# Migrant Identity at the Intersection of Postcolonialism and Modernity

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## Abstract

The post-Partition Indian state has become the place of residence for significant undocumented migrants from erstwhile East Bengal as well as present-day Bangladesh. The presence of these migrants has led to contentious questions of citizenship, residency, identity, belonging and legality. Migrants' identity is caught between the dilemma of pre-existing cultural markers based on differences of language, religion, caste, and the modernist approach, based on progressive civic ideals, which seeks to homogenise those identities under the category of homogenising citizenship. Moreover, such categorisation does not acknowledge the subjective experiences of different identity groups. The present paper drawing on fieldwork in West Bengal argues that the identity of migrants from East Bengal and Bangladesh is shaped by border making discourses, existing labour market transcending nation-state boundaries and religious identities. The universal marker of citizenship inside the space of nation-state does not do justice to the complex identities these migrants inhabit in the course of migration and everyday life both in the country of origin as well as the destination.

## Introduction

How does one define a migrant caught between the dilemma of pre-existing cultural markers based on differences of language, religion, caste or class, and the modernist approach, based on progressive civic ideals, which is aimed at objectification and measurement? The paper attempts to unravel migrant identity as a politico-religious category shaped by historical impulses over the decades following Partition and through being subjected to surveillance mechanisms devised by the state to decide the extent of migrants' presence in the country through enumeration. Modernist attempts in the postcolonial context represent a paradox and pose questions about a migrant's identity, and hence emerges the problematic of definition.

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The paper grapples with the intersection of these two domains. In doing so, it excavates how citizenship in India is conditioned by the ideological differences between a homogeneous identity and a postcolonial identity of the post-Partition Indian state, cultural markers and subjective constructions. It thereby addresses the persistent tension owing to the imposition of a concrete, homogeneous frame striving for an objective redressal of the situation, contrarily characterised by heterogeneity. In other words, the paper is aligned with a Foucauldian analysis that problematises the Weberian dichotomy between tradition and modernity, state and society.

Ambiguity towards language and religion forms the demarcating threshold of belonging in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The Indian state has attempted to detect and deport migrants from Bangladesh at various times, resulting in hidden or unofficial movements of the population across India-Bangladesh borders. Population mobility from Bangladesh to India has become a pertinent issue of our times. In light of this, it becomes crucial to revisit existing conceptualisations of citizenship, state, residency, identity and identifier.

Since migration in the Indian subcontinent, across Bengal (East and West) and Assam, relies largely upon pre-existing patterns, the creation of nation-states—of India and Pakistan, the eastern section of which became Bangladesh—and the establishment of international borders triggered bordered existences. Such anxieties have been highlighted by scholars such as Baruah (2009) and Samaddar (1999) who stress the integrated labour market across undivided Bengal and the pre-existing labour mobilities shaped by the demand for labourers in tea gardens and agricultural lands, while Banerjee (2013) moves on to explore the arbitrariness of the border-making exercise. She understands borders as discriminatory territorialisation, which eventually resulted in massive displacements and forced migration in South Asia, coupled with the proliferation of the concepts of aliens and/or illegal migrants. Drawing from narratives from both sides and the above literature, it becomes emphatic that undocumented migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal is an everyday reality. However, rather than looking at them as illegal mobility, such mobilities may be understood as contesting cartographic impositions as they follow precolonial and pre-Partition routes. Hence attributing objective markers of identity to the fissured postcolonial situation invites discomfort and calls for revisiting of cartographic imposition. The article explores the limitations and anxieties levied by such holistic frameworks and in so doing accounts West Bengal as a receiving area of mobile populations.

The paper begins with a brief introductory context of this cross-border migration and its trends and repercussions, moving on to examine the evolution of the category of the refugee and to throw light on national culture and sub-nationalist tendencies. It then proceeds to unravel the epistemologies of population mobilities in South Asia, the historical trajectory of mobility from Bangladesh to India and locates the politicisation of identity. The paper culminates in a focus on the contingency of the political boundary and the subjective conceptions of

surveillance, an inevitable consequence of the multiple realities in a postcolonial context. The paper is partly based on brief fieldwork carried out in two localities within the Basirhat I Community Development Block of the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal.

