

The Less Equal Migrants Of Karachi: Marginality And Multiplicity Of Identity Among The Burmese And Bengali Communities In Pakistan

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Abstract

The paper presents a thematic analysis of contemporary literature addressing socio-economic positioning of migrant Burmese and Bengali communities of Karachi. The two communities are ethnically marginalized for their migrant status in Pakistan while living in a metropolis known for its migrant demographic structures and infrastructures. Despite living in Pakistan for several decades, majority of both Burmese and Bengali migrants of Karachi are denied Pakistani citizenship status and are officially registered as “aliens”, living unlawfully in Pakistan. The literature analysis depicts that the two selected migrant communities are prone to state repression and harassment owing to their alien status, building on the theory of divisive role of citizenship by Isin (2012). It also makes them vulnerable to informal and often criminal means of livelihood to sustain life without citizenship status of Pakistan which makes it further easier for police and state agencies to ethnically portray them as “born criminals”; undeserving of Pakistani citizenship status. The paper concludes that both migrant background and ethnic identity of these communities add up to their marginality and limited access to Pakistani citizenship rights. Despite support and promises from various leading political parties of Pakistan, these communities have not been entitled to Pakistani citizenship right and remain marginalized without any access to public health, education, intercity mobility or formal economy in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Citizenship, Aliens, Ethnical Marginalization, State-Harassment.*

I. Introduction

Human history is the history of mobility and migration. With ever-changing political and demographical settings of the human race, the patterns and manifestations of these migrations altered, reshaping the forms of being and existing and transforming identities that continue to intrigue social scientists from various disciplines. The contemporary literature on migration is largely occidental, generating scientific frameworks and theoretical debates based on data collected from Western immigrants (Sadiq & Tsourapas 2021). On the other hand, the Global South remains a large host of cross-border immigrants with complex migration patterns and coping abilities (Lerch, 2020). Likewise, the state practices of handling and manhandling immigrant communities in the Global South remain dissimilar from the Global North,

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stipulating the development of alternate paradigms to evaluate immigrant lives in the global South (Sharma, et al, 2015). Migration is a global challenge as it exasperates inequalities and creates new development challenges in both host nations and countries of origin. Migration has several drivers and outcomes but acquiring citizenship in host nations is a major issue encountered by migrant communities globally. As per the report of “International Organization for Migration”, there are one billion migrants living without citizenship status of any country of the world. IOM also reports that “one in eight people in the world do not have legal identity and cannot have access to services” (Ahouga, 2023). Without legal citizenship these migrant communities cannot access equal work opportunities, health, political representation or access education in host nations. Additionally, global South is also host to 80 percent of world’s refugee population (International Migration Flows, 2020). Rapid urban expansion of megacities in the global South has been fueled by large inflow of migrant communities coming from war-torn regions, climate change affected regions, or regions with limited economic and educational opportunities. Migrants become marginalized, urban residents, living in slums and informal settlements without access to social mobility and no sense of urban citizenship (Saunders 2020).

The Pakistani megacity of Karachi with 23 million population, comprising 90 percent of migrants from other regions of Pakistan and South Asia (Karachi Population, 2023) is known as the “city of migrants” (Ali et al., 2010). Karachi offers a unique case for understanding the ways migration shapes the complex patterns and processes of urbanization in Global South and creates marginalization of specific ethnic migrants. Like other parts of world, there are also two ethnic migrant minorities in Karachi without access to Pakistani citizenship right in Pakistan. Majority of Burmese and Bengali migrants of Karachi are denied citizenship right in Pakistan. Karachi has 100 residential areas concentrated with illegal/alien migrants (Aligi, 2010). Among these, Machar Colony is slum colony of Burmese and Bengali migrants with 10 million population residing in 4.5 square kilometer residential area (Ali & Qazi, 2017). In Pakistan, ethnic identity plays a vital role in determining state treatment towards a migrant community. This paper critically analyses the contemporary academic literature to develop a thematic pattern focusing intersectionality of ethnic identity and access to citizenship focusing on livelihood/economic opportunities available to Burmese and Bengali migrant communities of Karachi.

The research selected the Burmese/Rohingya and Bengali migrant communities because the majority of people from these communities are not provided citizenship or refugee status in Pakistan and therefore, cannot access equal economic/livelihood opportunities such as working for public sector or skilled work (Zaman; Waseem, 2022). Rohingya Muslims and Bengali people without legal Pakistani citizenship status cannot also access basic right to education, health, voting rights, employment and property in Pakistan (Anwar; Siddiqui 2013, 2018).

