

Bargaining (in)visibility: Rohingya refugees and the politics of visibility in India

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Abstract

Despite relatively low numbers, Rohingya refugees in India have faced a spiralling, multi-factorial crisis of negative visibility over the past decade, constructed by public opinion, politicians, and media coverage. This paper examines this process of negative visibility, largely outside of the community's control, its very real consequences, and in response, how refugees navigate within an increasingly hostile policy landscape. Relying on qualitative data collected with refugees, community leaders, and NGOs in Delhi, Jaipur, and Hyderabad (2022–23), we make three interrelated arguments. First, the visibility of the Rohingya as 'illegal immigrants' is driven by multiple spatial and episodic factors and actors embedded in India's fragmented refugee governance. Second, refugees seem to adopt strategic mobilities/immobilities and pursue visibility in both mediated and coerced ways to protect themselves against the risks of negative visibility. Third, these strategies have unintended consequences for reassertion of hierarchical power relations within the community and with state authorities. Empirical evidence from the Rohingya case in India contributes to growing scholarly discussion on the co-constitutive politics of (in)visibility, (im)mobility, and fragmented refugee governance in South Asia.

Keywords: Rohingya, South Asia, India, refugee governance, refugee invisibilities

Introduction

(In)visibility is an emerging conceptual framework in migration studies to better understand the experiences of migrant and refugee communities. Scholars have looked at the range of processes and discourses that lead to both visibilization and invisibilization of migrants and refugees (Polzer and Hammond 2008; Brinham 2019; Bjarnesen and Turner 2020). Research has also explored strategies, subjectivities, and spaces through which migrants and refugees reclaim agency and counter the (in)visibilities imposed by state and non-state actors (Feldman 2008; Bhimji 2016; de Vries 2016; Lakraa 2017; Takaindisa and Palmay 2020; Benhura and Naidu 2021; Haile 2020; Pugh 2022;

Received: 21 September 2023. Revised: 12 March 2024.

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Stewart and Sanders 2023; Özdemir 2023). In this paper, we use the lens of (in)visibility to understand the politics of refuge in India through a case study of the Rohingya refugees. This community is worthwhile to zoom in on because as a stateless community from Myanmar, deemed illegal by the Indian government, but recognized as refugees by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), they occupy a precarious legal limbo in a fractured policy landscape and have been subject to a spiralling, multi-factorial crisis of visibility in recent years. The roughly 20–40,000 Rohingya refugees in India arrived at different periods in the last three decades and are disparately settled across several regions including Jammu, Delhi-NCR, Hyderabad, and Jaipur (Velath and Chopra 2018; Abbas and Hemadri 2022; Nair 2022; Rather 2022).

This article takes a multi-pronged approach to understand growing (in)visibility and its implications in the context of the Rohingya in India. We look at interactions between in(visibility) at the scale of the state/nation of India, the region of South Asia, as well as the level of the Rohingya community/individuals, and how they are co-constituted together with (im)mobilities. To do that, we first examine the sets of factors that have led to a growing visibility of the Rohingya community in India and how they structure and are structured by governance practices that are ad-hoc and fragmented across time, space, and region. We identify macro factors including temporal, spatial, and regional dynamics as well as the political factors interacting with these to produce this visibility. We show how localized domestic/regional conflicts such as terror attacks or political protests adversely affect refugees who are often blamed for episodes they did not participate in, producing a negative visibility. This effect is further compounded for those living in camp settlements where they are clearly identifiable and accessible, leaving them vulnerable to retaliation. Second, we identify how refugees have coped with this through mobilities and visibilities of their own, focusing on the ways in which the individual families and the community, as a whole, exercise agency and undertake protective, sometimes coerced practices. Third, we explore the consequences of these, and how everyday survival strategies interacting with coercive state practices can unintentionally heighten power hierarchies and affect community trust.

This paper aims to contribute to growing research on migrant and refugee (in)visibilities by bringing in the case study of Rohingyas in India. Similar to previous studies, it proposes to approach visibility and visibilization as a process (Polzer and Hammond 2008: 424; Bjarnesen and Turner 2020). In particular, this article uses visibility as a starting point to subsequently explore how (in)visibilities have functioned in conjunction with (im)mobilities as responses to this process. The article underlines that (in)visibilities go along with (im)mobilities as individuals and communities seek ways in which to protect themselves, with visibility/invisibility and mobility/immobility functioning as an interactive, co-constitutive process. Second, it responds to a growing need for research in the context of refugee governance in the Global South, where a majority of the world's forced migrants are hosted (Shivakoti and Milner 2021; Márquez-Lamedá 2022).

Empirically, the paper contributes a relatively understudied host country context, namely India. India's historical and current responses to forced migration situations and its ad-hoc policy approach to the existing, diverse refugee population have been the subject of much scholarship (Chimni 2003; Bhattacharjee 2008; Sen 2017; Ramasubramanyam 2020; Paliwal 2022; Biswas 2023). Literature on Rohingya refugee experiences in India has focused on issues such as legal identity, living circumstances, migration journeys, and conditions of protracted displacement (Tiwari et al. 2017; Basavapatna 2018; Velath and Chopra 2018; Anil 2022; Nair 2022; Rather 2022), however often without delving into the nuances of space, time, and politics in impacting refugee experience and responses. Notable exceptions include Field et al. (2019) who analyse refugee self-reliance in the context of urban space, highlighting how spatial marginalization in camps in Delhi affects refugees' access to services, relations with locals, and connections to NGOs and Paliwal who examines the politics of refugee reception in India, contrasting the experiences of different refugee groups (Paliwal 2022). Building on these studies, this paper aims to further nuance the conversation around refugee governance in India by bringing together

different spatial, temporal, and political/regional factors that have played a role in the approach towards refugees in different parts of the country as well as how refugees have coped with it.

