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Suspended identity: statelessness, citizenship challenges and the impermanence of identity status faced by Pakistani Bengalis

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ABSTRACT

Approximately 3 million ethnic Bengalis reside in Pakistan, some of whom have been refused citizenship rights and continue to face social and cultural exclusion despite being in their third and fourth generations. Many came following the creation of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) in 1971 under challenging circumstances. This paper examines the ongoing citizenship challenges faced by the Pakistani Bengali community in Karachi, Pakistan, with a particular focus on their experiences within the space of the citizenship registration office. Drawing on 85 oral history interviews with both adult and young Pakistani Bengalis, our findings reveal that the treatment of Pakistani Bengalis in this space is shaped by dominant racialised commonsense representations of them as 'eternal outsiders' and 'unworthy of belonging', rooted in a historical past marked by conflict and a series of exclusionary citizenship and state-security policies. Consequently, many are met with discrimination and challenges around identity acquisition, resulting in lasting intergenerational impacts in their own and their family's everyday lives, leaving them precarious. Our paper more broadly argues that within the social imagination of nations, particularly post-colonial ones, certain groups are constructed as outsiders, shaping racialised understandings that influence discriminatory citizenship practices in turn creating a state of suspended identity.

Introduction

In Pakistan, the fifth-most populated nation in the world, the act of registering and documenting individuals is a mammoth feat and one which is largely conducted by the National Database and Registration Authority[1] (NADRA). NADRA manages Pakistan's digital biometric and genealogical based computerized national identity cards[2] (CNIC) and the resulting database. This card, which has been in use in its digital form since the year 2000 is vital for everything from accessing health and education to gaining employment and housing (Hashmi 2021). Consequently, not having a card results in

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even basic human rights being inaccessible to people particularly in a post 9/11 context where the use of NADRA issued identity cards can make travelling across Pakistan's securitized major cities onerous and especially risky for the working poor (Waseem 2022).

This denial of citizenship mirrors what Hunter (2019) in her text 'Undocumented Nationals: Between Statelessness and Citizenship' has described as the 'active denial of access to proof of nationality', (38) seen in contexts like Kenya with the Nubians and the Dominican Republic with Haitians. It represents an exclusionary practice grounded in discrimination against specific groups and an attempt to deny the 'official recognition of the other' (Hunter 2019, 38). Sharma (2024) introduces the concept of 'paused citizens' (326) to capture similar discriminatory experiences faced by the approximately two million National Register of Citizenship (NRC)[3] dropouts in Assam, India who have found themselves in a limbo like state of between citizen and stateless waiting for clarity on their cases. Here, time is being used as an exclusionary tactic by the state and its administrative apparatus. In instances such as these Hunter (2019) argues that the implementation and regulation of administrative measures to address excluded populations is often ineffective, as the issue of exclusion is rooted in political and social issues.

Within Pakistan, the basis for a similar form of exclusion of ethnic Bengalis is rooted in historical developments, particularly the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War (but also predating this period), when Bengalis began to be viewed as foreign to Pakistan. The case of the ethnic Bengali and Bihari populations is especially distinct, as the creation of a new state – Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) – produced challenges around legal nationality. Prior to this, these communities were members of the Pakistani state. These challenges have continued, and in Pakistan today, there are large groups of undocumented individuals, many of whom are stateless or at risk of statelessness. These include Rohingya refugees, undocumented ethnic Bengalis, undocumented Afghans, and Biharis (Imkaan Welfare Organisation, Nationality for All and Institute for Statelessness and Inclusion 2023).

Drawing on work from Serge Moscovici on social representations and common sense (2011), Das (2006) on the illegibility of the state, and Taylor (2004) on social imaginaries, our paper argues that the representation of Pakistani Bengalis as eternal outsiders has been constructed over time within the social imagination, forming a dominant racialised *common sense* understanding of this group. This representation is rooted in a historical past marked by conflict and a series of exclusionary digital citizenship and state security policies.

By 'common sense', here we are referring to a set of shared beliefs, values, and practices that members of a society use to make sense of their world (Howarth 2006; Moscovici 2011). When common sense knowledge becomes racialised, representations of specific groups such as Pakistani Bengalis are not just personal or individual beliefs; they are shared, collective understandings that shape how people are perceived and treated based on their racial or ethnic identity. Racialisation occurs through a systematic process of re-articulations and re-enactments of these 'understandings' such that they come to constitute our realities and as such become what reality is intersubjectively agreed to be (Howarth 2006). These modes of exclusion become so deeply embedded in everyday thinking and social practices that they are perceived as 'common sense'. In this process, racial distinctions and hierarchies become normalized, taken for granted, and treated as

natural or self-evident aspects of the social world (Phoenix, Howarth, and Philogène 2017). Thus, a racialised common sense understanding of Pakistani Bengalis as outsiders significantly influences how they are treated in administrative settings such as the NADRA Registration Centres, where the substantial documentation required to prove their right to citizenship places them in a precarious position. A series of variables – such as the officials they encounter, whether they have connections, and their social or economic status – ultimately determine whether they will be rendered stateless or not. Analogous to the stripping and regranting of identity documents and citizenship of Vietnamese residents of Cambodia (Canzutti 2022) the system's contingent nature is precisely what makes engaging with it so risky for the Pakistani Bengali population.

As a community, Pakistani Bengalis have faced intense amounts of discrimination within the country (Nationality for All 2024). Thousands from the community in the not distant past (particularly in the early 2000s, see below), were forced to incorrectly register as aliens denying them access to rights, and in turn impacting the rights of other family members to the present day (Imkaan, Nationality for All and the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion 2023; Hasan 2023). Young people from the community are disproportionately impacted and face issues around citizenship access despite *jus soli* citizenship provision. Moreover Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan states that all children including stateless children and undocumented children should have access to education until the age of 16 (Pakistan 1982), yet in practice within the Pakistani Bengali community this is not the case (Hasan 2023). Marginalisation by the State can be seen in other forms too such as lack of recognition of language. This is reflected in the census of 2017 and the most recent 2023 version which do not include Bangla as an option for first language (despite others such as Saraiki and Kashmiri being recognised) (Population by Mother Tongue 2023). Such acts of racial and social profiling are telling of wider social prejudice and to deny that those who speak Bangla or appear in a particular way, is to erase the face that Pakistan and Bangladesh were once the same country.

