuses and rations pending.

Conclusions

The three decades from the 1930s to the 1960s defy the thesis that the Indian state had socialist leanings. This thesis, which is often derived from the idea of the Five Year Plan, welfare economics, and the stress on the expansion of industry lacks empiricism as well as a philosophical foundation. The emphasis of the Plantation Inquiry Commission was more on the idea of increasing productivity. The debates on the nationalisation of the tea industry also show how the new nation was reluctant to nationalise the tea industry and rejected the proposal whenever it was put on the table. The policymakers borrowed utilitarian ideas and applied them to both industry and labour. Within the frame of the "greater good" of the nation and region, workers were forced to "sacrifice." The emphasis on the young and skilled labour and retiring those who were in surplus was surely driven by utilitarian calculations. Tea industry was yet to be decolonised. Foreign capital continued to have a strong grip and the Government of India readily surrendered to the idea that without the foreign capital, the tea industry would die.

The decades from the 1930s to the 1960s were indeed a phase of transition from empire to nation. With the intervention of trade unions, the coolies were named mazdoors and were celebrated as economic assets of the nation. The coming of the Plantation Labour Act in 1951 also meant that now the new nation legislated for the workers. However, the transition also meant that workers lost on many grounds. In the 1950s and 1960s, most of the workers in the tea industry of Assam were laid off. The workers were asked to work on nominal wages, and many of the tea gardens closed. As per as constitutional rights to labour as a political category was concerned. The Constituent Assembly Debates failed to deliberate on whether labour should be given constituency and abolished the provision of labour constituency. Moreover, the tea garden workers were also raised from the status of Depressed Classes to Other Backward Classes, thus opening a fissure that continues to evoke ethnic polarisation in the contemporary. Moreover, it also shows that even the ideology of the Indian National Congress, the party in power in the 1950s was in transition. The local power dynamics and the regional ethno-nationalism linked to the politics of the "sons of the soil" overpowered Congress. The Assam government reversed its position of giving land to the tea workers and instead facilitated their repatriation. It adopted the policy of giving land to the indigenous thus treating migrants as "outsiders." Moreover, continuous discussions on banning recruitment and the final decision to ban the recruitment of coolies from outside the state of Assam meant that in the larger visions of the region and nation, migrants and migration were antithetical to improvement and progress.

The conversation between the nation and the coolies also reveals that in the high politics that was played, the interest of the coolies was secondary to both national and regional interests. Nehru while discussing the process of Constituent Assembly debate had argued: "It means a nation on the move, fashioning for itself a new government of its own making, through their elected representatives."[77] A reflection on the process of transition from empire to

nation from the viewpoint of coolies suggests that although the nation was on the move, it moved by alienating its mazdoors. One of the largest industries, an industry that contributed 13 per cent of the total export, was yet to disentangle from the imperial connections, most parliamentarians went on to defend foreign capital by citing debt and deficit as reasons, and the nation imposed the rhetoric of modernisation on its mazdoors to an extent that they were forced to sacrifice not just on economic front, but also on political fronts.

Notes

[1] "Setting up the New System," in *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920* by Hugh Tinker, (London: Oxford University Press, London, 1974) 61–115. Also see the first chapter, "Beginnings", in David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–15.

[2] Tirthankar Roy, *The East India Company* (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2016), 199–201; Jayeeta Sharma, "'Lazy' Natives, Coolie Labour, and the Assam Tea Industry," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 6 (November 2009): 1287–1324; Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire's Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), 25–48; Rana P. Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2014), 25–54; Nitin Varma, *Coolies of Capitalism: Assam Tea and the Making of Coolie Labour* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 15–42.

[3] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 39–40.

[4] For a detailed discussion on the labour market and labour catchment areas that allowed the recruiters from diverse industries to pool labour, *See*, Lalita Chakravarty, "Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in a Dual Economy-British India, 1880–1920," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 15, no. 3 (July 1978): 249–328; Ranajit Das Gupta, "Structure of the Labour Market in Colonial India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no. 44/46 (November 1981): 1781–1806.

[5] Kaushik Ghosh, "A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India," in *Subaltern Studies X: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, eds. Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash, and Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8–48.

[6] Ghosh, "A Market for Aboriginality", 19–26.

[7] Sharma, "'Lazy' Natives, Coolie Labour," 1306–7.

[8] See the chapter "Emergence of the Labour Regime", in Behal, *One Hundred Years*, 55-100; Rana Partap Behal, 'Coolies, Recruiters and Planters: Migration of Indian Labour to the Southeast Asian and Assam Plantations during Colonial Rule," *Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series*, no. 9, Bonn (2013), 5–9.

[9] The debates on decolonisation have moved beyond the idea of seeing it as an event. The fresh research emerging from diverse regions in South Asia has advanced the case of seeing decolonisation as a process, accompanied by continuity and change. For details, see the following: Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Introduction," in *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: Indian and Pakistan in Transition*, eds., D. Chakrabarty, R. Majumdar, and A. Sartori (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–10; Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 22–31; Ted Svensson, *Production of Postcolonial India and Pakistan: Meanings of Partition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 22–46; Meera Ashar, "Decolonizing What? Categories, Concepts and the Enduring "Not Yet"," *Cultural Dynamics* 27, no. 2. (July 2015): 253–65. Jayanta Sengupta, *At the Margins: Discourses of Development, Democracy and Regionalism in Orissa* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–12; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, ed., *Decolonisation and the Politics of Transition in South Asia* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2016), 1–20.

[10] For a detailed survey of metropolitan perspective that lays emphasis on transfer of power from European elites to indigenous elites, see, John Springhall, *Decolonization Since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 2; Nicholas Manserg, ed. *The Transfer of Power 1942–1947*, 12 vols (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Service, 1970–1983); D.A. Low, *Eclipse of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991),58-100; D.A. Low, *Britain and Indian Nationalism: The Imprint of Ambiguity, 1929–1942* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1–40.

[11] See the chapter, "The Changing World of Empire, 1939–59", in David George Boyce, *Decolonisation and the British Empire, 1775–1997* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 108–30.

[12] For historical debates on decolonisation and British Empire, *See*, John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire: The Historical Debate* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 5; John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonization: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 3–33; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: Meanings of Freedom in Post-Independence West Bengal, 1947–1952* (London: Routledge, 2009), 1–8; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, ed., *Decolonisation and the Politics of Transition in South Asia* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2016), 1–20.

[13] *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission, Part I-Tea* (Delhi: Government of India Press, 1956), 11.

[14] "Table II: Table Showing Quantities of Tea Exported from Indian as Compared to the Quantities Exported by All the Producing Countries," in *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission, Part I-Tea*, 10.

[15] *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission, Part I-Tea*, 23.

[16] "Table IX A: Table Showing Paid-up Capital with Particulars of Share-Holdings of 308 Tea Companies on 30th June 1939," in *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission*, *Part I- Tea*, 28.

[17] "Table IX B: Table Showing Paid-up Capital with Particulars of Share-Holdings of 308 Tea Companies as on the 30th June 1954," in *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission*, *Part I- Tea*, 30.

[18] *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission*, *Part I-Tea*, 21–2.

[19] *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission*, *Part I-Tea*, 38.

[20] The issue of nationalisation featured repeatedly in the discussions in the Parliament. One such discussion was held when *The Tea Bill, 1952* was discussed in the Rajya Sabha in 1953. Some of the members in the Rajya Sabha namely, Shri Kishen Chand, Shri Bhupesh Gupta spoke for nationalisation of the tea industry. See, *Rajya Sabha Official Debates*, Part 2 (Other than Question and Answer), "The Tea Bill, 1952," May 15, 1953, 5995–6, PD_03_15051953_50_p5995_p6040_6.pdf (rsdebate.nic.in).

[21] "No Nationalisation of Tea at Present: Association Chief's View," *Times of India*, March 10, 1956, 11, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 755534221; "Red Resolution on Tea Industry Nationalisation: Opportunity for Centre to Clarify Attitude," *Times of India*, March 21, 1957, 1, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 507175220.

[22] "Demand for Nationalising Tea Industry Rejected: Compensation too Heavy Says Union Minister," *Times of India*, March 23, 1957, 7, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 346325817.

[23] "Demand for Nationalising Tea Industry Rejected," 7.

[24] "Resolution to be moved by Khagendra Nath Barbaruah during the September Session of the Assembly in 1961," Industry Department, Tea Branch, File nos. MI 247, 1961, Assam State Archive.

[25] "Note by B.S. Saran, Minister of Industries, 23rd September 1961," Industry Department, Tea Branch, File nos. MI 247, 1961, Assam State Archive.

[26] *Lok Sabha Debates*, Eleventh Session, vol. XLII, nos. 1–10, 3rd to 7th August 1970, 73; *Lok Sabha Debates,* Fifth Series, vol. 7, nos. 56–9, 9th to 12th August 1971, 89.

[27] Prabhu P. Mohapatra and R.P. Behal, "Tea and Money Versus Human Life: The Rise and Fall of the Indentured system in the Assam Tea Plantations 1840–1908," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, nos. 3–4 (April 1992): 142–172; Prabhu P. Mohapatra, ""Restoring the Family": Wife Murders and the Making of a Sexual Contract for Indian Immigrant Labour in the British Caribbean Colonies, 1860–1920," *NMML*, *Occasional Paper on History and Society*, Second Series, No. CI (1995): 1–72; Samita Sen, ""Without His Consent?": Marriage and Women's Migration in Colonial India," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 65 (2004): 77–104.

[28] For a detailed discussion on the coming of trade unions in Assam, *See*, Raj Kumar Thakur, "'Coolie' to 'Mazdoor': Tea Garden Workers and the New Nation State, 1941–1960," *NMML*, *Occasional Paper*, *History and Society*, New Series, 101 (2020): 20–2.

[29] Setting up an investigation committee was one of the major demands raised by the All India Trade Union Congress in its session that was held in Nagpur in 1943. *Report of the All India Trade Union Congress*, Nagpur, 1943, 36.

[30] D.V. Rege was the Chairman, Teja Singh Sahni was the Secretary, and there were three additional members, namely: B.P. Adarkar, Ahmad Mukhtar, and S.R. Deshpande. Rege submitted the report on October 20, 1945, and the Government of India published this report in 1946. D.V. Rege, *Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in Plantations in India* (Shimla: Government of India Press, 1946), vi.

[31] S. Regaswamy, *Encyclopedia of Social Work in India*, vol. III, 280, access October 7, 2022, https://issuu.com/rengasamy/docs/encyclopedia_of_social_work_volume_/281.

[32] Regaswamy, *Encyclopedia*, 280; "Plantations Labour Bill," in Parliamentary Debates, Part II–Proceedings Other than Questions and Answers, vol. XVI (1951), September 24, 1951, to October 16, 1951, 3303; S.R. Deshpande, Plantation Labour in Assam Valley (New Delhi: Ministry of Labour, Government of India, 1951), 1–2.

[33] "Plantations Labour Bill," 3302.

[34] "Plantations Labour Bill," 3304–5.

[35] Sanat Kumar Bose, "Indian Labour and Its Historiography in Pre-Independence Period," *Social Scientist* 13, no. 4 (April 1985): 3–10. Also see the following to understand how since the 1870s coolies were depicted in literature, as well as in articles, books, and journals, Dakshinacharan Chattopadhyay, "Cha-Kar Darpan*"* in *Passage to Bondage*: *Labour in the Assam Tea Plantations* ed. Samita Sen, trans. Suhit K. Sen (Kolkata: Stree Samya, 2016), 1–56; Dwarkanath Ganguly, *Slavery in British Dominion*, ed. Siris Kumar Kunda (Calcutta: Jignasa Press, 1972); Charles Dowding, *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1894); Jogendranath Chattopadhyay, "The Autobiography of a Tea Garden Coolie" in *Passage to Bondage*, *Labour in the Assam Tea*

Plantations ed. Samita Sen, trans. Suhit K. Sen (Kolkata: Stree Samya, 2016), 131–213; Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, *Labour System of Assam*: Alight on the Chinese Ordinance (London: Humanitarian League, 1904); C.F. Andrews, *The Oppression of the Poor* (Madras: Ganesh and Co., 1921); Diwan Chaman Lall, *Coolie: The Story of Labour and Capital in India*, vol. II (Lahore: Oriental Publishing House, 1932), 1–72.