## Implications of Illegality: Blurred Statelessness and Refugeehood

According to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is 'any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (The Refugee Convention 1951). However, India is not a signatory to this convention, and its applicability in South Asia is also challenged by a history going back to pre-Partition times. In fact, refugee as a category emerged only as a by-product of the making of postcolonial nation-states in the twentieth century (Singh 2010) as, in the process of homogenising the nation, the modern nation-state pushed out those who did not 'belong', leaving them with no option but to look beyond the territory they had traditionally lived in and identified themselves with. This led to their 'dramatic metamorphosis' (Singh 2010, 223), as they transformed from residents to refugees.

Of significance also is the lack of concord between the sending and receiving countries. These have been analysed by scholars such as Banerjee, Basu Raychaudhury and Ghosh (2016) and Ahmed (2000) who show that the dearth of dialogue results in uncertainty about the prospects of the migrants, who become in-between people and are rendered stateless. Much of the migration across the Bangladesh-India border, most of which happens because of climatic, environmental and/or politico-religious factors, remains undocumented; neither is there any universal or international/national paradigm advocating for inclusivity of the undocumented Bangladeshi migrants. While animosity around migration from Bangladesh persists in the receiving area, the state deliberately looks away from the phenomenon. This approach hints at a subtle effort to maintain ambiguity around cross-border migration and/or the definition of an alien, making it difficult to distinguish legal from illegal migrants.

The contemporary reference to migration from Bangladesh through perceived illegal means must be understood in reference to how illegality evolved. This dates back to the time of the birth of the postcolonial state. The immigrant from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was referred to as 'displaced' till the government decided to wind up rehabilitation benefits for them in 1958. The Government of India defined the term 'displaced person' as one 'who had entered India (who left or who was compelled to leave his home in East Pakistan on or after 15 October 1947) for disturbances or fear of such disturbances or on account of setting up of the two dominions of India and Pakistan' (Annual Report of the Department of Rehabilitation 1965–66, 1967, 107 [cited in Basu Raychaudhury 2012, 65]). Hindus who had left East Pakistan before 15 October 1947 due to insecurity resulting from communal tension were

excluded from this definition since displaced persons, according to the above definition, implied only those who migrated after the above-mentioned cut off date. Also, with the passport system yet to be introduced, the refugees had citizenship rights in both the states and, therefore, the Indian government probably thought the term 'displaced' to be more suitable than 'refugee', as Basu Raychaudhury (2012, 67) explains. Moreover, after India's independence 15 August 1947, an extended period of two months was given to the people to settle themselves in the country of their choice. However, such people termed as the displaced were later classified into the categories of 'old migrants' and 'new migrants'. The former referred to those who migrated between October 1946 and 31 March 1958, while the latter comprised those who arrived between 1 January 1964 and 25 March 1971 (Manual of Refugee, Relief and Rehabilitation 2001, 1 [cited in Basu Raychaudhury 2012, 65]).

It is important to note that many people crossing over to West Bengal between 1958 and 1964 were excluded from these classifications of migrants. Those who came from East Pakistan to India with 'migration certificates', were treated as refugees and, in many cases, were sent to the camps because they needed relief and rehabilitation for their survival. As discussed earlier, India is not a signatory and beneficiary of the UN convention on refugees. Chimni (2005) traces instances of cooperation from India towards those who migrate due to persecution. However, the absence of a concrete legal framework for this has unpleasant repercussions. It makes the officials of various bureaucratic departments unaware of the principle of non-refoulment, and hence they often take arbitrary actions that generally escape public scrutiny (Chimni 2005). The situation results in differential treatment of and discrimination amongst different refugee and migrant groups. A humane international regime is needed to redress the situation for migrants and refugees is needed. Its absence has often led to the meeting of targets of arrests of illegal migrants (this was shared by some of the participants during my fieldwork). Such actions, which are manifestations of injustice, witness the paradox of subjective interpretations expressed through suspicion within the statist gaze, the latter being deemed to be based on positivist, objective ideals. Even in popular narratives, refugees are perceived as parasites, lacking autonomy and agency. The debate on charity versus rights has been highly polarised in the context of refugees in West Bengal after Partition, and the refugee organisations have been struggling in securing their (refugees') position as legitimate beneficiaries of rights. By distinguishing between a citizen and a refugee, the statist and bureaucratic discourse tends to suggest a citizen's obligation is only to a fellow citizen and not anyone else. Moreover, there exists a popular perception that a refugee is accorded more privilege than a citizen, which creates disharmony between citizens and refugees.

