

“OPERATION PUSHBACK”: *SANGH PARIVAR*, STATE, SLUMS AND SURREPTITIOUS BANGLADESHIS IN NEW DELHI

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ABSTRACT

The remarkable ease with which the xenophobic tenor of the Hindu Right nationalist organisations or *Sangh Parivar* found favour with many privileged Indians in the early 1990s cannot be easily or comfortably discounted. Indeed, it even perniciously swayed a moderate secular central government led by the long dominant Congress Party. By mid-1992, when *Sangh Parivar* made the manifold dangers of the unsanctioned immigration by growing numbers of poverty-stricken Bangladeshi Muslim peasants their rallying cry, the lenient attitude of the Indian state towards these immigrants had hardened with astonishing rapidity. Unsettled by this sweeping tide of Hindu chauvinism, a hurriedly enforced “Action Plan” to locate and identify these undocumented immigrants was followed by brisk efforts under “Operation Pushback” to deport them from New Delhi – India’s capital city and locus of bureaucratic, political and financial power. Haphazard and sporadic in implementation, Operation Pushback, while unmasking partisan dispositions coursing through the Indian bureaucracy, also exemplified Congress’ belated attempts at redeeming its enervated standing. It is also worth noting that the highly circumscribed material realities of the Bangladeshi immigrants residing in Delhi’s numerous slums made them easy targets of these perverse politics, and that subsequent opposition, internally and from neighbouring Bangladesh, to the gratuitous brutality displayed towards the first groups of deportees contributed to the Operation’s abrupt truncation.

Keywords: undocumented immigrants, state, Hindu nationalism, deportations, xenophobia, slums and squatters

INTRODUCTION

The dramatic rise of the nationalist organisations of the Hindu Right – collectively, *Sangh Parivar*¹ – from the margins to centrestage of Indian society and politics since the mid-1980s has been addressed by a fertile and burgeoning literature (Basu *et al.*, 1993; Lele, 1995; Jaffrelot, 1996; Ludden, 1996; Hansen, 1999). During this period, the heightened prominence and xeno-

phobic discourses of these “saffron” forces (the colour after which the Hindu Right are popularly dubbed in India) also drew appreciable attention towards the largely unregulated population flows from neighbouring Bangladesh. Most commonly, these undocumented² immigrants were characterised as “infiltrators”, a visible threat to the long-term existence of an enfeebled Hindu-Indian

nation (Navlakha, 1997; Ramachandran, 1999). It is noteworthy that a key member of the Rightist collective, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is the strongest party in the present National Democratic Alliance coalition government in India. A substantial body of Hindu chauvinist propaganda drafted by *Sangh Parivar* ideologues and supporters outside the fold chillingly outlined the supposed manifold dangers of this infiltration (see BJP, 1994). The apparition of impoverished, illiterate and bigoted Muslim Bangladeshis migrating en masse across the shared border began to loom large as a “silent, invisible invasion” constituting a “demographic aggression” against India (Rai, 1992, 1993; Joshi, 1994).

An arresting feature of this new development was the fervent acceptance of the anti-Muslim and highly prejudiced discourses zealously promoted by these organisations by many respectable figures, and even the Indian state, bureaucracy and various political parties. It would, therefore, not be an exaggeration to state that, in 1992, the situation of undocumented Bangladeshi immigrants, particularly Muslim ones, began to deteriorate speedily, although many of them had been living in several different parts of India as *de facto* citizens for many years. It was, however, no remarkable coincidence that the central and provincial governments’ recognition of such population flows into India materialised exactly at a time when *Sangh Parivar*’s political slogan, “Infiltrators, Quit India”, gained prominence and ideological momentum (*The Hindustan*, 1992a, 1992b; *Frontline*, 1992a). My contention is that it is precisely this saffron surge that provided the Congress-led government a powerful incentive to tackle the issue head-on, partly by deporting undocumented Bangladeshis from the capital city (*The Times of India*, 1992a).

Drawing on the extensive media coverage and field interviews conducted in New Delhi,³ this paper attempts a textured chronicle of

these exclusionary, albeit highly rancorous, exercises against unauthorised immigrants. The timing of these state-sponsored activities synchronised with a tumultuous period in recent Indian history, one inscribed by large-scale communal riots in various parts of the country (Datta *et al.*, 1990; Chakravarti *et al.*, 1992). While the adroit collusion of *Sangh Parivar*’s ranks in these cannot be overlooked, “Operation Pushback” exemplified a hasty, haphazard attempt by the long dominant, then ruling Congress Party to salvage its own authority in the face of the rising tide of what scholars interchangeably term Hindu nationalism, chauvinism or communalism. Additionally, Operation Pushback made manifest those partisan tendencies ordinarily camouflaged within the massive Indian bureaucracy, a narrative which tells of the more or less willing collaboration between different agencies and departments associated with the central and provincial governments in New Delhi and in West Bengal, bordering Bangladesh. Ultimately, these forced evictions signified a less than serious attempt by the state to engage with migratory flows from a neighbouring country. A final argument being submitted here is that, in addition to political upheaval within, activities on the other side of the border – in Bangladesh – substantially influenced the character and duration of these evictions.

Indifference, impotence, intolerance

The appearance of undocumented Bangladeshi immigrants in New Delhi’s slums or shanties (*bastis* or *jhuggis*) was definitely not a new-sprung occurrence; small numbers of these immigrants had lived in several *bastis* from as early as the beginning of the 1970s (*The Indian Express*, 1992a; Paul & Lin, 1995). It is also true that, for the most part, their gradually increasing numbers continued to be tolerated by Congress-backed powerbrokers operating through many slums. While the Foreigners’ Regional Registration Office (FRRO) had sponsored a study of Bangladeshi settlements in the metropolis as far back as 1988, a feature report corroborates the mostly

disinterested demeanour of the central administrative machinery (*Illustrated Weekly of India*, 1990:55):

Apart from occasional raids on their settlements when their shacks are dismantled, official action is rarely initiated against them. It is the FRRO and special branch of the Delhi police that may sometimes decide to do something about the *problem*. Then, a few people might be taken into custody for a while... But, generally, the police leave them alone [emphasis added].

