

# Hybrid Ethnography and South Asian Migration Studies

By

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Increased connectivity and mobility are two defining characteristics of modern living.<sup>1</sup> Recent advances in technology and a corresponding increase in telecommunications have made it easier than ever for migrants and refugees to keep in touch with family and friends back home and with other migrants all over the world. Migration is increasingly characterised by its interconnected nature, which serves to dynamically enhance the momentum of human mobility across geo-political landscapes reflecting broader technological advancements and consequent socio-economic transformations.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of “connected” or “digitised” refugees in South Asia, who use the smart/phone to navigate their everyday life, and their situational subjectivity towards biometric registration and identification necessitated by a vulnerability for protection has occasioned discussions on their digital identity. This warrants a renewed approach to the methodological ways such as online/digital ethnography adopted in studying refugees as opposed to being limited to the conventional offline ethnography. When one takes into consideration how access to the internet shapes the nature of mobility and the circumstances of being a refugee, the current state of migration research warrants a more balanced synthesis of offline and online ethnography. Many migrants may now keep in constant touch with their families back home via a combination of frequent physical visits and online communication, and the scenario is no different in South Asia.<sup>3</sup>

Using the empirical context of the digital identity of Rohingyas languishing in camps in India and Bangladesh, this paper argues that the dichotomous approach towards the suitability of digital/online ethnography vis-à-vis conventional/offline in understanding the formulation/reformulation of refugee identity in forced migration research should be eschewed. It serves no purpose to treat the “virtual” world as a completely separate social area from the “real” as people’s “online” and “offline” social lives are inextricably intertwined with the ubiquitous nature of the internet and digital connectivity. This has occasioned the need to redefine not just the “field” in which the

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refugee dwells, interacts, and survives within the host state, but also the approaches used to study the field warrants a re-introspection. Negating the Eurocentrically conditioned “methodological nationalism” which underscores the qualitative approaches such as conventional ethnography in the region, the paper makes a case for the adoption of “hybrid ethnography” in forced migration studies in South Asia, that in turn provides an avenue to incorporate both the positionality and reflexivity of the researcher vis-a-vis the field participants.<sup>4</sup>

### **Decolonising Migration Studies and the Necessity for Hybrid Ethnography**

The necessity of adopting novel qualitative research methodologies like hybrid ethnography is of much credence to analyse and understand both patterns and practices associated with migration in South Asia. What is specific to the contextual situation of migration studies in South Asia, even if not unique just to the subcontinent, is the colonial legacy.<sup>5</sup> The defiance of European imperialism and adherence to continued colonial practices in research created the way for voices from the Global South to lead the charge for decolonisation of migration scholarship.<sup>6</sup> The transition of authority from former colonies to postcolonial nation states was through the sociocultural process of decolonisation that lasted for the better part of the twentieth century. In its wake, it created lengthy shadows that indicated the disembodied spirits of political decolonisation well beyond occurrences which signified the advent of freedom for these individual countries. Its footprints were global in scope and linked with then concurrent metapolitical processes like the Cold War or currently, even the Covid-19 pandemic. South Asia is a particularly bountiful ground for studying such extended temporalities, and specters of decolonisation within the varied socio-cultural frameworks offered by the subcontinent. The colonial past of South Asian nations like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka shaped the political systems that emerged in these countries after independence.<sup>7</sup> Irresolvable ethnic tensions, struggles for regional autonomy, and cultural sovereignty amongst various segments of the postcolonial societies are further evidence that decolonisation itself remained a work in progress in the region. Sometimes, the impending trajectory of decolonisation becomes evident in the everyday patterns of migrant lives which are realised, mediated, and envisioned via many symbolic and material forms. Both the “field” in which migration research happens in South Asia and the unique lens through which to interpret these more mundane and far less spectacular settings of the everyday field warrants a recalibration in the wake of emerging techno-digital connectivity.

In the dominant narratives of migration studies focused on South Asia, there is a noticeable tendency to sideline the influences of colonialism to the theoretical assertions. The emphasis has been placed on economic and individual-centric reasons for migration, particularly highlighting recent movements of populations to Western nations.<sup>8</sup> Within the realm of migration studies in South Asia, it has been observed that there is not only an endorsement