The paper starts with introducing migrant/refugee (in)visibility as a conceptual framework. The following section focuses on the methods and data collection process. Then, we explore the process of growing visibility that has affected the Rohingya in India over the years, as well as its spatial, episodic, and political dimensions. We then examine the response of the refugee community across India, focusing on how (in)visibilities and (im)mobilities interact to form the Rohingya (in)visibility bargain (Pugh 2022). Finally, the conclusion consolidates the paper's argument and points to future areas of research.

Understanding migrant and refugee (in)visibilities

(In)visibility as an analytical concept has been defined, understood, and deployed in different ways in (forced) migration studies. In their seminal special issue on invisible displacements, Polzer and Hammond underline the relational nature of the concept, defining invisibility as a relationship 'between those who have the power to see or to choose not to see, and, on the other hand, those who lack the power to demand to be seen or to protect themselves from the negative effects of imposed visibility' (Polzer and Hammond 2008: 421). (In)visibilities are constructed by several actors and practices. State actors and international organizations such as UNHCR produce and impose different (in)visibilities through their categorization (e.g. refugees, irregular migrants, stateless) as well as through everyday bureaucratic practices (e.g. registration; paperwork). For example, calculated visibility is argued to be a key part of the production of statelessness for the Rohingya in Myanmar through issuance of new documents imposing new administrative realities and incrementally stripping the community of rights (Brinham 2019). Similarly, creating rigid categories can invisibilize those who fall through the bureaucratic cracks (Bakewell 2008; Bjarnesen and Turner 2020).

Visibility operates and is reacted to at the individual scale as well. Feldman highlights how identification documents serving as 'visible markers of existence and continued claims', enable Palestinians in Gaza to resist invisibility (Feldman 2008: 510). Brinham's research with the Rohingya in Myanmar finds that they similarly hold on to defunct Burmese papers in a bid to resist the state's invisibilizing practices (Brinham 2019). Countering the standard binary of victimhood and assertion in refugee studies, Haile introduces the notion of strategic invisibility to explain how refugees sometimes embrace visibility in different spaces for various reasons, including to avoid being slotted into a refugee stereotype (Haile 2020). Scholars have made similar arguments regarding the exercise of strategic (in)visibilities such as camouflage in other geographical contexts as well including Spain and Botswana (Takandisa and Palmayr 2020; Özdemir 2023). Stewart and Sanders also propose the notion of *cultivated urban invisibility* in the UK which both produces, and is, a product of illegality and functions at the intersections of irregularity, race, and class (Stewart and Sanders 2023). Bjarnesen and Turner, in an important 2020 book on in/visibility in African migration highlight the relational nature of the concept, the need to examine 'what in/visibilization does' and the critical role played by power in mediating this process (Bjarnesen and Turner 2020). Invisibility, for instance in an institutional setting, can co-exist with hypervisibility in other contexts, such as through racial profiling as it does for Vammen's Senegalese respondents in Buenos Aires and Özdemir's African and Asian respondents in Barcelona (Vammen 2020; Özdemir 2023).

Bringing together several elements of visibility and irregular migration governance highlighted in the literature, Pugh introduces the concept of *invisibility bargain* (Pugh 2022). He highlights how a particular social and political invisibility, along with valued economic contribution, underpins tolerance towards migrant and refugee groups in Ecuador. Violating these determinants leads to backlash and the emergence of the invisibility bargain—'an informal understanding [that] emerges in the form of a set of unwritten expectations' (Pugh 2022: 38). Pugh shows that three options are undertaken by migrants in this bargain—first, choosing to

invisibilize entirely and avoid encounters with the state in any form, second, building coalitions with non-state allies/actors who act as power brokers on their behalf, and third, choosing to speak out on their own behalf and reshape the narrative by relying on moral justifications, solidarity, and empathy as the basis of their claims (Pugh 2022: 2). The invisibility bargain, therefore, ranges from a total invisibility to a mediated visibility and finally, direct visibility. In this article, we adopt Pugh's invisibility bargain in the context of (im)mobilities to better understand the case of Rohingyas in India. Similar to other scholars, we treat visibility as a process and take it as a relational concept (Polzer and Hammond 2008; Bjarnesen and Turner 2020). To contextualize this relationship, we examine the factors and actors that have led, over time, to growing visibilization of the Rohingya in India. We examine how various temporal, spatial, and regional factors have shaped this process, as well as the political factors interacting with these. Second, we look at how the community engages in mobilities and (in)visibilities of different types, in an effort to exercise agency in the face of a growing negative visibilization largely outside of their control.

Data collection and methodology

Exact numbers of Rohingya refugees in India are difficult to estimate—while the UNHCR's data as of 2023 indicates a total of 22,110, estimates of India's Ministry of Home Affairs indicate 40,000¹ (Rajan 2022; UNHCR 2023). The community is distributed across the country, the largest populations being in Hyderabad, Jammu, and Delhi-NCR, with smaller groups living in Jaipur, Chennai, Bangalore, and other areas (Velath and Chopra 2018; Anil 2022; Nair 2022). The fieldwork for this paper was conducted primarily in Delhi-NCR and Jaipur, with some supplementary data from Hyderabad. Informal estimates offered during interviews indicate that the region of Delhi-NCR (including Haryana) is home to approximately 770 families, living in both urban and rural camp-like settlements as well as settled in rented accommodation across the city while Jaipur hosts roughly 160 self-settled families. Fieldwork was conducted between August and December 2022, further supplemented by online interviews afterwards. A follow-up field visit was conducted between October 2023 and January 2024 to the cities of Hyderabad and Jaipur.² The growing hostility towards Rohingya refugees in India, and increasing administrative scrutiny from the Indian government, has rendered many refugees reluctant to engage with outsiders, including researchers, and wary of disrupting the precarious status quo they had developed with various state and non-state actors. Hence, we found snowball sampling with multiple points of entry—community-led organizations, individual community leaders, NGOs—to be the most effective.