The emerging category of stateless persons is characterised by a lack of attributes that deter them from claiming legal correctives or rights. They constitute the in-between people, or people of indeterminate nationality or with the status of statelessness, which renders them vulnerable, devoid of rights and subject to discrimination. This category remains the permanent exception to citizenship (Agamben 2005). The state plays a crucial role at this juncture by

selecting and conferring citizenship to only a select few, which inevitably results in rendering the remaining populace as stateless. The situation is also muddled by the absence of neat categories to identify whether a person is a citizen, with the state patronising this absence and refusing to clarify one's status, as we have noted. The exclusionary boundaries are also blurred: although laws exist concerning the control of the mobility of aliens, the definition of an 'alien' has not been provided in any policy document, making it ambiguous.

Migrants have encountered differential treatments, being treated as refugees and illegal aliens at different phases (Basavapatna 2016). It is important to bear in mind that these migrants, while undergoing through bureaucratic processes to attain legality or claim rights, have been subjected to differential attitudes from officials, including a suspicious gaze. Gaining citizenship in one country also requires a formally declared deprivation of citizenship in their country of origin. For instance, even if Government of India stops issuing residence permits to Pakistani Hindus, if there is no formal order of deprivation of Pakistani citizenship for the Hindus in Pakistan, they are unlikely to be considered stateless. This reiterates the need for dialogues between the sending and receiving countries to redress the ambiguity over citizenship. The persisting ambiguity hinders a protective framework for populations, which in turn contributes to the precariousness of their existence.

This discussion highlights the blurred distinctions between the categories of refugee, migrant, and resident in statist and popular discourse. A migrant comes to assume a constructed category in everyday life. The subsequent sections shall explore how a migrant often comes to be constructed as 'infiltrator', and is mostly caricatured as a criminal, relegated to the domain of high politics, or perceived through a jingoistic nationalism.

## The Migrant Identity: Politico-religious Determinants

Under the present political dispensation, citizenship is viewed through religious and ethnic identity. While such an approach might imply accommodation of the regional specificity of the area, it takes into account only a homogeneous imagination of cultures and recognises only a skewed and nationalist understanding of belonging. India's recently passed Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, that confers citizenship on the basis of religion is a manifestation of such an approach. The visible selective catering to Hindu migrants from Bangladesh may be traced to the historical context of religious and linguistic divisions that shaped communal and socio-political divisions, the Partition in 1947 and the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. This had eventually triggered the splitting of Hindu from Muslim, and Bengali from Urdu-speaking communities, with the persecution of religious and linguistic minorities in both countries. The interpretation of history largely influences the state's initiative in contemporary times to distinguish on the basis of religion through a communal–political lens, where identifying people in accordance with national, religious and linguistic identities assumes the normative practice and leads to dominance. Such an approach selectively and arbitrarily relies on history (Ahmed

2000) and leads to conceptual inadequacy. This influences the construction of a migrant with certain religio-linguistic characteristics. The consequence in the contemporary scenario is that a migrant is framed as illegal if she or he is visibly a Muslim and speaks Bengali. This takes place according to a statist gaze, which is Hindu nationalist and hence xenophobic.

Pertinent in this context is the distinction made by governments in various regimes between a legal refugee and a foreign infiltrator, on purely ethnic-religious grounds, with the government representing all Hindu migrants from Bangladesh as refugees from an oppressive and intolerant Islamic regime with a natural right to Indian citizenship because of religious persecution (Gillan 2002). It is important to consider the agenda of the current government, through which it aims to deport Bangladeshi 'infiltrators' while permitting Bangladeshi 'refugees'. Although, in some instances, the government has pointed to general religious and/or political persecution as the criterion for granting refugee status, the distinction between refugee and infiltrator, the oppressed Hindu and the encroaching Muslim, regardless of individual circumstances, has been explicit within the state's discourse on migration from Bangladesh. Persecution measures against Bengali-speaking Muslims in India have been evidenced at various times, carried out by both the government and the Sangh Parivar. For instance, Delhi witnessed the eviction of visible Bengali-speaking Muslims, who were identified as Bangladeshis in mid-1992 as part of the Congress government's objective to cleanse the state of illegal migrants from Bangladesh under its initiative of Operation Pushback (Ramachandran 2003). Sujata Ramachandran (2003) explains that the Sangh Parivar's manoeuvring to deport Bangladeshi migrants triggered the act on the part of the Congress government; this was in contrast to the latter's hitherto persistent lenience to the existence of these populations. The brunt of the action was borne by the inhabitants of Delhi's slums, as easy targets, with Delhi, the national capital, as the locus of political, bureaucratic and financial power. The suddenness of such acts, or the deliberate unpreparedness of the operation, has been explained by Ahmed (2000) who traces it to the lack of mutual dialogue between the two countries. Consequently, those who were deported have come to be reported as Indian refugees in Bangladesh, and have been denied rights and privileges.