The same feature quoted a sub-inspector of the Kotwali Police Station in Delhi: “We took about 30 people who did not have passports into custody. Twelve men were sentenced to four months’ imprisonment” (p. 57). However, such decisive and draconian action remained fairly uncommon until much later. Also striking is that many of the undocumented immigrants interviewed in the January 1990 feature were “not bothered about their status as foreigners. Their immediate concern [at that point was] survival” (p. 57).

Nevertheless, media reports indicate a growing concern over undocumented Bangladeshis in the late 1980s, both in government circles and even among interest groups well known for supporting these immigrants. For example, more than three years before the first repatriations took place and a formal strategy was instituted in 1992, Jyoti Basu, the long-standing Chief Minister of West Bengal, had sent a letter to then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (which also alluded to several previous notifications from the state to the central government) regarding the acutely large numbers of Muslim Bangladeshis entering India through its borders (*The Hindustan*, 1989a ; 1989b; see also Samaddar, 1999). The Congress-led government had first opted to put aside this aggravating issue, given the immense pressures of contesting the 1989 general elections a few months later. Then, after it was unable to obtain a majority in the

Lok Sabha, the elected Lower House of the Indian Parliament, the formation of a left and centre coalition government that included the BJP further postponed any official decision (Malik & Singh, 1994). Consequently, it was more than a year after Basu’s missive to the Prime Minister that the National Front government proclaimed it was going to take stern action against undocumented Bangladeshis in West Bengal (*The Hindustan*, 1990).⁴

Ultimately, it was an Indian government commanded by the Congress Party under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao that, after 1991, initiated the harshest measures against undocumented immigrants. Though lauded for its liberalisation of the Indian economy and economic reforms that sought to attract the return of professional, wealthy non-resident Indians, Rao’s regime was also saddled with the uncontrolled violence concomitant with *Sangh Parivar’s Ramjanmabhumi* movement⁵ in addition to the problem of irregular Bangladeshis which had already caused widespread consternation in political circles – even in places far away from the border like New Delhi and Uttar Pradesh (*The Patriot*, 1992a; *The Times of India*, 1992b; *The Tribune*, 1992a). This somewhat delayed concern is humorously depicted in Figure 1, with a demoralised Rao lamenting to his advisor that his economic reforms had only encouraged a “flood of [extremely poor]... non-Indian residents” or “Bangla[deshi] refugees”.

Even then, at least a year would lapse before the Rao-Congress government finally launched its notorious “Action Plan” against undocumented Bangladeshis. Documentary evidence apprises us of the government’s willingness, finally, to own up to their growing presence, while it still wavered in its decision to firmly rein in their numbers. As a case in point, at the end of 1991, the Home Minister Shankar Rao Chavan, candidly conceded in Parliament that it was the exceedingly generous attitude towards undocumented immigrants rife among provincial-level authorities that had



Source: *The Times of India*, September 1992.

Figure 1. Rao's liberalisation and 'non-Indian residents'.

mostly contributed to the vast increase in foreign nationals immigrating to India (*The Hindustan*, 1991). Therefore, and because of the desperate circumstances in India due to these immigrants, the central government had granted provincial bureaucracies the legal authority to initiate stern proceedings against them (see also *The National Herald*, 1992a). A different report seriously disputed the veracity of the Home Minister's pronouncements and made the government's continuing vacillation even more conspicuous. Published out of Indore in Madhya Pradesh, it advised that the recently issued order to all Indian provinces to identify foreign citizens living in their areas was proving to be a "gigantic crisis" for the government (*Nai Duniya*, 1992):

It is widely believed that following these directives the Uttar Pradesh government had identified 10,000 Bangladeshis in different locations and arrested them for allegedly entering the

country without passports. It is also broadly accepted that despite repeatedly inviting input from the central government on how to deal with these uninvited guests, a prolonged silence from this quarter had forced Uttar Pradesh to eventually release [the detainees] after they had furnished personal bonds [author's translation].

Providing vital insights into this "silence", a later article quoted an unidentified though obviously disgruntled individual highly-placed in government circles: "No one wanted to rock the boat. [Earlier] there was a lot of buck-passing by government agencies. Besides, there were vested interests – political parties wanted to use them as a vote-bank" (*The Indian Express*, 1992b; see also 1992c). A subsequent editorial scathingly dubbed the reasons for this extended inactivity in years prior as the state's "ostrich-like policy" (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992a). I will return to this question of "vote-banks" shortly. Suffice it to



Source: *The Pioneer*, September 1992.

Figure 2. Saffronisation of the Congress Party and India.

say, for many years, the central government and many major political parties remained deeply ambivalent about Bangladeshi immigrants.

By mid-1992, a turning point had been reached and the largely ostentatious show of official dealings on unsanctioned immigration gave way to brusque displays of coercion. What emerges in this detailed elaboration of Operation Pushback and the Action Plan against Bangladeshis in New Delhi is the burgeoning encumbrance of jingoistic sentiments in both India and Bangladesh that had to be vigorously countered by the respective governments. The shrill and swift backlash in Bangladesh will be examined later, but, in India, a moderately secular state that had succumbed sporadically to ethnic and religious tensions in the past, now completely shed its thin veneer of neutrality. Rao's rule marked its high point when the Indian state embraced a soft stance towards the saffron

forces of Hindu nationalism or chauvinism, which *Frontline's* (1993:9) editor characterised as a “disgraceful and highly risky surrender to the forces of Hindu communalism”.

The sombre thought that the flaccid Congress Party and its governance were heavily tinged with communal fervour was driven home cogently in another cartoon (Figure 2) which shows a Congress worker replacing the much-favoured rose from the lapel of Jawaharlal Nehru's bust with the lotus flower – in this context, the electoral symbol of the BJP. Nehru has long been accepted by many as the architect of modern India and a central driving force of the Congress Party in its golden era (Goswami, 1998). An indication of the disturbing trend signified by the supplanted blossom of this ubiquitous signifier of the post-colonial Indian nation was that Indian state rhetoric now unofficially assigned the labels “illegal” immigrants or “infiltrators” almost exclusively to Muslim Bangladeshi immigrants.

