



Exorcisms: Xenophobia, citizenship, and the spectre of Assamese nationalism

Dikshit Sarma Bhagabati¹

Accepted: 16 May 2021 / Published online: 5 June 2021
© O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU) 2021

Abstract

I have received xenophobia and ethno-majoritarianism in the same nationalist legacy that ignites solidarities for collective subversion. Here, I explore my experiential heritage of Assamese nationalism via some personal sketches, involving people I have met and grown close to in different walks of life. I employ a psychoanalytical lens to contemplate the symbolic underpinnings of sublime patriotic imageries and therapeutically express the traumatic effects of hating Bangladeshi immigrants. Each section opens with a popular song that was freshly reimagined during the 2019 anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests. First, I argue that Bangladeshis, as signifiers of death, kill the Assamese subjectivity while staging a cause to become Assamese in the first place. Their presence represents our inability to recoup Assam's many losses, inducing melancholic helplessness in the ethnos. Second, I illustrate how middle-class households internalise certain immigrants as domestic helps, appropriating their emotional and material labour in private to claim hegemony in public politics. Third, I demonstrate why Assam is doomed to extinguish its revolutions before they happen. Our nationalism is stuck in a pre-oedipal mess, too infantile to be anything but fearful of whatever seems like a threat to the motherland. Finally, I end on the future anterior that nurses the present with the assurance of uniting with the homeland despite all odds. That our citizenship robs immigrants of theirs, then erecting a mirror showing our own reflections as impossible citizens, is what I wish to portray here.

Keywords Assam Agitation · Assamese nationalism · Mass psychology · Xenophobia · Melancholia

Many thanks to Prof. Oishik Sircar for his insightful comments, without which this piece would have been trapped in a block of convolutions and haphazard thoughts. I also owe my sincerest gratitude to the anonymous reviewer for their suggestions and the editors of this journal for co-labouring in equal measure with me to refine, revise, and produce the final draft.

✉ Dikshit Sarma Bhagabati
17jgls-dbhagabati@jgu.edu.in

¹ O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India

1 Introduction

I at times feel like a child reeling under innocuous savagery. The xenophobic hatred of Bangladeshi immigrants underlying Assamese chauvinism treats me like an infant socialised into prejudices. I know that the first victim of collective anger is the ego itself. Yet I prefer remaining a child in this postcolonial clutter, feigning an uneasy silence while jingoism runs its course. Opposing the ‘herd’ is a recipe for separation from its belief system, and is therefore kept in abeyance till a boiling point that seldom simmers.¹ But I am not sure to what extent I must go against the so-called herd either. Though I find predatory politics a horrid heritage, the praxes of Assamese nationalism have taught me how to survive with constant defiance, instrumentalising protests for the self-actualisation denied by superior structures. I cannot deny that defying its fiat draws on an entitlement of inclusion to station me on the fringes, at worst, as a friendly naysayer. Moreover, there are the familiar faces, people I have grown up with, denouncing whose nationalism would also douse bits of our treasured relationships. Thus, I write this—just this! A pile of photographs without any formal genre, somewhat naïve, somewhat cerebral—to lay bare my footloose-ness between intuitive submission and mindful dissidence, politics and ethics.

The fear of illegal immigration in Assam is not an unfounded myth. Colonial demographic policies and porous borders with what today is Bangladesh have encouraged a steady populational osmosis for more than a century now.² That Assam suffers from an immigration burden is an empirical fact, and so are its socio-economic ramifications.³ However, when demographic reality meets fanatic ethnocentrism, majoritarian psychosis starts conjuring its demons with hallucinatory armaments. I have received this cultural ethos as an ancestral bequest of the Assam Agitation (henceforth ‘the Agitation’), a mass anti-foreigner movement which, from 1979 to 1985, shoved Assam into a prolonged state of exception.⁴

¹ Freud writes, ‘opposition to the herd is as good as separation from it, and is therefore anxiously avoided.’ See Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (Ernest Jones ed, James Strachey tr, Hogarth Press 1922) 23.

