Necropolitics and the Precarious Lives of Rohingya Refugees in India

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/08/05/necropolitics-and-the-precarious-lives-of-rohingya-refugees-in-india/

ANANYA SHARMA, AUG 5 2020

With an unprecedented increase in global refugee numbers, there has been a collective failure on part of the most advanced liberal democracies to guarantee 'human' conditions for these refugees. Focusing on the conditions of Rohingya Muslims in migrant camps in India, this article conjoins the binary between bio and necro forms of power arguing that these ethical perspectives contribute to a connected understanding regarding questions of state responsibility and hospitality. The veil of ignorance exhibited by the state, allows for it to constitute itself as 'normatively good' in providing shelter to the refugees while being innocent of its violent complicities. The article proceeds in three parts. Section one charts the turn to ethics in IR, focusing on, critical humanism based on bodily vulnerability and the notion of stranger fetishism. The second section provides a detailed description of the experiences of the residents of the Rohingya refugee camps. The last section summarizes how the refugee camps can be identified as central to the contemporary necrpolitical landscape.

Ethics and Precarious Life: The Object of Disgust and Stranger Fetishism

There has been a recent turn towards inquiring into the 'human subject' within IR as a discipline, long obsessed with systemic explanations and formulations (Butler 2004; 2007; 2009, Hutchings 2010; Campbell 1992; Frost 1986; 2000; and Linklater 2007; 2011; 2016). This has been also in response to the securitizing discourses shaped by the global war on terror where the national body is under threat. In the contemporary world, one needs to therefore question 'what work does suffering do' for the fate of refugees. There is an ethic of hospitality (Butler 2009; Danewid 2017) that is evoked as a form of response to the suffering of others, to show solidarity with those beyond the borders in the sub-continent, underlining shared history and India's special status in the region. By focusing on the generosity and hospitality which manifests itself in a patronizing fantasy of protecting endangered others, one bolsters the claim for India as a bastion of democracy, rights and liberal values. This article makes two interventions. First, it contributes in dismantling the 'charitable', 'good neighbor', 'humanist' discourses around India that build on 'fetishisation of the stranger' and the narrative of treating guests as equivalents of god. Second and relatedly, by linking bio and necropolitics of power one unveils the erasures of the ongoing tragic conditions refugees are subject to due to state 'inaction'. The construction of India as 'ethical', good and responsible precisely obliterates the mundane violence and state complicity experienced by the refugees.

Sara Ahmed's work on stranger fetishism provides some insights into 'objectification of the stranger' as a figure of danger, as a constant reminder of difference but also relationality (Ahmed 2000). There is a self-serving motivation that underpins the welcoming of the alien stranger, as Ahmed explains

the alien is a source of fascination and desire: making friends with aliens, eating with aliens, or even eating one (up), might enable us to transcend the very limits and frailties of an all-too human form. Or, by allowing some aliens to co-exist 'with us', we might expand our community: we might prove our advancement into or beyond the human; we might demonstrate our willingness to accept difference and to make it our own. Being hospitable to aliens might, in this way, allow us to become human (Ahmed 2000, 53).

How does one recognise a stranger? The question of stranger/ness is often framed through the lens of recognition

Necropolitics and the Precarious Lives of Rohingya Refugees in India
Written by Ananya Sharma

and misrecognition, identifying the stranger as one who is not the object of our knowledge (Ahmed 2010, 24). Knowledge is thus constitutive of not only what is familiar/knowable to us but also what is strange and who is defined as a stranger. Thus stranger isn't someone we don't recognise rather it is someone we recognise as a stranger, he/she is produced as an object of knowledge than through absence of knowledge. There are hence far reaching implications of the inter-connections between knowledge and strangers. Strangers are not distant rather those who have entered the proximities of what the majority calls as 'home'(ibid, 25).