It must be reiterated that, alarmed by its considerably weakened position, the Rao-Congress government suddenly swung into action by launching its Action Plan to curb clandestine immigration. Although efforts were to be undertaken in many parts of the country, maximum exertions were actually expended against Bangladeshi immigrants in New Delhi. On initial scrutiny, this focus may appear unusual: after all, even the most questionable government estimates of 200,000-300,000 are minuscule compared to aggregates for other places in northeastern India closer to the Bangladesh border (*Frontline*, 1992b). An effective and practical strategy to restrict unauthorised immigrants surely would have converged, at least in the beginning, on geographical areas in proximity to Bangladesh. However, favouring New Delhi was more of a tactical calculation, not only as the capital city of India where much financial power resides but, more importantly, as the seat of centralised political authority and headquarters of the massive Indian administrative machinery that runs the country. Ultimately, then, it was the Assembly elections for New Delhi held in January 1993 that would dramatically set the stage for the unrestrained aggression towards unauthorised Bangladeshis. Previous elections had already indicated that several prominent Congress leaders who exercised considerable influence had experienced a noticeable decline in electoral backing, most conspicuously, from *bastis* and *jhuggis* that had voted en masse for Congress over an extended period – in popular parlance, its “vote bank” (*Navbharat Times*, 1992a).

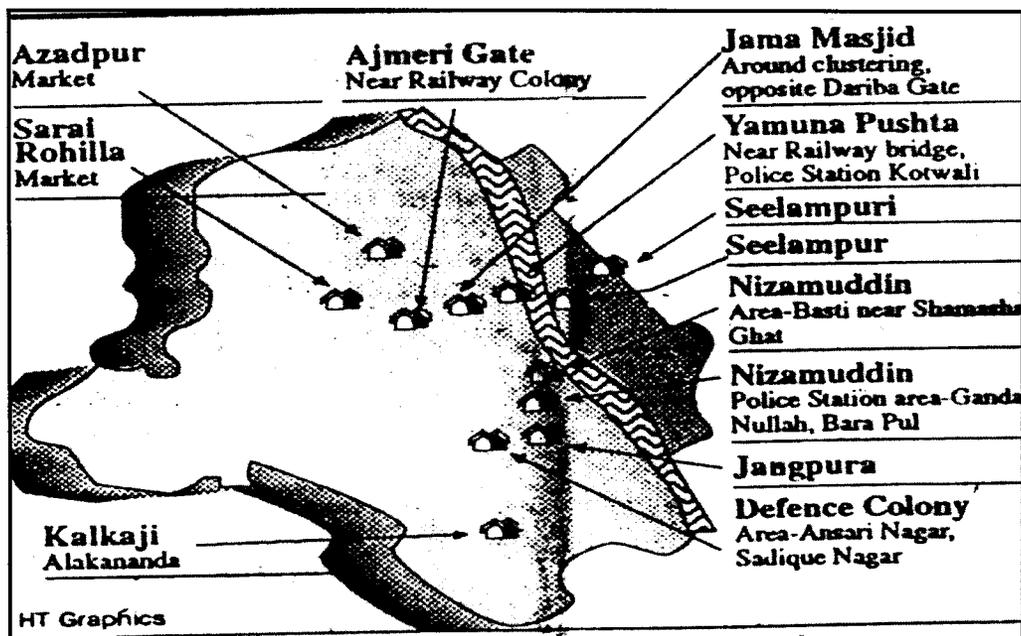
For our purposes, this denotes an exploitative system of patronage operating between high-ranking Congress leaders and their agents or powerbrokers within these marginal spaces or ranks. Since many slums are unauthorised encroachments on public space or government lands, their permanence, plus the occasional dispensation of basic benefits to poor urbanites, are significantly rooted in these power arrangements. The Bangladeshis living in these *bastis* also

enjoyed these meagre disbursements, which meant that most had received an identical treatment as impoverished Indians residents. Thus, a great majority of them had been issued ration cards for obtaining subsidised food rations under the government’s public distribution scheme, given individual identification tokens, and, therefore, recorded in the voting registers (*The Independent*, 1992a). The erosion of Congress power signalled that these informal though weighty arrangements between the party’s politicians and slum residents had been unsettled. The outcome was grave for many squatters, especially undocumented Muslim Bangladeshis who had to forfeit the tacit support previously extended to them by Delhi-level Congress leaders. It is precisely at this precarious juncture that the Action Plan and Operation Pushback were commenced in the capital city.

THE “ACTION PLAN”: DETECTION, IDENTIFICATION, DEPORTATION

In September 1992, shortly after Operation Pushback began, a Government of India spokesperson confirmed the imminent expulsion of several hundred thousand Bangladeshis living illegally in border provinces, and that the state had established three-step Action Plan to deal with unauthorised immigrants, namely, detection, identification, and, finally, deportation (*The Patriot*, 1992b). Having already detected locations where Bangladeshis existed in large numbers, the spokesperson indicated that the central and state governments were actively involved in identifying them.

Other accounts quoting Home Ministry informants also reported that the New Delhi administration had implemented a special Action Plan to identify undocumented Bangladeshis in that city and was working out methods to evict them by delegating more powers to the police and FRRO (*The*



Source: Compiled from *The Hindustan Times* & *Radiance Views Weekly*, September 1992.

Figure 3. “Bangladeshi-prone areas” in New Delhi.

Hindustan Times, 1992b, 1992c; *Navbharat Times*, 1992b). Armed with information provided by selected NGOs, intelligence agencies and local police, 12 areas said to include sizeable concentrations of undocumented Bangladeshi immigrants and falling under the jurisdiction of five police stations were identified (*The Hindu*, 1992a; *The National Herald*, 1992b). From these localities, 2,000-2,500 undocumented Bangladeshis were to be evicted from the city each month, including a quota of more than 400 detained immigrants held in each of the five police stations (*The Hindu*, 1992b). Transit camps where individuals identified as Bangladeshi citizens would be housed before being transported to the border were correspondingly located (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992c). Interestingly enough, all of the “Bangladeshi-prone areas” in New Delhi (Figure 3) identified by the government and reported widely in the press were also insignificant and marginal spaces occupied by the urban poor. Many of these were *bastis* and

jhuggis sited at the periphery of various upper-, middle- and lower middle-class *mohallas* or neighbourhoods (*The National Herald*, 1992b, 1992c). The insignificance of these spaces is exposed through their descriptive characterisation, in that they derived their identity wholly in relation to the rich *mohallas* they abutted, or in relation to nearby landmarks, such as a police station or monument, or prominent land use features, such as a *shamshan ghat* (cremation ground), *ganda nala* (open sewers) and *bara pul* (big bridge) – where, in many cases, they are still situated even today. Some included “resettlement colonies” for former squatters in the outlying areas of the city.