² See Nandita Saikia, William Joe, Apala Saha, and Utpal Chutia, ‘Cross Border Migration in Assam during 1951–2011: Process, Magnitude, and Socio-economic Consequences’, Report submitted to the Indian Council for Social Science Research (2016). <https://nanditasaikia.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Saikia-et-al-Immigration-in-Assam-1950-2011.pdf>. Accessed 22 November 2020.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Talks about non-citizens featuring in electoral rolls had begun doing the rounds from the mid-1960s onwards. After the incumbent parliamentarian from the Mangaldoi constituency passed away, the Election Commission ordered a summary revision of electoral rolls in 1979. When published, the new draft contained around 47,000 doubtful names (D-Voters), out of which 26,000 were confirmed to be foreigners. Although the by-election was cancelled when fresh polls were announced after the premature fall of Morarji Desai’s government, those numbers had built ample sensationalism to kickstart the Agitation. Despite ethnicity being the linchpin of the mobilisations, the leaders mainly depicted immigration as a nation-wide constitutional and legal crisis. Soon the rallying call expanded to include Assam’s—chiefly the Brahmaputra Valley’s—economic distress, political isolation, and waning control over natural resources, swarming the streets with protesters ranging across generations and backgrounds. See Sang-eeta Barooah Pisharoty, *Assam: The Accord, the Discord* (Penguin 2019); Basanta Deka, *The Design, the Betrayal, the Assam Movement* (1st edn, Purbanchal Prakash 2016); Sanjib Baruah, ‘Immigration, Ethnic Conflict, and Political Turmoil: Assam, 1979–1985’ (1986) 26(11) *Asian Survey* 1184.

My father—who had just enrolled in engineering college then but was back home since all educational institutions had been declared shut—regularly went picketing with his friends. Even my mother, merely a sixth-grader, took to the streets. Holding a makeshift bamboo torch, she went about her neighbourhood shouting ‘*ei jui jolise, jolibo, jolise*’.⁵ Government servants, like both my grandfathers, could either attend office and risk social boycott for perverting the movement, or stay at home and face suspension. Nevertheless, numerous employees overtly supported the movement and lost their jobs to administrative vengeance. People in the 1980s genuinely believed themselves to be harbingers of change, yearning to resurrect a new Assam out of colonial ruins and India’s post-independence amnesia.⁶ Gliding on this frenzy, the Agitation’s leaders, primarily members of the All Assam Students’ Union, signed a memorandum of settlement with Rajiv Gandhi’s government in 1985.⁷ So the Assam Accord (hereafter ‘the Accord’) was inked, ending the movement over plush meetings and phony developmental promises.

⁵ Translation: this fire is blazing, will blaze, is blazing.

⁶ See generally Pisharoty, *Assam: The Accord, the Discord* (n 4); Deka, *The Design, the Betrayal* (n 4); PS Reddi, ‘Electoral Rolls with Special Reference to Assam’ (1981) 42(1) *Indian Journal of Political Science* 27–37; Baruah, ‘Immigration, Ethnic Conflict, and Political Turmoil’ (n 4).

⁷ The Assam Accord was signed on 15 August 1985 between representatives of the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and the governments at the state and central levels, in the presence of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Earlier, Indira Gandhi had held talks with the Agitation’s leaders during 1980–1983. Discussions received a setback when Prime Minister Gandhi was assassinated in October 1984. However, throughout that year, informal talks continued to be held, morphing into formal deliberations with Rajiv Gandhi’s government in 1985. By 1984, around 860 protestors had already lost their lives. The prolonged disruption in the normal functioning of both everyday life and the civil administration begged an amiable solution. Thus, the Accord came as a relief to all the stakeholders. Clause 5 of the Accord specified 01 January 1966 as the cut-off date for the ‘detection and deletion of foreigners’. But a year later, the Citizenship Act 1955 was amended and Section 6A was inserted, which stipulates that foreigners who had arrived in Assam before 25 March 1971 shall have the same rights as an Indian citizen, including the ability to obtain a passport, without being a part of electoral rolls for 10 years. Clause 6 calls for constitutional and legislative safeguards to protect the ‘cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people’. Clause 7 prescribes ‘economic development’, Clause 9 more vigil at the international border, and Clauses 13–14 the restoration of ‘normalcy’. As it transpires, the border with Bangladesh remains porous, the economic goals unachieved, and the ‘detection and deletion’ of foreigners continues to elude success even after the publication of the 2019 National Register of Citizens (NRC). When Assembly elections were announced post the Accord, many predicted that the precarious religious and ethnic character of the state, which was also reflected in the Accord’s loose language and broad scope, would only bring about a coalition government. But the emergence of the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP; Assam People’s Party), a political party comprising the Agitation’s leaders, as a regional powerhouse with a sweeping majority baffled the sceptics, the more so since the party’s ranks included a good number of Muslim candidates and it won even in the tribal constituencies. See Explained Desk, ‘Explained: What Is the Assam Accord That Is Fueling Protests in the State?’ (*Indian Express*, 13 December 2019). <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-what-is-the-assam-accord-citizenship-amendment-bill-protests-6164018/>. Accessed 13 March 2021; Pisharoty, *Assam: The Accord, the Discord* (n 4); Sanjib Baruah, *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (University of Pennsylvania Press 1999); Sanjib Baruah, ‘Lessons of Assam’ (1986) 21(7) *Economic and Political Weekly* 282; ‘Problems of Foreigners in Assam (the Assam Accord)’, Memorandum of Settlement (signed 15 August 1985) 1–5. <https://assamaccord.assam.gov.in/portlets/the-assam-accord>. Accessed 05 May 2021.