The stranger is often attributed as the source of danger, making hysteria around their presence and anticipated source of threat they might be to the larger population. However, in liberal discourses strangers are celebrated as origins of difference, the testament to toleration and multicultural values of a progressive nation. Both these perspectives only further the idea of 'stranger fetishism', which is often observed in foreign policy as well as national security considerations of a nation-state (Ahmed 2010, 6).

Why do states need a figure for projecting disgust that translates into a climate of fear mongering and spectre of violence against the other? The idea of chaos and crisis emblematic in the refugee presence allows states to deflect attention by blaming the foreigner, the other and justify continuation of securitised policies to promote national sovereignty. They are often referred to as vermin, pariah or bogus: always less than human.

There are various processes of incorporation and eviction through which bodies are produced as assimilable and naturalised within a national context. The bodies of strangers or 'strange bodies' are removed/dismissed from the national space by reading them through histories of determination in which these bodies are associated with dirt and danger (Ahmed 2010, 14). There are various parameters in place that mark a body strange from a familiar one. The stranger rather being utterly unknown is always already predicated on recognisable attributes (not necessarily visual, like the beard for Muslims, sometimes these could be olfactory as well). Thus the stranger is kept at a distance through the fact of its proximity, the ability of the majority to discern strangeness.

In India, the subject (Hindu upper caste man, mostly) is presented as endangered by the proximity of 'imagined others' which threatens to take away something from the subject (jobs, wealth, land) as well as take the place of the subject. The presence of 'other' is conceived as a threat to the object of love (Ahmed 2000, 56). There are often narratives that are extensively propagated by the state attempting to re-write the history as a 'homogenous'. The majority (Hindus) often claim to be victims of the system where they feel threatened by the others (Appadurai 2006).The construction of 'other' as an object of 'hate' concretises both- idea of imagined nation as well as the imagined subject. This alignment also reifies the notion that the rights of the subject as well the nation itself are under threat from the other. It is this affective reading of 'hate' as a binding emotion that brings together the subject and the nation. Passionate emotional responses by the 'majority' like fear, loathing, repulsion, anger often construed as negative are shown in a positive light, often justified by state authorities. It is the love of the 'familiar' that results in the communal visceral response of hate towards the other that represents 'uncertainty'. As Ahmed (2000, 62) puts it, "together we hate, and this hate is what makes us together".

The extraordinary ordinariness of this narrative places both a country as well as its majority population under threat by the imagined proximity to the other. The subject is constantly reproduced as the 'injured party', been hurt by the invasion of others. The figure of the 'other' also connotes risk of impurity, threatening to violate the 'pure' bodies. The purity of the subject can only be maintained through a perpetual restaging of this fantasy of violence. Ahmed introduces the concept of 'metonymic slide' where hate cannot be relegated to a singular figure, rather it circulates to crucially align different figures and label them as a 'common threat' (Ahmed 2000, 62). There is a resemblance between these figures (Muslims, refugees, anti-national students, media) and what makes them similar is their 'dissimilarity' from us. This is evident in the lived experiences of those residing in the camps. It is important to acknowledge the role of the 'stranger' in both liberal narratives around multi-culturalism and hospitality as well as the populist far right anti-immigrant rhetoric. Both these discourses reify the figure of the refugee as the 'other', non-recognised subject as a starting point for their interventions. The discourse on India's benevolence and empathy towards the suffering of the migrants contributes to the construction of responsible leader in regional politics while at the same time effaces the lack of action on the part of the government that makes refugee lives 'unworthy' and 'disposable'. It is important to acknowledge the differential frames through which one views the suffering of others,

Necropolitics and the Precarious Lives of Rohingya Refugees in India
Written by Ananya Sharma

yet at the same time be cognizant in creating the category of 'other' both as a form of highlighting difference as well as the responsibility and moral culpability it creates on the part of the state.