In addition to the argument that these exertions were, as matter of course, directed at Bengali-speaking Bangladeshis practising the Islamic religion, the location of the Bangladeshi-prone spaces also exposes the overwhelmingly weak structural position of the displaced immigrants at the bottom of the

urban social scale. Put differently, the subsistence-level existence of these immigrants in India made them easy targets of the Indian state and *Sangh Parivar*. A non-Bangladeshi resident of a slum (field interview, Sakeena, 11 September 1998) pithily uncovered this link: “People do not want to eliminate poverty; they want to eliminate the poor”. These intimate connections between class and the xenophobic character of “Operations Ouster Bangladeshis” were also rendered transparent in a cartoon occasioned by a raging controversy surrounding the extraordinary emancipation of Bengali-speaking and Bangladeshi deportees from Mumbai by a large mob at Uluberia rail station in West Bengal in 1998.⁶ Entitled, tongue-in-cheek, “Business as Usual” (*The Indian Express*, 28 July 1998), it depicted several poor folk attending hospitably to a guest and, in the foreground, a solitary policeman in radio communication with his superior: “A scientist expelled by the U.S. is here, Sir. Says he grew up in this migrants’ slum. Shall we deport him?” As the cartoon so eloquently sums up, in these anti-immigrant operations the state and *Sangh Parivar* branded only specific categories of immigrants as undocumented – those shaped by greatly restricted material circumstances.

Tentative forays into immigration policy reform included guidelines for a new law that would make it mandatory for all private or public sector employers to report the hiring of foreign citizens, even those recruited on a casual or part-time basis – though, ultimately, this was never formalised. In form, the proposed legislation was very similar to the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) passed in the United States during the mid-1980s whereby the numbers of undesirable immigrants were to be regulated simultaneously *within* and *at* borders, especially inside its spatial and territorial domains. But unlike the IRCA, a main feature of which was the sanctions or penalties for knowingly hiring unauthorised workers, under the intended plan employers would act as “spies” for the local police and administration (see Mahler, 1995).

Owners of factories, businesses and heads of households would be asked to furnish the police with photographs and details of their employees, including their native place and duration of employment (*The Hindu*, 11 September 1992a).

It is unclear why this intended strategy was not legalised, though it is likely that the very real prospect of it being opposed by other political parties might have dissuaded the Congress-led government. It is equally probable that the continuous accretion of Bangladeshis into the informal sector of the urban economy, together with the unending desire of well-to-do urban dwellers for cheap (immigrant) servants and casual labourers also had some bearing. To begin with, the unconventional organisation of this vast and diffuse segment of the Indian economy does not lend itself to effective regulation by the state, and tightening restraints on this highly nebulous set of economic practices would have been anticipated by the already beleaguered Delhi bureaucracy as an administrative nightmare. However, in the few weeks before the Action Plan was formally launched, the Election Commission issued a nationwide directive to “revise” electoral rolls and disenfranchise undocumented immigrants, apparently after receiving several complaints about the inclusion of Bangladeshis in the voters’ lists (*The National Herald*, 1992d). Chief electoral officers of the states and Union Territories were asked to catalogue areas with large numbers of foreign nationals and take steps to prevent their enrolment as voters (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992d). In effect, electoral enumerators would not merely reform voter lists but create new sets of names by beginning from a clean slate and abandoning all previous records (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992b). A vital part of this registration exercise naturally involved inquiries into voters’ citizenship status, which local police and enumerators would then verify, particularly of those in *bastis* already identified as dominated by Bangladeshi immigrants.

There is ample evidence that the detection and apprehension of undocumented Bangladeshis took place in many parts of India (*The Hindu*, 1992c; *The Hindustan*, 1992c; *Rashtriya Sahara*, 1992). What remained vague, however, was the requisite documentary proof to establish Indian nationality. Home Ministry officials asserted that mere possession of ration cards, as for that matter registration in previous electoral rolls, did not in itself constitute “automatic Indian citizenship” but could be counted as evidence (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992b). Up till this point, ration cards issued through the government’s public distribution system had served as the principal means to establish the domiciled status of Indians, particularly those who did not have the resources or need to procure any other documents. Until very recently, documents such as passports were meant largely for those who could travel outside the country and the system of issuing birth certificates remained rather rudimentary and spotty, operating largely in urban areas. Likewise, while any person who held or once owned land in their native place could provide documents such as property deeds, this would not be the case for those who existed as landless peasants before migrating to big cities. With the exception of ration cards, *jhuggi* tokens and names on voters’ lists, the vast ranks of the urban poor in India had neither been issued nor ever been in need of additional certification until these verification drives. In the absence of standardised criteria for identifying Indians, this ambiguity surrounding the citizenship status of the extremely large numbers of residents in numerous slums and resettlement colonies, before long, came to haunt successive Indian governments.

It is in this maelstrom of activity a few weeks after the initial evictions that the Union Territories Home Minister S.B. Chavan presided over the Chief Ministers’ special conference on illegal migration from Bangladesh (*The Hindu*, 1992d; *The Patriot*, 1992c; *The Tribune*, 1992b). Ministers of nearly

all the provinces in close proximity to the eastern boundary participated in this crucial meeting which resolved to take “firm action” against unauthorised immigrants (*The National Herald*, 1992e; see also *Jansatta*, 1992).⁷ In his opening remarks, Chavan observed that the massive immigration of Bangladeshis, beginning in Assam, then affecting West Bengal, Bihar, other north-eastern states and, lately, the capital city, had resulted in many social and political upheavals (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992e). While confirming that accurate estimates on “illegal” migration were not available, the Minister underscored that this “problem” had acquired severe dimensions (see also *Aaj*, 1992a): “Whatever may be the compelling motive or cause for the migration, the continuous flow is a matter of serious concern for all of us” (*The Indian Express*, 1992a; see also *The Patriot*, 1992d). M.M. Jacob, then Minister of State for Home Affairs, proposed the establishment of monitoring groups that would periodically review the activities undertaken by provinces and government bodies to check irregular migration (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992e). A number of other regulatory measures, including barbed wire fencing along the boundary with Bangladesh and using retail ration outlets under the public distribution system to keep track of fresh migrant arrivals, were similarly considered. Finally, the Chief Ministers endorsed a scheme for issuing Identity Cards to Indian citizens living in the border districts, provided it was implemented through approved legislation (*The Hindustan*, 1992d; *The Statesman*, 1992a; *The Times of India*, 1992c, 1992d). Yet, in a fate similar to the previous proposal for the compulsory reporting of unauthorised immigrants by employers, the scheme was not executed.