[36] Thakur, "'Coolie' to 'Mazdoor'," 6.

[37] Assam Mazdoor Sangha was formed in 1947. Thereafter, with the involvement of the Assam Branch of the Indian National Trade Union Congress, several district branches of Cha Mazdoor Sangha were formed. On August 9, 1958, all of them were amalgamated into one body with separate district branches under the organisation name of Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha. *See*, "About Us," Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha, accessed July 20, 2022, http://www.assamchahmazdoorsangha.org/aboutus.html; Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826–1947* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1977), 242.

[38] Thakur, "'Coolie' to 'Mazdoor'," 6.

[39] Thakur, "'Coolie' to 'Mazdoor'," 7.

[40] See the discussions on the Draft Constitution held on August 24, 1949, on "Article 292," in *Constituent Assembly Debates*, *Official Report*, vol. IX, July 30, 1949, to September 18, 1949, Sixth Reprint (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, Jainco Art India, 2014), 637–8.

[41] C.S. Mullan, "Report on Assam," *Census of India 1931*, vol. III, Part I (Calcutta: Central Publications Branch, Government of India, 1931), 209, 222, Census Digital Library, Dspace_123456789_3132,
https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/31804.

[42] See the discussions on the Draft Constitution held on August 23, 1949, on "Article 292" in *Constituent Assembly Debates*, *Official Report*, Vol. IX, July 30, 1949, to September 18, 1949, Sixth Reprint (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, Jainco Art India, 2014), 634.

[43] Draft Constitution held on 24th August 1949 on "Article 292" in *Constituent Assembly Debates*, *Official Report*, Vol. IX, 30th July 1949 to 18th September 1949, 650.

[44] R.B. Vaghaiwalla, *Report of the Census of India: Assam, Manipur and Tripura*, vol. XII, Part I–A (Bombay: Municipal Printing Press, 1951), 417–18.

[45] Dhruba Pratim Sharma, "Demand of 'Tea Tribes' for Scheduled Tribe Status in Assam: A Review," in *Troubled Diversity: The Political Process in Northeast India*, ed., Sandhya Goswami (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 114.

[46] For discussion on categories and nature of interest groups, *See*, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Colonial State: Theory and Practice* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2016).

[47] Sharma, "'Lazy' Natives, Coolie Labour 1287–1324.

[48] "Fortnightly Report for the Second Half of December 1957," Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, 1957, 3, National Archives of India, Delhi.

[49] Especially the tea planters had a fetish for aboriginals, who came to be categorised as jungle coolies, *See*, Prabhu P. Mohapatra, "Coolies and Colliers: A Study of the Agrarian Context of Labour Migration from Chotanagpur, 1880–1920', *Studies in History* 1, no. 2 (August 1985): 247–303; Ghosh, "A Market for Aboriginality," 8–48.

[50] Sharma, *Empire's Garden*, 83; Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude*, 365–7.

[51] Behal, "Coolies, Recruiters and Planters," 8.

[52] *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission, Part I-Tea*, 106.

[53] *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission, Part I-Tea*, 120.

[54] In 1935, a book by Gyannath Borah titled *Foreigners in Assam* was published. By using the Census of 1911, 1921, and 1931, he added fuel to the idea that for Assam to improve and progress, the foreigners were to be thrown out. He felt that the "immigrants"

outnumbered the Assamese. Therefore, he appealed to the Assamese public that Assam had to be freed of foreigners. *See*, Sanjib Baruah, *India against Itself* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 81–3. For further details on polarisation and ethnic demands and a critique of Sanjiv Baruah, *See*, Sajal Nag, *Beleaguered Nation: The Making and Unmaking of Assamese Nationality* (Delhi: Manohar Books, 2017), 78–146.

[55] C.T. Lloyd, *Census of India*, *1921*, Vol. III, *Assam, Part I–Report* (Shillong: Government Press, 1923), 20; C.S. Mullan, *Census of India, 1931*, vol. III, *Assam, Part I*, *Report* (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1932), 49–50.

[56] To understand the language debate in colonial Assam, ethnic polarization, and the evolution of Assamese nationality, *See*, Nag, *Beleaguered Nation*, 78–135.

[57] "Assam May Ban Immigrant Labour," *The Times of India*, February 22, 1953, 14, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 501198375.

[58] *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission, Part I-Tea*, 120.

[59] Vaghaiwalla, *Report of the Census of India: Assam, Manipur and Tripura*, vol. XII, Part I–A 1951, 69; Raj Kumar Thakur, "Rethinking Planter Raj: Stories of Conflict between the State and Planters in Assam, 1860s–1950s," PhD diss., Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2019, 353–69; Thakur, "'Coolie' to 'Mazdoor',"16.

[60] For details on time expired labourers, see the following, Thakur, "Rethinking Planter Raj," 353–69; Keya Dasgupta, "Wastelands Colonization Policy and the Settlement of Ex-Plantation Labour in the Brahmaputra Valley: A Study in Historical Perspective," *Occasional Paper*, 82 (Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences 1986), 1–24.

[61] Discussions on temporary labourers are available in Rege, *Report on an Enquiry*, 17; Umananda Phukan, *The Ex-Tea Garden Labour Population in Assam* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1984), 23; Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude*, 213–16.

[62] Vaghaiwalla, *Report of the Census of India: Assam, Manipur and Tripura*, vol. XII, Part I–A, 1951, 69.

[63] The total number has been compiled from the *Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act* for the years from 1947 to 1959. Some statistics are also available in "Annexure XLVI" of the *Plantation Inquiry Commission*.

[64] "Arif Alif, Under-Secretary to the Government of Assam to the Undersecretary to the Government of India, Ministry of Labour and Employment, 28th April 1959," Labour Department, Labour Branch, File nos. GLR/261/1959, Assam State Archive.

[65] *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission*, *Part I-Tea*, 117–8.

[66] *Indian Labour Year Book* (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1963), 210.

[67] "Proceedings of the Working Committee of the APCC,' at 8 A. M, Gauhati, held on July 2, 1951," in *Assam Pradesh Congress Committee Proceedings* (*APCC*), Institutional Papers in *Nehru Memorial Museum and Library*, Micro Film, Reel No. 1, R-3599.

[68] "Tea Workers in Debt: Official Inquiry," *The Times of India*, June 2, 1954, 5, ProQuest Historical Newspaper, 501912928.

[69] "12 Tea Estates in Assam Closed: 16,000 Workers Idle," *The Times of India*, December 5, 1952, 5, ProQuest Historical Newspaper, 501185097; "6 Tea Gardens Reopen," in *The Times of India*, February 19, 1953, 4, ProQuest Historical Newspaper, 502318828.

[70] "Tea Workers' Cut in Wages Explained: Assam Governments Assurance," *The Times of India,* February 16, 1953, 5, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, 50262571.

[71] "Resolution No. 8," adopted by the Working Committee of the APCC on July 2, 1951, in *APCC Proceedings*, Institutional Papers in *Nehru Memorial Museum and Library*, Microfilm, Reel No. 1, R-3599.

[72] "Resolution No. 9," in 'Proceedings of the Meeting of the Working Committee of the APCC', held on May 30, 1952, in *APCC Proceedings*, *Ibid*.

[73] "Resolution No. 10," in 'Proceedings of the Meeting of the Working Committee of the APCC, held on May 30, 1952, in *APCC Proceedings*; "Resolution No. 1," in

'Proceedings of the Meeting of the Working Committee of the APCC', held on September 6, 1953, in *APCC Proceedings*, Institutional Papers in *Nehru Memorial Museum and Library*, Microfilm, Reel No. 1, R-3599.

[74] *Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act* for the years from 1955 to 1959; "Fortnightly Report for the First Half of August, Assam, 1957," File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, Nos. 1–21, 1957, 2, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, National Archives of India, Delhi.

[75] "Fortnightly Report for the First Half of August, Assam, 1957," File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, Nos. 1-21, 1957, 2, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, National Archives of India, Delhi.

[76] "Fortnightly Report for the First Half of August, Assam, 1957," File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, Nos. 1-21, 1957, 2, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, National Archives of India, Delhi.

[77] The Chairman of the Constitution quoted Nehru to deliberate on the Constitution making process. See, "Chairman's Inaugural Address", on December 9, 1946, in *Constituent Assembly Debates*, *Official Report*, vol. I, December 9, 1946, to December 23, 1946, Sixth Reprint (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, Jainco Art India, 2014), 6.

Hybrid Ethnography and South Asian Migration Studies

By

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Increased connectivity and mobility are two defining characteristics of modern living.[1] Recent advances in technology and a corresponding increase in telecommunications have made it easier than ever for migrants and refugees to keep in touch with family and friends back home and with other migrants all over the world. Migration is increasingly characterised by its interconnected nature, which serves to dynamically enhance the momentum of human mobility across geo-political landscapes reflecting broader technological advancements and consequent socio-economic transformations.[2] The emergence of "connected" or "digitised" refugees in South Asia, who use the smart/phone to navigate their everyday life, and their situational subjectivity towards biometric registration and identification necessitated by a vulnerability for protection has occasioned discussions on their digital identity. This warrants a renewed approach to the methodological ways such as online/digital ethnography adopted in studying refugees as opposed to being limited to the conventional offline ethnography. When one takes into consideration how access to the internet shapes the nature of mobility and the circumstances of being a refugee, the current state of migration research warrants a more balanced synthesis of offline and online ethnography. Many migrants may now keep in constant touch with their families back home via a combination of frequent physical visits and online communication, and the scenario is no different in South Asia.[3]

Using the empirical context of the digital identity of Rohingyas languishing in camps in India and Bangladesh, this paper argues that the dichotomous approach towards the suitability of digital/online ethnography vis-à-vis conventional/offline in understanding the formulation/reformulation of refugee identity in forced migration research should be eschewed. It serves no purpose to treat the "virtual" world as a completely separate social area from the "real" as people's "online" and "offline" social lives are inextricably intertwined with the ubiquitous nature of the internet and digital connectivity. This has occasioned the need to redefine not just the "field" in which the

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refugee dwells, interacts, and survives within the host state, but also the approaches used to study the field warrants a re-introspection. Negating the Eurocentrically conditioned "methodological nationalism" which underscores the qualitative approaches such as conventional ethnography in the region, the paper makes a case for the adoption of "hybrid ethnography" in forced migration studies in South Asia, that in turn provides an avenue to incorporate both the positionality and reflexivity of the researcher vis-a-vis the field participants.[4]

Decolonising Migration Studies and the Necessity for Hybrid Ethnography

The necessity of adopting novel qualitative research methodologies like hybrid ethnography is of much credence to analyse and understand both patterns and practices associated with migration in South Asia. What is specific to the contextual situation of migration studies in South Asia, even if not unique just to the subcontinent, is the colonial legacy.[5] The defiance of European imperialism and adherence to continued colonial practices in research created the way for voices from the Global South to lead the charge for decolonisation of migration scholarship.[6] The transition of authority from former colonies to postcolonial nation states was through the sociocultural process of decolonisation that lasted for the better part of the twentieth century. In its wake, it created lengthy shadows that indicated the disembodied spirits of political decolonisation well beyond occurrences which signified the advent of freedom for these individual countries. Its footprints were global in scope and linked with then concurrent metapolitical processes like the Cold War or currently, even the Covid-19 pandemic. South Asia is a particularly bountiful ground for studying such extended temporalities, and specters of decolonisation within the varied socio-cultural frameworks offered by the subcontinent. The colonial past of South Asian nations like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka shaped the political systems that emerged in these countries after independence.[7] Irresolvable ethnic tensions, struggles for regional autonomy, and cultural sovereignty amongst various segments of the postcolonial societies are further evidence that decolonisation itself remained a work in progress in the region. Sometimes, the impending trajectory of decolonisation becomes evident in the everyday patterns of migrant lives which are realised, mediated, and envisioned via many symbolic and material forms. Both the "field" in which migration research happens in South Asia and the unique lens through which to interpret these more mundane and far less spectacular settings of the everyday field warrants a recalibration in the wake of emerging techno-digital connectivity.