In this paper, we explore such contemporary citizenship challenges faced by the Pakistani Bengali community in the context of a historical past marked by conflict and interrogate how community members respond to and manage these challenges. We focus particularly on events enacted and related to the space of the citizenship registration office. More broadly, we argue that exclusionary state citizenship practices, particularly in post-colonial contexts, are shaped not only by formal laws and policies but also by racialised commonsense knowledge production that targets specific groups. Our contribution lies in showing how these racialised commonsense understandings – especially the perception of Pakistani Bengalis as 'outsiders' or 'foreigners' – are operationalised within the day-to-day functioning of state bureaucracies, notably in citizenship registration offices. These understandings, embedded both in societal attitudes and dominant state narratives, significantly influence how individuals are treated in everyday administrative encounters. At the citizenship registration office, the intersection of a 'reified' policy-based universe and a 'consensual' court of public knowledge (Andreouli and Howarth 2013) places ethnic Bengalis in a precarious position. The burden of proving their right to citizenship through substantive documentation makes them vulnerable, while registration officers – guided by commonsense notions of belonging and often on racialised assumptions about deservedness – make discretionary decisions that can have life-long repercussions. In relation to this, we explore: 1) how racialised exclusion is

enacted against ethnic Bengalis within NADRA Registration Centres (NRCs); and 2) how the uncertainty of acquiring citizenship, shaped by these commonsense logics, produces a condition of suspended identity for Pakistani Bengalis-one that is not incidental, but actively shaped through and sustained by the racialised commonsense that underpins bureaucratic decision-making.

Our paper starts by outlining the methods used as part of our three-year study on the Pakistani Bengali community on which this paper is based. As an interdisciplinary group of scholars, we then bring literature from our respective disciplinary backgrounds into conversation, using it as a lens to interpret key ideas explored in the paper, particularly around citizenship and statelessness. The theoretical ideas we engage with specifically link Social Representation Theory to concepts of social imaginaries and historical story-telling. We then turn to the historical events that help explain why many Pakistani Bengalis face institutional discrimination and challenges to citizenship, alongside a review of existing literature on the community's position within Pakistan. Finally, we present findings from our study, focusing particularly on interviews with individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds and their experiences both within, and beyond, the citizenship registration office.

Methodology

Within Pakistan, Karachi which lies adjacent to the Arabian Sea, is home to the majority of Pakistani Bengalis and was selected as our main study site. This megacity is highly multicultural as well as being the country's financial and industrial capital. With a population of 20 million, it is also the 12th largest in the world (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2023). Karachi is importantly home to Pakistan's fishing industry with the Port of Karachi being one of South Asias largest deep-water ports. Fishing is a central occupation for many from the Pakistani Bengali community and settlements near the coast such as Machar Colony and Ibrahim Haider have a large Pakistani Bengali presence.

Migration is key in the story of Karachi with different communities over the years making the city home as well as waves of refugee entry from neighbouring Afghanistan. The city has experienced a range of ethnic, religious and political conflicts from the 80s and has been impacted by internal instability as well as being impacted by external regional and global events (Gayer 2014; Kirmani 2015; Verkaaik 2009).

The Pakistani Bengalis, particularly those arriving after the creation of Bangladesh are a tight-knit community, many of whom live the over 126 settlements (Hasan 2023) including Machar Colony where they have mobilised under community organisations and contribute substantially to the fishery industry, domestic labour and cloth manu-facture. The migration pattern of ethnic Bengalis is complex with many arriving follow-ing 1971 (and before 1978) and their subsequent children born in Pakistan, as well as those who have followed in the 80s, 90s and till the present.[4] The community is not entirely homogenous and there is a stark difference in the experiences of wealthier, upper-class Bengalis as opposed to those who were working class within our study. For most of the community who exist either in lower occupation or middle-income profes-sions (by Pakistan standards), being able to survive in a hostile social and political environment is crucial.

Fieldwork was mainly conducted in the following areas: Musa Colony, Machar Colony, Orangi Town, Korangi, Zia Tow, 100 Quarter and Taiser Town. These settings were selected based on community size, district, key livelihood of the Pakistani Bengalis in the area, settlement patterns and histories, diversity within the community and social class. In each of the localities we spent time getting to understand the area, writing fieldnotes, capturing photographs and mapping key features.

Oral history interviews were conducted with 85 Pakistani Bengalis in Karachi (55 adults and 30 young people)[5] across a range of walks of life, age, gender, levels of political participation and socio-economic factors,[6] and enabled us to capture stories about participants' everyday life experiences with identity, citizenship, family life, occupation and education and health. Our use of oral history as a method was shaped by our multidisciplinary approach as a researchers[7] (across social psychology, history and political sociology) and in line with our theoretical standpoint of Social Representations Theory (Hamilton and Linda 2008).

Interviews were conducted in a range of settings, including at home, within schools, within the workspace and we also had access to spaces within Machar Colony and Orangi town through our partnerships with local NGOs. Many of our participants had ties to the fishery and garment industry but in different capacities (e.g. from shrimp peelers to boat captains and factory owners). We also interviewed advocates, activists, religious preachers, homemakers, councillors, those who had no employment, educators, students and a range of others.[8]

Interviews were transcribed, translated into English and interviewees were assigned pseudonyms. Data was thematically analysed and we developed initial categories based on the our research questions, our theoretical standpoints, our archival and media review as well as literature review (Flick 2014). Several key themes emerged in the analysis, yet for the purposes of this paper we are specifically interested accounts around Computerised National Identity Cards (CNICs), and within the citizenship registration office[9]

Theories on citizenship and statelessness

A variety of theories explore non-citizenship and citizenship deficit. Hunter (2019) introduces the concept of 'undocumented citizenship', to describe those individuals existing between absolute statelessness and full citizenship, who struggle to access the full services and rights available to their documented counterparts. She highlights two patterns of undocumented citizenship: one resulting from governmental neglect or failure, and the other from deliberate discrimination, often targeting racial or ethnic minorities. Similarly, Cohen (2009) challenges binary views of citizenship and advocates for the concept of semi-citizenship, focusing on varying levels of rights – autonomous (e.g. healthcare) and relative (e.g. voting) – which form four categories of semi-citizenship in democratic settings. Undocumented individuals fall at the extreme, with weak autonomous and relative rights. While Cohen's (2009) framework allows flexibility and acknowledges evolving political ideas, it has been criticized for overlooking de facto discrimination and the practical accessibility of rights. This gap is particularly problematic in postcolonial states like Pakistan, where fragile democracy and entrenched ethnic

stereotypes, such as those against Bengalis, complicate citizenship. Such divisions, rooted in colonial divide-and-rule tactics, persist in the postcolonial state (Chatterjee 2005).