A caricature (Figure 4) of the Chief Ministers’ special conference and the bellicose stance of a feeble Indian state shows the participants – and, by suggestion, the geographical spaces occupied by India – nearly submerged under a rushing deluge of



Source: *The Times of India*, September 1992.

Figure 4. Chief Ministers' Meeting, September 1992.

Bangladeshi immigrants. In the midst of this, as Home Minister Chavan rises above the rest, vowing fervently to turn back the inundating tide, the spectacle of weak governance is made complete by the presence of a small bucket touting the "Identity Cards Idea" (see also *The Patriot*, 1992b; *Observer of Business and Politics*, 1992a; *The Hindustan Times*, 1998). Like Operation Pushback, the Chief Ministers' workshop betrayed the resort to drastic action of a government increasingly confronted by the steady erosion of its own legitimacy. An op-ed piece in *Aaj* (1992b) pointedly insinuated:

The [critical] question above all here is, what desperate need motivated the central government to unexpectedly reveal anxiety about, and pursue answers to the problem of Bangladeshi *infiltration* by organising the meeting of Chief Ministers from West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Mizoram and representatives from Meghalaya, Manipur and Nagaland on September 27? After all, political developments of the past forty-five years

have shown that the Congress Party's position on these *infiltrators* has been undesirably soft from the very beginning [author's translation; emphasis added].

Another article (*The Hindu*, 1992d) more boldly observed:

It is difficult to avoid the impression that the decision to summon a special meeting in Delhi of Chief Ministers... specifically to discuss the problem of illegal influx from Bangladesh into this country has been influenced by calculations having a close bearing on the politics of Delhi than the more real apprehensions about the long-term impact of such influx in areas in the neighbourhood of Bangladesh.

"OPERATION PUSHBACK": AGGRANDISEMENT AND AGGRESSION

Plainly, the Indian government's inflated endeavours to tackle the question of irregular Bangladeshis proved ineffective from the

very beginning; equally so was the aggressive campaign to deport undocumented Bangladeshis from the capital city, fittingly termed Operation Pushback, which began with an initial round of forced evictions on 9 September 1992. In this highly publicised endeavour, a group of 132 persons (87 men, 23 women and 22 children) identified as Bangladeshi nationals were roughly removed from New Seemapuri, a large resettlement colony in east Delhi, by officers from the Seemapuri Police Station and taken to the Old Delhi Railway Station (*The National Herald*, 1992b). Fifteen officers, including two females from the Delhi Armed Police (DAP), escorted the deportees on a 90-seat coach on the Sealdah Express during their 36-hour journey to Sealdah in West Bengal. There, they were handed over to an FRRO advance party and delivered by two Border Security Force (BSF) army trucks and a Calcutta police bus to the Haridaspur check post, then sent across the border. An FRRO official explained this elaborate procedure: “We have already informed the Border Security Force. These chaps would be deported by the push back system” (*The Indian Express*, 1992d).

Rather astonishingly, in the beginning, the local administration vehemently denied that Operation Pushback was being coerced upon the helpless immigrants. In fact, in an interview in *The Indian Express* (1992d), Seemapuri Police Station House Officer Rathi, who had accompanied the deportees to the railway station, avowed that the deportees were enthusiastic to return to their country: “They are here because they want to go, all of them are volunteers”. But, in the same report, an unidentified officer from the same station let it slip that the police had forcibly rounded up people for three days and held them under detention for deportation: “There is no section under the Indian Penal Code to arrest such individuals. They are detained under Section 3C of the Foreigners’ Act and served Quit India Notices” (see also *The Hindustan Times*, 1992f).

By the same token, all the unfortunate deportees testified to the involuntary nature of Operation Pushback, as in the case of Khalid, a *kabadiwala* (rag-picker): “I am being forced to go. I am the only one from my family who is being sent away. My two kids and wife are still here” (*Radiance Views Weekly*, 1992a:11). Another deportee, Shamsuddin, divulged: “Given a chance, I [will] return...I am going [to Bangladesh] because I was unlucky to be on the road when the police came looking [for us]” (*The Indian Express*, 1992d). It appeared that Khalid and Shamsuddin were not the only deportees to leave behind their immediate families. Reportedly, more than three-quarters of those evicted still had close relatives in the same *basti*, and many also claimed that they possessed ration cards and had exercised their votes in previous elections.

The fundamental objective of Operation Pushback, to deter new infiltrators and intimidate the ones remaining behind, was made repugnant by the ritualised scripting of the first 1992 evictions to coincide with the Islamic Prophet Mohammed’s birthday (*Frontline*, 1992c). And, as if the symbolic nature of these repatriations was not already self evident, the (almost entirely) Muslim deportees had their heads shaved and their meagre belongings burnt in front of them before being cast out of Indian territory through the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992g). In a report in the Calcutta *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (*The Indian Express*, 1992e), when asked why their few clothes, bedding and even utensils were being destroyed, a BSF officer responded: “So that they can tell people *there* that nothing can be brought back. We are even burning their money [emphasis added]”. Over and above this, the officer informed that the deportees were to be soundly thrashed before the final shove. Geographical locations in close proximity to the actual border provided the appropriate sites for this unnecessary brutality and humiliation, the officer explained, as they would be in plain view of Bangladeshi

citizens across the border and discourage them from entering India at any future date (see also *The Patriot*, 1992a). Ultimately though, the ceremonious tonsuring, while humiliating and degrading its victims, exemplified the purging of Indian soil from the insidious effects of *infiltration* through the purification of the unclean bodies of these Muslim immigrants. The raw rejoinder of the requiting Indian state was forcefully written upon the physical frames of its transgressors.