II. Citizenship Laws and Ethnic Marginalization Burmese and Bengalis of Karachi

Examining the intersections of uneven patterns of urbanization and ethnic migrant minorities, this project aims to explore the lasting significance of ethnic identity in the construction of unequal forms of national and urban citizenship. In 2000, the digitalization of the citizenship acquisition process in Pakistan deprived many Bengalis and Rohingya Muslims of their basic citizenship rights (Siddiqui, 2018). The National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) of Pakistan introduced a new identity category for migrants as "Aliens" (Berda, 2020). Only Burmese and Bengali migrants of Karachi were labeled as aliens under this new legal category. Karachi is home to many other ethnic migrant groups who came from other parts of Asia but the newly introduced alien category only included Burmese and Bengali migrants of Karachi. After this new policy, many Bengali people who previously had citizenship right and Pakistan

identity cards were also put under alien category and could not renew their Pakistani citizenship cards. This depicts that legal eligibility of migrant community is not sufficient for securing citizenship rights and economic inclusion in Pakistan but ethnic identity also plays a significant role in determining the legal citizenship and economic status of migrant communities, developing an intersectionality of ethnic identity and citizenship and economic inequality. Like many other migrant groups of Karachi who are legally recognized as citizens of Pakistan, Burmese and Bengali people also meet the basic legal criteria for Pakistani citizenship right such as naturalization and living in Pakistan for 6 months, but their ethnic background has become a “condition” which keeps them from inclusion as legal citizens of Pakistan and instead categorizes them as “Aliens”.

III. Historical Background of Selected Communities

The Bengalis and Burmese migrated to Karachi during the partition of the Indian subcontinent and East Pakistan (Iqbal, 2018). Karachi is also called a mini-Bangladesh, as there are 132 settlements of Bengali communities in Karachi who are mostly Muslims (Hasan, 2021). The first wave of migration occurred during British rule when the first migrants of the Bengali community were brought by British traders from the Coasts of West Bengal to work at the port and exploit their fishing skills. The second wave of Bengali Immigration occurred after the partition of East Pakistan in 1971 (Gazdar et al, 2005). Before 1971, the Bengalis constituted the largest immigrant group in Karachi. The first generation of immigrants succeeded in securing social rights in Karachi, such as citizenship; however, the second layer of immigrants struggles for citizenship rights (Ahmad, 2021).

Burmese immigrants are the most marginalized community in Karachi, with limited or no access to citizenship rights in Pakistan (Zaman, et al., 2022). The first exodus of the Burmese community in Pakistan occurred in 1942 when the first major military crackdown on Muslims began in Burma, and one million Muslims were killed (Latif, 2020). The Burmese immigrants moved to Karachi from refugee camps of Bangladesh where most people lost their families during migration. The second exodus of Burmese occurred during 1970-80, when immigrants arrived in Karachi via Bangladesh (Latif, 2020).

IV. Theoretical Frameworks and Literature Review

The research explores themes of conditional inclusion of migrants (Hackl, 2022), which emphasizes not only how migrants are often excluded from legal right to citizenship, but also how their limited inclusion as unequal and second-class citizens help to maintain inequalities and power asymmetries. Ethno-cultural identities of migrant communities radically shape the lived experiences of migrant communities stemming not only from exclusive policies but also from conditional inclusion (Hackl, A., 2022). The research explored citizenship in terms of ethnic identity as a factor for conditional inclusion to state as Pakistani citizens for Burmese and Bengali migrants of Karachi. Marginality among migrant communities produces conditions of outsidership spawning multiple and intersectional identities as migrant communities vacillate between their original ethnic identity, the new ethnic identity formed after migration and their struggle for legal identity in a new territory (Nunzio, 2017).

The research also relates the concept of urban citizenship and urban inequalities (Varsanyi, 2006) while analyzing economic opportunities available for Burmese and Bengali migrants as they have limited options for livelihood in a metropolis setting. Hence the research contributes to understanding the meanings, content and extent of citizenship (Isin, 2013) of Burmese and Bengali communities, made and transformed in the urban setting of Karachi.

The paper builds on the theory of conditional inclusion (Hackl, 2022) and provides insights about the divisive functions of citizenship” (Isin, 2012) to discover how ethnic identity can function both as a ground for people’s exclusion from citizenship, and as a condition for using second-class citizenship to maintain durable inequalities. The research offers insights about the role of ethnicity and ethnic identity in shaping a hierarchical rank-ordering of migrant inequalities in the urban context.