The approach of the Indian state towards migrants comprises a complex synthesis of overlapping conceptualisations of aliens that emerge from 'anxieties of a postcolonial state within a historically common space, sub-national dissent, and political realism' (Chimni 2005, 290). It is this sameness and commonness around which the problematic operates. However, the Indian state does not recognise many segments of its migrant population as refugees, and the legal sphere is characterised by the absence of policies in favour of transitional populations. Chimni (2005) feels the necessity for an inclusive approach within the Constitution. He suggests that the ambiguity of the situation can be overcome through a concise legal recommendation. This, he foresees, would diminish political conflict to a large extent, and make identification of aliens and migrants objective, which in turn would form grounds for deporting them.

The lack of a concrete framework to categorise the Bangladeshi migrants has resulted in subjective conceptions about their identity. Identification of Bangladeshi migrants occurs on the basis of a subjective frame of reference beyond the legal discourse. This frame is constructed through a semiotic intersection of language, appearance, religion, region and nationality. This provokes a critical reflection on the concepts of citizenship, residency, identity and identifier. Universalisation of concepts appears to pose a potential danger in this context. In connection with the issue of deporting Bangladeshi migrants, Satadru Sen (2003) has questioned the applicability of concepts which are western in origin. Therefore, the concept of 'illegal alien' or citizenship needs to be understood in careful consideration of the regional specificity, which comprises culture and history; it is also required to assess whether these should be applied given the 'peculiar' context of a South Asian nation-state (Sen 2003, 611). This becomes particularly significant as the nation-state formation in South Asia involved the imposition of western conceptions of territoriality and a homogeneous imagining of identity on the sedentarised reality (Scott 1998) in the orient, and this, in turn, establishes the limitations of the effort to turn illegible populations into legible subjects.

## Nationalisms in India: Shaping Contingency of the Political Boundary

While liberal political regimes after Partition claimed to accommodate populations beyond a communal political interpretation of history, the subaltern populations in the Indian state continued to be excluded based on a de facto ethnically homogeneous view of populations— essentially a Brahminical conception of identity. This displaced those who, despite having traditionally belonged to India, came to have their allegiance and membership doubted. Such populations include not only the religious minorities but also caste Hindus such as the Namashudras in Bengal, located lower in the structural hierarchy.

The status of these populations is further jeopardised by the existence of a nationalistic regime that tends to ignore humanitarian concerns. This overlays the problem of the lack of consensus in evolving a regional framework to address the issue taking into consideration the interests of the refugees and/or populations who are at margins of citizenship, the receiving and sending countries, and the communities at the destination. The approach of a liberal democratic polity to look away from pre-existing identities of race, language, religion and ethnicity makes it difficult for the nation-states to address the 'two sets of competing identity markers' (Singh 2010, 223). States have not been able to uniformly balance cultural markers with the political-legal identity of citizenship, an outcome of the arbitrarily drawn borders followed by Partition that marked the end of colonialism, which eventually led to the artificial construction of nation-states. What becomes pertinent at this juncture is the distinction between what may be understood as politico-legal belonging reinforced through imposed legalities and modernist interventions, and cultural belonging embedded in pre-existing regional specificity. However, democratic citizenship involves two major dimensions: 'civic belonging in a political community and cultural belonging in a national community' (Castles 1998, 184). These are

contradictory to each other since for the former, individuals or citizens are perceived objectively, as equals, wherein personal characteristics such as gender, religion or ethnicity are not taken into account. Belonging in a national community, however, calls for recognition and incorporation of cultural and ethnic identities, and if such accommodation is not possible, stability may be assured through the act of forgetting or suppressing those. The nationalism, India had witnessed, is understood by Partha Chatterjee (1993) as a bourgeoisie hegemonic project as it spearheaded a homogenous imagination of community ignoring peripheral linguistic, religious, caste and class identities, and thereby may be interpreted as an effort towards 'cultural normalisation' (11). This strand of nationalism may be viewed as being bounded by 'old forms of the modern state' which Chatterjee terms 'postcolonial misery' (11), in addition to the incapacity of individuals to innovate novel forms of a modern community.