of restrictive border and migration policies but also a notable omission of colonial influences in the way we *look* at the migrants and refugee populations in the region.<sup>9</sup> As postulated by Gurminder Bhambra, this neglect overlooks the deep-rooted epistemic colonialism in migration studies<sup>10</sup> and often eclipses the rising postcolonial and decolonising methodologies that are being implemented elsewhere in Global South.<sup>11</sup> Historical instances from the twentieth century, such as the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, exemplify how colonial legacies are intertwined with migrations in the postcolonial era.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the migration trends from colonised regions to European nations and settler colonial states further underscore this continuous colonial footprint<sup>13</sup>. There is a need for a comprehensive historical understanding of migration trajectories and their governance mechanisms.<sup>14</sup> Acknowledging this gap, scholarship has emphasised how the sociocultural affinity emanating from the shared postcolonial history has shaped refugee's sense of belonging in South Asian countries.<sup>15</sup> With respect to the refugees in South Asian countries, where these people have come from, where they originally "belong to" or how should they be differently administered based on their identity and belonging are assertions central to the domain of forced migration in the subcontinent. Such an epistemic colonial perspective has moulded migration studies in ways that reinforce the structures birthed from the colonial era. These include the concepts of sovereignty, notions of freedom and rights, distinctions drawn between natives and outsiders, the categorisation of migrants through border regulations, and the perpetuation of racial hierarchies.<sup>16</sup>

This overshadowing, however, doesn't negate the fact that the field of migration studies is deeply intertwined with what Mignolo terms the "coloniality of knowledge."<sup>17</sup> In this case, one might ask: What kinds of information are increasingly crucial to the research agendas of Global South? What kind of information has been (un)willingly in/excluded? Whose knowledge does these data inform exactly? As Grada Kilomba asks: "Who is acknowledged to have the knowledge? And who is not?"<sup>18</sup> Extending this thought, one may ask: What are the methods that will justify the documentation and analysis of such knowledge? In the realm of South Asian migration studies, postcolonial narratives, as previously mentioned, primarily serve as instruments for academic metamorphosis posing challenges to the accepted knowledge and the justification of restrictive migration policies.<sup>19</sup> However, these accounts stand apart from the budding emphasis on the decolonisation of knowledge, which calls for dismantling inherent colonial frameworks used to study the field. Noxolo underscores that debates on decolonisation draw inspiration from histories and stances fundamentally different from postcolonial ideologies, with a pronounced inclination towards indigenous insights and critical standpoints.<sup>20</sup> Directly addressing the ongoing legacy of colonisation and colonial imprints in nations where communities have historically resided is at the heart of decolonial discourse and activism.<sup>21</sup> But decolonising initiative extends beyond the mere reshaping of knowledge creation.<sup>22</sup> It necessitates a holistic examination of established structures, institutional mechanisms, and practical applications, championed predominantly by indigenous populations and those marginalised within colonial constructs. Decolonisation should not be trivialised as mere

rhetoric in migration studies.<sup>23</sup> It is essential to note its departure from postcolonialism, which is rather heavily tilted towards homogeneous representation and deconstructive analysis of the research field of migration studies in South Asia to its colonial history.

Decolonising methodologies entail “actively participating with western colonialism at numerous levels” and are associated with establishing a much more analytical knowledge of core preconceptions, motives, and beliefs that shape research methods at any of those levels.<sup>24</sup> Decolonising research implies giving non-Western people and their viewpoints the attention they deserve, while also learning about and respecting theoretical and empirical frameworks from the so-called “other(ed)” viewpoints of migrants.<sup>25</sup> The critical pedagogy of decolonisation then consists of transforming our colonised views and holding alternative knowledge through novel methodologies. Postcolonial perspectives are at the forefront of migration scholarship in South Asia as it discounts the redundancy of conventional methodological tools to study the same. Decolonisation’s differential approach involves shifting away from the erstwhile colonised perspectives towards alternative forms of knowledge which are inclusive of the everyday life of refugees or migrants, emerging from their own narratives.<sup>26</sup> While views on postcoloniality have been at the center of research in South Asia, the subjugation brought about by colonialism has far-reaching effects on both the magnitude and nature of knowledge production regarding migration in the subcontinent. By bandwagoning in the struggle against continued neocolonial oppression, researchers should create a “field” where the collective experiences of marginalised groups may inform the development of new approaches to qualitative research. This can be done only if we acknowledge and consider the factor of digital connectivity and transnational networking amongst the migrant populations in South Asia.

We can no longer turn back the tide of technological advancements in information and communication technology which have invaded every facet of our society.<sup>27</sup> Even though the efficacy of conventional research methodologies are contested for their ability to capture the lived experience of refugees in such a digitised world, merely adopting digital methodologies for studying the field will not be enough. Since online research provides only a fragmented image of the transborder behaviour and practices of refugees, it cannot serve as the only basis of primary ethnographic data for any study. Neither would an ethnography that focused just on the offline world equip any researcher with the level of detail necessary to understand the interlinkages that exist between the real and virtual world of refugees, while considering their digitised identity. Hence it is necessary to establish a separate online ethnography, in addition to the conventional offline ethnography for studying refugee’s digital identity.