Balaton-Chrimes and Cooley (2022) similarly link the colonial use of ethnicity to divide and rule in Kenya to contemporary challenges in population enumeration, where the demographic structure and flexible construction of ethnicity allow group categories to 'shift' for political purposes. This has lasting effects on identity recognition and affirmative action for marginalized groups. The political effects of demography are also crucial, as ethnicity and race must be understood in their specific contexts, with citizenship in Kenya seen as an entangled process (Balaton-Chrimes 2024), not solely political and group based nor purely legal and individual, rather interdependent on these conceptualisations. Bezabeh (2011) examines citizenship in a Djiboutian context as historically contingent and shaped by conflict and dialogue, recognizing colonial legacies, such as the simultaneous creation of a 'core group' of protected citizens and another category of people reduced to bare existence, or Homo sacer. In this context, citizenship is non-homogeneous, with different groups receiving varying levels of protection and rights. Managing this process requires careful attention to the ambiguity of ethnic identity in registration and citizenship.

While these theoretical approaches, are helpful, it is challenging to neatly classify the Pakistani Bengali population according to one framework. The complexity of their story means they exist in a grey area between full citizenship and complete statelessness (Hunter 2019).

Social representation and enactments within the citizenship registration office

In our study we have been interested in the commonsense ideas around what it means to be Pakistani Bengali in different layers of society, and how these ideas influence citizenship experiences, or the social representation of the category 'Pakistani Bengali' population. This is why we feel that Social Representation Theory (Moscovici 1961) is a useful theoretical tool in which to understand the case of the Pakistani Bengali community.

As described by social psychologist Serge Moscovici (1973, xiii), a social representation is:

> a system of values, ideas and practices with a two-fold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history.

Social representations are thus modes of knowledge that constitute the realities of our everyday life (Duveen 2007), and they shape how we view the world and appropriate knowledge. These ideas resonate with the work of Charles Taylor on social imaginaries who discusses, similarly how people imagine their position in society, their relationship with one another and their expectations. These perceptions of oneself and others are held in place by narratives that are told and repeated (Taylor 2004). The social category of 'Pakistani Bengali' has systems of values, ideas and practices associated with it which have not emerged in a vacuum and Moscovici in his essay on social representations and ethnic

minorities uses the idea of the 'figurative kernel' to help us understand this idea. He defines this as 'a distinguishing feature, or set of characteristics (emblematic themata), that is used to represent groups, to reflect on how they are treated within wider society' (Moscovici 2011, 454). When considering what the figurative kernel of the Pakistani Bengali may be, it is evident that they have long characterised as being outsiders (ghair-mulkis), traitors (ghaddar) and sometimes even spies (jasoos) for example. The past plays a key role in the development of these representations, a point particularly argued by Psaltis (2016) in his work in post conflict Cyprus. Similarly, Veena Das argues that the ideas of the self and the role of the state do not solely evolve within public spaces. They often emerge in private spheres and are so deeply embedded in modern life that even those who critique them engage with them. In our own research, when speaking with participants during the interviews, they presented page after page of 'proof' of their right to citizenship (such as paper ID cards, birth and death certificates), where the proof itself both validated their claims and invoked the authority of the state (Das 2006). What Das refers to the 'illegibility of the state' explains why the use of law by officials and the reliance on specific 'proofs' by Pakistani Bengalis were so contingent.

Separation and conflict (such as events of 1971) can result in emotionally loaded collective memories which will differ for the conflicting groups involved and which in turn shape ideas of belonging. The social representation of what it means to be a Pakistani Bengali is important as impacts the lived experiences of this group. Relevant for this paper, this social representation can also impact their encounters with others in different spaces, such as the citizenship registration office.

Eleni Andreouli and Caroline Howarth (2013) conducted a study around citizenship and social representation within the space of the citizenship office. They build on Moscovici's work on knowledge creation and appropriation in which he discusses the *reified* universe, a space where rules, policies and procedures are key and scientific or expert knowledge is generated, and the *consensual* universe of social representations, a space in which the public who are non-experts make sense and circulate this complex knowledge such that it constitutes common-sense (Moscovici and Hewstone 1983; Wagner and Hayes 2005; Duveen 2007).

Social representations around citizenship and belonging are then shaped within in the reified universe of political institutions and by the state. Within these institutional contexts of state policies and practice, lay people are excluded, and the legitimate voice belongs to the policy maker. Yet, social representations also form in the debates and discussions and common-sense knowledge of lay social actors around some of these policies and practice in the consensual sphere of everyday debate and practice. Andreouli and Howarth (2013) argue that these two universes; the reified (policy and state-based rules around citizenship) and consensual (how the public makes sense of these ideas); are not mutually exclusive, and one space in which they do come together is that of the citizenship office. In our paper, we consider the NADRA registration centre as such a space where these two universes collide. Here recognition of identity is bestowed and/or withheld at an institutional level. These decisions are guided by state polices/laws and protocol developed in the reified universe. Yet they are also guided by collective memories and representations of particular groups and their worthiness developed in the consensual space and held by registration officials themselves. As well as an understanding of civic rights, status and resourcefulness held by Pakistani Bengalis applying for

identity documentation which also forms in the consensual space. Santos and Castro (2023) similarly in their study of Portuguese foreign residency laws, argue that text from laws which act as fact in the reified/institutional universe are simplified within the consensual universe, in line with dominant values held in this space. In a Portuguese context this is laws around who represents a 'good' and worthy citizen' linked to central values of work study and investment. Institutions (such as the citizenship registration office) thus act as mediating systems of different forms of knowledge.

In thinking about knowledge production, Howarth reminds us (2006) as does Das (2006) that all knowledge production (including here rules around citizenship created in the reified universe) is socially constructed and those producing such rules are inevitably influenced by dominant representations of categories ('Pakistani Bengali' in our case). Given this, within our work, we recognise the 'role of power in the reification and legitimisation of "expert" knowledge systems' (Howarth 2006, 21) and development of citizenship laws and their implementation.