Notably, and with remarkable haste, the authorities concerned took great pains to establish that these expulsions were not a fresh happening, stoutly insisting that Operation Pushback had begun more than a year before, on 1 September 1991 (*The Indian Express*, 1992f; *The Times of India*, 1992e). Accounts that small groups of undocumented immigrants had been deported previously under this scheme, based on information furnished by local authorities, suggested that more than 700 unauthorised Bangladeshis had been banished from the city in preceding months (*The Hindu*, 1992a, 1992b; *The National Herald*, 1992f).⁸ What is inexplicable is how those earlier “pushbacks” could have escaped the attention of the Indian press if even the secrecy surrounding the 1992 evictions had not prevented their widespread, albeit not entirely unfavourable, coverage in Indian newspapers and magazines. Consequently, these claims by the central government and Delhi administration had an unconvincing and untruthful ring. Equally flimsy was the revelation provided a day after the evictions by New Delhi Police Commissioner M.B.Kaushal that the families of deportees had not been returned along with them because they were widely dispersed in various parts of the city and simply could not be located. As a hard-hitting commentary caustically put it: “The whereabouts of their families could have been found out from [the deportees]... They would have been forthcoming... no one wants to leave one’s wife and children behind in a country from which one is being expelled” (*The Indian Express*, 1992e).

An earlier editorial (*The Indian Express*, 1992g) had also questioned the rather crudely worked out method of detecting Bangladeshis:

It is not difficult to imagine what can happen to their wives and children who remain here. The question arises, why were their families, whose whereabouts could easily have been found out from them, not sent back as well? The absence of a plausible explanation will only reinforce the impression one gathers from reports on the deportation that people had been picked up at random.

Government agencies were not entirely insensitive to such swift and sharp criticisms of the highly suspect and ruthless nature of this entire Operation, though the strongest opposition to this fateful exercise was yet to materialise. Disapproval over the treatment meted out to deportees ranged from the mild censuring of the depilatories as an “embarrassment” (*The Telegraph*, 1992a) to more strongly-worded condemnations, such as carried in *The Telegraph* (1992b): “As a part of Operation Pushback or perhaps a prelude to it, the government demonstrated its irresponsible impetuosity by forcibly deporting 132 migrants whose heads were tonsured on the birthday of Prophet Mohammed” (see also *PUCB Bulletin*, 1992; *The Tribune*, 1992c). Likewise, a rare newspaper editorial (*The Pioneer*, 1992a) opposing this “inhumane and unjust” method of deportation firmly declared: “This is not the remedy”; another (*The Indian Express*, 1992g) deemed that 132-odd deportees “packed like sardines” into a small compartment meant to hold only 90 persons, and that too for a long journey, was unfair and excessive. The journal, *Radiance Views Weekly* (1992b), challenged the context and underlying motives of the central government: “Is it also accidental that soon after the BJP passed a resolution to this effect at its Bhopal meeting, the deportation of illegal immigrants, most of whom happen to be Muslims started?”

In an unexpected twist, the CPI-M government in West Bengal registered its displeasure with the actions of the BSF and central government, requesting that future repatriations of Bangladeshis be conducted through border areas outside their province (*Frontline*, 1992d). State intelligence agencies divulged that, in a tense meeting, Chief Minister Basu had severely admonished BSF officials for sullyng the West Bengal government’s humanitarian reputation by tonsuring the hapless deportees (*The Pioneer*, 27 October 1992b). Basu not only demanded assurances from the BSF that such inhumane incidents not be repeated again but also protested against the province being used as a principal conduit for these expulsions. But, while a satisfied Basu informed the media that the BSF had agreed to comply with his requests, anonymous BSF sources reportedly criticised the West Bengal government for undermining their painstaking efforts and appearing to be far more concerned with the welfare of non-citizen immigrants than providing constructive solutions to this “serious crisis” (*The Times of India*, 1992f).

The Chief Minister’s stand on Operation Pushback, in fact, singularly contradicted the one taken at an earlier interview during which he had advised the BSF to strengthen their patrols along the border (*Observer of Business and Politics*, 1992b), as well as the resolution taken by his party in mid-September when it had backed the central government-sponsored Action Plan to check clandestine migration (*The Statesman*, 1992b). Like CPI-M, the protracted inconstancy of many major Indian political parties towards Bangladeshi immigrants would render the process of deportation and its outcome even more chaotic, particularly in succeeding campaigns (*The National Herald*, 1992g; *The Statesman*, 1992c).

“Operation Push-in”: Repudiation and retaliation

Even though the evictions of 1992 were conducted on a very small scale, the Indian

government had to immediately grapple with their troubling, albeit unintended, consequences. Though meant to characterise a robust state firmly in command of its geography, Operation Pushback quite literally involved forcibly pushing small numbers of undocumented immigrants back into Bangladesh, in this instance, without the cooperation of its government. Previously, immigrants apprehended at the border by the BSF were simply delivered to their counterpart, the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992h). Worse was yet to follow with the news stories circulating from Dhaka, Bangladesh, that their immigration officials had decided to detain around 35 deportees sent from New Delhi at the Benapole immigration office (*The Economic Times*, 1992). In a report from the Bangladeshi *Daily Star* (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992i), Manzurul Karim, then the Bangladesh Home Secretary, explained: “We are trying to verify who they really are. We are awaiting details. They must be Indian Bengalis”. The underlying reasoning, as much as the certitude that a higher-level authority had issued the summons, was confirmed when Foreign Minister Mustafizur Rahman clarified: “We will not accept [the deportees] unless the Indian authorities provide documents that they are our citizens” (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992j). Still, Khaleda Zia, then Bangladesh’s Prime Minister, added to this controversial posture with the stark proclamation: “They are not our headache since they are not Bangladeshis” (*The Economic Times*, 1992; see also *The Tribune*, 1992d).