The empirical material includes 46 life history interviews³ primarily with refugees in Delhi and Jaipur conducted in August–December 2022 and in December 2023–January 2024 along with two online interviews⁴ of refugee leaders in Hyderabad in July 2023.⁵ An additional 16 in-depth interviews⁶ with NGOs, experts, and community volunteers were conducted online and offline, and informal group discussions and extensive field notes were undertaken in all locations.

¹ The higher estimate from the Government of India is likely due to two possible reasons—either an overestimation based on assumed growth of Rohingya families or a deliberate attempt to project larger numbers in order to emphasize the security threat (Amin 2018). Empirical studies from 2015 indicate that most Rohingya refugees to India arrived in the late 2000s and many in 2012, after the violence in Rakhine state in the same year (Velath and Chopra, 2015) while a 2023 NGO report ascertains that 13,000 entered India between 2012 and 2016 (Sullivan and Sur 2023).

² We do not draw extensively on the new set of interviews from Hyderabad, but they set the context for the revised version of the manuscript.

³ Life history interviews with refugees was kept largely open-ended to allow participants to lay out the narrative of their own lives. Certain themes that emerged in early interviews (such as negative media attention, police scrutiny, mobility aspirations) were probed in later interviews generating a more iterative interview process.

⁴ These were preliminary online interviews conducted in the leadup to the second field visit.

⁵ Life histories and in-depth interviews typically involved written iterative consent and recording (except in a few cases) while group discussions typically took the form of informal conversations with community leaders as well as the additions, interjections, and clarifications from family members and friends present during a life history interview.

⁶ This involved a semi-structured interview schedule covering broad thematic areas including the profile and nature of engagement, key challenges faced by the community, major conflicts, and significant actors.

Additionally, textual sources such as parliamentary proceedings (questions) as well as print media coverage of Rohingya refugees in India are also extensively utilized.

Interviews were transcribed and translated during and after fieldwork. The data was coded in Atlas.ti using methods of first- and second-cycle coding (Saldana 2016). Provisional and holistic coding processes during the fieldwork informed the first cycle of coding. The former involves a 'start list of researcher-generated codes based on what preparatory information suggests might appear in the data' while the latter is manner of coding large units of data to discern broad themes or categories (Saldana 2016: 165). Second and subsequent cycles of coding involved splitting identified codes into smaller sub-codes as well as grouping together similar codes into larger code groups which formed the basis of the analysis presented below.

Increasing visibility of refugees amidst hostile narratives, politics, and fragmented governance

Before discussing the increasing visibility of Rohingya refugees, it is important to set the context of fragmented refugee governance in India. India's lack of policy frameworks for refugee communities, and the ad-hoc way the Indian state confronts, negotiates, and accommodates the existing, diverse refugee population has been the subject of much scholarship (Chimni 2003; Bhattacharjee 2008; Ramasubramanyam 2020; Paliwal 2022). India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor the 1967 Protocols but has ratified a number of international conventions encompassing the principle of non-refoulement (Bhattacharjee 2008). Similar to other countries in South Asia, India has a history of hosting refugee communities but has taken an ad-hoc fragmented approach to refugee governance, characterized by differential treatment of different refugee groups at different points in time, preserving what some term 'strategic ambiguity' (Chimni 2003; Paliwal 2022) and others, 'subcontinental defiance' to the international refugee regime (Ramasubramanyam 2020).

Within this context, in the next section, we explore how fragmented governance of Rohingya refugees over the last decade went hand in hand with a growing visibility or visibilization—a process of *becoming* more and more visible in the public and political sphere—as well as the various political, spatial, and episodic dimensions of this visibility. Policy towards the Rohingya has evolved over time, starting from a non-recognition to a regularization and brief period of acceptance between 2012–17 and now, a policy of illegalization and growing intolerance. Rohingya refugees in India today live in a precarious status quota and understanding the process of visibilization is critical to understanding India's current intolerance towards a refugee group that, by all estimates, including the government's own, number only 40,000 or less.

Political drivers of visibility and fragmented Rohingya governance

A key factor in the spiralling crisis of visibility faced by Rohingya refugees in India is the global attention to the issue, raised in the last decade through a series of escalating conflicts and state-sponsored violence in Rakhine, Myanmar. This began in 2012 with clashes between the Rohingya and the Rakhine Buddhist, and violent intervention by the Myanmar government, leading to internal displacement and flight into neighbouring Bangladesh (Kipgen 2013; Kyaw 2017; Ansar 2020). Prior to 2012, Rohingya asylum seekers to India were not formally recognized by either the government or the UNHCR, although many had been migrating since the late 1990s and made small settlements in different cities (Basavapatna 2018). After a series of refugee-led protests in 2011–12 at the UNHCR offices in Delhi, the Rohingya began to be interviewed through the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedure for cards. Several respondents recalled these protests and media coverage of it also led to a sudden visibility of Rohingya refugees in India (Bhattacharya 2012; Mann 2012; Perappadan 2012). In June 2012, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) extended an existing Standard Operating Procedure, empowering the Foreigners Regional Registration Offices (FRROs) to *prima facie* recommend cases of asylum-seekers for the granting of Long-Term Visas (Basavapatna 2018: 58) to Myanmar nationals including the Rohingya.

Hence, this first instance of political visibility, triggered by the large-scale sit-in refugee protest as well as the global coverage of the 2012 violence in Myanmar, had initial positive consequences for the Rohingya, leading to the acquisition of not only the UNHCR refugee card but also the potential to apply for long-term visas in India. However, the incidents also drew the attention of individuals and groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) who opposed refugee status for the Rohingya and called for bans on organizations/individuals supporting them (Sengupta 2012).