Historical context and the Pakistani Bengali

To understand the context of this paper and recognising as Moscovici does the importance of the past in understanding belonging today (2011), it's essential to consider two interrelated histories. One history produced the figure of the 'Pakistani Bengali traitor', while the other created the mechanism for erasing this figure – through the legal and bureaucratic invisibility of citizenship laws and their application to individuals and families. The first history concerns the violent events leading to the creation of Bangladesh, which led to the identification of all Pakistani Bengalis as outsiders or traitors to the Pakistani nation, even as the concept of the nation itself evolved. The second history involves the gradual transformation of citizenship laws and registration procedures, particularly through the expanding role of the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) in these processes.

Before the Liberation war of 1971 that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan), there was free movement and freedom to work for Bengali speakers living in East Pakistan across both arms of the country (Zakaria 2019). Prior to 1971 the country 'Pakistan' was divided into two land masses flanking either side of India. West Pakistan (what is now present-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (what is now present-day Bangladesh). A war for liberation from West Pakistani dominance, fought in 1971, is still remembered with bitterness in the region and because it did not affect all social groups in the same way as a result, it is remembered very differently across South Asia (Meher 2015).

Almost immediately after the war, Pakistan moved to declare Bengali soldiers and their entire families as state enemies and imprisoned them (Chattha 2024). This mass internment and detention of Bengalis as prisoners of war has only recently been written about in Pakistan, but much before this there was a concerted effort to shape the collective memory of this period. Nations and political parties have used educational textbooks, political rhetoric and the media as tools (Datta 2011). The Pakistani Bengali community, now in their third and fourth generations, largely based in Karachi in Sindh province are within this narrative labelled as outsiders who are particularly to blame and thus face the repercussions of this othering. The story of the Pakistani Bengalis is then

one that is rooted in a deeply fraught history which has been further compounded since the creation of Bangladesh (Anwar 2013, 2015).

In the more recent past, movement from former East Pakistan to now Pakistan continued well into the 1980s and 1990s. With the influx of migrants into Pakistan and following state reports and surveys such as the 'Report on Illegal Immigrants and Afghan Refugees in Pakistan', often informally known as the Shigri report (1996), it was concluded there was a need for a comprehensive immigration policy. The Shigri report did not frame Bengalis in a positive way. According to this narrative, every ethnic Bengali is an 'illegal alien', a 'criminal' and a 'security threat' (Shigri 1996). The report made its mark after Benazir Bhutto's second civilian regime (1993–1996) when state officials had expressed concern over the potential risk that undocumented Bangladeshi migrants posed not only to the nation's economic prosperity but also to the demographic balance of its leading metropolis, Karachi, where migrant Urdu-speaking Muhajirs, many of whom settled here after the partition with India in 1947, would soon be outnumbered by Bengalis (Anwar 2013).

In a move towards a more pervasive citizenship registration mechanism, former manual paper ID cards (introduced in 1973) were replaced with biometric digital Computerised National Identity Cards (CNICs) as proof of citizenship and the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) and the National Alien Registration Authority (NARA) were born in 2000, marking a key turning point in the story of Pakistani Bengalis. NADRA was set up for registering citizens and NARA, was tasked with registering foreigners in Pakistan.[10] The government appears to have been fully aware of the repercussions of this and additionally created a new requirement that verification of residency in Pakistan before 1978 was essential for citizenship eligibility.[11] Those who settled after this period would solely be given work permits or Non-Alien Registration Cards (NARA Cards) (Anwar 2015). This rule created severe pressure on those ethnic Bengalis who arrived pre-78, whose only proof such as from a ship or flight ticket, which may have been misplaced. Many Pakistani Bengalis had their cards blocked as they had no proof to show. Thus, the creation of NADRA and NARA had real implications for Pakistani Bengalis in their treatment as non-citizens. It is important to note, that the wider population of ethnic Bengali's contains those arriving after 1978 (the arbitrary date provided by the state for claiming citizenship following events of 1971) alongside those who were residents before 1978 and the subsequent generations of their families. It is often difficult for a clear distinction between the different categories of this community to be made by NADRA and within the database due to the challenges of providing proof of residency pre-78.

Just one year after the formation of NADRA and NARA, events of 9/11 resulted in the intertwining of immigration and security concerns within Pakistan (one of the key actors with the war on terror). Anwar (2013) discusses this 'heightened anxiety over potential terrorists circulating in the guise of illegals' (p. 424). Pakistani Bengalis were framed as such and seen as a threat to national security (Gazdar 2005; Waseem 2022). As a result, measures such as The Foreigners (Amendment) Ordinance (Government of Pakistan 2002; Anwar 2013) were introduced. This ordinance was a legal provision introduced by the State that amended the Foreigners Act of 1946 and gave enhanced powers to the police to arrest and detain undocumented migrants without a court order. There was a simultaneous big push for the enforcement of registration on the digital biometric

system (i.e. CNIC and NARA cards) for all of those living in Pakistan at this point. The Pakistani Bengali community particularly felt the brunt of this reform.

The 'Bangla Cell' which were operated by the Special Branch of the police in Karachi under the abovementioned Foreigners (Amendment) Ordinance (Government of Pakistan 2002) at this moment was particularly active during this period. Initially an informal and unofficial detention scheme monitoring ethnic Bengalis since the late 1990s, it became particularly active within the early 2000s when police and immigration officers began to work together with NARA. This encouraged the intimidation and arrest of ethnic Bengalis by the police without legal process, who were often forced to sign alien registration cards (discussed in our findings). Imprisonment did not require a court order and was at the discretion of law enforcement agencies. The focus and target on the Bengali community for detention and exclusion exemplifies the deep-seated racism and suspicion held towards this group, despite many of them having been born in Pakistan (Gazdar 2005). It also highlights the racialised assumptions of ethnic Bengalis as 'illegal migrants'. The Foreigners (Amendment) Ordinance (Government of Pakistan 2002) was part of a broader set of immigration policies in Pakistan aimed at border control, but it has been criticised for facilitating arbitrary detention, violation of fundamental rights, racial and ethnic discrimination and for being a key driver of statelessness and citizenship issues particularly for Pakistani Bengalis (Anwar 2013).