Thus, just as the immigrants’ grinding poverty made them an easy casualty of *Sangh Parivar*’s and the Indian state’s machinations, the government in Bangladesh would also forsake them. It also emerged that a delegation of immigrants who had desperately sought the intervention of the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi had been disregarded on the grounds that, as many of them had been registered as voters in India and possessed ration cards, they would not be considered Bangladeshi citizens – “as good

as saying we don't want you back" (*Indian Express Sunday Magazine*, 1992). Even though successive governments in Bangladesh since have embraced a similar attitude towards undocumented immigrants detained on the suspicion of being Bangladeshi – that is, not acknowledging them as citizens and conveniently making them expendable – one of my respondents (field interview, Rateeba, 15 April 1998) justified her home government's amnesia thus:

They know we exist here [in New Delhi] in large numbers. But they don't acknowledge our presence because it embarrasses them. It shames them that they have not been able to take care of their own who are now forced to seek a home elsewhere.

The diplomatic and hostile responses to the 1992 Indian evictions further violated the terms of an agreement reached between the BSF and BDR in the previous year, by which Bangladesh had consented to take back all those who were repatriated through judicial process (*The Times of India*, 1992e; *The Pioneer*, 1992c). As a quasi-judicial authority, Delhi's FRRO had been deemed the agency to repatriate these immigrants and, by way of a final stipulation, deportees were to be questioned jointly by both states' agencies and their status satisfactorily established before they were accepted into Bangladesh as its citizens. As to their belligerence over Operation Pushback, Indian government sources let it be known that, after initially accepting small groups of deportees, Bangladesh had refused to receive any more, claiming that their citizenship could not be verified – objections, it was admitted, that were not wholly unsubstantiated. After all, India had all but accepted these immigrants as quasi-citizens, issuing them ration cards and even the right to participate in the nation's electoral process, privileges usually reserved for citizens.

In Bangladesh, official repudiation worked in unison with the outrage in the media over

the evictions as a "brutal and inhuman" episode (*The Hindu*, 1992e; *The Pioneer*, 1992d). In an unanimously passed resolution of 14 September 1992, the Bangladesh Parliament condemned India's action as "yet another design" against the country, one which was "unilateral, illegal, unfortunate, and against all international laws" (*The Statesman*, 1992d). Ten days later, the government formally lodged a "strong protest" against the deportations with the Indian High Commissioner in Bangladesh (*The Hindu*, 1992f, 1992g; *The Hindustan Times*, 1992k). Three days later, Foreign Minister Rahman denied in Parliament that large numbers of citizens were living in India (*The Independent*, 1992b), but admitted to a two-way flow of persons across the common border over several decades due to "religious, cultural and historical reasons" (*The Hindu*, 1992e). An irate Bangladeshi government renamed the operation "Operation Push-In" and accused the Indian government of trying to get rid of its own rejected citizens (see also *The Pioneer*, 1992e).

Bangladesh's verbal rebuttals to Operation Pushback, occurring in a somewhat comparable context as the Indian government's capitulation to the xenophobic and grating demands of *Sangh Parivar*, were precipitated by sharply intensified anti-Hindu and anti-Indian sentiments. In the midst of a steady growth in the fundamentalist forces of the Islamic Jamaat in Bangladesh (Feldman, 1999), Prime Minister Zia's government was under enormous internal pressure to harden its attitude towards its dominant neighbour (*The Independent*, 1992c). The unwarranted display of cruelty towards the first group of deportees had only strengthened this (*The Indian Express*, 1992h). Thus, the compulsions and constraints imposed by extremist politics had proved overwhelming for both governments, but with far more critical consequences for the Indian state, where other cracks and discordant notes had manifest themselves in a "badly divided house", this time between two different ministries. In the absence of a

coordinated approach, it seems that the Ministry of External Affairs was pretty sore over the timing of the Home Ministry’s Operation Pushback, inauspiciously following considerable efforts to improve Indo-Bangla relations. The Home Ministry neither notified nor invited them to attend several inter-ministerial meetings on it, an anonymous senior ministry official grumbled (*The Statesman*, 1992e):

It began the Operation without building a national consensus. The meeting of the seven Chief Ministers was held three weeks after the operation started. Had the pushback operation been kept in abeyance for some time we could have used it as a lever in countering Bangladesh’s offensive.

To this charge, the Home Ministry officials countered: “Our Foreign Secretary during his visit to Dhaka last June had conveyed India’s tough stand on infiltration” (*The Statesman*, 1992e). Clearly, though, the sentiment that echoed was that high-ranking bureaucrats in the Home Ministry had launched a “highly sensitive and risky operation” without any meaningful nor obligatory domestic and diplomatic consultations (*The Pioneer*, 1992f).

Bravado and contraction

For a short while, the Congress-led central government was undeterred by these mounting criticisms, and the Delhi administration bravely proceeded to send small groups of Bangladeshis to the border (*The Independent*, 1992d). These deportations were carried out very quietly as the authorities, fearing additional opposition to its *modus operandi*, increasingly desisted from broadcasting their endeavours through the press. Government sources now insisted that the highly sensitive nature of Pushback should do without a “publicity blitzkrieg” (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992l).

Despite being kept under wraps, however, the continued implementation and effect-

iveness of Pushback were in question, with widely reported accounts of sporadic violence in slums objecting to these evictions (for example, *The Indian Express*, 1992h; *The National Herald*, 1992h; *The Patriot*, 1992e; *The Pioneer*, 1992g; *The Times of India*, 1992g). Hostile residents resisting deportation pelted stones at the local police, who in turn resorted to violence (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992m). Shamshad, a migrant, explained their difficult position: “We have been living here for 12 years and now suddenly the local police want us to leave” (*The Statesman*, 1992f). Another major frustration for the government was that many of the deportees, before long, returned to their squatter settlement in the vast spaces of slums in New Delhi (*Navbharat Times*, 1992c; Ramachandran, 1999). An unidentified senior official responsible for Operation Pushback confirmed: “We are actually providing them with a free holiday, even better than a travel leave allowance. Most of them stay in Bangladesh for a couple of months and then come back” (*The Statesman*, 1992g) – the ambitious plan to “push back” unauthorised Bangladeshis, at considerable financial expense, was proving to be an acutely “half-baked one”.