In the dominant narratives of migration studies focused on South Asia, there is a noticeable tendency to sideline the influences of colonialism to the theoretical assertions. The emphasis has been placed on economic and individual-centric reasons for migration, particularly highlighting recent movements of populations to Western nations.[8] Within the realm of migration studies in South Asia, it has been observed that there is not only an endorsement

of restrictive border and migration policies but also a notable omission of colonial influences in the way we *look* at the migrants and refugee populations in the region.[9] As postulated by Gurminder Bhambra, this neglect overlooks the deep-rooted epistemic colonialism in migration studies[10] and often eclipses the rising postcolonial and decolonising methodologies that are being implemented elsewhere in Global South.[11] Historical instances from the twentieth century, such as the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, exemplify how colonial legacies are intertwined with migrations in the postcolonial era.[12] Moreover, the migration trends from colonised regions to European nations and settler colonial states further underscore this continuous colonial footprint[13]. There is a need for a comprehensive historical understanding of migration trajectories and their governance mechanisms.[14] Acknowledging this gap, scholarship has emphasised how the sociocultural affinity emanating from the shared postcolonial history has shaped refugee's sense of belonging in South Asian countries.[15] With respect to the refugees in South Asian countries, where these people have come from, where they originally "belong to" or how should they be differently administered based on their identity and belonging are assertions central to the domain of forced migration in the subcontinent. Such an epistemic colonial perspective has moulded migration studies in ways that reinforce the structures birthed from the colonial era. These include the concepts of sovereignty, notions of freedom and rights, distinctions drawn between natives and outsiders, the categorisation of migrants through border regulations, and the perpetuation of racial hierarchies.[16]

This overshadowing, however, doesn't negate the fact that the field of migration studies is deeply intertwined with what Mignolo terms the "coloniality of knowledge."[17] In this case, one might ask: What kinds of information are increasingly crucial to the research agendas of Global South? What kind of information has been (un)willingly in/excluded? Whose knowledge does these data inform exactly? As Grada Kilomba asks: "Who is acknowledged to have the knowledge? And who is not?"[18] Extending this thought, one may ask: What are the methods that will justify the documentation and analysis of such knowledge? In the realm of South Asian migration studies, postcolonial narratives, as previously mentioned, primarily serve as instruments for academic metamorphosis posing challenges to the accepted knowledge and the justification of restrictive migration policies.[19] However, these accounts stand apart from the budding emphasis on the decolonisation of knowledge, which calls for dismantling inherent colonial frameworks used to study the field. Noxolo underscores that debates on decolonisation draw inspiration from histories and stances fundamentally different from postcolonial ideologies, with a pronounced inclination towards indigenous insights and critical standpoints.[20] Directly addressing the ongoing legacy of colonisation and colonial imprints in nations where communities have historically resided is at the heart of decolonial discourse and activism.[21] But decolonising initiative extends beyond the mere reshaping of knowledge creation.[22] It necessitates a holistic examination of established structures, institutional mechanisms, and practical applications, championed predominantly by indigenous populations and those marginalised within colonial constructs. Decolonisation should not be trivialised as mere

rhetoric in migration studies.[23] It is essential to note its departure from postcolonialism, which is rather heavily tilted towards homogeneous representation and deconstructive analysis of the research field of migration studies in South Asia to its colonial history.

Decolonising methodologies entail "actively participating with western colonialism at numerous levels" and are associated with establishing a much more analytical knowledge of core preconceptions, motives, and beliefs that shape research methods at any of those levels.[24] Decolonising research implies giving non-Western people and their viewpoints the attention they deserve, while also learning about and respecting theoretical and empirical frameworks from the so-called "other(ed)" viewpoints of migrants.[25] The critical pedagogy of decolonisation then consists of transforming our colonised views and holding alternative knowledge through novel methodologies. Postcolonial perspectives are at the forefront of migration scholarship in South Asia as it discounts the redundancy of conventional methodological tools to study the same. Decolonisation's differential approach involves shifting away from the erstwhile colonised perspectives towards alternative forms of knowledge which are inclusive of the everyday life of refugees or migrants, emerging from their own narratives.[26] While views on postcoloniality have been at the center of research in South Asia, the subjugation brought about by colonialism has far-reaching effects on both the magnitude and nature of knowledge production regarding migration in the subcontinent. By bandwagoning in the struggle against continued neocolonial oppression, researchers should create a "field" where the collective experiences of marginalised groups may inform the development of new approaches to qualitative research. This can be done only if we acknowledge and consider the factor of digital connectivity and transnational networking amongst the migrant populations in South Asia.

We can no longer turn back the tide of technological advancements in information and communication technology which have invaded every facet of our society.[27] Even though the efficacy of conventional research methodologies are contested for their ability to capture the lived experience of refugees in such a digitised world, merely adopting digital methodologies for studying the field will not be enough. Since online research provides only a fragmented image of the transborder behaviour and practices of refugees, it cannot serve as the only basis of primary ethnographic data for any study. Neither would an ethnography that focused just on the offline world equip any researcher with the level of detail necessary to understand the interlinkages that exist between the real and virtual world of refugees, while considering their digitised identity. Hence it is necessary to establish a separate online ethnography, in addition to the conventional offline ethnography for studying refugee's digital identity.

Tim Ingold evaluates the relationship between anthropology and ethnography where he argues that while ethnography aims to describe life as experienced by a particular people at a specific time and place, anthropology is more broadly concerned with the conditions and possibilities of human life within the world.[28] This distinction situates ethnography as an end in itself rather than merely a methodological approach to anthropology. Ingold emphasises that traditional participant observation should be seen as an

anthropological practice rather than a method exclusive to ethnography.[29] This perspective shifts the focus from studying people as objects of research to learning with them, which Ingold describes as an educational rather than purely ethnographic process.[30] Such an approach challenges the conventional boundaries between the observer and the observed, advocating for a more immersive and engaged anthropological practice that recognises its speculative nature.

The study of migrants and forced migration through ethnography has significantly evolved over time, reflecting broader shifts in methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks within the social sciences. Initially, ethnographies of migration tended to focus on the assimilation processes within host societies, often influenced by the Chicago School's interest in urban sociology and patterns of adaptation.[31] Contemporary ethnographies of migration are increasingly attentive to issues of power, identity, and agency, challenging earlier models that depicted migrants as largely passive recipients of structural forces.[32] This change is aligned with a broader turn towards reflexive and critical ethnography, which interrogates the positionality of the researcher and the ethical dimensions of ethnographic work.[33] Researchers now often focus on how migration is experienced differently based on intersecting factors such as race, gender, class, and legal status which called for a corresponding inclusivity in the ethnographic approaches used.[34]

The ethnographic approach in migration studies has, moved from traditional methods focused primarily on singular, often isolated field sites to a more expansive, multi-sited methodology. This shift addresses the dynamic nature of human migration influenced by globalisation. Researchers now emphasise understanding migrants' lives across multiple locales, reflecting the transnational experiences that characterise contemporary migration. The approach has grown to incorporate theoretical frameworks that link empirical findings to broader socio-political contexts, thereby enriching the analytical depth and relevance of migration studies. David Fitzgerald in "Towards a Theoretical Ethnography of Migration," explores the methodological advancements in ethnography under the influences of globalisation and transnationalism.[35] Fitzgerald advocates for a multi-sited approach to ethnography that encompasses both the countries of origin and destination of migrants, urging researchers to remove "national blinders" to better compare domestic and international migrations. He emphasises the need for historical depth through local archival work and revisits, which counters the "ethnographic present" and provides a longitudinal perspective on migration phenomena. By integrating these methodologies, Fitzgerald argues that one could enhance the representativeness and theoretical applicability of migration studies, pushing for a more comprehensive understanding of migrants' experiences across different spaces and times.

Blommaert through a discursive analysis of influential theorists like Hymes, Bakhtin, Goffman, and Bourdieu in his book *Dialogues with Ethnography*[36] discusses the epistemological problems of ethnography highlighting the fact that it is largely a conceptual outlook as opposed to being a mere methodology. He examines the concept of participant observation via the Bourdieusian lens

(Bourdieu's research with the Kabyle people in Algeria) to rethink the anthropologist's privileged status as an "unchallengeable epistemic superior." It is difficult for ethnographers to "drop aspects about oneself to become a true participant," suggesting that it is inconceivable for ethnographers to adopt characteristics of the identities of their participants, except in extremely exceptional situations.[37] However, the phenomena of "turning native" i.e., the situation wherein the observer has been a part of the community being watched, is difficult in conventional ethnography owing to the explicit differences in the conditions of both researcher and participant. As much as being a "native" is difficult in offline ethnography, the participation of both refugees and researchers alike as members of the same social networking sites as Facebook opens an avenue to go "native" in online ethnography.[38]

Ethnography is the most viable approach for exploring the impact of the internet on migrants' lives, but it needs to make certain methodological adjustments to account for the unique challenges presented by digital and technological mediation within the phenomenon of migration. digital migration.[39] According to Schrooten,[40] the study of migrants and their online interaction therefore fits in with a major trend in the development of the field by way of moving away from "methodological nationalism"[41] to a theoretical foundation built on the idea of transnationality.[42] Acknowledging the increased connectivity amongst refugees and migrants, current scholarship has come to reject the simplistic equation of society and nation states, arguing that "national organisation" as a structuring principle of societal and political activity could no longer function as the guiding benchmark for them.[43]

Refugees and migrants often participate in transnational social networks which play a role in socio-economic development and allow them to be active members of various global communities, sometimes facilitating their political engagement across multiple countries. Even if their statelessness precludes them from substantively participating in the polity of the state they flee and the host state, for example, a large segment of Rohingya refugees in India and Bangladesh navigate their everyday life through digitally mediated avenues of interaction facilitated by smartphones and social media participation. The advent of this transnational or transborder paradigm has had a profound impact on the social sciences generally and forced migration studies specifically. This perspective refers to the mechanisms through which individuals systematically engage in social spheres that extend beyond national boundaries.[44] This transnational or transborder emphasis has prompted scholarship to abandon the standard practice of utilising the "national" as the geographical unit of consideration and instead alter their methods to meet the digitised connectivity that shapes the current globalised world. The lens of hybrid ethnography, informed by the notions of "positionality" and "reflexivity" has become the right tool to contest methodological nationalism.