In 2014, a new government came to power at the centre, with a coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP, a Hindu nationalist party, followers of the Hindutva ideology, and part of the larger political family which includes the VHP, have historically been strongly opposed to what they view as 'rampant and illegal immigration' of Muslim nationals from neighbouring countries, especially Bangladesh (Gillan 2002; Jaffrelot 2023). 'Illegal immigration' has remained a key part of the BJP's political and electoral agenda from the 1990s till today (Gillan 2002; Ramachandran 2019; Das and Anisujjaman 2022). Although no formal policy change emerged in the immediate aftermath of the change of government, subsequent empirical research conducted by scholars in Delhi-NCR and Hyderabad indicates that many Rohingya did not receive long-term visas post-2014 while those that had visas could not get them renewed, a finding reiterated in our interviews as well (Field et al. 2023; Anil 2022).

The next shift in status quo came in 2017 when a series of conflicts and state-sponsored violence in Rakhine resulted in nearly 725,000 Rohingya fleeing across the border into Bangladesh, where 965,467 Rohingya refugees are registered today (Kyaw 2017; Ansar 2020; UNHCR 2023). A twin response emerged from India in 2017 and beyond, reflecting both a strategic international approach to the crisis at the regional level while also pushing for a domestic policy of detention and deportation for the Rohingyas, possibly to prevent further immigration (Yhome 2018). In August 2017, the MHA issued a new advisory on the 'Identification of Illegal Immigrants and Monitoring' (MHA 2017), referencing 'infiltration from Rakhine state of Myanmar' as a threat to security. It also stated that 'detection and deportation of such illegal immigrants from Rakhine state, also known as Rohingyas, is a continuous process' (MHA 2017: 2). This was preceded and, according to one respondent, perhaps prompted by an anti-Rohingya campaign undertaken by a local political party in Jammu. In 2017, the National Panthers Party spearheaded a public campaign demanding that 'Rohingyas and Bangladeshis' quit the region, involving public hoardings, advertisements in leading newspapers, and protests against the ruling party for tolerating Rohingya settlement in Jammu (Rather 2022). The same year witnessed the filing of a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in Jammu against the Rohingya. In the aftermath of the 2017 advisory, refugees have also faced a renewed, more aggressive drive of biometric data collection by the Indian government which issued orders to all states to keep records of Rohingya in their territory (Tiwari et al. 2020).

The 2017 MHA statement was a turning point in the public and political discourse around Rohingya refugees. Since then, multiple government representatives have referred to the Rohingya as illegal immigrants (Press Trust of India 2017; Bhatnagar 2018). Responses to questions in the Parliament between 2017 and 2021 repeatedly refer to the refugees as illegal immigrants whose repatriation is being discussed at the highest levels with Bangladesh and Myanmar. Out of 14 questions asked in the Lok Sabha—the lower House of the Indian Parliament—(nearly all revolving around refugee numbers, living conditions, national security threats, and repatriation plans), nine responses explicitly referred to illegal activities such as allegedly obtaining Indian documents (Aadhaar, PAN card, driving licence, passports) as the threat to national security and all made references to them as illegal immigrants, always emphasizing that the nature of their entry makes it nearly impossible to estimate their numbers.⁷ This was a turning point from the policy of calculated tolerance to one tantamount to 'shutting the doors'

⁷ A list of the parliamentary questions can be found in the reference list.

and illegalizing the Rohingya specifically (Yhome 2018: 6). Paliwal also argues that the Indian government's responses marked 'a huge shift in India's response to conflict generated migration', unlike the approach for every other group⁸ (Paliwal 2022: 21).

One potential explanation for this is rooted in nationalistic anxieties about immigrants from neighbouring countries. Cultural, social, and even physical similarities between the people of the subcontinent mean that differentiating immigrant groups from one another as well as from Indians is difficult, creating anxieties about uncontrolled immigration that 'goes unnoticed' (MHA 2017: 1). This is particularly true in the case of India-Bangladesh, a fluid border known for extensive mobility including for the Rohingya (Shamshad 2017; Brenner 2019; Sur 2021; Ghosh 2023). It also forms part of a larger political narrative, often supported by election campaigning, which criminalizes (Muslim) immigrants from Bangladesh who are seen as a potential threat to India's security, a narrative that has accelerated in the aftermath of the Bharatiya Janata Party's rise to power in 2014 (Ramachandran 2019; Das and Anisujjaman 2022). In the case of the Rohingya, therefore, a fear of their potential invisibility (and the demographic and political consequences) has been a key driving factor of the crisis of visibility. Such anxieties are not unique to South Asia. For example, drawing from research in West Africa, Adida (2011) argues that cultural similarities tend to aggravate host-immigrant relations because of the greater threat of group identity loss. Not only do host communities further distance culturally similar immigrant groups, but such immigrants also face in-group acceptability barriers, often rejected by their own leaders who are as invested in maintaining group ethnic boundaries (Adida 2011). In the case of the Rohingya, it is nationalistic fears around who an Indian is and how they can be visually differentiated from a foreigner (who may have ascriptive similarities) amidst fears of undetectable illegal immigration that has, arguably, been a key factor in the growing crisis of visibility.

Growing visibility⁹ has gone hand in hand with fragmented governance practices (Shwe et al. 2021). Since 2017, there have been multiple attempts at detention and subsequent deportation of refugees in different parts of India (BBC 2018; Human Rights Watch 2018). In 2021, 155 Rohingya refugees in Jammu were detained by police in a makeshift centre, allegedly for eventual deportation (Reuters 2021). Subsequently, Hasina Begum, a refugee with UNHCR status was deported to Myanmar. Although a few detentions and deportations had taken place in earlier years, recent mass detentions and the deportation of a UNHCR-registered refugee was a sudden and massive shift in the status quo, leading to fear and panic among community members living in other parts of India as well. Detentions of Rohingya people for a number of reasons including internal mobility, carrying expired ID cards, and allegedly carrying falsified Indian documents, in the past few years have gone up, according to community leaders, inducing fear and insecurity, even prompting potential journeys back to Bangladesh. The most recent instance of mass detention took place in July 2023 in Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, where the Anti-Terrorism Squad arrested and detained over 70 primarily male Rohingya refugees for illegal entry (Sharma 2023).