Following this, the year 2015 saw the merger of the National Alien Registration Authority (NARA, responsible for registering foreigners digitally) and the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA, responsible for registering citizens digitally). This had severe consequences for the Pakistani Bengali community (Anwar 2015). Since citizenship record keeping is genealogically based in Pakistan (Hashmi 2021), every individual's record is embedded as part of a digital family tree-based collective record called a family registration certificate (FRCs). The merger of NADRA and NARA meant that digital records of alien status now showed up in their family registration certificates, impacting the citizenship status of the entire family. Many members of a family who may have had citizenship, now would have their citizenship status blocked or revoked (due to this family tie), rendering them stateless. This has extended across generations, resulting in intergenerational statelessness. It was particularly unfair to ethnic Bengalis, as we know many were wrongly and sometimes forcibly registered with alien cards through the Bangla Cell programme (as discussed earlier). Citizenship[12] in Pakistan is thus closely linked with security, law enforcement, migration control and privacy (Sperfeldt 2021).

As it stands today, the Citizenship Act of 1951 continues to regulate Pakistani citizenship, granting it through birth, descent, or migration. This citizenship law operates both through *jus sanguinis* (by descent) and *jus soli* (by birth on the territory). Jus sanguinis provisions in Section 5 of the 1951 Act stipulate that a child born in Pakistan to a Pakistani parent (regardless of how the parent obtained citizenship) is granted citizenship by descent Additionally, if the child is born outside of Pakistan to a Pakistani citizen by birth, they automatically acquire Pakistani citizenship provided they register this birth at a Pakistan Mission or Consulate (Republic of Pakistan 1951). Jus soli provisions, are primarily governed by Section 4 of the Pakistan Citizenship Act (1951) which stipulate that every person born on the territory of Pakistan is considered a citizen by birth, with some exceptions, including a child born to a foreign diplomat or importantly in clause 4(b), that a person will not be considered a citizen by birth if their father is an 'enemy

alien', and the birth occurs in a place under occupation. An 'enemy alien' is defined in the Protection of Pakistan Act (Government of Pakistan 2014) as someone who fails to establish Pakistani citizenship and is suspected of engaging in war or insurrection against Pakistan (Farhat 2019). Farhat in her critical review of the Citizenship Laws of Pakistan argues, that due to the often-ambiguous interpretation of this provision alongside Section 5, and in the reading, in particular who neatly qualifies as 'enemy alien', effectively deny the right of citizenship to certain groups (Farhat 2019). These groups include Afghan refugees[13] and their children born in Pakistan, as well as individuals who chose to go to Bangladesh after the 1971 Liberation War (see note xi and Farhat 2019 for details of specific cases).

Our research shows that within NADRA Registration Centres (NRCs), ethnic Bengalis living in Pakistan often face rejection when attempting to provide proof of their family's residency in Pakistan before 1978 (see note xi), leading them to become undocumented nationals (Hunter 2019).[14]

Contemporary community: narratives of statelessness and the colonial past

Today, of the 3 million Pakistani Bengalis in Pakistan, the majority live in Karachi, in Sindh province within the estimated 126 settlements here. Families are in their fourth generations and the settlements they live in are varied in terms of their formations. Some have been created because of forced internal displacement, others are informal settlements such as Machar colony; one of the country's largest sprawling slums where approximately 65% of all inhabitants are ethnically Bengali (Hasan 2023). The locality in which individuals live can act as a marker for their ethnic background within Pakistan, which means this background becomes identifiable as soon as they present their address to the officer they encounter at the citizenship registration office. Occupation too serves as another marker. As well as working in garment factories and informal domestic labour, Bengalis have found employment in fishing and many live near the Karachi harbour.

Studies prior to this have focused on Pakistani Bengalis and explored themes like migration, citizenship challenges and policing (Anwar 2013, 2015) exploring how minority groups like Afghan refugees and Bengalis are controlled and disciplined through policing (Waseem 2022). Waseem (2022) also emphasises the creation of newly independent states against the backdrop of colonial exit, as a process that has left deep seated mistrust between neighbouring countries, in this instance those that make up the subcontinent. Redclift (2016) in her study of the displaced Urdu speaking refugee communities in Bangladesh following the 1971 war, similarly, argues that the influence of British colonial narratives of community integration remain across the subcontinent. These narratives stress exclusion via language, ethnicity poverty as well as social space. Further, colonial constructions of 'modernity' and 'progress' continue to overlap with schemas of 'pollution' and 'purity' and are tied into acceptance of communities. This is important because such ideas impact how certain communities are treated in society.

Others too such as Shahid and Turner (2022), Breckenridge (2014) and Dalberto and Banegas (2021) have drawn attention to how the legacies of colonialism continue to shape the ways citizenship is used to construct hierarchies of power and access. They show how biometric information is shared unevenly on a global scale – for instance,

former colonies often implement ID cards and extensive surveillance, while former metropoles have resisted institutionalizing such measures (Dalberto and Banegas 2021). More closely related to our own work, Zehra Hashmi traces the colonial logic of the NADRA office arguing that the way it marshals and creates hierarchies of evidence is based on genealogical information gathered and collated by the colonial state for maintaining property records (Hashmi 2021). In other words, the larger social imaginary within which the right to citizenship of Pakistani Bengalis is imagined is heavily suffused with a colonial logic in which citizenship regimes are as much about creating docile subjects that can be surveiled as they are a 'rights bearing' category. We next turn to findings from our study which tie into some of these ideas.

Empirical findings

Enactments of othering in the NADRA registration centres

Our first key finding relates to the space of the citizenship registration office. As described earlier, NADRA Registration Centres are located across Pakistan. Within Karachi they include both mega centres as well as smaller offices and the website of NADRA states that over 136,000 transactions happen per day across the country with over 209 million people registered on the system (NADRA 2024). They claim to host one of the largest 'multibiometric national identity databases' in the world. Each office differs depending on its size and function, but most have the same essential function of checking, renewing and conducting administration processes. They are often extremely crowded spaces with a series of counters, each monitored by an official. From a social representation theory perspective these offices represent spaces where there is an overlap between the consensual universe (where common-sense understandings prevail) and the reified universe (where state policies and practices exist – in this case around citizenship). In other words, this is a space where policy meets people's understanding (see Figure 1).