Here it is significant to note distinctions between civic nationalism and particularistic demands of cultural identity. Civic nationalism signifies a universal ideal based on individual freedoms and equal rights irrespective of distinctions of religion, race, language or culture. Opposed to it are the particular demands of cultural identity, which call for the differential treatment of particular groups on the grounds of vulnerability or backwardness or historical injustice. Postcolonial India, at the current juncture, witnesses a situation wherein multiple realities are subsumed within the overarching sway of the modern governmental system. This may be understood as a characteristic feature of the modernisation paradigm that induces 'imperialism of categories' (Rudolph 2005, 6), and aspires to restrict identity to or define it as a monolithic category in accordance to hegemonic world order (read xenophobia). However, citizenship in the Indian context cannot be imagined in holistic terms and comprises an 'unbound seriality' (22). The rival demands of universal citizenship, on the one hand, and the need to reserve particularistic rights, on the other, are difficult to reconcile and represent a paradox. Chatterjee highlights that the success of the modernist claims was made possible by a strategy of cooption within the nationalist framework. As a result, the subaltern groups who otherwise asserted counterclaims and challenged the homogeneous impositions that characterised postcolonialism, came to be triumphantly silenced and undermined through the blending of the modernisation project with nationalism.

This attempt at a synthesis of the modern in the postcolonial situation needs to be contextualised through a careful understanding of the structures of nation, religion, caste, class and language that characterise the region. Within the population, some were the elite, but most were ordinary folk whose fortunes and destinies were changed without taking into account their feelings and interests. The latter spoke 'in different voices', expressed 'varying concern'(s) and chose 'separate and distinct points of identification' (Hasan 1995, 26). In terms of religion, it is significant that more than nationalism, communalism, or rather communal politics based on religion, became a dominant determinant, integrating and/or disintegrating the population of the region. The relationship between Indian nationalism and communalism is 'complex and ambivalent, both in terms of ideology and political practice' (Chatterjee 2002,

1). Recent studies have argued that nationalism in India cannot be regarded as the 'other' of communalism. The opposite of communalism is secularism, which separates politics from religion. Admittedly, many aspects of Indian nationalism of colonial times were not in this sense secular. Nationalist campaigns often manipulated religious imagery and issues to win popular support. Nor did Indian nationalism have truly secular ideological and philosophical underpinnings. Nationalist thought tended to share the colonial view: that the basic unit of Indian society was the community as defined by religion. The 'secular' nationalist ideal was *sarvadharma sambhava* (equal treatment to all religions). Nevertheless, most nationalist thinkers tended to describe national identity in religious terms and to equate being an Indian with being a Hindu.

Ayesha Jalal (1996) has pointed out some of the shortfalls of historicisation of the event of Partition in relation to religion, which has neglected some of the embedded discontinuities evident in the entire region (now comprising India, Bangladesh and Pakistan). According to her, religion in India accommodates dimensions other than only faith. Jalal terms it as civil religion and conceptualises it as a mode of articulating civil and traditional rights. A civil religion facilitates ethnic integration and mobilisation, legitimising membership of populations within ethnic categories. She further establishes the need to focus on the micro-history, comprising the interconnectedness of material conditions, identities, social relations, shared beliefs and experiences, and collective interactions. Interconnected to this, she stresses the need to focus on the subjective experiences of individuals who were witness to the event of Partition. This questions the imposition of the political boundary as a result of Partition, and calls for understanding how borders come to everyday life. Also, the experiences of individuals on both sides of the border differed on the basis of their class and caste positions.