Embracing Positionality and Reflexivity to Transcend Methodological Nationalism

Researchers recognise the importance of "positionality" i.e., the need to consider their position with respect to that of the "other" in the course of data gathering for any research.[45] It is impossible to ascertain our positionality without taking into account both the shared and divergent sociocultural norms and values of researchers and participants alike.[46] While adopting positionality in research, scholars have typically considered factors such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, workplace, and adherence to broader cultural norms of the research subjects and participants.[47] Because of the importance of a researcher's "position" and their ability to analyse and explain the social group they are researching, it is necessary to ask themselves: How we are positioned as a researcher? Chavez opines that one could be an "outsider," "partial insider," or "complete insider," based on their positionality as the researcher.[48] That is to say, the researcher can evaluate whether their position is completely divergent from the subjects of their research. This would determine whether the researcher is an "outsider" to the social group under investigation. It is also possible to be "partial insiders" vis-à-vis the members of a group with whom the researcher might have some level of familiarity but not complete identification. A researcher will be considered a true insider if they share several significant characteristic traits or perspectives with the members of that group or community. During the offline fieldwork conducted in refugee camps of Hyderabad and Chennai, I could solicit better responses from the Rohingya refugee women in camps owing to my positionality as a "partial insider" occasioned by my "Muslim female" researcher identity. Positionality in any ethnographic study as insiders or partial insiders is seldom problem-free.[49] On the one hand, researchers get a unique perspective that allows them to simultaneously see the similarities and distinctions between themselves and the people that make up their study samples, but on the other hand, they may also have to struggle with how their subjects perceive them back,[50] which may add another layer of complexity to their work. In addition, close sociocultural ties might heighten participants' and researcher's perceptions of social differences and power dynamics.[51]

Researchers using qualitative methods to explore transnational (forced)migration should be attuned to this kind of problem since their research revolves around people who, for one reason or another, are discriminated against, and occupy the lowest rung of society. While examining the discourse on migration, researchers also need to reflect on the conceptual and methodological categories they use, ultimately adopting those structure/s that provide a more accurate and complete picture of the everyday experiences of refugees and migrants. This necessitates moving away from the "methodological nationalist" approach while conceptualising migration, as well as refraining from seeing transnational mobility solely through the prism of the nation state.[52] This will inadvertently necessitate privileging the viewpoint of the vulnerable migrant/refugee through a bottom-up approach, mainly through long-term interactions channeled as semi-structured interviews within the chat

rooms associated with the social media platforms. Their posts and photographs shared in these public forums help the researcher to understand the self-representations of their identity emanating from refugee/migrant subjectivity in these digital platforms. Such online methods and platforms also facilitate prolonged interactions over frequent predetermined intervals, helping the researcher to map the trajectory of their inter-community and transnational networking through such platforms and further integrating it into theoretical frameworks that can account for the refugees' complexities in navigating their everyday life. It may be used to attack the very foundations of oppression, authority, discrimination, and inequalities, warranting an interaction with "false ideas."[53]

The use of official statistics on refugees obtained from their biometric data organised so that ethnocultural differences of refugees or migrants appear as an independent variable in the reporting of educational attainment, physical health, work status, and incidence of poverty in everyday survival. This is one way in which methodological nationalism contributes to the homogenisation of cultural identity and the categorisation of migrants into ethnic communities and are regarded as upholders of discrete cultures.[54] In other words, migration studies and corresponding ethnic studies equivalents add value to the revitalisation of modern nation state building initiatives as they are now constituted.[55] The fallacy of methodological nationalism is that it conceals the interplay of genuine causal factors that lead to the identification of particular groups of individuals as refugees and their subsequent treatment as such. Because of its fundamental traits, that are connected to its intense involvement with the lives of real people, actual social interactions, and related dialogic sociocultural effects,[56] appropriately adapted qualitatively ethnographic research may considerably help in transcending methodological nationalism.

Qualitative ethnographic research is helpful as it allows for a more in-depth examination of the processes by which societal borders are conceived to become functional, and also of how unequal power relations are reinforced and perpetuated as a result.[57] In order to better understand the true formative dynamics that generate modern migratory phenomena, critical realist-inspired qualitative research on migration includes the study of various interactional understandings, reflexive formulations, social practises, and social interconnections. Modern migration scholarship in South Asia must reject methodological nationalism based on a solely state dominated perspective by adopting methodologies that reflect the critical position toward social relations of power imbalance, oppression, and dominance. Often, the critical perspectives and ideas presented by migration qualitative research are reinforced and made more effective when they resist relativising genuine linkages of inequality, subjugation, and control as well as the implicational forces which generate and perpetuate them.[58] However, its applicability and significance are not limited to nation states, rather, it is directed at movements and collectives that seek to counteract power imbalances, combat anti-immigrant sentiment,[59] challenge the perception of refugees as "undesirables"[60] and instead work towards guaranteeing their mobility, [61] apart from ensuring universal rights of protection. In order to steer clear of methodological

nationalism, it is important to zero in on the actual nature of social ties expressed by refugees'/migrant's reflecting their identity in various domains rather than unquestionably adhering to the representations and presumptions we as researchers give them. This is particularly true when it comes to understanding relationships marked by asymmetry and disparity as in the case of biometrically enhanced digital identity of refugees. According to Glick Schiller,[62] the field of migration studies has been hampered by its inability to grasp the global political economy and its failure to investigate the connections between migration and other forms of power, such as the racialisation and subordination of territories, populations, and communities. Hence, there is a need to counter migration studies standard units of analysis limited to innate ethnocentric assertions privileging nation state and more towards people's placement in different structural, class, and such other power hierarchical structures.[63]

Hybrid Ethnography as a Synthesis of Online (Digital) and Offline Ethnography

To produce a more complete and accurate understanding of the phenomenon and transnational processes involved in refugee connectivity, it is beneficial to conduct "multi-sited" ethnography in both traditional and digital settings, otherwise considered as hybrid ethnography. In tandem with the growth of a transborder perspective on migration came the advent of "multi-sited field-work"[64] a novel research methodology that gave scholars access to transnational units of reference for investigation. Multi-sited ethnography on migration involves studying migrant groups in various geographic locations to understand the interconnectedness of their experiences across different sites. By conducting ethnographic research in multiple settings where migrants live, work, or transit, researchers can better capture the transnational social fields that migrants navigate, thereby acknowledging the global connectedness of contemporary migration patterns. The "multi-sited fieldworker" is distinct from a researcher who does a mere comprehensive survey of different locations as he/she instead traces individuals and their networks over vast and varying geographic areas.[65] The participatory research across social media networks accessed by the bulk of the refugees, conducted using an online ethnographic approach enables the researcher to conduct the research in multiple sites. Multiple sites in this case include online fields like Facebook and X (Twitter) instead of restricting only to the offline refugee camp settlements in the host state. Such a multi-sited approach leads to "methodological transnationalism,"[66] which in turn occasions the expansion of the "field" in which research is conducted. In the current refugee studies, this would signify a change towards studying transnational and fragmented networks that create a digitally "connected refugee"[67] as opposed to a geographically "uprooted" refugee. Through their participation in and occupation of cyberspace, refugee groups are discovering new kinds of social cohesion on a global scale. Hence, apart from expanding the number of fields or spatial units of the study where researchers may gather data, this requires exploring novel research

methodologies like "digital ethnography" and more nuanced hybrid ethnography for data analysis.

The primary analytical unit of hybrid ethnography for studying digital identity is the hybridity of online and offline connections. In this line of research, it is not appropriate to begin with digital initiatives but rather integrate fieldwork in real world offline settings with the observation of digitally mediated behaviours.[68] Recent years have seen the growth of "digital ethnography"[69] and "digital sociologies" both of which strive to comprehend digital mediation as a characteristic of substantively and deeply embedded personal experiences, practices, and larger social environment.[70] Hybrid ethnography takes online-offline relationships as its main unit of analysis. Rather than taking digital practices as a starting point, in this strand scholars combine fieldwork in physical places with observing digitally mediated practices. These efforts are making strides toward developing qualitative internet research methodologies that take into account the fact that "no one lives an entirely digital life"[71] and that technological advances of the web, and media do not exist independently, but rather transform and are transformed by, everyday practices.[72]

For instance, Rohingya refugees are referred to as the "boat people" indicating the perilous journeys they undertake in crammed up boats without adequate food or water, paying huge amounts as carrier fees to the agents only to escape the persecution in Myanmar. Even in such journeys, mobile phones and the images, updates and sometimes desperate cries for help are broadcasted to the larger world by refugees themselves through their social media posts. Taking the relevance of mapping such trajectories of flight into account, Zijlstra and van Liempt[73] used "trajectory ethnography" to examine the ways in which Syrian refugees used cell phones throughout their journeys from Greece and Turkey to the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and other European countries. In their study, Zijlstra and van Liempt adapt the mobile method of trajectory ethnography to observe and follow informants over time, incorporating both offline observations and digital interactions to capture the evolving migration patterns. This framework stresses that researchers studying digitally connected refugees need to consider the ways in which contemporary refugees encounter telecommunication and how technological mediations are embedded in their own unique, power-ridden sociocultural, historical, and geographical contexts. For this reason, one should consider the specificity of technological and digital mediation while approaching it as something inherently related to a broader spectrum of refugee studies. Connected migrants, in particular, are perpetually engaged in a spectrum of interdependent components of "encapsulation," retaining a sense of shared identity with current colleagues of a finite diasporic community—and "cosmopolitanism"—connecting two local cultural issues through engagement with diverse communities different from their own.

If so, what necessitates a change in approach while introspecting the digital identity of refugees? In simple terms, digital identity includes any individual's personal information data like name, age, gender, location, contact details, and other identifiers. Interactions made in these digital terrains such as comments, likes, shares, posts, or even one's call logs contribute to the digital footprint and are very significant aspect that helps in conducting surveillance

on stateless persons and are deemed as "illegal immigrants." But it is through biometric registration that physical attributes like iris scans, and fingerprints get converted to binary data and are saved in intermediary platforms managed and operated by private techno-conglomerates by collaborating with governments and international humanitarian organisations. For a regular citizen, credentials like usernames, passwords, and other authentication factors help individuals access various online services and platforms securely. However, the biometric data of refugees goes on to become the authentication or identification details that are supposed to validate the credentials qualifying him/her for the conditional protection offered by humanitarian organisations. But this binarised data also becomes an important constituent of the digital identity.[74] It is closely linked to surveillance practices by governments and corporations, leading to concerns about privacy, autonomy, and the potential for control. The commodification of personal data and the use of digital identities for surveillance can erode personal freedom apart from signifying the power imbalance between the refugee and the prevalent humanitarian governance infrastructure. As digital identity is shaped by algorithms that can perpetuate biases, leading to discriminatory outcomes in many areas as algorithms may amplify existing biases, reinforcing systemic inequalities, and limiting individual agency over their digital identities.

While studying the digital identity of refugees, one should keep a humanistic approach taking into consideration the unique characteristics of technological mediation that refugees are subjected to as all digitally connected refugees/migrants effectively possess a distinctive "digital identity," and also problematically give rise to distinctive ambiguity in assertion of identity. There cannot be something as distinctive as "digital identity" for it gives an illusion that an identity whose subjective qualities emanate from digital origin is an exclusive category in itself. Rather, it discounts the most evident fact that such an identity draws its existential specification from the spatial terrain of the digital world in which it operates and is caused sometimes by the mere digitisation of the realm it functions in. Seen so, the characteristic feature of digital identity is not an exclusive category by means of its unique attributes separated from the "offline/real" world. Rather it is conditioned and shaped by the existing power asymmetries and imbalances operating in the real world. The "digital identity" of the refugees needs to be distinguished from being a distinctively exclusive category, normalised as a conduit for foundational legal identity in any host state. For refugees languishing in the camps, techno-digital assertions in humanitarianism through biometric registration are not the means to an end of inclusion. Rather it constitutes and perpetuates a techno-politics of exclusion, showcasing the embeddedness of technology within the pre-existing politics of refugee recognition.

Researchers must transparently address potential biases arising from their positionality when examining the digital identity of refugees. Digital identity is not equally accessible to all, especially to refugees who don't have even legal documentation that is required to obtain a SIM card. This effectively contributes to digital inequalities based on factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, geography, and digital literacy which primarily influence the level of

their digital engagement. These inequalities reinforce existing social hierarchies and limit marginalised refugee groups' opportunities for online participation and self-representation. Hence while studying the identity of refugees, researchers must critically reflect on their own biases and digital literacy, as these factors can impact the interpretation of refugees' online activities. Acknowledging and addressing biases stemming from the researcher's own digital identities enhances the validity of findings related to refugees' digital experiences. At the same time, we need to be cautious and recognise the intersectionality of the refugee identities, including their cultural, social, and technological dimensions, when analysing their digital presence. Subjective knowledge production of refugees' digital identities and interpretations of online behaviours can vary depending on the researcher's perspectives. Hence, one must transparently address potential biases arising from their positionality when examining the digital identity of refugees. The researcher's reflexivity and positionality can contribute to a more just representation of refugees' digital experiences, advancing their voices and struggles. Such an approach will underscore the importance of obtaining informed consent and giving participants agency in shaping the narrative of refugees in their everyday lives.