In the registration office, recognition is bestowed and/or withheld at an institutional level, meaning that NADRA officers can act as gatekeepers. State polices/laws and protocol guide these decisions. Yet, so do collective memories, and representations of particular groups and their worthiness. Therefore, commonsense understandings held by
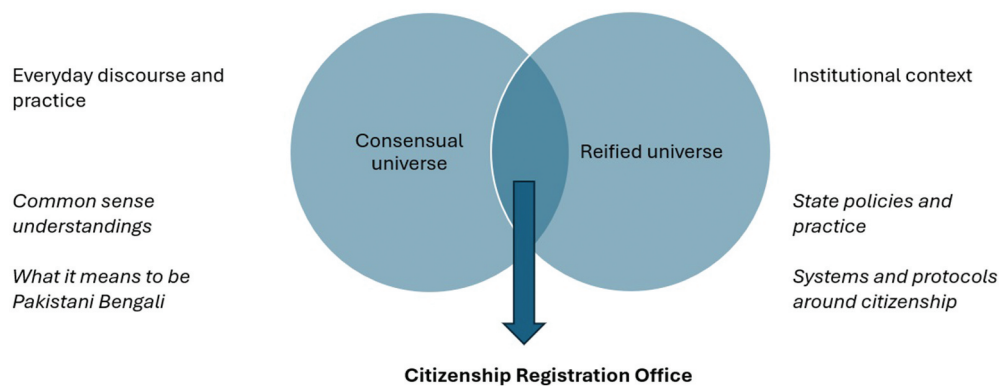

Everyday discourse and practice

Common sense understandings

What it means to be Pakistani Bengali

Consensual universe

Reified universe

Institutional context

State policies and practice

Systems and protocols around citizenship

Citizenship Registration Office

Figure 1. The consensual and reified universes in relation to citizenship registration.

the NADRA officers around the category of 'Pakistani Bengali' are important. At the same time, knowledge of civic rights, resourcefulness, and status held by the individuals applying for citizenship rights are key. When individuals are aware of their rights, they are more likely to speak up, if they perceive an issue.

Experiences of individuals here are intersectionally compounded, particularly across gender and social class. Our findings show us that accounts described by elite interviewees were different from working class members from the community. An account from Naila, a 60-year-old lawyer from a privileged background shows this disparity. Naila who describes herself of ethnic Bengali origin who was born and raised in East Pakistan, was studying in West Pakistan before the events of 1971. She was separated from her family for some time following the war under challenging circumstances and remained in West Pakistan, entitling her to Pakistani citizenship. Naila shared she never faced an issue with her own citizenship despite renewing her CNIC multiple times. She believed that many Bengalis from working backgrounds who arrived after 71 were viewed as 'traitors'; a label that she never felt was directed towards herself.

> It's easy for me to say I didn't feel it, my mother didn't feel it, because it's also a class thing. If you are in the right class, you are not going to feel it. And even if someone tries to [block your identity], then you do what my mother did 'dou chaar! -you tell them off'. You find somebody who is their superior officer, you get your work done and that's the end of it, you forget about it.

> **Naila, lawyer, DHA, age 60**

Naila, like other ethnic Bengalis in our study whose families arrived before 1978 (or remained in Pakistan) was entitled to citizenship, yet the possibly of drawing on contacts as in Naila's case in instances of contention is not one available to non-elite Pakistani Bengalis. Overall, they shared that their experiences of obtaining and renewing CNICs could be challenging with issues of stigma and card blocking being extensive. The language used by such interviewees around the process of acquiring identity highlights this, with terms like 'baaga dori' (running around); 'passayah gya' (entrapped) and 'raghra khana' (enduring hardship) being used by across numerous interviews.

Our interviewees have described their experiences of being racially profiled, based on cultural attributes including their appearance and accent, place of residence and what they identify as their mother tongue. Taj Din, a community politician shares his experience.

> The NADRA people on purpose harass us. especially Bengali people, them the most. Whoever has an address right, I am telling you, they know which areas Bengalis live in, they know this. Machar, Orangi Town, Korangi Town, so if it is in the address, then they catch it.

> **Taj Din, political figure, Gulshan, age 52**

Other markers of distinction come up in the citizenship registration office. Shaukat (age 44), a Pakistani Bengali advocate, reflected during his interview on how distinctive markers of physical appearance cause officers to behave in particular ways:

> Now see, let us say whatever area you are from, if any Bengals there go to any of the offices in the area. Either their agents are sitting, or they see them on the basis of face and appearance, and that he is Bengali. So then, compared to with other people, his attitude changes.

Shaukat also mentions 'agents' in his discussion. Numerous interviewees discussed how within the office, 'dalals' or agents exist who are willing to accept payments or bribes to facilitate the process of identity card registration or renewal. We discuss this elsewhere; however, it is noteworthy to mention that firstly the agents are often (but not always) external to NADRA and secondly, bypassing the registered channels does not always result in an NIC card that is official, meaning it can cause problems at a later date.

In the discussion with Shaukat, he also points to the wider figurative kernel and collective memory around the Pakistani Bengalis and how such racialised ideas and constructs from media sources, make their way to the space of the registration office.

> They [citizenship registration officers] have a fear in their minds, that they [Bengalis] are strangers here, they are aliens here, not one of theirs is here . . . . Everyday in newspapers, through media trial, he also keeps reading it.
>
> **Advocate Shaukat, age 44, Pakistani Bengali**

Another key marker of distinction used by officers was language, as Zeyneb, a homemaker in her late 30s reflected on. She shared that within the NADRA office she was asked about her *'mother language ("madri zuban")'*. Others have shared how; they had their cards blocked as a result of stating Bangla was their first language despite having all of the required evidence for a CNIC.

Evidence (Saboot) also becomes of heightened significance in this racialised space. At 23 years old, Usama has already had negative experiences at the registration office and reflects on the importance of such 'Saboot' in the process of identification for Pakistani Bengalis.

> I went to NADRA to get an NIC. The moment they hear [we are] Bengali then they, step back. Say 'stay far from me, sit at a distance'. In this way there are a lot of issues . . . they say 'bring old proof. Bring old proof and all'. And . . . if we tell them we are educated, our association, our birth was here only . . . we are Pakistani . . . . there is no benefit. They say: 'no yours won't be made; you go here'.
>
> **Usama, administer in a private school, age 23**

The various forms of knowledge for displaying belonging are tied into identity and daily life. They can include proof of death, proof of life, ration cards from the late 1970s (when food shortages existed), plane and train tickets from decades ago. Essentially proof involves being able to demonstrate that you or your lineage can demonstrate arrival into Pakistan before 1978. This ties into the law introduced that stipulated citizenship eligibility would be based on verification of residency between 1971–78 (see endnote xi). Those who settled subsequently would be given work permits only. Yet, as many of our interviewees shared, such proof which was in paper form, can be damaged and even lost and not everyone had careful records. Sharma (2024) and others have noted that arbitrary 'cut-off' dates (such as 1978 in the case of Pakistan) have been used in India and other post-colonial settings to enforce restrictions and manage population. Das (2006) too, as discussed earlier also reflects on how the act of sharing proof serves to validate the claims of ethnic Bengalis while at the same time invoking the authority of the state.