As Anusua Basu Raychaudhury (2004) documents, uprooted and displaced Hindus who were termed refugees came in phases from East Pakistan to West Bengal. The first batch of refugees arrived after the riot in Noakhali and Tippera in 1946. The shelter seekers continued to trickle in till the end of 1949. Those who came during this phase mostly belonged to the upper and upper-middle strata—the landowning, merchant and professional classes. The next significant influx took place following the massacre in several districts of East Bengal, particularly in the village called Kalshira in the Bagerhat subdivision of Khulna district on 20 December 1949 and then Rajshahi, Faridpur and Barisal in February 1950. This time, those who crossed the border were very poor—mostly agricultural labourers. If the better-off people from East Pakistan could reconstruct their lives with relative ease in West Bengal, for those belonging to the middle class and lower middle class, it was almost impossible. Many of them had to spend ten to twenty years in refugee camps before they could move on to a better life. Many of those who did not go to the camps and settled in the *jabar dakhal* (forcefully taken) colonies on the margins of Calcutta also continued with a hand-to-mouth existence for many years. Many of them could never return to their traditional family occupations and, therefore, felt a sense of alienation and irreparable occupational loss

even after partial rehabilitation. In other words, the Partition of Bengal had a long-term impact on the economy and culture of the region.

Similarly, experiences of individuals differed inter and intra-caste, and between genders and ethnicities. Also, one of the uniting features for newly formed Bangladesh was the linguistic commonness, that of a Bengali-speaking majority. However, there was a Bengali-speaking population on the other side of the border as well. The presence of two Bengali-speaking populations, one on either side of the border, which share a common cultural heritage, magnified the complexity of the situation. The intersectionalities are significant points of analysis and present the heterogeneity of a situation that stands beyond any uniform paradigm.

## Surveillance through Subjective Definitions: Living through Fissured Identities

The objective to define identity as a homogeneous category is fraught with fallacy and cannot address the ambiguity around the phenomenon in the contemporary era. The results are subjective conceptions of identity. This complicates the constitutional definitions of concepts, as in the common-sense usage (Schutz 1967), the definitions of categories are largely contingent upon subjective constructions, influenced by one's own definitions and ideas of determinants, mediated through semiotics in the form of language, religion, appearance and region. This explains the prevalence of situational definitions and fluidity/ambiguity of the objective categories in everyday life. The amalgamation of signs, as mentioned above, creates frames of reference to identify individuals with attributes that construct an illegal migrant and triggers suspicion not only among the ordinary people but also within bureaucratic procedures.

During my fieldwork, participants shared instances of 'physical attributes' aiding the Border Security Force (BSF) officials to discern one's Bangladeshi identity. Arrests are often carried out according to the frame within which a Bangladeshi migrant is imagined and situated. Language becomes an easy determinant of origin and nationality. There is an assumption that a particular Bengali dialect signifies Bangladeshi origin. Association of a region with the dialect is experienced not only in the borderlands but within the urban metropolis of Kolkata, where an apparent non-urban woman speaking in *Bangal* (a regional dialect spoken in Bangladesh) would be taken as being either from Assam or from one of the adjoining districts of Bangladesh (shared during an interview). While the native dialect of the Rohingyas helps them to claim citizenship in Bangladesh, it assumes a negative connotation in India: it aids the frames relied upon by the BSF to carry out the majority of the arrests of Rohingyas in the borderlands. Some resist by adopting ways of speaking that deviate from the typical dialect spoken by a Rohingya, and thereby escape detainment (drawn from an interview).

The addition of religion problematises the situation further. Individuals not placed within the semiotic frame would be identified as Hindus and treated with lenience by the officials of the

BSF; their tales of struggle would be sympathetically perceived as they are regarded as the natural citizens of the country. However, only those individuals are seen as Hindus whose ways of life are in accordance to the bhadralok culture. The Brahminical state as well as the upper caste dominated civil society is suspicious against not only a visible Muslim, but also those whose way of speaking, dressing, or eating do not align with the dominant culture in West Bengal. Participants, who identified themselves as Hindus and belonged to lower castes, shared the humiliation and labelling (of a potential Bangladeshi) they encountered on account of their *Bangal* dialect. They expressed the need to learn the 'clean' language of Kolkata, or how they had emulated the eating habits in the dominant culture at the destination. This explains the fewer recorded numbers of Hindus being arrested and reported as infiltrating borders. However, while exclusions against subaltern Hindu groups still operate in seemingly benign ways, the visible Muslims would be subjected to stringent surveillance. The construction of this frame of reference is motivated by the theocratic interpretation of history. This works according to a homogenised frame and undermines the alternate cultural meanings of identity. This determines the construction of an individual as a Bangladeshi by the apparent Bengali linguistic identity and Muslim religious affiliation. Religion, in this sense, comes to imply not just a belief system or a faith, as has been explained earlier, borrowing from Jalal's (1996) conceptualisation of civil religion, it is constructed as ethnic-religious identities. It operates through a Brahminical Hindu nationalist and xenophobic gaze on the part of the state towards its inhabitants, constructing a migrant as a 'citizen-outsider'. Hence, non-Muslim populations, such as individuals with mongoloid features, or 'Rohingya-looking' persons (as a participant shared), or chotolok (a derogatory term used by the bhadralok to refer to lower caste people) are also targeted.