The fact that political parties, till date, include its implementation as a goal in their manifestoes⁸ indicates how monumental a failure the Accord has been. As electoral democracy continues to eclipse direct participation, Assam has surrendered its collective subversions to partisan incumbencies and a wanton insurgency.⁹ However, the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA)¹⁰ finally shattered our docility last year, once again arousing massive civil society mobilisations across the state. It is in the wake of this re-emergent repressed, while Covid-19 locks down our protests and student leaders graduate to electoral politics, that I pen my intimate dissonances with Assamese majoritarianism. Four popular songs, four psychoanalytical acts, and many familiar faces¹¹ thematising the affect of nationalist nurture—the reflections smudging my mirrored houses are what I explore here.¹²

Assam's woes might befit political, structural, social, and cultural explanations. Psychoanalysis, on a more sanded-down plane, ponders how context itself is symbolically organised, and in it the subject, amidst an apocrypha of free-floating discourses and interlocking structures. When in the first year of college I was urged to think 'socially' about my 'privileges', I did not want to. I knew the social was softly at work, but to cede my sensation of realness to something more real than myself, something so horrendously real that I could not even see it, seemed pure insanity. Then I chanced upon Lacan in my second year and he uncovered that any conceit of fixed reality, boosted with either the consciousness of social forces or the illusion of free will, is equally psychotic.¹³ As with Maggie Nelson¹⁴ who realises through Lacan that feeling real virally grips our body with wanting to be alive,

⁸ See Imtiaz Ahmed, 'BJP Poll Manifesto to Have Provision for Clause 6 Implementation: Himanta' (*Inside NE*, 18 February 2021). <https://www.insidene.com/bjp-poll-manifesto-to-have-provision-for-clause-6-implementation-himanta/>. Accessed 13 March 2021; Hemanta Kumar Nath, 'To Oust BJP, Congress Begins "Save Assam" Campaign with CAA as Core Poll Issue' (*India Today*, 19 February 2021). <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/story/oust-bjp-congress-save-assam-campaign-caa-core-poll-issue-1770945-2021-02-19>. Accessed 13 March 2021; 'AGP Promises Assam Accord Implementation in Manifesto' (*United News of India*, 18 March 2016). <http://www.uniindia.com/agp-promises-assam-accord-implementation-in-manifesto/other/news/419756.html>. Accessed 13 March 2021.

⁹ For more on the insurgency, see Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast* (1st edn, Penguin India 2000).

¹⁰ The Citizenship (Amendment Act) 2019.

¹¹ All names have been anonymised.

¹² Two caveats are in order. Firstly, I copiously use first-person collective pronouns—we, us, our—to locate myself self-critically in the very hateful structures that I castigate. However, these pronouns also hint at my wish to not renounce the Assamese identity and cherish it a little while longer. In doing so, I do not intend to whitewash its violent tendencies but simply own up to the social climate that has given me the subjectivity to critique it in the first place. Secondly, I frequently use the signifier Bangladeshi. The term undoubtedly has a demeaning aspect, and using it reinscribes immigrants in their old sites of subordination. But a psychoanalytical account would not be possible without the signifier itself, thus I am forced to wincingly reiterate the word Bangladeshi.

¹³ The first work of Lacan's that I read was his *Seminar VII*. As important to his oeuvre as it is, not many would recommend it as an ideal entry into his thought. But the idea that the Thing in its muteness, the void with all its unattainability, is the 'dumb reality' of our desire made me approach psychoanalysis as a critique of the substances, cognitions, and socialities that we consciously think are too real to not be true. See Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Denis Porter tr, WW Norton and Co 1992).

¹⁴ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Graywolf Press 2015) 14.

psychoanalysis slivers identities into an elegy of disintegrated puzzle pieces—Assamese now, Indian then; something sometimes, still nothing yet.¹⁵ We are constantly swinging between aliveness and deadness, fighting the relic of death in life and taking shots of aliveness from a morose pitcher while everything else is merely ephemeral—the social, political, contextual, and their impress on me. This piece, accordingly, is my therapeutic conduit to express the virulent traumas of predatory anger.