Locating the Camp in Context

Space is not apolitical, rather it is fundamental to any form of communal life and for exercising power (Foucault 1984, 252). It was the fateful night of April 15th 2018, at around 3:30 am a massive fire broke out in Delhi's Kalindi Kunj camp for Rohingya refugees burning 50 shanties and rendering close to 230 people 'homeless' (The Print 2019). This wasn't the first incident of fire in the camp established in 2012, similar instances have happened in 2012, 2016, 2017 and the latest in 2018. The camp housed around 50 refugee families. The fire devoured everything in its way, turning it into ashes, but the biggest loss was their ID cards and documents pertaining to their origins in Rakhine state in Myanmar. One of the victims claimed "we don't know the cause of the fire, but our houses are made of plastic and fire gutted everything, our everything is lost" (The Caravan Magazine 2019). The camps are not connected to an authorised power grid, and the shelters have been assembled in an ad hoc, tightly packed arrangement. This disordered layout is also an obstacle, making it strenuous and time-consuming for emergency response teams to locate the fire.

The Rohingya Muslims described as the 'world's most persecuted minority' have been searching for asylum to avoid their fatal destiny. At the beginning of 2017, with reports of renewed violence, including mass rapes, murders and arson, triggered another phase of mass exodus of Rohingyas to rescue themselves from the 'genocidal repression' by Myanmar's security forces (The Print 2019). At various points, the government has reiterated that they aren't bound to accept Rohingya refugees, citing domestic concerns of national security. This precludes the government of any moral responsibility towards the conditions of refugees in the country, while maintaining that they are 'sympathetic' towards these strangers forced to flee their homes. This lack of accountability is co-constitutive of the precarious lives refugees lead in abysmal conditions in the country, despite the narrative of India welcoming these 'strangers' with open arms, fulfilling its role as the conscientious big brother in the neighbourhood.

The Ministry of Home Affairs has cited Rohingyas as 'threats for domestic security' claiming that intelligence suggests their links to terrorist outfits (The Print 2019). However, this hysteria of calling Rohingyas as 'terrorists' is driven by the politics of the current deeply divisive and communal government which seeks to create 'a Hindu rashtra' by driving out Muslims. With the recently enacted controversial Citizenship law, there are rekindled fears of displacement among the Rohingya community (The Caravan Magazine 2019). This explains the viciousness in deporting these Rohingyas back to Myanmar which is unprecedented behaviour on part of Indian government. For the present party in power, which is unabashedly communal and anti-constitutional Rohingyas are Muslims first, refugees later, thus justifying their 'miserable' existence without a right to a dignified life.

The aggressive nationalism and divisive rhetoric of the current national government is only aggravating the already traumatized Rohingya refugees. BJP chief Amit Shah has often termed them illegal immigrants, comparing them to 'termites' eat into the nation's security (Indian Express, 2019). The election propaganda for 2019 was even more vitriolic, seeing increasing chiasms based on religious identity creating an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty among the refugees. There has also been an increasing surveillance with respect to their verification. One of the forms provided by the Indian authorities to the Rohingyas in the Delhi camps, titled the 'Personal Data Form', asks for details of a refugee's family members in Myanmar. The refugees are wary of sharing this information citing the safety of those back home as a concern. Such intrusive details about their existence remind them of a starkly similar citizenship-verification programme that the Myanmar government launched in June 2014. The renewed attempts at re-writing the citizenship laws in the country, along with the contentious National Register for Citizens and Citizenship Amendment Act have only increased the uncertainty of the futures of these refugee migrants.