V. Discussion and Analysis

Contemporary literature accentuates that marginalized Bengali and Burmese communities of Karachi undergo several hardships and challenges in their everyday lives owing to their limited access to Alien citizenship status in Pakistan. Among various barriers to accessing citizenship rights, the ethnic identity of these communities plays a part for subjugation of their citizenship and other basic human right. Several themes emerge by analyzing researches on selected communities which include, their ethnic marginalization, police harassment, limited access to education, health care and formal economic opportunities.

i. Ethnic Marginalization

Ethnic identities are fluid and situational as ethnicity incorporates both subjective and objective qualities in certain spaces and periods of time (Bengali & Sadaqat 2002). Objective ethnic attributes involve racial, linguistic, religious and cultural patterns whereas subjective elements involve common ancestry and sense of belonging. Additionally, ethnic identities also play an instrumental role by providing access to material resources such as education, employment and health (Bengali & Sadaqat 2002). In a metropolis urban environment, with scarce employment opportunities and high population, instrumental role of ethnic identity develops exaggerated importance. Hence ethnic marginalization of Burmese and Bengali migrant communities of Karachi stems from a racially polarized political and economic structures. A fragile and state-controlled democratic political structure in Karachi keeps the disadvantaged ethnicities underrepresented by limited access to citizenship rights (Bengali & Sadaqat 2002).

The new citizenship registration process in 2000 revoked citizenship status of many Bengali people who have been living as citizens for decades in Pakistan (Anwar, 2013). These previously Bengali citizens were systematically categorized as “Aliens” and now the state officials assert that Bengalis cannot have any hope of securing citizenship rights as children born to “Aliens” are also categorized as Aliens instead of being a Pakistani citizen by naturalization right (Waseem, 2023).

Hence the Bengali and Burmese in Karachi are trapped in a vicious cycle of marginalization. With limited access to formal economy and mobility, these communities fall prey to criminal and informal means of earning such as beggary, criminal gangs, prostitution and drug rackets which further fuels the state narratives of criminalized ethnic identity of Bengalis and Burmese in Karachi (Waseem, 2023). Both men and women of Bengali and Burmese communities are targeted and harassed by police, currently there are 2000 Bengali women held as prisoners by Karachi police (Hasan & Raza, 2009). This process further strengthens state repression and harassment of Burmese and Bengali of Karachi adding up to their ethnic marginalization.

ii. Limited economic opportunities

There were three major waves of Bengali migration in Karachi, the first occurred before the partition of Indian-subcontinent during the British Rule in early 1900s when Bengali people were brought to port city of Karachi by British rulers to employ their fishing skills. Hence early settlements of Bengalis were formed during this period which now known as Machar colony (Hasan, 2021). Since then, fishing has been key occupation of Bengali migrants of Karachi.

The second Bengali exodus occurred after partition of Indian Subcontinent when Muslim Bengali population moved to Karachi for better employment opportunities (Chatterji, 2017). During this time Karachi was not only economic hub of country but also capital of Pakistan. The last exodus of Bengali migrants occurred after the partition of East Pakistan in 1971. The Bengali migrants from during this wave had come from urban areas of Bengal and majority of them were ethnically non-Bengalis (Hasan & Raza, 2009). These new migrant's setup community schools for children as they settled in Orangi Town in Karachi. These self-taught settlers had access to formal sectors such as factories. Bengali women also worked in formal sector during this time (Hasan & Raza, 2009). Additionally, they also had access to local union councils of town that ensured access to basic facilities for Bengali migrants in Karachi.

On the other hand, the Burmese migrants also arrived in Pakistan in early 1970s as Muslim genocide in Burma forced Burmese Muslims to establish new settlements in Pakistan, a newly formed Islamic state where Muslims were welcomed (Hasan & Raza, 2009). Hence both Bengali and Burmese migrants had access to formal employment where they worked as fishermen, dock workers and crew members on deep ocean vessels. Currently, fishing industry is main formal source of income for Burmese and Bengali migrant communities as they work at lower rates than other local fishing workers (Hasan & Raza, 2009).

Historically, Karachi has been an open city for migration and higher rates of migration eroded the capacity of formal sector to bear increasing migrant populations with limited infrastructure (Ahmad et al, 2008). A large scale informal economic infrastructure was inevitably formed often managed and regulated by state organisations in Karachi. Under this Scenario, strengthening local social networks based on ethnic identities aided state organisation in economically and politically managing informal sector of a metropolis (Ahmad et al, 2008).