A hybrid ethnographic approach allows researchers to understand how their familiarity with digital platforms might influence their analysis of the online behaviours of the refugees. The biometric registration process and social media usage of refugees are influenced by complex power dynamics, with implications for data collection and interpretation. In such situations, hybrid ethnography enables researchers to uncover power imbalances that might affect refugees' online presence, shedding light on how they navigate digital spaces in the context of their forced migration. It ensures a more comprehensive examination of digital identity, encompassing both the refugees' perspectives and the researchers' own insights. This empowers refugees to actively participate in shaping their digital identity narrative, emphasising their agency in online representation. Hybrid ethnography can thus help the researcher illuminate how refugees' multifaceted identities intersect with their use of social media platforms, providing a nuanced understanding of their online engagement. It allows researchers to embrace subjectivity, acknowledging that their interpretations of digital actions are influenced by their own experiences and background. As it involves a reflexive analysis of how researchers' biases might impact their understanding of refugees' online interactions, promoting open discussions about these biases enables researchers to amplify their narratives, challenging dominant narratives and advocating for their rights.

Even if one were to limit to either digital or conventional (offline) approaches that would have still resulted in a substantial quantity of data, yet, it would be missing several essential components. Miller and Slater notably write that "if you want to go to the Internet, don't start from there."[75] They did ethnographic research on everything from sex to religion to business to personal relationships in places as varied as internet cafes, companies, middle class homes and settlements in Trinidad, and the webpages, email, and chatroom services used by Trinidadians residing overseas. A multi-sited hybrid ethnographic fieldwork that encompasses both online and offline study

locations and navigates its varying trajectories across multiple media would be more appropriate for studying forced migration in the current context. Hence an additional yet crucial tactic is the combination of online and offline qualitative data collection methods to collate robust data about the effects of both domestic and transborder digital networking activities apart from the impact of biometric registration on the identities of refugees. Access to the research site and the issue of getting informed permission are the primary areas of distinctions between offline (face-to-face) and online (digital) ethnography. The process of gaining access to the Facebook groups and X (Twitter) forums stands out as a key departure from physical ethnography. Although the challenge of how to portray oneself also occurs within conventional ethnography, in getting access to the digital research context, a researcher cannot depend on their physical presence and interactional style.[76] Sometimes researchers take the assistance of language translators to understand the content and context of the internet discussion forums. Often after learning that a researcher is working on the statelessness and digital identity of refugees/migrants of a particular community concerned, some refugee interviewees connect with these researchers as friends on their social networking sites like Facebook. This aids ingress/egress in requesting permission to perform online ethnographic fieldwork and to use online comments. Some academics contend that all online content is in the public domain and can be freely used by anybody.[77] In addition, the open-source nature of the online environment enables a researcher to double-check their assumptions and get permission from the participants, both of which are essential to the ethical conduct of a research study. Furthermore, many researchers may have previously joined Facebook and X (Twitter) before beginning their research. Therefore, at the beginning of the research study, it is necessary to present the research theme and announce their internet presence to promote themselves as researchers. After making the first introduction, they may refrain from repeatedly identifying themselves as researchers in subsequent chats. Instead, make sure that their user profile remains always displayed and that he/she is engaged in ethnographic research. In addition, everyone included in the research must be made aware that they could quit at any time and that their identities would be concealed appropriately. Another crucial component of participant privacy in hybrid ethnography is how their data is presented in published formats. In comparison to ensuring confidentiality to respondents in offline research, concealing contributors to online websites is sometimes more challenging since identities and textual excerpts retrieved online are simpler to recover. The issue of privacy is complicated further by the erosion of the private/public boundary. Not everyone who has an online/digital presence prefers to keep a low profile. They may instead be considered as writers since they knowingly publish in the public domain.[78] The researcher may decide to reveal the real name of the online group they are researching while changing participants' virtual pseudonyms, addresses, and other identifiers in the study. However, ethical considerations must guide decisions about revealing or concealing identifiers like participant detailers in research such that these

choices are justified not merely for the validity of the research argument but by thorough ethical evaluation.

Social media platforms play an important role in capturing and relaying the plight of refugees while significantly shaping and reshaping their digital identity. In online ethnography, researchers can rely on social networking sites as an extension to the offline field of camp settlements to understand the ways in which digital technology helps the refugees living in the camp to connect with each other. So, social networking sites need to be understood as part of a larger range of technological mediation that challenges the boundedness of offline fields by extending to the broader digital realm apart from having an impact on their individual representation and articulation of their specific refugee identity. We may end up overlooking the fact that individuals utilise a variety of media in their communication if we restrict to focus on just one of the ways in which refugees express themselves. I reiterate that contemporary forced migration researchers, according to the question/s they ask, should provide specific attention to digitally mediated communication in their research. This may be done, amongst many other novel methodologies, via a digital ethnographic study compounded with conventional offline ethnography for analysing the everyday life of refugees in the original settlement areas. An alternative knowledge of migration and an alternative type of migrant research subject who gets a privileged perspective of a bottoms-up approach may be possible only if we reconceive "the field" as the broader terrain where hybrid ethnographic research should be conducted.

Conclusion

With the agenda of replacing Western epistemology as the exclusive paradigm for knowing, decoloniality provides the avenue to expand existing canons of knowledge in South Asian migration studies.[79] To prevent learning and knowledge from being centered on the West, postcolonial and Western academics must work together to co-create new paradigms.[80] To accomplish this we as researchers must embrace the need to adopt hybrid ethnographic methods that are responsive to the technological and digital engagement of migrants and refugees in the region. By doing so, postcolonial viewpoints may be incorporated into academic conceptual knowledge and resources, allowing them to play an active role in establishing and maintaining the epistemologies associated with them.[81] Hybrid ethnographic methodology emerges as a pivotal tool in the quest to decolonise migration studies in South Asia. Recognising decolonisation as a long-term vision addressing the persistent influences of colonialism, the emphasis shifts towards overturning the migration policies of the government rooted in colonial mentalities.[82] It is not just about the practicalities of migration but about the epistemology i.e., the necessity to decolonise the very knowledge practices that underpin migration studies. Central to this reimagined approach is a keen focus on who conducts the research. *By doing so, postcolonial viewpoints can be incorporated into academic conceptual knowledge and resources, allowing them to play an active role in establishing and maintaining the epistemologies associated with them*. It calls for

unity among different racial and marginal groups, given their shared experience at the crossroads of migration and colonial oppression.[83] Moreover, the process of dissemination of migration knowledge to researchers, policymakers, and activists plays a crucial role in this decolonisation process.[84] This progressive shift promises not just academic reformation, but also an actionable blueprint. Coupled with online and offline strategies, hybrid ethnography can effectively counteract the reductive tendencies that have historically dominated South Asian migration regimes.

This article is part of the author's ongoing Doctoral research on biometric registration and digital identity of Rohingya refugees titled "Techno-Politics of Exclusion: Statelessness, Citizenship and Abandonment of Rohingyas."

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Report

Migrant Asias: Refugees, Statelessness, and Migrant Labour Regimes

By

Debashree Chakraborty [*]

The Seventh Annual Conference titled *Migrant Asias: Refugees, Statelessness and Migrant Labour Regimes* (November 17–19, 2022) was held to mark twenty-five years of the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group's (CRG) existence as a premier research institution working in the fields of migration and forced migration studies. The Conference was a part of CRG's Annual Research and Orientation Workshop on Global Protection of Refugees and Migrants in collaboration with Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and The Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna. The central focus of the Conference, as evident from the title, was to understand the myriad processes of migration in Asia through centuries and the factors which have been responsible for such instances. The Conference also sought to understand whether these processes are homogenous by nature or there is a mélange of diverse, heterogeneous elements at play. The Conference was conceptualised keeping in mind the broader themes of metamorphosis of the contemporary nation state, citizenship rights, the transition of labour in Asia, solidarity, Asia's connections with the other continents and the more cogent and contemporary themes like Partition of the Indian subcontinent, climate migration, etc. The Conference was helmed by the members of the Conference Organising Committee—Anup Shekhar Chakraborty (Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, and CRG), Ishita Dey (Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, South Asian University, New Delhi, and CRG), Sabir Ahamed (National Research Coordinator, Pratichi Institute, Kolkata, and CRG), Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury

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(Professor, Department of Political Science, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, and CRG), Samata Biswas (Assistant professor, Department of English, Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata, and CRG), Sanam Roohi (Fellow, Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities [KWI], Essen, Germany, and CRG), and Sahana Basavapatna (Lawyer, Trial Courts, Bangalore, and CRG). Debashree Chakraborty (Researcher, CRG) coordinated the Conference. The Conference opened with an inaugural session on November 17, 2022, followed by academic panels on November 18–19, 2022, and the concluding session on November 19, 2022. The Conference also featured two special lectures apart from the inaugural/keynote and valedictory addresses.

The keynote address was delivered by Sevasti Trubeta of the Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences, Germany at the inaugural session of the Conference on November 17, 2022. She spoke on the medicalisation of borders. The title of her presentation was "Medicalisation of Racism and Classism in the Context of Migration." The lecture focused on medical racism and medicalised classism in the context of migration. Trubeta connected her lecture on medicalised racism to the intersection of theoretical approaches and classism and highlighted the naturalisation of class membership and the collective representation of mobile precarious workers as potentially infecting bodies. She noted how medicalisation refers to the power of medicine to shape societal relations in regulating and controlling mobility. Just as cultural racism absolutised cultural differences during the colonial era, medicalised racism also absolutises the biomedical perception of disease by seeing the phenomenon of migration as a pathogenic process through pathogenic germs inherent in the bodies of the migrants, like hereditary features, gets transmitted to from one generation to the other. By this logic, the endemicity of disease is located not in geographical locations but in the bodies of inhabitants of such lands. She argued that refugees and migrants are then considered potential vectors of infectious diseases and their mobility becomes a cause of global insecurity. Trubeta took into consideration case studies to substantiate her argument by citing Covid-19 pandemic as an example when migrant workers were ambivalently treated in several countries as essential to the production of food and other provisions as well as emergency services on one hand, and as potentially dangerous carriers of the virus, on the other. She illustrated through images the kind of inhumane treatment these workers had to go through such as blast spraying of sanitisers/fluids on their bodies and cramped spaces in quarantine centres to 'protect' the more privileged classes from them. This kind of treatment, Trubeta concluded, may be considered a new phenomenon, as may be seen in historical examples like Ellis Island or the Mexican mobile workers in the USA at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Following the inaugural lecture, academic sessions were held for the next two days. The sessions were divided into panels on the following themes:

- Seeing Like a State.
- Metamorphosis of the Migrants: State, Migration, and Identity Politics
- Climate Migration: Documents and Distractions
- Solidarity and Agency: Case Studies
- Partition: Texts and Contexts
- Labour and Transition: Then and Now
- Migration and Refugee Issues in and around Central Asia: A Cultural Perspective
- Climate Migration: Crisis and Resources
- Citizenship and Rights to the City
- Asian Mobilities

