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Survival Beyond Borders: Bangladeshi Immigrants and the Hindu Right-Wing Politics in India

Nabanipa Bhattacharjee*

This paper is an attempt towards exploration of the relationship between certain social processes and the rise and growth of Right-Wing ideologies in South Asian societies. It examines immigration as a social process and its location within the Hindu Right-Wing discourse in India. This may be best understood in the context of the 'clandestine'/illegal immigration from Bangladesh to India and its linkage with the ideology of Hindutva. Based on preliminary research (conducted using interviews and other observational techniques in Vasant Kunj area i.e. certain JJ clusters of South Delhi), the paper (divided into three broad sections) addresses first, immigration as one of the elements of 'social transformation' in India, second, the growth of Hindu political-cultural ideology in the context of such 'transformation' and third, the case of 'illegal' immigration from Bangladesh and its role in the growth of Hindu-Right wing politics in Delhi, particularly in the 1990s. Therefore, the central concern is to evolve an understanding of the politics of lebensraum or living space and its implications for the articulation of Hindu Right-Wing political ideology, principles of governance and construction of national identity and models of social integration and development in India.

Introduction

"I am comparing gravity with belonging... The anti-myths of gravity and of belonging bear the same name: flight. *Migration*, moving, for instance in flight, from one place to another. To fly and to flee: both are ways of seeking freedom... an odd thing about gravity, incidentally, is that while it remains uncomprehended everybody seems to find it easy to comprehend the notion of its theoretical counter-force anti-gravity. But anti-belonging is not accepted by modern science..."

Salman Rushdie in 'Shame'

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10 July, 2001: At about 12.30 p. m. 36 years old Selima¹ enters her home in a J. J. cluster adjoining Vasant Kunj, a middle class South Delhi locality. She finds me waiting to talk to her about the kind of work she does and life she lives. Selima who is a widow & mother of three, works as a domestic help. She is assured by a neighbour of my academic intentions. After the introduction, Selima begins narrating the history of her journey from a small village near Dhaka in Bangladesh to the capital of India. She reveals after moments of hesitation that she is still called an 'illegal' immigrant² though nothing can prove she is one. For, she has all the valid 'documents' (ration card, voter's identity card etc.) to support her claim as an Indian citizen. The conversation goes on and it becomes obvious that Selima's story is no different in 'essence' from the stories of other migrants – the similar anxieties and traumas and at the same time unflinching hope for a better tomorrow. She says in vernacular Bangla: "aamra choli aar shonge ammader duniya" (we move and so does our worlds).³

Migration of people across state borders is not unknown in South Asia. Unlike Europe, South Asian states have rarely followed well-defined immigration policies to restrict the flow of populations. In fact, "...traditionally...the characteristics of permanent population and defined territory as a basis for laws on immigration and nationality were alien to Asian regions...introduced or superimposed with the advent of colonialism" (Muntarbhorn 1992:5, cited in Chaudhuri 2005). As a result, most states house a large number of 'unwanted' and 'illegal' migrants who have become a source of political controversies and conflicts both within and outside them. As Myron Weiner says:

In their efforts to follow historically well-trodden path of state building by controlling borders, the states of South Asia have been faced with two familiar problems. The first is that all of the states grant freedom of exit to their citizens, but none of the states allow freedom of entry... The second problem is that no state in South Asia is able to control its borders. The unwanted enter, often with frightful political and social consequences for receiving countries (1993:1737).

¹ Name has been changed to protect identity.

² The terms migrant and immigrant are used interchangeably in this text. Though Selima mentions Bangladesh as the place of her birth, yet that aspect is not stressed as if it did not matter where her roots lay (unlike 'legal' migrants). Her aim was to communicate to me the trauma of non-recognition/acceptance of her present by people no different from her. Selima appeared to be ignorant about the legal aspects of inter-state migration (full text in my field notes).

³ The term Bangladeshi (and not Bengali Muslim or Bengali immigrant) is used in the title as well as the paper because most of my informants mentioned so, albeit in a matter-of-fact way. Despite being somewhat aware of the implications of identification as Bangladeshi, Selima and others confided in me after I told them that I too was a second generation migrant from Sylhet in Bangladesh. I convinced them that my interest in their lives was driven by cultural rather than 'political' considerations. I thank them for trusting me for that was the truth.