Delhi is one of the largest settlement areas for these Rohingya refugees, often sharing spaces with migrant labourers from Bihar and Assam (The Caravan Magazine 2019). Even within these shared spaces, there is hierarchisation of access to resources and often Rohingyas face discrimination on daily basis. In other places in Northern India, particularly, Jammu, a Hindu dominated district, they face extreme hostile conditions with vilification at an everyday basis. There have been advertisements in the local newspapers calling for their deportation and even threatening to

Necropolitics and the Precarious Lives of Rohingya Refugees in India
Written by Ananya Sharma

run an 'identify and kill campaign' (The Caravan Magazine 2019). With growing polarisation and Islamophobia, their bare existence has been out to jeopardy. Most of the Rohingyas rely on informal labour for their livelihood, since they don't have refugee cards and language acts as a constraint in getting employed. According to South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre, the most common jobs are: rag-picking, selling vegetables, daily-wage labour work, and selling cigarettes (Indian Express 2019). The health hazard faced by Rohingyas living in camps across Delhi-NCR is exacerbated by the profession these refugees engage in. Some living in the Kalindi Kunj camp are involved in sorting potentially hazardous biomedical waste, heightening the infection risk for an already vulnerable community (Indian Express 2019).

Thus what defines the 'necro-political' nature of the Indian state is the 'economy of violence'- an intricate interplay between spectacular/physical violence and suspended/invisibilised forms of violence practiced in the everyday (Azoulay and Ophir 2012). In the context of the Indian state, suspended violence hasn't superseded or eradicated spectacular violence, in fact the latter has become imminent and visible in the everyday. It has allowed for the ruling party to operate without any restrictions or circumscribed by the constitution, this giving a free hand to the sovereign to determine 'who matters and who does not'.

Due to their stateless condition, Rohingya refugees struggle to access basic healthcare. In Nuh, camp residents said pregnant women received little prenatal care and 17% of deliveries in 2016 took place in the camp itself (Human Rights Law Network 2019). In Kalindi Kunj, the UNHCR conducts occasional medical camps and assists financially with any consultations at Safdarjung Hospital, which are reimbursed (The Indian Express 2019). The last reported medical camp was held here in 2016. Refugees living in this camp also complained that ambulances never responded to their calls. The two hospitals they visited for emergencies – Nallhar and Nuh Medical College – often referred them to Safdarjung Hospital in Delhi, which is over 70 km away. The invisible and steady consequences of these conditions might be hard to immediately materialize and articulate resulting in 'slow violence' (Nixon 2011).

Necropolitics and Structural Violence

The migrants living in perilous conditions with lack of proper shelter, sanitation, food supply and constant threat of facing violence are pushed towards 'letting die' through active state non responses (Tyner 2016a 206).Refugees are always escaping from a 'death world' either due to the genocidal attacks in their countries of origins, the precarity of their journeys or the hazardous living conditions in the camps (Mbembe 2003). These are territories of abjection, peripheral sites, where violence is exercised in quotidian existence through an estrangement from political normality (Dillon 1999). The estrangement is both manufactured and constitutive of the state's responses. The refugees are concurrently both invisibilised and visibilised to the state by denying them basic rights, legal protections and access to welfare, leading to their uncertain existence while simultaneously exploiting them for cheap labour and for political gain. Foucault's conception of biopolitics doesn't take into account the contemporary forms of subordination of 'life to the power of death.' The creation of a biological field that creates as distinction between those who 'must' live from those 'can' die (be killed) is the premise for biopower, the living conditions of some subjects lead to the denial or human-ness, thus labelling them as 'living dead' where one is expendable without the death being accounted for as murder (Papailias 2018).

Necro politics pushes this understanding of killing as an act of sovereign power by including the decision to let die. Here, 'to let die' signifies the precarity of life by depriving individuals of access to basic health care facilities, living conditions and refusal to guarantee due legal processes. One of the techniques deployed by the state to this effect is through construction of 'cultural imaginaries' which give differential rights to different categories within the same space (Mbembe 2003, 24). To understand state's actions in these necro-political spaces it is important to identify the narrative around 'savages' inhabiting these zones. The violence employed in these spaces is justifies in the service of 'civilisation'. This is Arendtian notion which ennobles those who commit murder to believe that their acts are legitimate and moral since the victims lack human-ness (Arendt 1973). This engagement with the 'political' construction of those who are left to die in abeyance helps to reformulate the 'state of exception' beyond the camp into the everyday spaces. These refugees are considered as 'surplus', given their endless supply, making them disposable and the next section explores how they can be 'let to die'. The aim is to move beyond the 'spectalisation of death' and engage with the everyday struggle of living resulting in pre-mature deaths. For these refugees, violence

Necropolitics and the Precarious Lives of Rohingya Refugees in India

Written by Ananya Sharma

is an everyday reality, a constant companion as the state decides who is worthy of salvation and who should be left to die. This resonates with the daily lives of the Rohingya refugees in India.