Signs exist and operate in everyday life and result in discriminatory measures. These are relied upon to persecute perceived undocumented migrants from Bangladesh in India. They have even received state patronage at various points of time during their stay in India, and they are subjected to victimisation in the form of periodic outbursts of nationalist sentiments and xenophobia. Such instances have occurred in Delhi at Amar Colony Basti, as traced by Anupama Roy (2010) in her work on citizenship, and in Mumbai in April 1995 following the mandate of the Shiv Sena government (Ahmed 2000) respectively. The 'branded' migrant would be territorially limited to Amar Colony of Delhi, as Anupama Roy (2010) has explained in her work on citizenship, or the Raey Road of Mumbai, as a researcher (participant in my research) observed, or the colony near the railway station of Basirhat in the North 24 Parganas of West Bengal, which I located during my fieldwork. Their territorial location makes them vulnerable to state action, signifying territorial stigmatisation, as pointed out by Loïc Wacquant (2008).

The othering process of the constructed Bangladeshis in India operates through multiple layers. Participants in my fieldwork shared accounts of those unable to master the dominant 'clean' urban language of Kolkata being mocked. This lack of linguistic proficiency makes

them fall within the frame of a Bangladeshi. Equally significant are times of migration, legal or illegal means undertaken to migrate, and the networks of facilitation and patronage. For example, those who migrated through legal means and attained legal citizenship, and those who arrived earlier, shunned those who took recourse to clandestine means and/or migrated more recently. A fieldwork participant observed:

> *Truly speaking, if you take out the population from Bangladesh in this state, you will find very few original inhabitants here. Some migrated earlier, some later. But there are very few original inhabitants of India here. You will come across people from Bangladesh in the upper levels of the hierarchy and notable positions within the bureaucracy. People will accept them since they are in power now, but they would not accept us. Even now, many talk to me this way: 'Boudi (sister-in-law), haven't you come from Bangladesh? I will inform the police, and they will arrest you.' But such threats would not be directed towards those who came earlier and hold influential positions today.*

The narrative establishes non-cooperation among the migrant populations motivated by relative privileges and times of migration. Some are forced into return migration because of the constant harassment from landlords and neighbours threatening to report illegal stay. The authority of this group is legitimised by the illegal status of the migrants and their own status of having become natives, coupled with lack and ownership of social and economic capital on the part of the migrants and natives, respectively. The threat of being deported functions as a panoptic vigil on them, disciplining them in ways deemed appropriate by the state and its native citizenry. The migrant continues to be the perpetual citizen-outsider (Roy and Singh 2009) and is socially produced through policies in the political, social and economic spheres that have perpetually demarcated the migrants from the mainstream. They are subjected to being criminalised, relocated, rejected and thus live a precarious existence. In fact, their presence is perceived as a threat to society at large. However, the social and cultural capital of some migrants, coupled with the time of migration, determines acceptance by the state. As a participant shares, "Jahar Sarkar, who is a bureaucrat based in Delhi, also hails from Chittagong. So, can you imagine? Even a bureaucrat is a migrant." This also reinforces that the migrant community is a highly fissured group, which in turn calls for moving away from a homogeneous understanding of the category of the migrant itself.

The fear of being evicted and deported to Bangladesh makes the migrants take recourse to surreptitiousness, to conceal signs associated with the popular conception of a Bangladeshi migrant, as discussed above. A participant shares, "Those who have some idea about the Chittagong dialect can make out my native origin. The accent shall remain, no matter how pure the Bengali I speak." Since language assumes an easy determinant of nationality and/or origin, proficiency in the language of the host community aids in evading vigilance, and this emerged sharply in many of the participants' accounts. For greater assimilation with the

natives, participants expressed the need to learn the latter's language. One of them observes, "If you change [your dialect] it is better. If you are living here for many years, you should learn the dialect. Else, you shall not be able to adjust to the people here."