It is important to note that apart from the distinction between internal and international migration and legal and illegal migration, Robin Cohen (1995) mentions four other dyads that cover most forms of migration worldwide. They are:

1. Forced versus free migration;
2. Settler versus labour migration;
3. Temporary versus permanent migration; and
4. Planned versus flight migration.

Given these, he cautions that in "many occasions... each side of these linked dyads merges with its opposite" and hence should be seen as more akin to Weber's ideal-types. For instance, the distinction between legal and illegal migration may appear clear and unambiguous yet "(b)ecause a migrant is undocumented does not make him or her illegal. States may choose to ignore long-established circulatory zones rather than invite controversy, expense or ridicule if they fail to police their frontier effectively" (Ibid.) or states may 'deliberately' choose to ignore the claims and pleas of migrants for a legal status. Hence, a generic term like illegal migration may cover a variety of situations. In fact, "the growing saliency of illegal migration worldwide (is) precisely the perceived need to come up with reliable information on the scope of the phenomenon" (Miller 1995: 537). Although its connotation is often negative, it is not always so. True, "(m)any illegal migrants consciously violate immigration laws. But in other situations, illegal immigrants are produced overnight by changes in politics and policies or by the complexities of maintaining legal residency" (Ibid). One of the major thrusts of current debates on illegal immigration has been about the response of the state and its people to it, the reasons for which are not hard to discern (Glazer 1990). That is, "(t)he right to regulate entry is a fundamental consequence of state's claims to sovereignty (and) illegal immigration challenges a state's command over the space encompassed by its territorial boundaries and thereby also presents a challenge to its sovereignty" (Doty 1996:172, also see Teitelblau 1984). Elaborating further, R. L. Doty presents a critique of the existing international relations theories of illegal immigration and the state, which she says have been victims of the 'territorial trap' based on three assumptions. That "1. states are fixed units of sovereign space, 2. the domestic/international dichotomy is unproblematic and 3. states are spatial containers of societies" (Ibid). She suggests a theoretical framework "that can escape the territorial trap and overcome the static notion of space entailed in conventional understandings of state sovereignty" (Ibid: 173) to explain legal and illegal immigration. In the same vein, Weiner discovers that on the one hand, international relations theories have paid little attention to state interventions and on the other, literature on it says remarkably less on population movements excepting the refugee phenomenon as an outcome of conflicts. What needs to be

looked into, says he is: "How do state actions shape population movements, when do such movements lead to conflicts and when to cooperation, and what do governments do in their domestic policies to adjust to or influence population flows..." (1985:441).

Broadly, the factors responsible for population movements in South Asia fall into one or more of the following:

1. Artificial geographical divisions
2. Failure in nation-building and inter-ethnic conflicts leading to civil strife.
3. Open or virtually open inter-state boundaries
4. Inter-state developmental disparities
5. Contractual obligations
6. Military interventions by extra-regional powers.

Whatever may be the cause of inter-state migration, the fallouts usually range from small-scale border skirmishes to full-scale anti- or pro-immigrant movements e.g., the *Assam Movement* and the *Muhajir Quami Movement* respectively. Given the scope of 'cross-national' migration two categories of inter-state conflicts may be considered. One, when migration creates population pressure upon resources leading to 'expansionist tendencies' and two, by "clandestine population movements affecting the demographic balance of the host region to the detriment of the political future of the local elites forcing the latter to enter into a conflictual relationship with the country of origin of the migrants" (Ghosh n.d.: 94). More often than not, "(m)igration is both a result of global change, and a powerful force for further change in migrant sending and receiving societies. Its immediate impacts are felt on the economic level, but it also affects *social relations, culture, national politics* (emphasis mine) and international relations" (Castles 1998:179). Migration often leads to greater ethno-cultural diversity within states, sometimes blurring traditional boundaries and transforming identities (see Chaudhuri 2005).