Hence with limited access to state education and high-paying jobs, migrant Burmese and Bengali communities also fuel the informal economy of Karachi as they are involved in drug mafia, street crime gangs and prostitution. The research data points to involvement of Bengali women in prostitution as 200,000 Bengali women were trafficked to Karachi for prostitution in last 10 years (Kumar, 2015). Hence limited access to Pakistani citizenship right is pushing these migrant communities into informal sector as major source of employment.

iii. State Harassment

Bengalis and Burmese of Karachi with an Alien status are subjected to daily police harassment which limits their inter-city mobility and access to various economic zones of metropolis. As Zoha Waseem (Waseem, 2023) quotes a talk with a local police representative of Karachi about Bengalis and Burmese people who labeled these ethnic groups as “criminals” who do not deserve to be included as a citizen of Pakistan. This relates to concept of divisive role of citizenship in Pakistani context where citizenship right is employed as a tool for creating ethnic divide in metropolis (Isin, 2012). On the other hand, the Burmese and Bengali residents reported daily harassment by police for not having citizenship documents. They have to bribe law enforcement officials to release them after getting bribes of 200 to 1000 rupees (Rehman, 2018).

iv. Limited Access to Health and Education

Without citizenship right, Burmese and Bengali communities cannot access basic health and formal education. Majority of these migrant send their children to Madrassas (Religious School) (Zaman et al, 2022). Likewise basic facilities such as clean drinking water and sewerage system is also not accessible for these migrant communities making them prone to disease and health problems. During the covid-19 pandemic, Burmese and Bengalis were

unable to travel long distances in Karachi for reaching vaccination registration. Additionally, without citizenship cards, they could not also register themselves for Covid-19 vaccination as only people with ID number were eligible to register for this facility during Covid-19 (Zaman et al, 2022). The local government also did not initiate any awareness campaign in migrant settlements of Burmese and Bengali communities about Covid-19 precautions. Private health facilities in these settlements cost about 30USD (including medical fee and cost of medicines) which is unaffordable for daily wage Burmese and Bengali people (Zaman et al, 2022). Likewise, Female health is also a challenge for these communities. Majority of women deliver babies at home, in absence of any trained medical professional because delivery cost at a private health facility is around 100 to 300 USD (Zaman et al, 2022). Burmese and Bengali pregnant women or patients cannot access public health facilities without legal citizenship documents.

v. Citizenship: An Unrealizable Dream

Since 2000, Bengali and Burmese migrants of Karachi have made efforts to restore citizenship rights for themselves and their children. Currently, majority of migrant settlements of these communities are politically protected and supported (Anwar, 2013) by the “Muttahida Quami Movement-MQM”, a leading political party of Karachi aimed at unifying and representing migrant communities of Karachi. Bengalis and Burmese in some areas of Karachi are also working as councilors and local leaders of MQM. The party also tried to make constitutional amendments by forming a special committee to discuss issues of Bengali community of Karachi (Rehman, 2018). However, no such constitutional amendment has passed till date. On the other hand, leaders of another leading Political party of Pakistan, the Pakistan Tahreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) also promised citizenship right for Burmese and Bengali migrants during their general election campaign in 2018 (Maryam, 2021), but despite winning elections, the PTI did also not make any legal amendments to provide citizenship right to Alien migrant communities. Hence Bengali and Burmese migrants, despite political support and vows, continue to navigate life under fearful and uncertain urban environment of Karachi.

VI. Conclusions

Above discussion accentuates those ethnic identities become politicized and discriminated against when situated in urban landscapes of metropolis. The Bengali and Burmese migrant communities of Karachi remain deprived of their basic citizenship right due to their ethnic identity. Daily life of these migrant communities differs from other migrant communities of Karachi due to their Alien status in Pakistan. Bengali and Burmese migrants have limited access to formal employment, restricted mobility which adds up to their daily struggles of navigating life and means of life in Karachi. Public education and health facilities also remain inaccessible for these migrant communities depriving them of their basic human rights. Under such limiting living conditions, these migrant communities also become vulnerable to criminal activities and informal employment channels to afford means of life and power gains which makes them prone to police harassment and ethnic marginalization. The involvement of these Alien communities in criminal activities further strengthens the state narratives entitling them as “born criminals” who should not be provided citizenship status of Pakistan. On the other hand, ethnically polarized political environment of Karachi city also hinders the process of acquiring legal citizenship rights of Pakistan. Therefore, despite political support from various political parties, Burmese and Bengali migrant communities continue to live under alien status in Pakistan.

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