The panels were set out in a way that each would focus on the cardinal thematic concerns that the Conference intended to focus on. Most of the panels had roughly three presenters but a few had two presenters as well. The panels were of ninety minutes duration each. The presenters came from diverse academic and practitioner backgrounds, thus adding to the diversity of presentations. The panel *Seeing Like a State* had six presenters who presented in parallel sessions. The paper of Ajeet Kumar Pankaj et al., titled "Document and North-Indian Labour Migrants: Governing Labour Mobility in Manipur" explored the various ways migrant labourers have adopted over the years to negotiate with the state. The paper took into consideration the case study of the Northeastern state of Manipur where entry is possible through an Inner Line Permit (ILP) which restricts and regulates movements of non-Indigenous people in the state. The paper focused on how migrants who go to the state to make a living and sustain themselves through continuous negotiations and the harassment they face if they fail to prove their legal status. Baidehi Das, in her paper "Exploring Recent Histories of Re-bordering along Indo-Bangladesh Border: Stories Emerging from Villages Lying along Porous Borders of North 24 Parganas in West Bengal" explored the unwritten rules of control along the Indo-Bangladesh and how the politics at centres of power jeopardise the already difficult lives of people along the bordering areas who live on the throes of neglect and poverty and hardly have any connect to the alleys of power at the national or state capital. Yojak Tamang's paper "The Seasonal Migrant Labourers Living at the Edges of the State" focused on migrant labourers that come to Kalimpong district of West Bengal. He noted that Nepali labourers have been coming to the hill districts of West Bengal since time immemorial but with the creation of independent India and the coming up of borders, the relationship between the Indian state and these labourers has changed manifold. William Singh's paper titled "Border Crossing in Mizoram: Desirable and Unwanted Communities" explored the different dimensions of borders, borderlands, and refugees by historically tracing the

changing nature of cross-border migration between Mizoram and Myanmar. Sonika Gupta's paper titled "Tibetan Rehabilitation in Arunachal: Local State and Geopolitical Anxieties" explored the relationship between Tibetan refugees and the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh in a historical context. These papers explored their respective contexts in the hindsight of 1947 when the Indian state drew borders with all these countries, and also when internal borders were redrawn in the country. Santi Sarkar's paper "The Politics of Populist Policies in West Bengal" talked of the popular policies and schemes in the context of certain areas in the Jhargram district and tea gardens of Dooars in West Bengal. The paper explored how these schemes have affected the migration scene in these years in the past few years.

The panel on *Metamorphosis of the Migrant: State, Migration and Identity Politics* was floated by Rajarshi Dasgupta. The panel has a total of four presentations. Each paper focused on different aspects of migration and labour and drew from diverse geo-political parts of the country. Anasma Gayari's paper titled "A Cosmopolitan Race: Representations of Northeast Migrants in Delhi-NCR" highlighted the racial othering of migrants from Northeast India in the Delhi-NCR zone. Krishanu Bhargav Neog's paper "Migrant as a Political Entrepreneur" argued that the figure of the illegal immigrant generally percolates through popular discourse and digital media. The paper took into consideration the image of Sukur Ali, and his image became comical and was consumed by social media and political parties for electoral campaigns. Bidhan Golay's paper "The Migrant at Home: A Case of the Gorkha Conundrum" explored the historical experience of migration of the Nepalis from the western part of present-day Nepal, particularly after the British took over Darjeeling from Sikkim in 1935. Rajarshi Dasgupta spoke on the overall theme of the panel by dividing the talk into two parts— metamorphosis and the conditions influencing it.

The panel on *Climate Migration: Documents and Distractions* had two presentations. The paper titled "Climate Refugees in Bay of Bengal and Sundarbans" co-authored by Upasana Ghosh and Debojyoti Das stated how climate migration is ingrained in the political economy of deltaic Bengal. The internal refugee crisis and its connections to livelihood stresses that have been amplified by climate change constituted the main focus area of the research. Sohini Sengupta's paper titled "Drought Policy in the Context of Climate Change and 'Post-Humanism': A Desk Review of Indian Droughts" argued that issues related to loss, depletions, disappearances, and collapses of ecosystems are caused by human societies as a result of climate change.

The panel on *Partition: Texts and Contexts* had three presenters. The Panel focused on how the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 continues to echo in contemporary times and how its reflections are visible in artefacts all around us. Anindya Sen and Debashree Chakraborty's paper "Partition, Migration and Identity Formation: Narratives from Southern Assam" explored the lesser-known effects of Partition in South Assam which is a part of Northeast India. The paper discussed how the experience of migration in South Assam is different from those in the eastern and western parts of the country and is dependent on multiple timelines as well and has

given rise to multiple layers of identity construct in the region. Anushmita Mukherjee's paper "Those Forgotten after Partition: Migration and Identity in Debesh Roy's Selected Works" discussed the experience of displacement. The paper drew a context of the Koch Rajbongshis to situate the selected novels which included *Mafassali Brittanto* and *Tista Parer Brittanto*. The paper noted how migrants, post-Partition, settled in India without familial protection, social security, and networks of solidarity, lost all points of reference and identity and had a hard time negotiating the urban space to engage in everyday acts of resistance. Samata Biswas in the paper "What Does the Border Mean for Children? Narratives from the Indo-Bangladesh Borderlands in Manjira Saha's *Chhotoder Border*" analysed narratives from Manjira Saha's book which had visual representations of how children in border areas view their lives on fringes. She observed that three recurring tropes emerged in the analysis—the border fences with lights and barbed wires, the Border Security Force (BSF) which the children often confuse with Police, and members of gangs smuggling drugs and goods. The paper analysed the relationship these children have with BSF and remarked that the premise of the relationship is not monolithic. The children also depicted the threat of violence and illegality in the risk of smuggling in the area and the children are not aware of the differential nature of legitimacy and illegitimacy and the complicity of the BSF in smuggling through the act of taking bribes.

The panel on *Solidarity and Agency: Case Studies* too had three presenters. Joseph K Lalfakzuala's paper titled "People's Response to the Influx of Myanmar Refugees in Mizoram: Implication and Limitation of State Policy" noted the traditional bonds that have existed for centuries between Mizoram and Myanmar. He highlighted that Mizoram has traditionally sheltered refugees from Myanmar for centuries and ever since democracy became a contested issue in Myanmar following the multiple military coups beginning in 1989, Mizoram has not only offered shelter to the refugees from Myanmar but also accommodated their livelihood and facilitated all measures for the education of the refugee children. Johnny K.D. and Ankita Singh's paper titled "Urban Renewal Stage in City's Life and Its Impact on Slums and Slum Dwellers: A Case Study of Noida City, Uttar Pradesh" denoted slums as a by-product of the urbanisation process. The paper focused on the rehabilitation schemes for slum dwellers and noted that the current schemes in Delhi-NCR are inadequate in terms of compensation for displacement, inadequate and poor-quality housing, health and education, etc. Deeksha's paper "On the Move for Care: Conceptualising Migration for Healthcare in Asia" contextualised medical travel in Asia. The paper focused on the rising popularity of medical travel from the Global North to the Global South and the challenges that come up in the system of caregiving. Drawing from ethnographic narratives of her field study done in Delhi, the paper highlighted the several ways the regime of medical mobilities is getting created in South Asia. Rajat Kanti Sur's paper "Solidarity for Survival: Cooperative Building as a Method to Overcome Vulnerability" discussed the role of cooperatives in fostering solidarity among communities like that of sex workers, ASHA workers, etc. The paper contends that cooperatives might aid in making the

lives of the underprivileged better and accord them with a life of dignity and justice.

The next panel on *Labour and Transition: Then and Now* had four presenters. Raj Kumar Thakur's paper "Coolie Question in the Age of Transition, the 1940s to 1960s" drew up a deep observation of the lives of Coolies in Assam from the 1940s to the 1960s. The paper focused on the production of tea as a global commodity and on the coolies who were employed in the production of the same. Migration was a global phenomenon during the colonial period and the coolies who came to Assam to work in the plantations were part of the global phenomenon but after the Independence, these coolies were seen in a negative light. Their right to a dignified life was contested under the light of indigenous politics in Assam. The paper focused on how the lives of the coolies changed after the transition of power during the 1940 and how the Independence of the country changed it all the more. Emirilda Thabah presented her paper titled "Coal Mining and Migration in Meghalaya." Its focus was on the migrant workers who go for rat hole mining in Meghalaya. She spoke about the legal issues that plague the issue of illegal mining in the state. Rituparna Datta in the paper titled "Coolies, Climate and Territories of Mobility" tried to look at climate change and acclimatisation to it as a method of understanding coolie mobility and the dialogism between their belonging and social welfare within the empire. Kamal Thapa Khestri's "Protection of Nepalese Workers in India and Nepal" focused on the legal frameworks of protection of Nepalese workers in India and the risks and problems faced by them and the ways of overcoming those challenges. The paper highlighted the legal mechanisms and the border functions that are important for aiding them as part of their protection.

The panel on *Migration and Refugee Issues In and Around Central Asia: A Socio-Cultural Perspective* had two presenters. Nandini Bhattacharya's presentation on "Labour Migration and Its Social Impact on Post-Soviet Tajikistan: An Overview Along Cinematic Lines" explored the cinematic universe in Tajikistan. The paper analysed five films from the country and noted the similarities among the films in terms of how these represent migration and its associated factors. Her analysis also included a film that has been made by a migrant worker with money saved from his earnings. The film goes at length to talk about the various issues faced by migrant workers. The paper explored the unseen lives of migrant workers of Tajikistan who are neglected by their own political and economic systems. Veena Ramchandran's paper "Exile, Liminality, and Nation: A Study on Tibet in Exile in India" examined the statelessness of the Tibetan exile community in the Indian state, with specific reference to the youth in exile. The paper noted that people in exile are forced to adapt to the host countries.

The next panel on *Climate Migration: Crisis and Resources* also had two presenters. Nirmal Kumar Mahato's paper "Climate Migrants, Resource Scarcity and the Sustainability Issue: The Case of Jungle Mahals Region" traced deforestation by the colonial state that altered human-nature relationships in the Jangal-Mahals and Manbhum regions of West Bengal. Shatabdi Das' paper "Kolkata and Climate Crisis" highlighted the pattern of

changes in land cover and landuse in Kolkata while delving into the trend of climate hazards and their consequences over the last two decades.

The last panel of the Conference, *Asian Mobilities*, had two presenters as well. Ali Dad Mohammadi presented online. His paper, "The Tragedy Overload: Suppression to Exodus to Afghan Hindus and Sikhs (1992–2021)" located the tragedies befalling Afghan Hindus and Sikhs who constituted a large population group in Afghanistan in the 1970s. The paper located the push factors that lead to individuals in the community to migrate out of it. Anita Sengupta's paper "The Pandemic and Governance in Central Asia" briefed about the authoritarian expanse of the state. The author emphasised the securitised approach to a public health emergency in the region and the suppression of information, especially by medical health professionals.

The Conference ended with a Valedictory Lecture by Ranabir Samaddar on November 19, 2022. The lecture was titled "An Intelligent Guide to the Responsibility Paradox." The lecture reflected upon the dual nature of responsibility. The notion of responsibility has traditionally been seen from socio-legal and philosophical perspective whereas the political reflection on responsibility takes place relatively less often, more so because political ideas tend to be focused on sovereignty rather than responsibility. The paper also questioned the nature of power and responsibility at the margins. The lecture focused on a postcolonial interrogation of the global protection regime and of the refugees and the stateless.

The Conference also had two special lectures. The online lecture titled "A Critical Genealogy of the Forced Migratory Labour in the Asian Mediterranean Sea: Trajectory, Logistic, and a Few Halting Points Today" by Joye C.H Liu and Jonathan Parhusip talked about how the sea routes facilitate migration in Northeast and Southeast Asia through the Asian Mediterranean Sea. The paper focused on the nature of forced labour and institutionalised logistics, the role played by middlemen in handling the slave trade and whether it works as a surveillance mechanism, etc. The other lecture was given by Lydia Potts. This was the Jayanta Dasgupta Memorial Lecture and was titled "Gig Economy and Migration: The Future of the Work or of the Precariat?" The Lecture stressed the significance of the gig economy in the Global South, particularly India, even with the dearth of statistics and data. The lecture noted that key dimensions such as privatisation, liberalisation, and deregulation, along with the deconstruction of the nation states have led to the emergence of the gig economy.