In the Indian context, barring partition-migration all others (of Nepalese, Bhutanese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Tibetans and Bangladeshis) continue 'unabated' even today with varying/changing causes and consequences. What is important however, is to first, note the level and nature of impact these have on the local host societies (of both border and distant areas) i.e., changes taking place in India's social-structural bases and second, how the 'impact' and 'change' is interpreted by the latter and the Indian state and in some cases particular political parties and groups. For followers of the Right-Wing ideology (the *Sangh Parivar*), "migrant labour bring down wage levels by competing with the local wage workers... put undue pressure on the social security provisions of the country, accentuate the trend of lumpenization and criminalization... have no loyalty to the country which provides succour

and hence they deserve periodic beatings, warnings and sometimes even expulsions" (Samaddar 1999:43). In this case, migration, as one of the factors of social transformation, contributes to the consolidation of the Right-Wing ideology and tendency towards 'fascization' of certain sections of the polity of Indian society. The left-wing parties, however, refuse to acknowledge the very 'authenticity' of migration (particularly after 1990 with the ascendance of the BJP led *Sangh Parivar*), let alone consider its consequences on society (see *Desh*, December 17, 2005). Interestingly, the Congress, despite its secular claims has an ambiguous position on this issue though in 1993, the then Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao "made the mental shift from seeing Bangladesh as a source of cheap labour to suddenly seeing it as a menacing country from which millions of illegal immigrants would deprive happy Hindus of their jobs" (Sanghvi 2006:8). Against this backdrop, the Indo-Bangladesh population movement becomes relevant.

India and Bangladesh share an over 2000 km loosely manned border and despite the latter's repeated denials of out-migrations, reports of the Government of India and other monitoring groups suggest that there is a substantial presence of Bangladeshi 'illegal' immigrants in India particularly in the border districts of West Bengal and Assam. Evidences of Bangladeshi immigration in India are found in as distant parts of the country as Delhi, Bombay, the Punjab and Haryana. As Partha Ghosh says: "It was revealed by the West Bengal government in 1983 that at least 400,000 'passport-holders' from Bangladesh, who entered West Bengal during the previous ten years, had disappeared into the Indian community without a trace" (n.d.: 45). Latest statistics suggest that between 1972 and 2004 about 1.1 million Bangladeshis entered West Bengal but did not go back to their country. In government records, they are declared as 'missing' (*Desh*, December 17, 2005). In May 1997, the then Union Home Minister stated that there were nearly ten million undocumented immigrants largely from Bangladesh residing in India (*The Times of India*, May 7, 1997). According to the *Sangh Parivar* members, the number of 'illegal' Bangladeshis in India is now close to 20 million (*Bharatiya Paksh*, January 2006). This claim is supported by available data on rising population growth in India's border states as compared to steady rate of growth in border districts of Bangladesh (Ibid: 10). The demographic scenario in India's border states "creates a spectre – a spectre of people descending on India from neighbouring Bangladesh" (Samaddar 1999:19, see *Census of India Provisional Totals*, 1995; *Hindustan Times*, September 8, 2004; Navlakha 1997) though the very nature of immigration makes the calculation of an exact numerical figure an impossible task. And, the "...truth is that nobody knows how many illegal Bangladeshi migrants have made India their home...every figure...(is) an approximation or...a simple guess"(Sanghvi 2006:8). For instance, a figure close to 30 million is often quoted by "people who want to claim that the problem of migration has now veered dangerously out of control. Because, 30 million sounds more alarming than 10

million"(Ibid). In fact, the more the effort is to count the numbers, the greater is the fear (of the *Sangh Parivar*) of a 'demographic avalanche' that may eventually destroy the unity of India. This view is articulated as a reaction against the occasional utterances of a few Bangladeshi intellectuals who implicitly justify the case of immigrants in the name of a right of the latter to find a *lebensraum* – a living space in India, given the high population growth and density and paucity of space in Bangladesh (see *Holiday*, October 18, 1991; Rai 1993). In this situation, the government of India to check the flow occasionally resorts to fencing the borders, introducing photo-identity cards for border population and even deportation if detected, though without any 'commendable' results. Given India's massive size and population it is likely that the immigrants would not affect the Indian economy as is usually 'perceived' (or feared) except in a few border states (e.g. Assam) where they (in addition to Nepalis, Biharis, Bengalis and others) hold a number of jobs in the service and other crucial sectors of the economy, creating competition and conflict in the native society (see *Hindustan Times*, September 9, 2004).