I begin, in Act I, by arguing that Bangladeshis manifest our lacking ethnoses, killing—castrating—the subject at the very point of linguistic intervention where it can call itself Assamese. Act II expounds how we internalise certain immigrants into the household as domestic helps, appropriating their emotional and material labour to save our abusiveness from encountering class-conscious resilience in the market. However, monopolising the motherland, sheltering her from any external influence, whether immigrants as workers or them as another community, demotes us to an immature pre-oedipal stage—a psychopathological regression that I contemplate in Act III. Our infantile xenophobia feeds on notions of Bangladeshi evilness, reflectively casting us as evil too but not in the Nazi sense. Lastly, in Act IV, I close on Assam's tryst with its future anterior, underscoring the various alienations we willingly undergo to retrieve the nation in a definite future.

I am located in a neoliberal law school. The easel of legal education bolsters my theoretical canvas, albeit the text itself might conceal hues of law. Learning from law yet cynically ridiculing its weakness in untangling the immigration stalemate—irreconcilability is at the root of my expression here. Being nakedly relentless with my paradoxes is all I hope to accomplish. That the movement which has taught me how to subvert law, resist state violence, organise in solidarity, and dream for constitutional progress also preys on jingoism, xenophobia, subordination, and contumacious citizenship, is indeed a 'profoundly troubling paradox'.¹⁶

2 Act I: Melancholia

Ami Axomiya, nohou dukhiya
Buli xantona lubhile nohobo
Ajir Axomiya'e nijok nisinile

¹⁵ I hope to show my inclination towards what has become popular as 'autotheory' through this Maggie Nelson reference. To borrow from Beatriz Preciado, my elision of the biographical and the scholarly—a roller-coaster marriage that might appear a bit jarred and forced at places—is at best 'a somato-political [non]fiction, a theory of the self, or self-theory'. Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (Bruce Benderson tr, The Feminist Press 2008) 11. For more on autotheory, see Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (MIT Press 2021); Robyn Wiegman, 'Introduction: Autotheory Theory' (2020) 76(1) *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture and Theory* 1.

¹⁶ I borrow the term 'profoundly troubling paradox' from Patricia Williams. She defines it as 'claiming a heritage', the 'weft of whose genesis is my own disinheritance'. See Patricia J Williams, 'On Being the Object of Property' (1988) 14(1) *Signs* 5–7.

*Axom roxatloi jabo*¹⁷

To be Assamese and not be famished: a felt sense of cultural opulence already engulfs my identity. Must I therefore blindfold my politico-ethical commitments with the blood-marred imaginaries of sublime ethnonationalism to be anything at all, let alone an Assamese? Majoritarian hatred, be that as it may, fledges in spite of parochial, jingoistic myopia. The faint Assamese script on billboards, cramped compulsively below its Hindi and English counterparts, does not bring out any repressed acrimony in me. The tiny letters may remind one of commercial complicity in linguistic politics, but their extra-textual agency also projects the language's excess over its concomitant identity. Every morning when I go cycling, I stop for a breather beside a 'Bengali Hotel' before commencing uphill to Kamakhya. The run-down establishment bears a hoarding in the Eastern Nagari script,¹⁸ and as I stand panting for a fugacious breath, my benumbed mind fails to distinguish whether the signboard is in Bengali or Assamese. Linguistic ambiguity permeates the memory traces of the state's residents. *Koka's*—my maternal grandfather's—flair in Assamese prose, for instance, was inseparable from his pre-partition Bengali education in East Pakistan. Even when Assamese is pitched against Bengali, its status as a North-Eastern *lingua franca* effortlessly becomes an argument against mindless localism.

'Be a good human, care equally for all'—from school to dinner-table discussions, from competitive debates to inebriated ramblings, I hear, see, and make claims to compassion all too often. Yet the spectre of contempt underlies every appearance of its absence, haunting not specifically the Assamese ethnos but the pathos of Being¹⁹ itself. Humanism, however inclusive, extols speciesist oneness, ethical devotion to which diverts focus from our disparateness within diversified co-existence. I emerge as a relatively better-off *human* with an irreducible singularity that also brings forth the immigrant as a non-subject, an object, maybe a void, but a singularity unto its own origin nonetheless. My world germinates from the plurality of singular beings. To banish Bangladeshis from it I need not shun any empathy and term them sub-humans when I can simply deny the uniqueness of their existence, thus refusing immigrants so much space in the world as even an absence. It is this hegemonic capacity to revile minorities for presumably lacking sociality—rendering them non-being against the Other, not necessarily a particular identarian other—which enables self-fulfilling humanitarian narratives to subsist with the filth of hatred.