Book Review

Everyday State and the
Politics of Natural Disaster

By

Sayan Kandar [*]

In the Wake of Disaster: Islamists, the State and a Social Contract in Pakistan, **Ayesha Siddiqi; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019; pp.196, ₹475; ISBN- 13: 9781108472920**

The flood disasters in 2010 and 2011 in Pakistan remain one of the deadliest in the history of Pakistan. The country's southern part was the worst affected region with unprecedented damage to infrastructure and crops. Ayesha Siddiqui's book *In the Wake of Disaster: Islamists, the State and a Social Contract* (2019) explains the political construction of a large-scale disaster which, in turn, highlights critical aspects of the state-citizen relationship. In exploring the political landscapes produced in the aftermath of a large-scale disaster the book challenges two linear and reductionist metanarratives—a fraught, fragmented, and "non-existent" state and the absence of a social contract between the state and its citizens in Pakistan. These two often overemphasise feudal politics, patronage networks, prioritising security–military funding over a developmental project, powerful hereditary relationships, etc., in Pakistan. This book is based on the three worst affected districts of Thatta, Badin, and Tharparkar in Sindh province (lower) of Pakistan. The debate on the "social contract" in Pakistan is often marred by repeated civil, political, and ethnic tensions and unrest. One group of authors argues that there is no relationship between the Pakistani state and its citizens, creating not only a political void but also the "biggest fault line" in Pakistan's history. Another group sees this as a fragmented social structure deeply divided along class, ethnic, or kinship

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lines. Challenging such a "fixed" and "prejudiced" image of social contract, the book attempts to show that this is a space for constant negotiation and rewriting of terms between the actors. The social contract in the post-disaster space was thought to be erased because the state was considered a failure to provide basic rights to the citizens.

Divided into five chapters the book does not intend to add to an already existing literature on political economy that establishes causal linkages between weather-related variables and changes in voting patterns, rather it tries to identify various processes of change in the aftermath of a disaster. The first chapter discusses the analytical framework, the conceptual foundation, and the methodology followed to do this research. Siddiqi describes how ideas such as rights and entitlements change depending on different contexts. Amartya Sen's *Poverty and Famines* and de Waal serve as references to argue that in postcolonial contexts these rights and entitlements cannot be thought of as monolithic, rather there are multiple elements at play. Categories such as citizenship and rights are blurry and porous in the postcolonial nations. Pelling and Dill on the Sichuan earthquake in China, the Hindu Right political agenda post-disaster in the Kachchh region of Gujarat, and the USA flood disasters are some of the examples that Siddiqi uses to demonstrate the established links between disaster and social contract. She uses an anthropological mode of enquiry and uses an intensive research technique to generate insights into the interviewees' lived experiences. Instead of following a positivist philosophical tradition, the book utilises interpretive philosophy because the latter interprets the ways humans attach meaning to and experience their material world. Siddiqi conducted 118 interviews across 96 flood-affected hamlets to understand why, despite the existence of social and hereditary relationships, the state is the central social and political entity, one that is called upon by its citizens to deliver in the aftermath of challenges such as the 2010 and 2011 floods.

Chapter two delves into the intricate dynamics of local politics in the districts of Thatta, Badin, and Tharparkar, challenging common perceptions of feudal dominance and religious influence. Despite popular narratives depicting these districts as under the sway of feudal families and religious leaders, the chapter offers a nuanced perspective. Conducted in the rural interior of Sindh province, the research refutes the notion of an exclusively agrarian-based socio-economic structure dominated by landlord-tenant relationships. Instead, it highlights the presence of an autonomous state politics not solely defined by traditional social structures. While acknowledging the importance of social relations, the study reveals a desire among locals for interaction with a compassionate state and the exercise of their rights, countering assumptions of an absent state and passive citizenship. The research reveals that political families in each of the three districts expose various features of the state beyond simple patronage and kinship ties. Chapter three offers an ethnography of the state, examining how it is perceived and experienced at the local level in the lower Sindh province. Drawing on the concept of the "everyday state," the chapter challenges conventional notions of a cohesive state, revealing instead a personalised

version shaped by mundane interactions between government officials and citizens. The research unveils a vernacular understanding of the state characterised by individualised encounters at state offices for various needs. People use terms like "*hakumat*," "*sarkar*," and "*riyasat*" to define the state, emphasising its role in providing services and protecting rights. Even amidst natural disasters like floods, citizens invoke the state for assistance, highlighting a lived experience of citizenship centered on rights and entitlements. Chapter four explores how the aftermath of the 2010 and 2011 floods spurred a push for rights-based citizenship, blurring traditional divides in citizenship literature. The demand for greater rights from the state emerged from a dynamic state-citizen relationship post-disaster, reshaping the social contract. This demand for rights led to a transformation in Pakistan's disaster management approach, framing relief and services not as acts of kindness but as entitlements. The chapter illustrates an "indigenisation" of the democratic process, ensuring citizens' rights through state intervention, despite some administrative challenges. Chapter five challenges the notion of a militant group like Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) taking over post-disaster spaces. JuD's influence depended heavily on state support, and its attempt to capitalise on the situation was hindered when local administration and political leadership opposed it. The chapter highlights the rarity of basic entitlement failures, rejecting the idea of JuD emerging as a significant political actor in the absence of a social contract breakdown. Despite JuD's visibility, it lacked the progressive state-citizen interaction observed post-disaster.

The conclusion emphasises the existence of a social contract in lower Sindh, incorporating elements of rights and entitlements. It suggests extending this analysis to other rural and backward parts of Pakistan, emphasising the need for deeper and more nuanced examinations of citizenship beyond oppressive traditional structures. In this context, notions of rights, entitlements, and the state ("sarkar") play crucial roles in shaping state-citizen relationships and patronage dynamics.

Book Review

Fractured Nations, Fractured Selves: Looking at the Past, Present, and Future of Partition in the Bengal Context

By

Ashmita Saha, Mallika Ghosh Sarbadhikary [*]

Banglar Partition-Katha: Uttar Prajanmer Khoj vol. 1, the first of a three-part series, edited by Manan Kumar Mandal is based on the interviews and surveys from the project "Bengal Partition Repository" by Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU). The subtitle *Uttar Prajanmer Khoj* offers a window to look at the continuity of trauma of the survivors of Partition. Mandal traces the multiple Partitions that the subcontinent experienced and notes that the crucial turn in Partition Studies began by moving away the location of history from official documents and government archives to the stories narrated by ordinary people, the tales which they pass down through the generations. The common human becomes the central character of this mode of history-writing/narrating/recording. This was also marked by a movement from the why's and how's of Partition to the post-Partition lived reality, the complex social and psychological implications of this event. He also draws one's attention to an oft-neglected issue that is intrinsic in the Partition experience of Punjab, both in India and in Pakistan. Quoting Pippa Virdee's *From the*

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Ashes of 1947, Reimagining Punjab (2018), he talks about how the idea of a consolidated Punjabi identity has been dismantled by the division. While the Punjabi Muslims residing in Pakistan have forsaken their mother tongue in favour of Urdu, the Punjabi populace residing in India has been absorbed into the larger Hindu-Sikh identity and has even gradually accepted some variations of Hindi as their language. This is very different from the Partition experience of Bengal, both East and West, where linguistic and cultural identity occupies a place of prominence over one's religious identity.

The title of the book *Banglar Partition-Katha* becomes important as well when one becomes aware of the indigenous storytelling tradition of India which is called *katha*. Strewn with instances of ordinary people leading ordinary lives that are disrupted by Partition and marred by gaps, pauses, and silences which are hardly surprising in the case of trauma survivors, the narratives that line the pages of this book deeply resemble the ancient storytelling tradition. As noted by the editor himself, some of the interviews were collected over the course of several sessions, while some were pieced together from anecdotes and conversations by the interviewers themselves. Moreover, the introduction serves as a worthy preface that prepares the ground for an engaging conversation (*kathapakathan*) between the reader and the interviews, the reader and the essays, a conversation that facilitates one to become both critical and compassionate of Partition and its subsequent players.

The 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent, once seen as a singular isolated cataclysmic event, has since been perceived differently as a part of a long-drawn-out, ongoing event. This is especially relevant in the case of the Bengal province which has lived through several divisions—the first Partition of Bengal in 1905, the Partition of the country in 1947, and the 1971 Liberation War which led to the creation of Bangladesh. Moreover, owing to the porous borders which paradoxically separate these nation states while also making way for the process of a continual influx of refugees, the very idea of Partition has become complicated. The book undertakes the task of entangling this complex history of Partition. In its efforts to bring to the fore the common people on either side of the border who lost the agency to determine their selfhood owing to international decisions, the NSOU project "Bengal Partition Repository" set out to record oral histories of these individuals in the form of interviews, snippets of their writings, letters, diaries, photographs, and leaflets.

Divided into two parts, the first half of the book consists of thirty such interviews from the 24 Parganas, Nadia, Hooghly, Murshidabad, South Dinajpur, and Jalpaiguri. Titled *Jibanbhashya*, this section presents a rich variegated collection of the life stories of individuals who have lived through the long shadow of Partition, all of whom are aged above seventy and belong to a primarily rural background. They are a part of the mass who populate the villages and suburbs and can be seen living on both sides of the rail tracks, they are often perceived as a by-product of the entire refugee-generating enterprise of Partition. Having faced a serious disruption owing to Partition and being deprived of the chance to get a proper education, most of these

individuals have never had the opportunity to record their narratives in writing. However, this has not deterred them from passing on their tales of loss, displacement, rehabilitation, trauma, and triumph to their subsequent generations in the form of oral histories. It is this mine of memories, emotions, and information that the book taps into. Alternating between a first-person narrative and a third-person narrative as and when deemed necessary, these *Jibanbhashya*-s or life-narratives can be traced along three different pathways: a) childhood memories, b) memories of life and the surrounding areas during migration from East Bengal, c) memories of seeking refuge in West Bengal and gradually rebuilding a new life in this new terrain.

 The interviews travel across a wide range of emotions, nostalgic remembrances of the past, deep sighs resonating with a feeling of repressed anger, and a sense of loss and dispossession, which capture the multifaceted aspects of Partition as it played out in the lives of the ordinary people. Rumour, hearsay, and the politics associated with it, the *Bangaal-Ghoti* divide and gradual reconciliation, communal harmony, and religious tolerance experienced by these people during and after Partition, the issue of property exchange, and the failure of the government to provide proper rehabilitation—all of these issues reveal the fault lines at the heart of the dominant discourse of Partition as propagated by the colonial and the later governments. While one of the interviewees laments the distortion of history and how they had experienced it, other wonders at the absurdity of his particular situation since he had been forced to flee his native land when faced with aggression at the hands of their Muslim neighbours but had managed to find sustenance at the kindness of some Muslim landowners. The interviews in this volume thus try to challenge the current trends of demonisation of particular communities at the hands of the ruling dispensation. While some of the interviewees long for a tiny glimpse of their birthplace, some others are frightened by the very prospect of having to return to that long-forgotten land, a bad dream they believe would be made a reality by the National Register of Citizens (NRC) scheme proposed by the Government of India. Moreover, repeated references to the Matua community, a religious group of Namasudras who migrated to India from East Pakistan during Partition, and its efforts to eke out a separate identity and existence without being subsumed under the larger middle class Hindu identity make clear the underlying class-caste biases which were at work. Placed in the context of the current political scenario, it reminds one how disempowered groups and people divested of their natural rights at times end up becoming pawns at the hands of different political groups. Made up of thirty such interviews that portray different kinds of emotions, this volume challenges the very notion of homogenisation and the unfair hierarchy that draws boundaries between nations, societies, and individuals.