Conclusion

The paper thus establishes that the form of violence, the refugees are being subjected due to their abandonment by the state is ultimately structural. These 'neglected spaces' where people are destined to suffer indignity and harm are 'socially sanctioned' projects of dehumanization (Castro 2015, 248). The refugees in these camps are entrapped in the routinised processes of silencing their stories, dreams and corporeality. Necropolitics thus further concretizes the idea that 'modern humanism' is exclusionary in nature and predicates on the notion of mundane suffering. The Indian notion of '*vasudev katumbakam'* fades in the light of our differential treatment to these refugees. The logics of human hierarchy operate and extend in the realm of the 'ordinary' by state action and inaction.

References

Ahmed, Sara. 2000. Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality. London and New York: Routledge.

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

Alves JA. 2014. From necropolis to blackpolis: Necropolitical governance and black spatial praxis in São Paulo, Brazil. Antipode 46(2): 323–339.

Appadurai, A. 1993. Number in the colonial imagination. In Orientalism and the postcolonial predicament, ed. C.A. Breckenridge and P. Van Der Veer, 314_39. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Arendt H 1973. The Origins of Totalitarianism. Orlando, FL: Mariner Books.

Bauman Z. 2004. Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts. London: Polity Press

Butler, J 2004. Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence, London: Verso Books.

Butler, Judith. 2010. Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?. London: Verso.

Castro A F H. 2015. From the "bio" to the "necro". In S E Wilmer and A Žukauskaitė (eds) Resisting Biopolitics: Philosophical, Political, and Performative Strategies (pp 237–253). London: Routledge

Cresswell, Tim. 1996. In place/out of place: Geography, ideology, and transgression. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

———. 2001. The production of new mobilities. New Formations 43: 11–25.

———. 2006. On the move: Mobility in the modern Western world. London: Routledge.

 Danewid, I. 2017. White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean: Hospitality and the erasures of history. Third World Quarterly, 38(7), pp.1674-1689.

Davies T and Isakjee A 2015. Geography, migration, and abandonment in the Calais refugee camp. Political Geography 49:93–95

Davies, T., Isakjee, A., and Dhesi, S. 2017. 'Violent Inaction: The necropolitical experience of refugees in Europe', Antipode, 49(5), pp.1263-1284.

Diken B 2004. From refugee camps to gated communities: Biopolitics and the end of the city. Citizenship Studies

Necropolitics and the Precarious Lives of Rohingya Refugees in India
Written by Ananya Sharma

8(1):83–106

Esses V 2015. Siege mentality. New Scientist 225 (3011): 26–27.

Estevez A 2014. The politics of death and asylum discourse: Constituting migration biopolitics from the periphery. Alternatives: Global, Local, Political 39(2): 75–89.

Fassin D 2009. Another politics of life is possible. Theory, Culture, and Society 26(5):44–60

" Fearing Detention and deportation, Rohingyas refugees Flee India". The Caravan. Accessed February 3, 2019. https://caravanmagazine.in/communities/fearing-detentions-deportation-delhi-rohingya-refugees-flee-bangladesh

Foucault M 1978. The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction. New York: Random House

Foucault M 1997. The birth of biopolitics. In P Rabinow (ed) Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth (pp 73–80). New York: New Press

Galtung J 1969. Violence, peace, and peace research. Journal of Peace Research 6(3):167–191

Gidwani V and Reddy R N 2011. The afterlives of "waste": Notes from India for a minor history of capitalist surplus. Antipode 43(5):1625–1658

"Gutted Delhi camp puts spotlight on sub human living conditions of Rohingyas in India". The Print. Accessed March 18, 2019. https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/gutted-delhi-camp-puts-spotlight-on-sub-human-living-conditions-rohingyas-face-in-india/50410/

Hannabach C 2013. Technologies of blood: Asylum, medicine, and biopolitics. Cultural Politics an International Journal 9(1): 22–41.