Tim Ingold evaluates the relationship between anthropology and ethnography where he argues that while ethnography aims to describe life as experienced by a particular people at a specific time and place, anthropology is more broadly concerned with the conditions and possibilities of human life within the world.<sup>28</sup> This distinction situates ethnography as an end in itself rather than merely a methodological approach to anthropology. Ingold emphasises that traditional participant observation should be seen as an

anthropological practice rather than a method exclusive to ethnography.<sup>29</sup> This perspective shifts the focus from studying people as objects of research to learning with them, which Ingold describes as an educational rather than purely ethnographic process.<sup>30</sup> Such an approach challenges the conventional boundaries between the observer and the observed, advocating for a more immersive and engaged anthropological practice that recognises its speculative nature.

The study of migrants and forced migration through ethnography has significantly evolved over time, reflecting broader shifts in methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks within the social sciences. Initially, ethnographies of migration tended to focus on the assimilation processes within host societies, often influenced by the Chicago School's interest in urban sociology and patterns of adaptation.<sup>31</sup> Contemporary ethnographies of migration are increasingly attentive to issues of power, identity, and agency, challenging earlier models that depicted migrants as largely passive recipients of structural forces.<sup>32</sup> This change is aligned with a broader turn towards reflexive and critical ethnography, which interrogates the positionality of the researcher and the ethical dimensions of ethnographic work.<sup>33</sup> Researchers now often focus on how migration is experienced differently based on intersecting factors such as race, gender, class, and legal status which called for a corresponding inclusivity in the ethnographic approaches used.<sup>34</sup>

The ethnographic approach in migration studies has, moved from traditional methods focused primarily on singular, often isolated field sites to a more expansive, multi-sited methodology. This shift addresses the dynamic nature of human migration influenced by globalisation. Researchers now emphasise understanding migrants' lives across multiple locales, reflecting the transnational experiences that characterise contemporary migration. The approach has grown to incorporate theoretical frameworks that link empirical findings to broader socio-political contexts, thereby enriching the analytical depth and relevance of migration studies. David Fitzgerald in "Towards a Theoretical Ethnography of Migration," explores the methodological advancements in ethnography under the influences of globalisation and transnationalism.<sup>35</sup> Fitzgerald advocates for a multi-sited approach to ethnography that encompasses both the countries of origin and destination of migrants, urging researchers to remove "national blinders" to better compare domestic and international migrations. He emphasises the need for historical depth through local archival work and revisits, which counters the "ethnographic present" and provides a longitudinal perspective on migration phenomena. By integrating these methodologies, Fitzgerald argues that one could enhance the representativeness and theoretical applicability of migration studies, pushing for a more comprehensive understanding of migrants' experiences across different spaces and times.

Blommaert through a discursive analysis of influential theorists like Hymes, Bakhtin, Goffman, and Bourdieu in his book *Dialogues with Ethnography* <sup>36</sup>discusses the epistemological problems of ethnography highlighting the fact that it is largely a conceptual outlook as opposed to being a mere methodology. He examines the concept of participant observation via the Bourdieusian lens

(Bourdieu's research with the Kabyle people in Algeria) to rethink the anthropologist's privileged status as an "unchallengeable epistemic superior." It is difficult for ethnographers to "drop aspects about oneself to become a true participant," suggesting that it is inconceivable for ethnographers to adopt characteristics of the identities of their participants, except in extremely exceptional situations.<sup>37</sup> However, the phenomena of "turning native" i.e., the situation wherein the observer has been a part of the community being watched, is difficult in conventional ethnography owing to the explicit differences in the conditions of both researcher and participant. As much as being a "native" is difficult in offline ethnography, the participation of both refugees and researchers alike as members of the same social networking sites as Facebook opens an avenue to go "native" in online ethnography.<sup>38</sup>

Ethnography is the most viable approach for exploring the impact of the internet on migrants' lives, but it needs to make certain methodological adjustments to account for the unique challenges presented by digital and technological mediation within the phenomenon of migration. digital migration.<sup>39</sup> According to Schrooten,<sup>40</sup> the study of migrants and their online interaction therefore fits in with a major trend in the development of the field by way of moving away from "methodological nationalism"<sup>41</sup> to a theoretical foundation built on the idea of transnationality.<sup>42</sup> Acknowledging the increased connectivity amongst refugees and migrants, current scholarship has come to reject the simplistic equation of society and nation states, arguing that "national organisation" as a structuring principle of societal and political activity could no longer function as the guiding benchmark for them.<sup>43</sup>