The lifelong state of suspended identity and citizenship uncertainty

Our second point considers the notion of citizenship uncertainty and the state of being in suspended identity. As Redclift notes (2016), belonging and possession of citizenship status are often not dichotomous. For Pakistani Bengalis the process of obtaining an identity card can be arduous and what's more, once in the possession of a card, there is no guarantee they will remain as registered citizens. A CNIC requires renewal after 10 years, and it was at the juncture of this renewal that our interviewees often faced problems.

Usama, a 23-year-old administrator from Machar Colony who we discussed earlier, described his mother's experience of this.

> **I**: How did you find out that your mother's card was blocked?

> **U**: When mother went to get it renewed, to extend the date, they saw the card, the counter person spoke with a pleasant manner. After speaking, they submitted the forms and all. When they went to another counter, the officer sitting there, the moment he saw Bengali, [he] twisted the forms and put them in the dustbin. He said 'yours wont be made' gave them a name and said you go there. **He didn't tell us, blocked it**. When 1 or 2 days later we went to the other centre, . . . we found out they blocked our card. We didn't know, they didn't tell us, they said your card is blocked. Now how will it be made?

For Usama he directly equated this act of citizenship stripping as a mark of deep discrimination towards them due to their Bengali background. This act of violence from the officer created a long process of appeal from Usama for his mother. Usama due to his awareness of his rights eventually took the matter to the Federal level, where it was eventually rectified. This process also created a state of sustained anxiety not only for Usama's mother, but for the rest of her family due to the genealogical nature of citizenship who as a result faced citizenship issues. Usama's case highlights how the knowledge he possessed around his civic and citizenship rights and his resourcefulness in appealing to a higher level, allowed him to challenge racialised commonsense discourse and effectively navigate the reified and consensual space.

The process of obtaining an identity card or renewing it when it is blocked can create financial, time based and even health-based problems for families. Having a card blocked unfairly can result in lack of employment. Ahmad a gatekeeper at a school, age 52, who was formerly a fisherman, reflected back to the early 2000s when he tried to get his card issued:

> I couldn't do any work. Nobody will give you any work without an NIC. No work . . . Oh God, it took me at least, 3–4 years I struggled (dhaka khaya). I got told – 'you are Bengali, you won't get it Bengalis cards don't get made.'

Again here, Ahmad recounts overt racism and hostility towards Bengalis which directly impacted his livelihood and ability to work. Unlike Usama, Ahmad possesses less understanding of his rights and in turn ability to challenge the system.

Multiple such instances were shared with us of individuals living in limbo and despair with no clear answers as to why their ID cards were not being made or renewed. The term suspended identity (adhoori shahnakht) is one we have introduced to capture this state of limbo, meaning that individuals within their lifetime, can find themselves having citizenship at one timepoint and being declared a non-national or having their card blocked at

another. In other words, they experience a lack of certainty around belonging. It ties also to work by Choudhury (2024) in his conceptualisation of a zone of statelessness. Statelessness he argues is – 'a spectral phenomenon that falls into a grey zone of identity and belonging' (Choudhury 2024). and of work by Sharma (2024) around the idea of paused citizens, who find themselves in a waiting game with the State marred with ambiguity. Many of those we interviewed found themselves in this grey non-monolithic state.

This includes that of Begum a 30-year-old home worker from Machar Colony who described the process of how her husband attempted to get his previous paper-based ID card (which he had issued before the year 2000) into a digital card. When he began the process, he was told that he should come an inquire back within 20 days. After this period, he returned only to be sent to another centre with no answers as to why his case was not being resolved. Both Begum and her husband were born in Pakistan. It has taken over 5 years and placed a strain on his health. Begum, told us:

> We went to NADRA. First, he submitted in Kimari, then they told us to check in Nishat Sharif Park. Those people sent us to, what's the place, at Awami Markaz . . . We went to the Awami Markaz for about a year, minimum. Then they said there is something up with your NIC, it has been cancelled, you should submit another one.

They were offered no explanation as to why the card was cancelled, and they remain trapped in the process. Begum's husband was then forced to work in the informal sector. Begum debones and skins chickens for her husband to sell.

The strain of the financial toll of the process can be immense, as not only is work in the official sector prohibited due to lack of ID, but some take out loans to be able to hire dalals (agents) and offer bribes at a high price to obtain documents which are not always guaranteed. Multiple interviewees described the mental stress and feelings of uncertainty they faced due to the lack of reason given for card blockage or issuance of the CNIC. For those with extended family or immediate family members with NARA cards meaning that their citizenship would be affected this too left them with feelings of hopelessness and uncertainty. This state of citizenship leaves many Pakistani Bengalis, and particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, living with a sense of precarity.

Conclusion

For Pakistani Bengalis, discrimination, statelessness, and undocumented status is a manufactured condition, as it stems from state failure in providing necessary documents, the intentional neglect of this group, and targeted discrimination (Jain 2022). Historical ideas and past events have shaped contemporary social representations and common-sense ideas of this group, and in turn, mistrust towards this community. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the citizenship registration office, where the reified and consensual universes meet (Andreouli and Howarth 2012). Here, dominant discourse – shaped around the figurative kernel of Pakistani Bengalis being 'the other' – converges with doctrine and policy around citizenship and the right to belong. Registration officers act as gatekeepers, both bestowing and withholding this right. What results is a highly racialised and politicised space;one in which access to citizenship is made precarious, and where individuals are left in a prolonged state of legal and social

limbo. We contend that this state of suspended citizenship and identity is not accidental, but rather the product of racialised common-sense logics embedded within and perpetuated through bureaucratic processes and digital systems.