Hyndman, Jennifer. 1997. Border crossings. Antipode 29, no. 2: 149–76.

"India's Rohingya Shame". Aljazeera. Accessed April 24, 2019 https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/india-rohingya-shame-190125104433377.html

India's Rohingya refugees struggle with hatred, fear as first group expelled". Reuters. Accessed March 18, 2019. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-india-insight/indias-rohingya-refugees-struggle-with-hatred-fear-as-first-group-is-expelled-idUSKCN1MH04P

Johnson HL 2013. The other side of the fence: Reconceptualizing the 'camp' and migration zones at the borders of Spain. International Political Sociology 7(1): 75–91.

Lee D and Pratt G 2012. The spectacular and the mundane: Racialised state violence, Filipino migrant workers, and their families. Environment and Planning A 44(4):889–904

Lemke T 2011. Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction. New York: NYU Press

Lewis H, Dwyer P, Hodkinson S and Waite L 2015. Hyper-precarious lives: Migrants, work, and forced labour in the Global North. Progress in Human Geography 39(5):580–600

Li T M 2010. To make live or let die? Rural dispossession and the protection of surplus populations. Antipode 41(1):66–93

Malkki, Liisa H. 1992. National geographic: The rooting of peoples and the territorialization of national identity among

Necropolitics and the Precarious Lives of Rohingya Refugees in India
Written by Ananya Sharma

scholars and refugees. Cultural Anthropology 7, no. 1: 24–43.

Mbembe A 1992. The banality of power and the aesthetics of vulgarity in the postcolony. Public Culture 4(2):1–30

Mbembe A 2003. Necropolitics. Public Culture 15:11–40

McIntyre M and Nast H J 2011. Bio(necro)polis: Marx, surplus populations, and the spatial dialectics of reproduction and "race". Antipode 43(5):1465–1488

Moore S A 2009. The excess of modernity: Garbage politics in Oaxaca, Mexico. The Professional Geographer 61(4):426–437

Nixon R 2011. Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor. London: Harvard University Press

Proctor R and Schiebinger L L 2008. Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance. Redwood City: Stanford University Press

Ramadan A 2013a. Spatialising the refugee camp. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 38(1):65–77

Round J and Kuznetsova I 2016. Necropolitics and the migrant as a political subject of disgust: The precarious everyday of Russia's labour migrants. Critical Sociology 42(7/8):1017–1034

Sigona N 2015. Campzenship: Reimagining the camp as a social and political space. Citizenship Studies 19(1):1–15

Sparke M B 2006. A neoliberal nexus: Economy, security, and the biopolitics of citizenship on the border. Political Geography 25(2):151–180

Tyner J A 2016a. Violence in Capitalism: Devaluing Life in an Age of Responsibility. New York: University of Nebraska Press

Urry, John. 2000. Sociology beyond societies: Mobilities for the twenty-first century. Routledge: London.

Vaughan-Williams N 2015. Europe's Border Crisis: Biopolitical Security and Beyond. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Williams J M 2015. From humanitarian exceptionalism to contingent care: Care and enforcement at the humanitarian border. Political Geography 47:11–20

Yates M 2011. The human-as-waste, the labour theory of value, and disposability in contemporary capitalism. Antipode 43(5):1679–1695

About the author:

Ananya Sharma is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Ashoka University. Her research interests include decolonial thought, intellectual histories of IR and popular culture in the global south.