Equally embarrassing, Prime Minister Zia’s government in Bangladesh, ever more compelled to affirm a militant stance against an increasingly partial, weakening Indian state, directed the BDR to block the entry of the deportees (*The Hindustan*, 1992e; *The Patriot*, 1992f). The outcome, in mid-October, a mere month after the initial deportations, was that some 150 persons, who had been sent from New Delhi in separate groups and expelled by the BSF, were instantly driven back. Since the BSF refused to let them set foot back into India and the BDR vehemently insisted that they were not Bangladeshi nationals, many of these “stateless persons” were to be seen squatting defencelessly on the zero line between the two territories at Haridaspur in North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal (*Frontline*, 1992e; *The Independent*, 1992e). Tension rapidly built up at this stretch of the

border as angry Bangladeshi civilians hurled stones and other objects at residents on the Indian side, causing them to abandon their borderline villages to escape the rampant threat of violence (*The Hindustan Times*, 1992g; *The Pioneer*, 1992h).

Even as the BSF fleetingly considered pushing back undocumented immigrants through the western border into Pakistan instead (*The Statesman*, 1992h), the level of the opposition to the deportation campaign and representations on behalf of the undocumented immigrants by several religious and voluntary organisations and NGOs, including Amnesty International (*The National Herald*, 1992i; *The Times of India*, 1992h), forced BSF officials to admit their blunder. A senior BSF official privately termed the cruelties inflicted on the deportees a “silly act” that had jeopardised diplomatic ties between the two countries (*The Independent*, 1992f). Meanwhile, fuelled by the real need for their loyalty in the approaching New Delhi Assembly elections, Congress politicians readily consented to mediate on the immigrants’ behalf, while influential Delhi-level Congress leaders agitated for an end to Operation Pushback. Scanty evidence suggests that, perhaps, having been exposed to the threat of large-scale deportations, the Bangladeshi immigrants in New Delhi had shifted their support back to the Congress (*The Statesman*, 1992h).

Consequently, in the wake of mounting international and internal pressure, Operation Pushback was suspended in early November 1992, as abruptly as it had been inaugurated (*The Times of India*, 1992e). Though no official circular was issued to the effect, hardly any cases of deportation were reported for the rest of that month (*The Statesman*, 1992i; *The Independent*, 1992d), though sporadic deportations of Bangladeshis continued over the next few years, for instance, under “Operation Flush Out” in 1993. In these subsequent expulsions, the direct involvement and complicity of

Sangh Parivar activists and slum leaders would become more apparent.

CONCLUSION

Sangh Parivar’s relentless quest in the early 1990s for political legitimacy and authority or hegemony had, in the first instance, much to do with a sudden hypervisibility of undocumented Bangladeshis in India. Crucially, several major Indian political parties long recognised for their largesse towards the immigrants, also aligned themselves with the tide of xenophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Prominent among them was the ruling (and now dissipated) Congress Party that, with great fanfare, implemented a hastily prepared Action Plan to “detect, identify and deport” unauthorised Bangladeshis. Operation Pushback, the accompanying government-sponsored campaign, singled out Muslim Bangladeshi immigrants who occupied the insignificant spaces of slums in India’s capital city, New Delhi. Randomly picked up by the local police, the initial groups of deportees were subjected to the coercive and communal impulses of the Indian state and bureaucracy.

What surfaces in a scrutiny of the campaign is the intimate relationship between the xenophobic practices adopted by the Indian state and other social and political processes in the capital city, arising both from the disquieting partnership of various political actors outside the Hindu nationalist fold and the significances of the connections between class, language, religion and citizenship. Also exposed are the hidden geographies of these exclusionary exercises, structured as they were by the new imagined geographies of Hindu nationalism and the retaliatory acts of a weakened secular state coming to terms with its own loss of leadership. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, for the poverty-stricken Bangladeshi immigrants, this strategy of expulsion signalled a new sobering phase of their already fragile existence in India. A detailed account of their changing social and political realities is, however, yet to be composed.

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ENDNOTES

¹ *Sangh Parivar* derives from the family of the long-standing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

² In this paper, such terms as “unauthorised”, “irregular” “covert”, “surreptitious” and “clandestine” are those that have been applied to undocumented or “illegal” Bangladeshi immigrants.

³ To protect the safety of the Bangladeshi immigrants interviewed in New Delhi, especially in the current political circumstances in India, all interviewees have been given fictitious names; similarly, the locations where these field interviews were conducted have not been identified.

⁴ The persistent flow of undocumented immigrants from Bangladesh into India continues to be a vexed issue, though for many years, the leading Congress Party and CPI-M (in West Bengal) adopted an unusually generous attitude of allowing them to remain in India. The forceful attempts to expel these immigrants from the country that became a feature of the past decade were confined mainly to big cities like New Delhi and Mumbai. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a political agitation in the northeastern province of Assam had centred on Bangladeshi immigrants and Bengali-speakers (Weiner, 1985, 1993; Hazarika, 1994, 2000).

⁵ The *Ramajnamabhami* agitation credited for ending the marginal political existence of *Sangh Parivar* in India in the mid-1980s centred on the disputed site of the centuries’ old Babri mosque in the small town of Ayodhya in northern India, and the historically unverified argument that it was built on this site after destroying a temple dedicated to Rama, a chief Hindu deity. In early December 1992, *Sangh Parivar* supporters forcefully demolished the mosque, resulting in widespread riots in many places in India.

⁶ In this politically motivated episode, it was alleged that the Maharashtra state BJP-Shiv Sena provincial government was attempting to forcibly evict Indian Bengali Muslims by branding them as illegal Bangladeshi settlers (*The Hindu*, 1998a; 1998b).

⁷ Accurately estimating undocumented Bangladeshis in India is difficult due to the nature of these popula-

tion movements. Government estimates, however, suggest that the northeastern provinces close to Bangladesh like West Bengal and Assam have each received four million immigrants, and Bihar some two million (*The National Herald*, 1992j).

⁸ There are considerable discrepancies in the reported numbers of Bangladeshis deported under Operation Pushback. One account, citing figures issued by the FRRO, suggested that nearly 3,000 immigrants were deported by early November 1992 (*The National Herald*, 1992k). Another suggests that more than 5,000 Bangladeshis were deported (including 1,700 immigrants sent by the New Delhi administration) (*The Times of India*, 1992e).

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