But it is unlikely that interested political parties may take maximum political advantage of the ethno-religious characteristics of the migrant communities to ignite primordial sentiments.... The Hindu chauvinistic parties do emphasize the Islamic dimensions of the Bangladeshi infiltration⁴ into India (Ghosh n.d.: 109).

Immigration and Hindu Right-Wing Politics in India: Some Observations

The issue of immigration both legal and otherwise is a complex one in all respects. In an era of globalisation – where flow of goods, money, information and other commodities defy the territorial 'logic' of modern states, it is surprising that the accompanying flow of people is harshly resisted, sometimes even by extreme violence and persecution. Therefore, one may lose the 'meaning of migrations' without an analysis of not just the 'statistical profile of migratory movements', but also the nature of political interventions they generate, especially in the ideological practices of statecraft (Doty 1996), xenophobic reactions and their historical underpinnings. Obviously, immigration has ceased to remain a benign process, as one that is free of ideological and political implications. From being 'mere question of numbers' and a somewhat marginal issue, it has taken centre stage in the social and political agenda of states. Not surprisingly, it is increasingly viewed as a growing menace

⁴ The word 'infiltration' as against says 'clandestine' or 'undocumented' or even 'illegal' immigration has been in circulation in the *Sangh Parivar* circles and some sections of the press. Despite its serious pejorative connotations, it is part of the popular vocabulary now.

in an otherwise 'globalised' world – a world where on the one hand, modern states have failed to act as the 'spatial containers' of their cultural/national identities and on the other, have continued to erect barriers for such others. Indeed, as Chaudhuri says "...cultural identities are not territorially rooted and that there is an erosion of cultural distinctiveness of places...identities are increasingly coming to be, if not wholly deterritorialized, at least differently territorialized...(A)nd refugees, migrants,...are perhaps the first to live out these realities in their most complete form" (2005:285). However, despite the 'fluidity of borders' and subsequent deterritorialisation, "...state boundaries matter and impinge often violently on people, particularly the poor and marginalized..., the 'nation-state' (thus) continues to be visible and encroaching..."(ibid). Interestingly, such fixed and contained 'nation state/space' is very often seen as co-existing with dynamic and flowing space produced and sustained by marginalised 'outsiders/insiders' and oppressed peoples. One such are the immigrant communities/groups who create parallel and alternative spaces where hegemonic cultural/national ideologies and institutions become sites of bargain and contestation. In fact, it is this ambiguity on which 'nations' and their statecraft thrive, more so in liberal democracies and welfare states, and it is these Right-Wing challenges that seek to correct. It tends to homogenize and strive for a 'sacred' space by resorting to a politics of exclusion. It creates a hierarchy of attributes based on say, race, religion or language by which individuals are defined (as insider/outsider, national/anti-national etc.) and ranked within the social order, thus bringing in a new phase of 'racialism' and 'racial' tensions. As E. Balibar shows "how the category of 'immigration' has given rise to a new type of racism, a racism which does not depend on 'biological distinction' but on cultural differentials and thus becomes a theory of racism without races" (cited in Samaddar 1999: 13).

The phenomenon of immigration has become a rallying point of Right-Wing ideologies in recent times. In India, the Right-Wing BJP-led *Sangh Parivar* raised the bogey of immigration, particularly of the Bangladeshis (Muslims) to consolidate its position in the early years (i.e. late 1980s and early 1990s). The ideological practices of the BJP-led *Sangh Parivar* and sections of 'civil society' are averse not just towards the act of migration and the 'demographic burden' but also the personal attributes and intentions of the migrants – about 'who' the migrants are and 'why' they are migrating. Even today, after it has been officially in power for five years, the issue of 'Bangladeshi infiltration' has not died down. The situation has further deteriorated with the data released by Census Report 2001. It states that Hindus are 80.5% and Muslims are 13.4% of India's population. While the Muslim population has grown (12.1% in 1991), the population of Hindus shows a downward trend (82% in 1991). The Census recorded the highest growth rate for the Muslim community-up from 34.5% in 1981-1991 to 36% in 1991-2001. The *Sangh Parivar*, with the support of these new figures is set to pursue its agenda afresh,