Refugees and migrants often participate in transnational social networks which play a role in socio-economic development and allow them to be active members of various global communities, sometimes facilitating their political engagement across multiple countries. Even if their statelessness precludes them from substantively participating in the polity of the state they flee and the host state, for example, a large segment of Rohingya refugees in India and Bangladesh navigate their everyday life through digitally mediated avenues of interaction facilitated by smartphones and social media participation. The advent of this transnational or transborder paradigm has had a profound impact on the social sciences generally and forced migration studies specifically. This perspective refers to the mechanisms through which individuals systematically engage in social spheres that extend beyond national boundaries.<sup>44</sup> This transnational or transborder emphasis has prompted scholarship to abandon the standard practice of utilising the "national" as the geographical unit of consideration and instead alter their methods to meet the digitised connectivity that shapes the current globalised world. The lens of hybrid ethnography, informed by the notions of "positionality" and "reflexivity" has become the right tool to contest methodological nationalism.

## **Embracing Positionality and Reflexivity to Transcend Methodological Nationalism**

Researchers recognise the importance of “positionality” i.e., the need to consider their position with respect to that of the “other” in the course of data gathering for any research.<sup>45</sup> It is impossible to ascertain our positionality without taking into account both the shared and divergent sociocultural norms and values of researchers and participants alike.<sup>46</sup> While adopting positionality in research, scholars have typically considered factors such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, workplace, and adherence to broader cultural norms of the research subjects and participants.<sup>47</sup> Because of the importance of a researcher’s “position” and their ability to analyse and explain the social group they are researching, it is necessary to ask themselves: How we are positioned as a researcher? Chavez opines that one could be an “outsider,” “partial insider,” or “complete insider,” based on their positionality as the researcher.<sup>48</sup> That is to say, the researcher can evaluate whether their position is completely divergent from the subjects of their research. This would determine whether the researcher is an “outsider” to the social group under investigation. It is also possible to be “partial insiders” vis-à-vis the members of a group with whom the researcher might have some level of familiarity but not complete identification. A researcher will be considered a true insider if they share several significant characteristic traits or perspectives with the members of that group or community. During the offline fieldwork conducted in refugee camps of Hyderabad and Chennai, I could solicit better responses from the Rohingya refugee women in camps owing to my positionality as a “partial insider” occasioned by my “Muslim female” researcher identity. Positionality in any ethnographic study as insiders or partial insiders is seldom problem-free.<sup>49</sup> On the one hand, researchers get a unique perspective that allows them to simultaneously see the similarities and distinctions between themselves and the people that make up their study samples, but on the other hand, they may also have to struggle with how their subjects perceive them back,<sup>50</sup> which may add another layer of complexity to their work. In addition, close sociocultural ties might heighten participants’ and researcher’s perceptions of social differences and power dynamics.<sup>51</sup>

Researchers using qualitative methods to explore transnational (forced)migration should be attuned to this kind of problem since their research revolves around people who, for one reason or another, are discriminated against, and occupy the lowest rung of society. While examining the discourse on migration, researchers also need to reflect on the conceptual and methodological categories they use, ultimately adopting those structure/s that provide a more accurate and complete picture of the everyday experiences of refugees and migrants. This necessitates moving away from the “methodological nationalist” approach while conceptualising migration, as well as refraining from seeing transnational mobility solely through the prism of the nation state.<sup>52</sup> This will inadvertently necessitate privileging the viewpoint of the vulnerable migrant/refugee through a bottom-up approach, mainly through long-term interactions channeled as semi-structured interviews within the chat

rooms associated with the social media platforms. Their posts and photographs shared in these public forums help the researcher to understand the self-representations of their identity emanating from refugee/migrant subjectivity in these digital platforms. Such online methods and platforms also facilitate prolonged interactions over frequent predetermined intervals, helping the researcher to map the trajectory of their inter-community and transnational networking through such platforms and further integrating it into theoretical frameworks that can account for the refugees' complexities in navigating their everyday life. It may be used to attack the very foundations of oppression, authority, discrimination, and inequalities, warranting an interaction with "false ideas."<sup>53</sup>

The use of official statistics on refugees obtained from their biometric data organised so that ethnocultural differences of refugees or migrants appear as an independent variable in the reporting of educational attainment, physical health, work status, and incidence of poverty in everyday survival. This is one way in which methodological nationalism contributes to the homogenisation of cultural identity and the categorisation of migrants into ethnic communities and are regarded as upholders of discrete cultures.<sup>54</sup> In other words, migration studies and corresponding ethnic studies equivalents add value to the revitalisation of modern nation state building initiatives as they are now constituted.<sup>55</sup> The fallacy of methodological nationalism is that it conceals the interplay of genuine causal factors that lead to the identification of particular groups of individuals as refugees and their subsequent treatment as such. Because of its fundamental traits, that are connected to its intense involvement with the lives of real people, actual social interactions, and related dialogic sociocultural effects,<sup>56</sup> appropriately adapted qualitatively ethnographic research may considerably help in transcending methodological nationalism.