The effort to document subjects through surveillance mechanisms (Bandyopadhyay 2013; Jha 2013)—in the form of Aadhar, Electoral Photo-Identity Card (EPIC or the voter's ID), passport, Permanent Account Number (PAN) card, Below Poverty Line (BPL), or through the most recent initiative of updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam and proposals for NRC in every Indian state and a pan-Indian National Population Register (NPR)—is part of the state's endeavour to make individuals legible within a standardised parameter that would eventually aid in governing them. Such parameters, however, have proved to be inaccurate in the history of demographic governance as it is difficult to conceptualise identity as a homogeneous category (Scott 1998). Despite these contingencies, we have witnessed persistent efforts on the part of states towards increasing surveillance measures, sometimes equipped with advanced technologies. In a region which is marked by two contrasting realities – on the one hand, linguistic, religious, and ethnic heterogeneity, and on the other, cultural commonness and a historical lineage of mobility – identifying 'illegal' migration across political boundaries is fraught with political discontent and creating great humanitarian concerns. Any effort to evolve objective parameters to define legality is unlikely to be appropriate; the parameters are blurred as these are interpreted and implemented in the subjective domain.

While postcolonialism implies questioning the colonial ideologies that aimed at control by making the subjects tangible and hence governable, the post-Partition Indian state witnesses a phase which may be termed neo-colonialism (Nkrumah 1965), which has at its heart modern regimes of a paradoxical phenomenon that may be termed xenophobic governmentality. With the bureaucracy following a communal political ideology, the state engages in a deliberate 'non-recording' of its subjects, and hence there is a 'state-produced oblivion' where they 'disregard, outsource, desert, expel, sanction, exploit, or victimise non-recorded subjects' (Kalir and van Schendel 2017, 1). The NRC in Assam, for instance, has witnessed non-recording of subjects, who are at the mercy of the state to be made eligible for legal, political, and economic citizenship. Kalir and van Schendel (2017) perceive the state practices of non-recording as strategic, selective and episodic rather than systematic, pervasive and continuous. The developmental agendas of the newly independent nation-state presented a statist utopia that undermined the proliferation of 'common-sense legitimacy' (Fuller and Benei 2000, 8) which even the colonial powers did not attempt to do. It failed to create a common language, a 'common thicker we-ness' and a 'single political language for the entire polity' (Fuller and Benei 2000, 8). Therefore, with the expansion of states, a sharp cleavage developed between the bureaucratic elite, who were representative of a modernist discourse of bureaucracy resembling Weberian rationality, and the 'vernacular everyday discourse' that lay at the grassroots, and were distanced from formal rationality (8), an

entrant of the modernist statist initiative. The result may be such that the community assertions of their palpable cultural identities come to be positioned in a paradoxical location to the tenets of a modern Indian state, the objective of the latter being aimed at universalisation and subjugation of disruptions. Under the present governance centred around Hindutva politics, the overarching Hindu right-wing regime that dominates the political language of present times leaves little room for disruptions and cultural assertions. However, one cannot deny the possibility of the eruption of contentions around the issue of legality, which would once again make people witness the failure of a watertight perception of identities.

## Conclusion

The conception of homogeneous identity is a characteristic feature of a globalised era and a consequence of colonisation by the West of other parts of the world. This homogenising thrust is being resisted at different levels through appeals to culture, ethnicity, history, language and similar vehicles of identity, which are both national and sub-national. The notion that there is a clash between the stability of the state and the recognition of multiple cultural identities has had a powerful influence on the political discourse of nation-states.

The discussion here establishes the limitations of universal paradigms for grasping multiple realities. As is brought out in the paper, in the context of India and Bangladesh, influx and outflow of the population have assumed a recurrent form, and universal definitions, often mediated through political boundaries, have not succeeded in either addressing the diverse constituents of the demography or limiting population mobility. The demographic situation in the region has been highly fluid. This comprehensively unravels the limitations of attributing a singular and homogeneous identity or category and highlights the need to reject the conception of identity as universal, homogeneous and the uniform, and, hence, to grasp tensions imposed by modernity in the postcolonial context.

To conclude, it may be said that we are witnessing fierce contestation between fixity and territorialisation on the one hand, and fluidity and de-territorialisation on the other, which in turn poses questions around discourses of the state or the notion of belonging through citizenship.

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