Spatial drivers of visibility

Visibility has had spatial nuances in the way it has affected refugees living in different spaces in different cities. As a community scattered across and settled in various parts of India as well as across different modes of living, the spatial aspects of visibility reflect strongly in the contrasting experiences of refugees living in camps and those self-settled in rented accommodation. In Delhi-NCR, Jammu, and Hyderabad, camp-like settlements emerged as groups of families rented out land from locals or sympathetic charities on which individual families constructed *jhuggis* or

⁸ Despite the fact that the Rohingya case could actually be interpreted as high international priority (due to the keen global media focus on the issue of genocide) and low domestic priority (due to the actual conflict itself being somewhat removed from India, geographically and the relatively low number of Rohingya asylum seekers), paradoxically, it was viewed as a high domestic political priority and low international strategic priority (Paliwal 2022: 21).

⁹ Despite a growing visibility in India, at a global level, an argument can be made that the Rohingya refugee crisis has tended (and continues) to be invisible, especially in Western policy and research agendas, compared to refugee crises that have more directly impacted the Global North.

temporary structures. Self-settled families rented rooms or small flats from local landlords, at considerably higher prices. The significant difference in cost of living has prompted some to move to camps in the past, but the growing visibility of camp spaces prompted two of our respondents to note that they are now encouraging families to return to the relative invisibility of rented homes, despite the higher expense. Several self-settled respondents viewed life in the camp negatively, with some respondents arguing that living in close proximity with limited resources leads to intra-community conflicts that worsen their reputation among the locals, hence further (negatively) visibilizing them.

According to a former NGO employee, camps make refugees visible and also make them easier to target. The increased visibility of camps is particularly reflected in the multiple instances of fires that have displaced camp residents over the years as well as in the fact that major instances of mass detention have mostly taken place in camp settlements. Between 2016 and 2022, Rathore records 12 instances of fires across Delhi-NCR and Jammu, all of which took place in camp settlements (Rathore 2022: 7). While five were officially concluded as short-circuit cases, Rathore notes serious inconsistencies in the evidence, especially for the seven of unknown origin and circumstantial evidence pointing to local involvement. Despite extensive media coverage and reports, many of which point out the probability of arson, no arrests or prosecutions took place—conversely, the coverage may have led to further visibility of the camps and their location.

Episodic drivers

(In)visibilities also vary temporally and episodically with the community encountering different intensities of scrutiny and attention at different times. One of the earliest examples is the 2008 Jaipur bombings, a series of blasts that occurred in May 2008 across populated and busy parts of the city, leading to over 80 deaths (Ramesh 2008). The blasts, initially connected to a terror group in Bangladesh, resulted in a significant backlash against Bangladeshi immigrants—as well as Rohingya Muslims, who were often considered Bengali or Bangladeshi by locals (Chaulia 2008). While police tracking of the Rohingya population in other parts of the country seems to be a more recent development (perhaps tied to the 2017 MHA advisory) the community in Jaipur had their first encounter with the police in the aftermath of the 2008 bombings.

Another notable episode is the 2019–20 protests in Shaheen Bagh against the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019, which introduced easier access to citizenship for non-Muslim asylum seekers from neighbouring countries. The law's discriminatory approach invoked national and international protests, marches, and sit-in demonstrations, with the Shaheen Bagh women's protest emerging as a key locus point in Delhi. The location of the protest, close to two prominent Rohingya camps in Delhi made everyday life difficult for refugees living there, increasing police scrutiny and monitoring manifold. Multiple respondents described how a narrative was spread that Rohingya refugees were the ones who had started the protest in order to be included in the CAA. Refugees found it difficult to leave the camp for jobs, with many facing income loss and reduced work hours as a result. Many were, therefore, already going through a period of livelihood insecurity when the COVID lockdown hit in March 2020.

In August 2023, domestic political and communal conflict once again led to a negative visibility. When violence broke out between local Hindu and Muslim communities in the Muslim-majority district of Nuh, Haryana in Delhi-NCR, Rohingya refugees living in nearby camps were implicated, with claims that several refugees had also taken part. Several were subsequently detained, including two young minors, leaving the rest of the community terrified of further detentions (Dhanker 2023). These recent incidents (among others), which opposition parties have connected to the upcoming General Elections of 2024 (The Hindu Bureau 2023), are stark examples of how domestic political conflicts and contestations have visibilized (and criminalized) refugee communities such as the Rohingya, sometimes by conflating them within a larger anti-Bangladeshi immigration narrative.

Bargaining (in)visibility by refugees

Across India, Rohingya refugees and community leaders have responded in a range of ways to the heightening crisis of visibility described above. The increasing visibility initially limitedly helped the dispersed Rohingyas demand better protection as observed in the large-scale sit-in refugee protest in 2012. However, such demand-making also drew negative attention, and amidst the growing crisis of visibility, individuals and the community, as a whole, pursue ways of protecting themselves. This involves further engagement in (already prevalent) internal and international (im)mobility which leads to practices of community policing and self-surveillance that have emerged as standalone alliances with state authorities in different parts of the country.