Qualitative ethnographic research is helpful as it allows for a more in-depth examination of the processes by which societal borders are conceived to become functional, and also of how unequal power relations are reinforced and perpetuated as a result.<sup>57</sup> In order to better understand the true formative dynamics that generate modern migratory phenomena, critical realist-inspired qualitative research on migration includes the study of various interactional understandings, reflexive formulations, social practises, and social interconnections. Modern migration scholarship in South Asia must reject methodological nationalism based on a solely state dominated perspective by adopting methodologies that reflect the critical position toward social relations of power imbalance, oppression, and dominance. Often, the critical perspectives and ideas presented by migration qualitative research are reinforced and made more effective when they resist relativising genuine linkages of inequality, subjugation, and control as well as the implicational forces which generate and perpetuate them.<sup>58</sup> However, its applicability and significance are not limited to nation states, rather, it is directed at movements and collectives that seek to counteract power imbalances, combat anti-immigrant sentiment,<sup>59</sup> challenge the perception of refugees as "undesirables"<sup>60</sup> and instead work towards guaranteeing their mobility,<sup>61</sup> apart from ensuring universal rights of protection. In order to steer clear of methodological

nationalism, it is important to zero in on the actual nature of social ties expressed by refugees'/migrant's reflecting their identity in various domains rather than unquestionably adhering to the representations and presumptions we as researchers give them. This is particularly true when it comes to understanding relationships marked by asymmetry and disparity as in the case of biometrically enhanced digital identity of refugees. According to Glick Schiller,<sup>62</sup> the field of migration studies has been hampered by its inability to grasp the global political economy and its failure to investigate the connections between migration and other forms of power, such as the racialisation and subordination of territories, populations, and communities. Hence, there is a need to counter migration studies standard units of analysis limited to innate ethnocentric assertions privileging nation state and more towards people's placement in different structural, class, and such other power hierarchical structures.<sup>63</sup>

### **Hybrid Ethnography as a Synthesis of Online (Digital) and Offline Ethnography**

To produce a more complete and accurate understanding of the phenomenon and transnational processes involved in refugee connectivity, it is beneficial to conduct "multi-sited" ethnography in both traditional and digital settings, otherwise considered as hybrid ethnography. In tandem with the growth of a transborder perspective on migration came the advent of "multi-sited fieldwork"<sup>64</sup> a novel research methodology that gave scholars access to transnational units of reference for investigation. Multi-sited ethnography on migration involves studying migrant groups in various geographic locations to understand the interconnectedness of their experiences across different sites. By conducting ethnographic research in multiple settings where migrants live, work, or transit, researchers can better capture the transnational social fields that migrants navigate, thereby acknowledging the global connectedness of contemporary migration patterns. The "multi-sited fieldworker" is distinct from a researcher who does a mere comprehensive survey of different locations as he/she instead traces individuals and their networks over vast and varying geographic areas.<sup>65</sup> The participatory research across social media networks accessed by the bulk of the refugees, conducted using an online ethnographic approach enables the researcher to conduct the research in multiple sites. Multiple sites in this case include online fields like Facebook and X (Twitter) instead of restricting only to the offline refugee camp settlements in the host state. Such a multi-sited approach leads to "methodological transnationalism,"<sup>66</sup> which in turn occasions the expansion of the "field" in which research is conducted. In the current refugee studies, this would signify a change towards studying transnational and fragmented networks that create a digitally "connected refugee"<sup>67</sup> as opposed to a geographically "uprooted" refugee. Through their participation in and occupation of cyberspace, refugee groups are discovering new kinds of social cohesion on a global scale. Hence, apart from expanding the number of fields or spatial units of the study where researchers may gather data, this requires exploring novel research

methodologies like “digital ethnography” and more nuanced hybrid ethnography for data analysis.