which includes a. strict family planning measures for the Muslims; b. check on Bangladeshi 'infiltration' and c. conversion (see *Bharatiya Paksh*, January 2006). In the *Sangh Parivar* discourse, it is the duty of every Indian (essentially 'Hindu') to resist the erosion/'change' of the social – structural bases of Indian society brought about by Bangladeshi (Muslim) 'infiltration'. Time and again Bangladeshis are 'discovered' in Delhi and elsewhere, only to be arrested by the local police, beaten, tortured and threatened with expulsion from the country (see Sanghvi 2006). Baljit Rai, a *Sangh Parivar* sympathizer says that "the pushing of millions of Bangladeshi Islamic morons into India is fraught with the gravest of threats to our very existence" (1993:vii) and hence they are to be driven out. The rhetoric of Hindu Right-Wing fundamentalism vis-à-vis 'Bangladeshi Muslim infiltration' gets amplified further through malicious propaganda about say the abnormal size of Muslim population and possibility of another partition, link with terrorist networks and threat to Indian (read 'Hindu') security and integrity and many more (see Sanghvi 2006:8). As scholars worldwide analyse the increasing saffronisation of Indian politics, it is rare that they give more than a footnote treatment to the role played by population flows from Bangladesh in the process. For "(a)lthough it is necessary to understand the essential constituents of *Hindutva*, it is also imperative to uncover the prospects of oppositions such as that provided by the... Bangladeshi immigrants" (Ramachandran 1999:241). Indeed, one way of exploring the growing hegemony of *Hindutva* in India is to search for spaces that celebrate differences with it. To disregard, this aspect is to become party to the homogenization project itself (see Lele 1995).

Bangladeshi Immigrants and the *Sangh Parivar*: Notes from Delhi

In the early 1980s, one particular immigrant community i.e. the Bangladeshis came under severe public scrutiny in India. As 'illegal' immigrants in the sense that most of them arrived in India much after the official immigration process following the Liberation War of 1971 was stalled, the members of this community have been subjected to consistent harassment, first, during the anti-immigrant Assam Movement in the 1980s and second, when the Hindu Right (*Sangh Parivar*) launched communal pogroms against a section of them (the Muslims) in the early 1990s in Delhi⁵ (and it is Delhi on which this paper is based). The *Sangh Parivar* cadres to track them down conducted massive combing operations here. In 1992, under pressure of these cadres, the government decided to deport the 'illegal' immigrants, under the 'Operation Push-Back'. Unfortunately, almost all of them were refused entry to

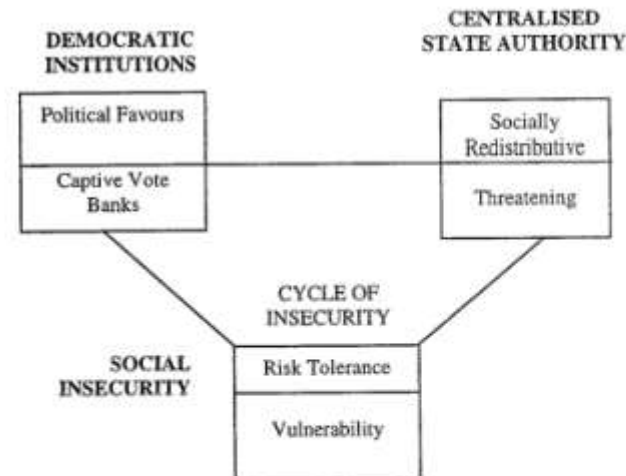
⁵ There is no denying the fact that, both Bangladeshi Hindus and Muslims are illegal immigrants, but ironically the former are not viewed so by the Hindu Right. The issue therefore is not only one of illegality but that of a 'cultivated' cultural/religious distance with the latter