Internal and international (im)mobilities

Mobility between refugee settlements has long been a part of life for the Rohingya in India (Abbas and Hemadri 2022). A majority of respondents, whether from Delhi or Jaipur, whether long-time residents in India or recent arrivals from Bangladesh/Burma spoke about living in different refugee areas and moving for a variety of reasons, with these accounts depicting an overall picture of frequent mobility. For example, NH and CP, both initially resident in Delhi in 2012, eventually moved to Jammu and Uttar Pradesh respectively with their families. While NH moved on again to Haryana and ultimately settled in Delhi, CP and her family lived first in Uttar Pradesh, and then moved to Hyderabad. KK and JR, both Jaipur residents, also have histories of internal mobility, having lived in Delhi and Jammu, and moved for work. For Rohingya women like LP and TR, internal mobility took the shape of marriage migration from Jammu to Delhi.

Amidst mobility undertaken in search of stable settlement, income, and marriage, the spiraling political crisis of visibility, accompanied by the hostility of local authorities, began to play a role in mobility decisions. For CP and her family, living in Hyderabad since 2012, although the immediate reason was conflict with a local family, the overall decision to move was tied to how the situation for refugees has changed, with larger numbers in Hyderabad visibilizing further, 'when we came there were less families so the Indians that lived there, they liked us, then when there were more numbers, thik se nahi reh sakte [could not get along], people fight, and the Indians didn't like it ... humko chota rehkar rehna padta [we had to lie low]'. Hence, their move to Delhi in 2020 was an attempt to escape the highly visible and scrutinized Rohingya settlement in Hyderabad.

A similar negative impact of visibility and subsequent detention drives prompted other journeys. 'We heard a day in advance that some people, some families have been called to the police station, and then when they went, they were locked there and then taken to jail at night' said AS, who left with her family for Jaipur after the 2021 detentions in Jammu. She was not alone. Several other respondents spoke of a group of 40 families that had recently arrived from Jammu in the aftermath of the detentions. KK, another such respondent, spoke of the atmosphere of fear that has now developed and is prompting new journeys away from Jammu as it had for his family. Although this mobility between different settlements in the country is for protection purposes, it is not entirely invisible as many families seek out the Rohingya community in the cities they migrate to and re-register with the UNHCR as well as the local police, often having to negotiate the terms of their presence through community leaders.

Engaging in mobility to escape visibility is not just internal. Media reports highlight that the recent crackdowns, followed by detention and prospective deportation has prompted many refugees to return to Bangladesh, with some being detained on the way (Bhattacharya 2022; Muzamil 2022). Onward migration to other countries in the region and resettlement is a limited prospect, due to several reasons including India's attempts to control and the production of particular immobilities as a tool of fragmented refugee governance in recent years. For instance, several respondents in Delhi described how Rohingya families attempting resettlement, with valid visas, are being refused exit from India. 'From here, even after getting the visa, the FRRO doesn't allow them to exit. We've told them quite a few times about this issue, but they said for Rohingya it is

on hold ... earlier they used to give these permissions for them to go, now for about one year they're not giving' said one community leader in 2022. Sur and Sullivan point to similar findings, showing that although the policy began during times of COVID restriction, approximately 300 refugees, mainly Chin and Rohingya are still waiting for exit permissions (Sullivan and Sur 2023). During the second field visit in 2023, respondents reported that this has recently begun to change, with a few Rohingya being allowed to legally depart in 2023.

Mediated visibility, community policing, and state coercion

While mobility may help some refugees attempt a total invisibility, it also creates bureaucratic and administrative anxieties that generate new forms of visibility elsewhere. In an interview in October 2022, an NGO in Delhi described how the constant mobility which characterizes the Rohingya refugee community in India often raises issues for government agencies like the Crime Investigation Department who ask questions about where large numbers of people go. The visibility-invisibility process compels refugees to delve into other methods to survive and protect themselves, while the local state authorities seek new techniques to control this mobility, including building co-optive alliances with the community through their leaders for surveillance and monitoring purposes.

In September 2022, TR and KL, both leaders of a small group of families in Delhi describe the practice they follow of keeping track of refugees, maintaining a close record of the total number, and making a note of arrivals and departures from their part of the city. The community there started as a few families living in close proximity in the early 2010s and has now expanded to nearly 80 families, with TR and KL responsible for 20 of them. The community leaders share an updated list of the total families with the local police station every month. Although this practice has been going on for a few years, both agree that it has gotten much stricter in the past year. A leader in a different part of Delhi spoke about how the practice of police verification has long been a requirement for local landlords and has often been weaponized against the community.

A similar community policing practice has been prevalent in Jaipur for much longer. JR and WR, both community leaders in the city, trace close tracking of the Rohingya population and regular updates to the police back to the 2008 attacks. JR recalls how he was arrested along with several other Bangladeshis outside of the local mosque during a police round-up in 2008. After sitting in custody for hours, he was able to clarify his nationality to the police, show them an ID card from Burma, and be released. 'Since then, every year, every few months, we go to the police, give our papers on who has come, who has gone, since 2008', he said. Nowadays, community leaders share the necessary information over the phone with a specific leader holding the responsibility for timely data collection and sharing.

These practices of surveillance are necessarily localized, functioning as standalone alliances with local police in different neighbourhoods of the cities where the Rohingya live, also possibly facilitated by the relatively smaller numbers in Delhi and Jaipur. Questions remain about how such practices scale in larger settlements such as Jammu and Hyderabad where regular data collection would be administratively harder. The politically sensitive setting and local ethnic and religion-based conflicts may have led to harsher approaches such as outright detention in Jammu. However, in Hyderabad, it is co-optive alliance-seeking that is widespread and also more covert, with state actors sometimes approaching individual refugees to privately share information about new arrivals, breeding further distrust among the community.