The primary analytical unit of hybrid ethnography for studying digital identity is the hybridity of online and offline connections. In this line of research, it is not appropriate to begin with digital initiatives but rather integrate fieldwork in real world offline settings with the observation of digitally mediated behaviours.<sup>68</sup> Recent years have seen the growth of “digital ethnography”<sup>69</sup> and “digital sociologies” both of which strive to comprehend digital mediation as a characteristic of substantively and deeply embedded personal experiences, practices, and larger social environment.<sup>70</sup> Hybrid ethnography takes online-offline relationships as its main unit of analysis. Rather than taking digital practices as a starting point, in this strand scholars combine fieldwork in physical places with observing digitally mediated practices. These efforts are making strides toward developing qualitative internet research methodologies that take into account the fact that “no one lives an entirely digital life”<sup>71</sup> and that technological advances of the web, and media do not exist independently, but rather transform and are transformed by, everyday practices.<sup>72</sup>

For instance, Rohingya refugees are referred to as the “boat people” indicating the perilous journeys they undertake in crammed up boats without adequate food or water, paying huge amounts as carrier fees to the agents only to escape the persecution in Myanmar. Even in such journeys, mobile phones and the images, updates and sometimes desperate cries for help are broadcasted to the larger world by refugees themselves through their social media posts. Taking the relevance of mapping such trajectories of flight into account, Zijlstra and van Liempt<sup>73</sup> used “trajectory ethnography” to examine the ways in which Syrian refugees used cell phones throughout their journeys from Greece and Turkey to the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and other European countries. In their study, Zijlstra and van Liempt adapt the mobile method of trajectory ethnography to observe and follow informants over time, incorporating both offline observations and digital interactions to capture the evolving migration patterns. This framework stresses that researchers studying digitally connected refugees need to consider the ways in which contemporary refugees encounter telecommunication and how technological mediations are embedded in their own unique, power-ridden sociocultural, historical, and geographical contexts. For this reason, one should consider the specificity of technological and digital mediation while approaching it as something inherently related to a broader spectrum of refugee studies. Connected migrants, in particular, are perpetually engaged in a spectrum of interdependent components of “encapsulation,” retaining a sense of shared identity with current colleagues of a finite diasporic community—and “cosmopolitanism”—connecting two local cultural issues through engagement with diverse communities different from their own.

If so, what necessitates a change in approach while introspecting the digital identity of refugees? In simple terms, digital identity includes any individual’s personal information data like name, age, gender, location, contact details, and other identifiers. Interactions made in these digital terrains such as comments, likes, shares, posts, or even one’s call logs contribute to the digital footprint and are very significant aspect that helps in conducting surveillance

on stateless persons and are deemed as “illegal immigrants.” But it is through biometric registration that physical attributes like iris scans, and fingerprints get converted to binary data and are saved in intermediary platforms managed and operated by private techno-conglomerates by collaborating with governments and international humanitarian organisations. For a regular citizen, credentials like usernames, passwords, and other authentication factors help individuals access various online services and platforms securely. However, the biometric data of refugees goes on to become the authentication or identification details that are supposed to validate the credentials qualifying him/her for the conditional protection offered by humanitarian organisations. But this binarised data also becomes an important constituent of the digital identity.<sup>74</sup> It is closely linked to surveillance practices by governments and corporations, leading to concerns about privacy, autonomy, and the potential for control. The commodification of personal data and the use of digital identities for surveillance can erode personal freedom apart from signifying the power imbalance between the refugee and the prevalent humanitarian governance infrastructure. As digital identity is shaped by algorithms that can perpetuate biases, leading to discriminatory outcomes in many areas as algorithms may amplify existing biases, reinforcing systemic inequalities, and limiting individual agency over their digital identities.

While studying the digital identity of refugees, one should keep a humanistic approach taking into consideration the unique characteristics of technological mediation that refugees are subjected to as all digitally connected refugees/migrants effectively possess a distinctive “digital identity,” and also problematically give rise to distinctive ambiguity in assertion of identity. There cannot be something as distinctive as “digital identity” for it gives an illusion that an identity whose subjective qualities emanate from digital origin is an exclusive category in itself. Rather, it discounts the most evident fact that such an identity draws its existential specification from the spatial terrain of the digital world in which it operates and is caused sometimes by the mere digitisation of the realm it functions in. Seen so, the characteristic feature of digital identity is not an exclusive category by means of its unique attributes separated from the “offline/real” world. Rather it is conditioned and shaped by the existing power asymmetries and imbalances operating in the real world. The “digital identity” of the refugees needs to be distinguished from being a distinctively exclusive category, normalised as a conduit for foundational legal identity in any host state. For refugees languishing in the camps, techno-digital assertions in humanitarianism through biometric registration are not the means to an end of inclusion. Rather it constitutes and perpetuates a techno-politics of exclusion, showcasing the embeddedness of technology within the pre-existing politics of refugee recognition.