Bangladesh. "Dhaka... officially protested against the deportation asserting that it would not accept them unless India supported the deportation with documents that proved that they were Bangladeshi citizens" (*Economic and Political Weekly*, September 26, 1992). The *Sangh Parivar* maintained a clear position throughout; that Hindu immigrants would be considered 'refugees' and 'natural insiders' fleeing minority-persecution in Bangladesh but Muslims would be nothing but 'outsiders' and 'infiltrators', planning to drive the Indian state towards another partition.⁶ In fact, Bangladeshi Hindus were invited to seek shelter in India (Sanghvi 2006). In 1997, Uma Bharti accused the Indian government of being unable to check the 'infiltration' and warned that if effective measures were not adopted, the Bangladeshi immigrants would soon demand a state (or a greater Muslim homeland), probably in north-eastern India (*The Hindu* May 7, 1997).

The Bangladeshi immigrant community in Delhi are concentrated in the localities of New Seemapuri, Nizamuddin, Vasant Kunj, Mahipalpur, Masudpur and trans-Yamuna and they eke out a precarious existence as rickshaw pullers, domestic help, rag-pickers and manual labourers numbering around 3,00,000 (the number may have increased by now but no data is available) unofficial estimates (*Economic and Political Weekly*, September 26, 1992). From being "captive vote banks" (of allegedly the Congress in Delhi and also the Left Front in West Bengal) to declared disruptive social elements, said to be involved in drug-trafficking and other nefarious activities (housing Islamic militants etc.), the community has been at the perpetual receiving end, bordering on extreme fear and social insecurity. Belonging to impoverished peasant families, the causes behind the migration has been primarily the economic condition of Bangladesh like lack of rural infrastructure, natural calamities and population pressure on land, uneven industrial development and the like (also see Lin and Paul 1995). For many immigrants, Delhi or any another city in India is not always the final destination. Sometimes it is to go beyond, to the Middle East enroute any Indian city.

The migration usually begins in rural Bangladesh of families desperate to escape socio-economic hardships. With the help of friends and relatives who have already migrated to India and supply them with information about better economic opportunities there, these families who are otherwise unaware of the 'dynamics' of border crossing and that too without travel documents' seek a *thekedar/dalal* (agent). The *dalal* in Bangladesh serves as a middleman who arranges 'fake' travel documents and facilitates not only the border crossing but also helps establish a

connection with another *dalal* in India who does the needful. Initially, the migrants reside in inconspicuous places in the border sites and gradually move to bigger cities. The cycle of migration continues involving rewards for the *dalal* on both sides in huge cash and kind. Once in India, very few migrants visualise a return and "search for every avenue of legitimisation of residency, including winning the patronage of top religious leaders and politicians, acquisition of ration cards, construction of (un)authorised permanent housing, or the community attaining status as a registered society" (Lin & Paul 1995:12). Essentially, another instance of international labour migration facilitated in the Indo-Bangladesh context by a "common border, continuum of culture, mediation by dalals,... (Ibid: 11), it has ceased to remain so given the socio-political developments in India during the last decade. The immigrants today are caught in a vicious cycle of insecurity because of the 'triple nexus' of electoral institutions, centralized state power and social insecurity. As Lin and Paul says, "it is precisely the triple nexus of centralized state power, electoral contests and the social insecurity of illegal immigrants that gives rise to authoritative intimidation on the one hand and captive vote banks and political favours on the other" (Ibid: 19 see diagram below).



As mentioned, choice of Delhi as the site of exploration of immigration – *Hindutva* interlinkage is driven by many reasons of which two are pertinent. One, it is in Delhi that the issue of the Bangladeshi 'illegal' immigrants was taken up and subsequently blown out of proportions by the adherents of the *Sangh Parivar* ideology. Elsewhere (in Assam), it has been sections of the host population (though not politically

⁶ As B.L. Sharma 'Prem' says: "We are clear about one thing -- Hindus aren't infiltrators. Muslims are, because there is already a separate land for them... of course, there is place here for a Mohammad Karim if he believes in Ram... But they can't say, 'Islam comes first, and the country second'" (*Telegraph*, 10 April, 1993).