Despite regular data collection, prevalence of internal mobilities is differentially tolerated by local police, demonstrating the differing nature of this visibility across the cities. In Delhi, respondents spoke about the increasing difficulty of moving around within and beyond the city as well as the associated risk of detention in some cases. While earlier, local authorities were satisfied with just updated numbers, in recent years, this is no longer allowed. 'A family from one location cannot go and live in another part of Delhi, a person from here should not be going there and from there should not be coming here', according to TR who adds that this has been happening in the past 1.5 years. Earlier, new people arriving were usually expected to inform the local

community leaders and register with the police, but now new arrivals are not allowed. YR and SP, two self-settled refugees in another part of Delhi spoke about how they are now increasingly scared to move around freely, especially after the lockdown when controls seem to have gotten stricter. Moving, even within the city, from one neighbourhood to another, is not a possibility. Consequences typically involve paying fines to the police or facing arrest/detention. During a visit to two well-known camps in Delhi in September 2022, decade-long camp residents spoke about one of their leaders being detained by the police for bringing someone new to the camp. Several respondents in Hyderabad similarly described how the police closely monitor mobility into the city, often through co-opting leaders for information and covert surveillance through community members. The first author was often warned by respondents during fieldwork that her presence in the area would likely be taken note of and reported to the local police through these covert channels.

In Jaipur, on the other hand, while new arrivals are expected to register with local authorities, it has not, so far, resulted in arrests and detentions. Smaller numbers and lesser visibility due to non-camp living arrangements may explain this. While it is sometimes difficult to get new arrivals registered with the police, once this is complete, they face no further issues remaining in Jaipur. Hence, new visibilities for mobile refugees are, in some cases, successfully mediated (Jaipur) and, in others, coerced (Delhi and Hyderabad). The fragmented nature of refugee governance, reflected in the ad-hoc responses of local state authorities to internal mobility, generates internal borders and internal deportability at various scales, whose violation is penalized (Pekşen 2023). While in Jaipur, the internal border is rescaled to the city level, in Delhi it is even smaller, rescaled to the level of the neighbourhood. Nevertheless, these practices do largely complement and draw from the national-level policy towards the Rohingya, which, since 2017, mandates the tracking of the refugee population across the country (Tiwari et al. 2020).

Despite the varied response of local authorities to refugee mobilities, this mobility itself is, to varying degrees, a cause of conflict, disruption of the status quo, and source of asymmetric power hierarchies for existing communities. Community leaders, attempting to maintain good relations with state authorities, must answer for new arrivals and often have a tough time explaining where people have gone and where people have arrived from. Some spoke in terms of a moral imperative now incumbent on them to preserve the notion of the Rohingya as a law-abiding peaceful community. This challenges the boundaries of community policing as well, leading to varied levels of conflict between newcomers and already-established families. In Jaipur, where existing relations with state institutions are mostly cordial, two respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the newly arrived families from Jammu who they felt were cornering limited resources.

In Delhi and Hyderabad, on the other hand, where the penalties for mobility include potential arrest/detention, this can impact the existing community far more significantly. In one location in Delhi, the threat of arrest/detention was closely connected to existing patronage networks within the community which develop due to the power leaders typically hold when it comes to tracking and reporting to the police, according to SP. Such patronage networks create asymmetric power hierarchies which SP, as a single male refugee, living alone without a family, appeared to be keenly aware of. Recounting a recent incident of a long-time resident in Delhi being falsely reported as a newcomer to the authorities, he said, 'There are no questions asked, I think it should be checked how long someone has been living, have they actually come new, have they committed any crime, no questions are asked...'. Another respondent recounted a similar instance where, while travelling from Delhi to Hyderabad to visit family members, he found himself arrested after being reported by another refugee in the settlement. While he never found out the reason, he spoke about how such asymmetric power hierarchies increasingly enable some in the community to take advantage while others are motivated by fear of the authorities.

Discussion: politics of (in)visibility, (im)mobility, and reconsidering the Rohingya invisibility bargain in India

The previous section examines how refugees strategically deploy mobilities, visibilities, and invisibilities in response to a growing visibilization across India. Pugh's invisibility bargain framework is originally conceptualized for a large number of irregular migrants who are perceived to make a valued contribution and remain both socially and politically invisible. Despite the small numbers, in the case of the Rohingya in India, the spiralling crisis of visibility that they have faced during the last decade of protracted displacement has pushed the community in different parts of India to embrace versions of their own invisibility bargain. Unlike the political and social invisibility that underpin the bargain of Pugh's framework, it is the fear of a *potential invisibility* of the Rohingya in India, as well as their conflation with Bangladeshi immigration, that has spurred the crisis of visibility over the years. In the case of the Rohingya, the stakes of this invisibility bargain are further influenced by the larger political climate in India after the rise to power of the Hindu nationalist BJP in 2014, which scholars argue have led to growing persecution of the Muslim minority (Jaffrelot 2017; Jayal 2019; Varshney 2022). Increasing communal and religious conflict in recent years reflecting what Palshikar terms a shift of 'public opinion in favour of majoritarian (and therefore pro-Hindutva) sentiment' (Palshikar 2015: 1) has laid the ground for the intersectional vulnerabilities faced by Muslim asylum-seeking communities like the Rohingya.

Besides Pugh's invisibility bargain framework, our case also relates to the findings in the literature on governance involving undocumented immigrants, including the strategic assumption or framing of refugees or migrants in general as 'illegal' in several contexts (Ellermann 2010; Walters 2010; Flores and Schachter 2018; Stel 2021; van Houte et al. 2023). In particular, the relationship between imposed illegality by governance techniques and (in)visibility and (im)mobility as a response is reflected in the Rohingya experience in India. For example, in the context of the US, Flores and Schachter propose a typology to illustrate the relationship between illegality and invisibility, arguing for the prevalence of a 'social illegality'—a *perception* of illegality, prompted by social stereotyping along racial, ethnic, or other lines (Flores and Schachter 2018). The Rohingya, on the other hand, once inhabited what the authors term 'invisibly illegal'—undocumented but living under the radar, undisturbed. Although many Rohingya refugees now carry documentation in the form of UNHCR cards, their limited acceptability and the outright illegalization of the community in recent political and public rhetoric now means that refugees in different parts of the country often inhabit different parts of the spectrum at different points. In some parts of the country, refugees are able to maintain an invisibly illegal existence even today while in others they have become more visibilized in particular (often camp) spaces, prompting attempts at mobility, mediated, or coerced visibility.