 Moreover, the fact that the hegemonic forces at work do not always succeed in flattening out all pockets of resistance and that humans will persist in the face of adversity is evident from the second part of the book which consists of six essays. Shaktinath Jha's essay on the resistance built up by the *bauls* and *fakirs* of Bengal against Partition is very incisive. Jha adopts a

different perspective to look at the baul songs which are usually celebrated for an all-encompassing spirituality that they promote. He draws ample references from the songs composed by Lalon Fakir, Shah Abdul Karim, and other bauls to illustrate how the baul-fakirs of Bengal kept alive the tradition of harmony amid Partition and also spread the message of humanity against the ravaging forces of fanaticism and communalism. Anindita Dasgupta traces the formation of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra and discusses the role played by the radio broadcasting centre during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Amid the all-pervasive totalitarian devastation, the radio broadcasts immediately after the Pakistani army staged a massacre in Dhaka emboldened the masses, boosted their morale during this period of genocide, and eventually broadcasted the Declaration of Independence. Dasgupta also highlights the significant contributions made by Akashvani Kolkata during this period of turmoil and examines how this single instance of a concerted effort can be read as an ode to the two nations' national and historical consciousness. A relatively less discussed but very controversial topic, "The Enemy Property Act" in post-Partition India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh has come up in the article by Uttam Kumar Biswas. He questions the implications of the imposition of such a law, which was a remnant of the two World Wars, on the Indian subcontinent without taking into account the complexities present in this context. Drawing upon several case studies and surveys, he further points out the differences inherent in the implementation of this law in the Western and Eastern parts of the subcontinent while mainly focusing on its application in the context of Bengal. The two research articles on Coopers Women's Camp and the border village of Charmeghna written by Pradip Adhikari, Dipika Mondal, and Anudev Mazumder respectively are based on field studies. Featuring interviews with those still residing in the said camp, the former article traces the progressively deteriorating condition of the camp that had once been curated carefully by Bidhan Chandra Roy, the erstwhile Chief Minister of Bengal. By blending oral histories with empirical data, the article lends a certain immediacy to the experience of the camp residents all while questioning the current government's reluctance to look into the matter. Anudev Mazumder's informative article is also a valuable addition to this collection. Shedding light on an issue described by the author as "adverse land" which has cropped up in Charmeghna, a village stuck in the territorial dispute between India and Bangladesh, owing to Partition, this reportage attempts to assess the unfavourable living conditions of the people residing in Charmeghna. The final article of the collection by Subhasis Mondal examines the role played by Rabindranath Tagore in protest against the 1905 Bengal Partition through the magazine *Bangadarshan Nabaparyay* of which he was the editor from 1901 to 1906. This goes a long way to show that instead of remaining as a distant observer residing in an ivory tower Tagore took up his pen to resist the forces of colonial oppression. Mondal has also provided a list of the patriotic and anti-imperialist writings that were published in the magazine during this period. These essays and articles, dealing with issues that were relevant during the 1947 Partition, the 1905 Partition, and the 1971 Liberation War, as well as issues that are relevant to this day, once again

reiterate the intricacies inherent in this peculiar event which has the past, the present and the future enmeshed in its very being.

Comprising of both first-hand accounts and essays and research articles, the book provides a more panoramic view of the struggle and presents a moving insight into the lives of ordinary people who could only act as mere puppets at the hands of the nation states. This continuous interplay between the personal and the political is what makes the book engaging. The appendix contains a complete catalogue of 254 interviews taken in the first phase of the project undertaken by the "Bengal Partition Repository" which adds to the ongoing process of oral history archiving and also promises to be useful for future researchers. It thus becomes a testament to the human penchant for trying to chalk out new avenues of free expression, kept alive by both individual and group efforts, upon encountering the homogenising forces of the hegemonic powers.

Book Review

The Borders Through Lived Experiences

By

Sipra Mukherjee *

Negotiating Borders and Borderlands: The Indian Experience, **edited by Gorky Chakraborty and Supurna Banerjee; New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2023; pp. 388; ₹915; ISBN: 9789354423741**

The book is an anthology of essays that discuss issues raised by the existence of borders, both tangible and intangible, and the quotidian lives of the people living in these borderlands. The book is divided into two parts. The first part which has an introduction and a chapter by Nimmi Kurian, lays out the land and the perspectives that the book seeks to cover. The rest of the book is divided according to geographical borderlands. Covering the northern half of India, the essays range from the India-Pakistan border on the west to the eastern India-Bangladesh and India-Myanmar borders, to the northern India-China and India-Tibet borders and their borderlands. The last subdivision within this second part deals with "Invisible Borders" that exist within the political territory of the nation state.

Distancing itself from border studies that perceive borders "through the eyes of the State," Chakraborty and Banerjee attempt to redress the imbalance born out of state-centric studies by shifting the gaze to the people who inhabit the borderlands. They situate their de-centring within contemporary globalisation's assertion of space and spatiality which go beyond the nation states' performances of territoriality and bordering. In their inclusion of the very heterogeneous geopolitical regions, the book makes a commendable effort to address the differences among these many border areas. Most of the essays draw on both archival data and fieldwork carried out amidst the diverse communities residing at the borders.

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The first chapter by Nimmi Kurian is a fascinating delineation of the book's thrust area emphasising the unreal state discourse that is often out of sync with the historical realities of the borderlands. She points to the dismal gap in knowledge between subregional initiatives and the predominantly politico-military understanding of the borders that characterises the state's discourse. The statist discourse has chosen to ignore the sub-border stakeholders, treating the areas as peripheral and distant from the centre, that need to be patrolled and controlled. Yet the sub-border stakeholders' discourse is capable of yielding rich methodological and conceptual insights into the borderlands and could address "the biases in knowledge production," The state's obsession with the systemic has resulted in neglect of the actual connections, negotiations, and struggles on the border lands which have remained under-theorised, placing the state's narrative in an analytical cul-de-sac. Drawing on examples of co-governance that have emerged as felt realities in South and Southeast Asia to tackle common concerns born of environmental crises or local trade difficulties, she argues for the need to look from the systemic to subterranean sub-regionalism, which is alive and thriving, albeit outside the statist policies. The need is to localise foreign policy, and to "socialise the State."

The first section of the book deals with the India-Bangladesh border and includes essays on the Bengal and the Assam borders. Debdutta Chowdhury looks at the complex legacy of the Partition. While memories and nostalgia figure large in Partition narratives, there is a quotidian connect with the border in cities like Dinajpur and Siliguri which, she argues, is very different. Once at the systemic centre, they are now border towns which have remained vibrant hubs of trade and business, with the border functioning as an active aspect of their present realities. The lived border reality here includes the re-linking of old ties in official and unofficial ways, with or without the state's support. The next chapter by Deboleena Sengupta uses the example of the Indian and Bangladeshi enclaves to explore, through the everyday negotiations required of the inhabitants, a citizenship that went against the territorial concept of the nation state. Binayak Dutta studies the Partition of Assam through the unique history of this place to note how old suspicions have been kept alive, continuing the concepts of foreigners/outsiders. Using archival data, the chapter traces the metamorphosis of the Assamese/Bengali conflict of the colonial age into the postcolonial present to show how the problematic CAA and NRC have become live issues in contemporary Assam.

The next section on the India-Myanmar border begins with Pum Khan Pau's chapter on the Zo people inhabiting the Indo-Burma border. Situated as they are in Manipur and Mizoram in India, and in the Chin state in Myanmar, the borders of the space occupied by the Zo have been repeatedly redrawn by Burmese and British colonisers. Despite the persistent borders, there has been a continuity of ethnic affinity among the people that has been ignored in postcolonial India. Pum Khan Pau recounts how diverse historical forces like the coming of Christianity, western education, ethnic links, and even natural disasters have revived and forged links, making them view "the other side" more as transborder kinsmen than foreigners. N. William Singh's

chapter on the borderland of Chin-Mizoram focuses on Mizo societies divided by borders but connected by institutional networks, and by the personal ethos of culture and dreams of the ethnic community's unity that transcend nation states. Like the earlier chapter, this chapter too foregrounds the role played by various histories and institutions like the Gospel Mail, songs and even famines to create a well-knit community.

The third part is on the Indo-China border. The first chapter here is by Sarah Hilaly who, focussing on Arunachal Pradesh, draws on studies that deal with issues of states and borders in East Asia. The chapter offers insights into the tenuous percolation of state power in these inner frontiers of Asia, characterised by high altitude landscapes. She discusses how the new forms of cartographic control introduced by the colonising British was at odds with the flexibility of connections that the multi-ethnic people of this region were accustomed to, a gap that has continued into the postcolonial period. The second chapter authored by Biswanath Saha and Gorky Chakraborty takes up the hill resort of Darjeeling in West Bengal. Using colonial documents and archival data on migrations and political movements, they study the political inclinations and traditions of this space which was made into a "place" in the spatial imaginary of the British, and consequently a part of their larger project of state formation across the eastern Himalayas. The chapter locates the roles played by discrete colonial initiatives and the confluences and conflicts of cultures that have been in flux within this space through history, enabling a holistic perspective of the present Gorkhaland Movement.

The fourth section is on the India-Pakistan border. The first chapter here by Tarif Sohail and Asifa Zunaidha F. is an ethnographic study that explores daily life and the experience of citizenship in the border area in the Poonch district beside the LoC. Carried out over a period of three years in two villages, it surveys how the normalisation of violence occurs, the need for security and survival overriding issues of nationality or citizenship. The second chapter by Zahida Rehman Jatt studies the practice of religions on the borders, using as case studies the scattered Sindhi community and noting the intra-religious inclusivity in the performance of religions practised at the borders.

The final section on Invisible Borders deals first, with a chapter by Subhasri Ghosh, on the *ghati-bangal* communal conflict in West Bengal in the post-Partition times. Through a study of the areas of Calcutta where these two communities are settled or did settle post-Partition, the intangible borders of identities are explored. The second chapter by Thanggoulen Kipgen is on the Kukis who are residents of Delhi. Based upon interviews, it throws light on the social boundaries within the mainland of India that cause north-east migrants to be ghettoised allegedly because of their food habits and clothes and, in a predictable turn of the mind, the women to be homogenised as "easy." The final essay by Abhijit Guha is an interesting case study on how the sudden appearance of a land, ungoverned and unrecognised by the state, was territorialised by marginal villagers, all from the vulnerable sections of society. He takes up the appearance of a *char*, a sandbank, formed near the village Dahi in Paschim Medinipur district after heavy floods. With no legal provision

governing the *char*, the situation held ample potential for conflict among the villagers. Guha outlines the negotiations that the villagers entered into amongst themselves and the "rules" they formulated in order to transform this "no-State's-land" area into a workable agricultural piece of territory, giving us a unique insight into the appropriation of land by a community at the grassroots.

The volume, held together by its focus on lived realities at the borderlands, is a satisfying read and will be a welcome contribution to border studies. The anthology would have profited much from a greater inclusion of maps and tables. The final section of the book on the invisible borders is supported by these, possibly because the authors felt the need to concretise the abstract nature of the borders discussed in this section. However, many of the earlier chapters, dealing with movements across borders, shifting borders, or changing demography, could have included diagrams and tables, the details of which are largely already contained within the text. One must, however, congratulate the authors for the detailed data that have been included, whether tabled or not.

The structuring of an anthology is always a difficult task and the editors here have chosen to use geographical divisions. This is an excellent decision given the confusing range of issues that constitute the geopolitical and geosocial borders of the Indian state. However, a note on the different methodologies used in the many chapters may have helped. Given that the study is on the contemporary experience and understanding of borders through the lived realities of the people, most of the researchers have used both historical archives and fieldwork. A few of the essays have, however, used one or the other of these approaches, leading to some unevenness in reading.

Though dealing with different borders and, consequently, different periods of history, the chapters are all held together by their collective attention to the interplay between territorialisation of the state and the social dynamics associated with such territorialisation. The essays do address the need stated in the introduction and Kurian's first chapter to focus on the hybrid, non-state policy networks and their role as "bridge-builders" across the many borders, many of which have not crystallised as borders on the ground. The book will be a valuable reference for scholars of the social sciences, humanities, anthropology, policy studies, and development studies.

NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

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