Researchers must transparently address potential biases arising from their positionality when examining the digital identity of refugees. Digital identity is not equally accessible to all, especially to refugees who don’t have even legal documentation that is required to obtain a SIM card. This effectively contributes to digital inequalities based on factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, geography, and digital literacy which primarily influence the level of

their digital engagement. These inequalities reinforce existing social hierarchies and limit marginalised refugee groups' opportunities for online participation and self-representation. Hence while studying the identity of refugees, researchers must critically reflect on their own biases and digital literacy, as these factors can impact the interpretation of refugees' online activities. Acknowledging and addressing biases stemming from the researcher's own digital identities enhances the validity of findings related to refugees' digital experiences. At the same time, we need to be cautious and recognise the intersectionality of the refugee identities, including their cultural, social, and technological dimensions, when analysing their digital presence. Subjective knowledge production of refugees' digital identities and interpretations of online behaviours can vary depending on the researcher's perspectives. Hence, one must transparently address potential biases arising from their positionality when examining the digital identity of refugees. The researcher's reflexivity and positionality can contribute to a more just representation of refugees' digital experiences, advancing their voices and struggles. Such an approach will underscore the importance of obtaining informed consent and giving participants agency in shaping the narrative of refugees in their everyday lives.

A hybrid ethnographic approach allows researchers to understand how their familiarity with digital platforms might influence their analysis of the online behaviours of the refugees. The biometric registration process and social media usage of refugees are influenced by complex power dynamics, with implications for data collection and interpretation. In such situations, hybrid ethnography enables researchers to uncover power imbalances that might affect refugees' online presence, shedding light on how they navigate digital spaces in the context of their forced migration. It ensures a more comprehensive examination of digital identity, encompassing both the refugees' perspectives and the researchers' own insights. This empowers refugees to actively participate in shaping their digital identity narrative, emphasising their agency in online representation. Hybrid ethnography can thus help the researcher illuminate how refugees' multifaceted identities intersect with their use of social media platforms, providing a nuanced understanding of their online engagement. It allows researchers to embrace subjectivity, acknowledging that their interpretations of digital actions are influenced by their own experiences and background. As it involves a reflexive analysis of how researchers' biases might impact their understanding of refugees' online interactions, promoting open discussions about these biases enables researchers to amplify their narratives, challenging dominant narratives and advocating for their rights.

Even if one were to limit to either digital or conventional (offline) approaches that would have still resulted in a substantial quantity of data, yet, it would be missing several essential components. Miller and Slater notably write that "if you want to go to the Internet, don't start from there."<sup>75</sup> They did ethnographic research on everything from sex to religion to business to personal relationships in places as varied as internet cafes, companies, middle class homes and settlements in Trinidad, and the webpages, email, and chatroom services used by Trinidadians residing overseas. A multi-sited hybrid ethnographic fieldwork that encompasses both online and offline study

locations and navigates its varying trajectories across multiple media would be more appropriate for studying forced migration in the current context. Hence an additional yet crucial tactic is the combination of online and offline qualitative data collection methods to collate robust data about the effects of both domestic and transborder digital networking activities apart from the impact of biometric registration on the identities of refugees. Access to the research site and the issue of getting informed permission are the primary areas of distinctions between offline (face-to-face) and online (digital) ethnography. The process of gaining access to the Facebook groups and X (Twitter) forums stands out as a key departure from physical ethnography. Although the challenge of how to portray oneself also occurs within conventional ethnography, in getting access to the digital research context, a researcher cannot depend on their physical presence and interactional style.<sup>76</sup> Sometimes researchers take the assistance of language translators to understand the content and context of the internet discussion forums. Often after learning that a researcher is working on the statelessness and digital identity of refugees/migrants of a particular community concerned, some refugee interviewees connect with these researchers as friends on their social networking sites like Facebook. This aids ingress/egress in requesting permission to perform online ethnographic fieldwork and to use online comments. Some academics contend that all online content is in the public domain and can be freely used by anybody.<sup>77</sup> In addition, the open-source nature of the online environment enables a researcher to double-check their assumptions and get permission from the participants, both of which are essential to the ethical conduct of a research study. Furthermore, many researchers may have previously joined Facebook and X (Twitter) before beginning their research. Therefore, at the beginning of the research study, it is necessary to present the research theme and announce their internet presence to promote themselves as researchers. After making the first introduction, they may refrain from repeatedly identifying themselves as researchers in subsequent chats. Instead, make sure that their user profile remains always displayed and that he/she is engaged in ethnographic research. In addition, everyone included in the research must be made aware that they could quit at any time and that their identities would be concealed appropriately. Another crucial component of participant privacy in hybrid ethnography is how their data is presented in published formats. In comparison to ensuring confidentiality to respondents in offline research, concealing contributors to online websites is sometimes more challenging since identities and textual excerpts retrieved online are simpler to recover. The issue of privacy is complicated further by the erosion of the private/public boundary. Not everyone who has an online/digital presence prefers to keep a low profile. They may instead be considered as writers since they knowingly publish in the public domain.<sup>78</sup> The researcher may decide to reveal the real name of the online group they are researching while changing participants' virtual pseudonyms, addresses, and other identifiers in the study. However, ethical considerations must guide decisions about revealing or concealing identifiers like participant detailers in research such that these