inconsequential), albeit with no such intentions as those of the *Sangh Parivar*. Two, this is linked with the growth of Delhi as a city; coloured by the experiences of its resident (Hindu and Sikh) partition-migrants and refugee population (also see Gupta 1991). In this backdrop, the case of Bangladeshi (Muslim) immigrants acquires significance,⁷ because a large number of Muslims (not settlers) in Delhi (around Nizamuddin and Okhla) exude empathy towards the Bangladeshis.⁸ As 'victims' of Hindu majoritarianism themselves, they believe that the *Sangh Parivar* is deliberately trying to disenfranchise (despite the existence of names in the voter list) and deport the latter to further the cause of building a Hindu India (details in field notes). Thus, one can see a delicate and complex relationship between the three sections of Delhi's population with the Bangladeshi immigrants caught in between. For the Hindus and Sikhs, they are Muslims, hence alien-outsiders and non-citizens, whereas for the Muslims, they are victims of exclusionary politics, being denied legitimate citizenship rights by the Indian state.

December 26, 2003: It is a foggy, winter afternoon in New Delhi. After visiting a friend in Vasant Kunj, I decide to check on Selima who I last met about eight months ago. We meet and get talking. Towards the end of the conversation, she reflects in a most profound way "*eto din hoiya gelo eei deshe, tobuo shob bhabe/koi ami Bangladeshi... ami to bharater, eei desher... musalman hoitey pari kintu bolte chai na....* [most of the house maids (domestic helps) in localities such as Mayur Vihar in Delhi are Bangladeshi women who seek employment in Hindu households by using false Hindu names. In many Hindu households, Muslim helping hands are not preferred (details in field notes)].... *kintu aamare shobe bujhaiya dey ami aalada, ami roja rakhi, naamaz pori... aashole aamra gorib... eei aamader dush... aami kichu lekhpura korsi... aami bujhi je eei gorment aamader chai na... aamader duniya aar gormenteria mile na... aamara bachte aashchi... kaaj korte... eei deshtare noshto korte na... aamadere mishte dey na... Hindura amago bhoi payy... musalman hoitey ki manush hoi na... bhalo lagey na... aamago desher Hindu aashle ki eei hoyito... Bangladesh to bhuiya gechi... eei aamar desh...* (so many years in this country, yet everybody thinks and says I am Bangladeshi... I am Indian... I am a Muslim, but refrain from saying so... everyone makes me realize, I am different for I keep roza, say namaaz... actually we are poor... this is our fault... I know some reading

⁷ This paper is concerned with the Bangladeshi immigrants in general, not particularly Hindu or Muslim. However, it is not untrue that most of the immigrants are Muslims and hence experience the wrath of the *Sangh Parivar* members and also at times sections of the local non-Muslim population. The Hindus who arrive often 'assimilate' with the majority population and become 'untraceable'.

⁸ I am not aware of the attitude/response of the Hindu Bengalis (mostly partition-migrants) in Delhi towards these immigrants given that both belong to the same 'cultural'/linguistic (with dialect variations) family.

and writing... I understand that this government does not want us... our world and the government's do not match... we have come to survive, live, work... we do not want to ruin this country... they don't let us mix with others... Hindus are scared of us... are Muslims not human beings?... I really don't like all these... had Hindus come from Bangladesh would they get the same treatment?... this is my land, I have forgotten Bangladesh...).

Selima's utterances though emotion-laden, are sensitive and thought-provoking. They go a long way to show that immigrants like Selima realize, first, how to "...actively negotiate with state and society to carve out their existence and identity" (Chaudhuri 2005:300) and second, how 'unconsciously' they create contested spaces and fluid social formations in the host societies against which Right-Wing ideologies raise their heads, and subsequently consolidate their positions. In India, it is the fear of marginalisation of the Hindu community vis-à-vis 'imagined' Islamic dominance that has led to the Hindu Right-Wing's consistent 'demonization' of the Bangladeshi (Muslim) immigrants. Indeed, "(w)hether the immigrant is privileged or marginalized in national imagination may not be the consequence of migration, but rather of specific political (and cultural) conjunctures that determine the extent to which nation may be reimagined, the state reordered, and the norms of citizenship restructured" (Mahmud 1997:636). Amidst such 'ambiguous' social and political currents, the immigrant being the bravest of all continues to survive.

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