This situation is not unique to Pakistan. We find exclusionary citizenship practices in other post-colonial settings such as Kenya, India, and the Dominican Republic, where racialised knowledge systems and discriminatory administrative procedures create and sustain statelessness. As Bronwen Manby (2021) highlights, legal identity systems and digitised registration efforts, while framed within development agendas like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 16.9), can in practice deepen exclusion and reinforce existing inequalities when designed or implemented without regard to the political and historical contexts of marginalization. Rather than offering universal access to rights, such systems may institutionalize discrimination when they rely on documents that the most vulnerable – such as stateless groups – are historically least likely to possess.

In presenting the various accounts of Pakistani Bengalis and their experiences of citizenship registration, it is evident that discrimination is the root cause for statelessness across the different settings, and this leads to the creation of the eternal outsider. For such outsiders less accountability is needed by the state as they are deemed as 'non-nationals'. Poverty and lack of education and knowledge of citizenship rights, further compounds the issue of statelessness. Many from the community reside in the most vulnerable localities susceptible to climate change and face further risk of displacement. Our data has also shown that the experience of citizenship is shaped by class; elite Pakistani Bengalis navigate the system with relative ease, while lower- and middle-class members face far greater barriers.

The aim of this paper has been to explore some of the contemporary citizenship challenges faced by the Pakistani Bengali community living in Karachi, particularly within the space of the citizenship registration office. One limitation of the present study is that citizenship registration officers themselves were not interviewed, nor did we conduct an ethnography within the NADRA Registration Centres. This was intentional, as we wanted to present a platform here to amplify the voices of a marginalised community. Of course, future research would benefit from such work within these spaces, and with the engagement of the officers themselves. The paper highlights that identity status and citizenship continues to remain unreachable for many Pakistani Bengalis (even if they were born in the country), for those who do obtain their computerised national identity card (CNICs), this status can be impermanent with the threat of revocation permanently looming over thus causing them to remain in a state of what we have termed 'suspended identity' (adhoori skanakht) and uncertainty. The repercussions of this can be felt across generations.

Notes

1. NADRA is the government agency responsible for maintaining and managing the national database of citizens, as well as issuing various official documents like National Identity Cards (CNIC), passports, and family registration certificates within Pakistan. It is not authorised to determine nationality, rather to conduct the aforementioned roles. A NADRA Registration Centre (NRC) is a facility operated by the National

Database and Registration Authority (NADRA). These centres play a central role in ensuring that citizens are accurately documented and have access to the necessary official documents needed for identity, travel, and other government procedures. In this paper we use the term NRC and citizenship registration office synonymously (https://www.nadra.gov.pk/identity/).

2. The term CNIC – computerised national identity card, is the official term used by NADRA. 'Computerised National Identity' as used by NADRA refers to digital citizenship.

3. The **National Register of Citizens (NRC)** is an official record aimed at identifying legal citizens of India in Assam by verifying individuals' ancestry through documentation. It has led to the exclusion of many, placing them in a state of legal uncertainty and potential statelessness. See Sharma (2024) for more details.

4. For the purposes of our study, we are interested in the first category.

5. Oral history interviews with the adults were around 2–3 hours long, while those of the young people (16–25 years old) were around 1–2 hours long. The interview questions differed slightly for both groups.

6. Our sample was made up of 48 male and 38 female participants, varying across the following markers: area of residency, home ownership, employment, income, and living conditions. Participants were recruited from a wide range of methods (including through gatekeepers such as youth activists, building links with local councillors, through NGOs, connecting with union members in the fishery and garment sector, connecting with journalists, through cultural organisations, through schools, colleges and political parties). We also used snow-balling to connect with other members.

7. Most of the interviews were conducted by the core research team, all women from upper middle or upper social class backgrounds and non-Pakistani Bengali. We positioned ourselves as different from the community, each kept extensive field notes and held regular reflexive team discussions to reflect on our position and how it would impact the research (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014). Two community researchers (both men) who joined team members on some interviews.

8. Sixty-four participants stated that at the time of interview they had an NIC card or B-Form (although many had experienced difficulties in obtaining it). However, 21 participants did not have an NIC card at the time of interview.

9. We share data predominantly from our lower- and middle-class sample, as the experiences of the elite were markedly different.

10. Digital citizenship was introduced to manage the personal and biometric information of the Pakistani population. Yet, it has also created issues around legal safeguarding of information, state control and further marginalisation of minorities (See Kohari 2021).

11. Pakistani citizenship is regulated by the Citizens Act of 1951, which confers citizenship through birth, descent, and migration. In reaction to the citizenship challenges following the secession of East Pakistan, Ordinance XI of 1978 was introduced. This law established the criteria for determining the status and affiliation of Bengalis in the post-1971 era. Section 16-A of the Pakistan Citizenship Act, effective from March 18, 1978, was crafted using both exclusionary and inclusionary language, embodying the modern state's approach to defining citizenship. With a few strict exceptions, those Bengalis not living in West Pakistan on or before 1971, or who had since migrated to Bangladesh were not able to claim Pakistani citizenship. Citizenship was granted to those living in West Pakistan before the specified date and who remained there (Farhat 2019; Republic of Pakistan 1951).

12. Identification refers to the systems and processes by which states, or other authorities establish, record, and officially acknowledge a person's citizenship. In Pakistan, identification takes place through a process of verification by NADRA which includes checking of family history, proof of residence, family registration certificates and birth certificates (birth certificates are issued by union councils). A birth certificate alone is not sufficient proof of citizenship in Pakistan. Official proof of nationality is evidenced through a digital CNIC issued by NADRA. See Hashmi (2021) for more details. We also note that the switch to

digital identity systems as proof of citizenship within Pakistan generated issues of exclusion for some communities such as ethnic Bengalis (see Manby 2021).

13. Afghanistan refugees in Pakistan and their children have been shut out from efforts to provide citizenship for marginalised groups. The High Court of Pakistan specifically ruled that they are excluded from the operation of jus soli provisions of citizenship law. See Nazir (2016, 5–6). More recently, the government has actively introduced harsh measures to deport undocumented Afghani refuges back to Afghanistan (Alimia 2022).

14. Note Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1954 Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons, or the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. However, it is party to a series of UN and other regional treaties around nationality (see pg 2. Imkaan, Nationality For All and the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion 2023).

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Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study as well as their parents/caregivers.

Ethical approval

All data was collected following ethical approval for the study by the Research Ethics Committee at which the lead author is based (Data protection registration number: Z6364106/2020/02/27)

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