choices are justified not merely for the validity of the research argument but by thorough ethical evaluation.

Social media platforms play an important role in capturing and relaying the plight of refugees while significantly shaping and reshaping their digital identity. In online ethnography, researchers can rely on social networking sites as an extension to the offline field of camp settlements to understand the ways in which digital technology helps the refugees living in the camp to connect with each other. So, social networking sites need to be understood as part of a larger range of technological mediation that challenges the boundedness of offline fields by extending to the broader digital realm apart from having an impact on their individual representation and articulation of their specific refugee identity. We may end up overlooking the fact that individuals utilise a variety of media in their communication if we restrict to focus on just one of the ways in which refugees express themselves. I reiterate that contemporary forced migration researchers, according to the question/s they ask, should provide specific attention to digitally mediated communication in their research. This may be done, amongst many other novel methodologies, via a digital ethnographic study compounded with conventional offline ethnography for analysing the everyday life of refugees in the original settlement areas. An alternative knowledge of migration and an alternative type of migrant research subject who gets a privileged perspective of a bottoms-up approach may be possible only if we reconceive “the field” as the broader terrain where hybrid ethnographic research should be conducted.

## Conclusion

With the agenda of replacing Western epistemology as the exclusive paradigm for knowing, decoloniality provides the avenue to expand existing canons of knowledge in South Asian migration studies.<sup>79</sup> To prevent learning and knowledge from being centered on the West, postcolonial and Western academics must work together to co-create new paradigms.<sup>80</sup> To accomplish this we as researchers must embrace the need to adopt hybrid ethnographic methods that are responsive to the technological and digital engagement of migrants and refugees in the region. By doing so, postcolonial viewpoints may be incorporated into academic conceptual knowledge and resources, allowing them to play an active role in establishing and maintaining the epistemologies associated with them.<sup>81</sup> Hybrid ethnographic methodology emerges as a pivotal tool in the quest to decolonise migration studies in South Asia. Recognising decolonisation as a long-term vision addressing the persistent influences of colonialism, the emphasis shifts towards overturning the migration policies of the government rooted in colonial mentalities.<sup>82</sup> It is not just about the practicalities of migration but about the epistemology i.e., the necessity to decolonise the very knowledge practices that underpin migration studies. Central to this reimaged approach is a keen focus on who conducts the research. *By doing so, postcolonial viewpoints can be incorporated into academic conceptual knowledge and resources, allowing them to play an active role in establishing and maintaining the epistemologies associated with them.* It calls for

unity among different racial and marginal groups, given their shared experience at the crossroads of migration and colonial oppression.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, the process of dissemination of migration knowledge to researchers, policymakers, and activists plays a crucial role in this decolonisation process.<sup>84</sup> This progressive shift promises not just academic reformation, but also an actionable blueprint. Coupled with online and offline strategies, hybrid ethnography can effectively counteract the reductive tendencies that have historically dominated South Asian migration regimes.

*This article is part of the author's ongoing Doctoral research on biometric registration and digital identity of Rohingya refugees titled "Techno-Politics of Exclusion: Statelessness, Citizenship and Abandonment of Rohingyas."*

## Notes

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<sup>53</sup> According to Arnauld Antoine, “false ideas” can be understood as beliefs or theories that are based on incorrect assumptions, inadequate evidence, or flawed reasoning, and do not accurately reflect or explain social reality. These ideas may persist due to various reasons, including ideological biases, resistance to new evidence, or the historical and cultural contexts in which they arise. Andrew Sayer extends his notion of “false ideas” from Marx’s analysis of false consciousness which effectively identifies the origins and material consequences of certain erroneous beliefs, demonstrating their inaccuracy. Although these ideas and practices might be flawed, their real-world existence and impact are undeniable. The identification and correction of false ideas are crucial for the progress of social science disciplines, as they strive to provide a more accurate understanding of human behaviour, societal structures, and cultural dynamics. See, Antoine Arnauld, *On True and False Ideas* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990); Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Andrew Sayer, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

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