In the context of liberal states, Ellermann notes that undocumented migrants choose to invisibilize in response to attempts at deportation by 'identity-stripping' (Ellermann 2010). However, the practices of mediated and coerced visibility seen in the case of the Rohingya reflect the opposite as they choose to, rather, visibilize further in an effort to co-operate with state authorities. Ellermann also argues that such practices may often not be viable in illiberal states, where the prospect of return is preferable to the violence of the state. Although recent scholarship asserts the growing facets of illiberalism in Indian democratic politics (Jaffrelot 2023), the complexities of the Rohingya stateless identity render attempts at deportation as little more than political statements. Even as India asserts that deportation is the aim for 'Rohingya illegal immigrants', Myanmar continues to reject them as nationals. So, even if for illiberal states, deportation is not easy, undocumented migrants have some agency by using invisibility and mobility to constrain the states' exercise of sovereignty or evade coercive identification.

In a more nuanced way, Pugh's framework presents three main forms that the invisibility bargain as refugee response can take—embracing total invisibility, building coalitions with non-state brokers for access and advocacy (networked governance), and directly advocating by making visible demands. Our research demonstrates how the bargain in India, in the context of fragmented refugee governance, reflects a relational understanding of mobility, visibility, and

invisibility, rather than being particular attributes of a refugee at a point in time. It also illustrates how (im)mobilities and (in)visibilities interact and are co-constituted. Internal mobilities undertaken may be seen as an attempt to invisibilize in one context but require refugees to visibilize in others (re-registration with the UNHCR, re-building connections to the refugee community, re-registering with the police in the new city of arrival). In some cases (Jaipur), this new visibility is mediated through negotiations with police and state authorities and, in others (Delhi and Hyderabad), emerges through tacit coercion and covert surveillance. In the face of an uncertain legal landscape and the threat of detention, the refugee community pre-emptively and protectively visibilizes in the eyes of the state in different ways. This preserves a notion of legal standing by emphasizing their UNHCR-registered status, updated cards, and goodwill to work with the local authorities, reflecting a characteristic of the third option in Pugh's framework where refugees emphasize 'discourses of human rights, cosmopolitanism and universal citizenship, reciprocal obligation, empathetic solidarity, or other narratives' (Pugh 2022: 2). Asad, writing in the context of Latino irregular immigrants in the US similarly argues that immigrants strategically engage with state authorities undertaking everyday surveillance in an attempt to protect themselves, while also establishing a positive track record of engagement that may benefit a future regularization attempt (Asad 2023). Everyday surveillance, he argues, therefore, is 'as much about societal exclusion as potential societal inclusion' (Asad 2023: 5). Further multi-sited research is required, though, to explore this further, including the factors that lead to mediation in some contexts and coercion in others.

As the Rohingya case in India illustrates, this is a precarious status quo, easily disrupted, and also raises critical questions about the role played by institutions such as the UNHCR, how they navigate the bargain of invisibility, and what their presence means in a non-signatory country. Individual refugees and their families, as well as community leaders, attempting to maintain good relations with state authorities and prevent a deterioration in this precarious legal status quo, are trapped between different forms of (in)visibility and (im)mobility that are co-constitutive, illustrating the limits of the bargain. For instance, as demonstrated in the section about mediated visibility above, although mobility emerges as both a critical tool for refugees to adapt and integrate in India as well as a protective response to growing negative visibility, it can reassert existing power hierarchies within the community and with state actors. This is illustrated through the ways in which mobility may disbalance the precarious status quo of existing communities that receive newcomers in different locations. They also further increase bureaucratic anxieties around unchecked refugee mobility, contributing to tighter surveillance efforts, intra-community conflicts through power brokerage, and 'immobilising practices of containment' such as detaining new arrivals and blocking exit visas for resettlement (Etzold et al. 2019). These also echo findings in other refugee-hosting contexts like Turkey, where the illegalization of refugees' internal mobilities turns into an internal deportability, a product of rescaling borders to the level of the province (Pekşen 2023: 1).

This paper has examined the case of Rohingya refugees in India, illustrating how a politics of (in)visibility has shaped the state's approach towards the community over the years as well as refugees' response to an increasingly hostile policy landscape. Using the emerging notion of (in)visibility to understand refugee experiences, the paper has first argued that the Rohingya community in India has been subject to a growing visibilization, marked by various spatial, temporal, and political factors, over the past decade of protracted displacement. In response, refugees and community leaders exercise agencies and strategies to pursue the forms of invisibility bargain available to them, highlighting how (im)mobility and (in)visibility interact and are co-constituted. The paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship around migrant and refugee (in)visibilities also by empirically examining an understudied host country context—India—further adding to academic scholarship around (forced) migration governance and the realities of onward migration in South Asia and the Global South. Future research interrogating the role of various other factors such as gender, family structures, class-based hierarchies, as

well as how (in)visibilities and (im)mobilities manifest for other refugee and immigrant groups would further nuance our understanding of (forced) migration governance in the Global South.

Funding

This study was funded through the doctoral grant held by Ms. Mitra at ZEF, University of Bonn. Ms. Mitra's doctoral funding is through the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Doctoral Fellowship.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers for their comments and feedback which helped us considerably improve the paper. The authors thank also Dr Bidisha Biswas and the participants of the *Politics of Invisibility* panel at the ECPR General Conference 2023 for their feedback on the early draft as well as Dr Conrad Schetter for his academic supervision of the first author's doctoral project. We also sincerely thank the anonymized research respondents without whom this paper would not be possible.

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