'Bangladeshis *lack* civility; they *lack* cleanliness, education, gentility, and every tinge of sociability'—such ubiquitous utterances construct a lack within the fugitive immigrant subjectivity to remove it from the Assamese nation. A mute, voiceless, placeless, senseless void structures Assam's unfulfilled reality. Xenophobic exclusion seeks to rationalise the emptiness, mounting an apology for the incomplete

¹⁷ Translation: We Assamese, won't be famished / Such solace is no more right / If today's Assamese misread themselves / Then Assam will face an afterlife of plight. Composed and sung by Dr Bhupen Hazarika. The refrain is borrowed from an eponymous poem by Lakshminath Bezbarua.

¹⁸ This script is common to both Bengali and Assamese, except the consonant 'R' sound which contains a dot in Bengali and a bar in Assamese.

¹⁹ The interlocking social possibilities out of which the specific social condition (being) of the Assamese nation arises.

ethnos by prohibiting an identity which anyway is nullified. Hating Bangladeshis, thus, is not a dog-whistle to cleanse the national space of some substantive contaminant but an intimate everyday practice that elides our psychic nothingness with the Other's emptiness.²⁰

Our awareness of ourselves undergirds the breakdown of fully conscious lives. I name myself Assamese upon the remembrance of an inexplicable sinking feeling that something is missing in my other monikers, therefore in the symbolic space of baptism to begin with. What will happen once Bangladeshis are identified and incarcerated in detention centres, is a question no one wants to seriously ponder. That does not deter us from the xenophobic rhetoric. Not knowing what will follow the National Register of Citizens (NRC), for example, is never a reason enough to declaim it.²¹ This irresolution is not an immobilising mishap but a productive sense of uprootedness that turns ignorance into desirable knowledge. Despising Bangladeshis for its own sake—without an end in sight, sans a 'final solution' to efface them completely—spawns a realisation that the lack bothering us on a personal level is already the Other's bane. Collective hatred assures us that the emptiness in our individual lives actually draws on what is missing in the nation, turning the immigrant into a placeholder for the common void. I am equally *nothing* like them. We both occupy a correlation of empty singularities that de-naturalises hierarchies and introduces mutuality as the atomicity of living together. Nothing precedes nothingness, so no one identity is more original than the other. The lack births us, yet it prevents our supremacy. But we cannot accept our innards rotting with a vacuity that betrays our, as well as the Other's, primacy. Instead, we throw it up, turning Bangladeshis into a signifier of this void that terrorises national uniformity with heterogeneity. Once immigrants become a plank in our identities, it is merely a matter of working backwards to blame them for the very uncertainty of daily life.

The immigrant—reduced to nonbeing, no-thing—lurks as a cancelled-out embodiment of the signifier Bangladeshi, interdicted in the discursive preserve of the nation for marking the lacks predating yet pervading our experiential selfhood. Those raging moments when we use the term pejoratively—vilifying a manual labourer as 'dirty Bangladeshi' or blaming the rising crime rate on immigrants—signal the synthesis of personal angst with collective abhorrence. Predatory nationalism, the act of hating itself, tries to pronounce the unpronounceable anxieties

²⁰ The title of Žižek's magnum opus, *Less Than Nothing*, aptly illustrates the transposal of one void, embodied in our unconscious, onto another symbolic lack inhering in the Other. Emptiness within emptiness at the site of jouissance, thus *Less Than Nothing*. See Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso 2012).

²¹ See Naresh Mitra, 'Assam NRC: A Month after NRC, No One Has Answer to What Happens Next' (*Times of India*, 03 October 2019). <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/a-month-after-nrc-no-one-has-answer-to-what-happens-next/articleshow/71420140.cms>. Accessed 11 March 2021; 'Assam NRC: What Next for 1.9 Million "Stateless" Indians?' (*BBC News*, 31 August 2019). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49520593>. Accessed 11 March 2021; FP Staff, 'Amit Shah Promises to Expel All Illegal Migrants by 2024 but Assam's Failed NRC Has a Lesson or Two for Centre' (*Firstpost*, 03 December 2019). <https://www.firstpost.com/india/amit-shah-promises-to-expel-all-illegal-migrants-by-2024-but-assams-failed-nrc-has-a-lesson-or-two-for-centre-7731851.html>. Accessed 11 March 2021.

beyond language, transposing our lack onto the Other's nothingness²² and deriving unconscious solace²³ from being able to pin our lived consternations on the treacherous signifier.²⁴ The ecstasy of emotional offloading may not be a professed political goal, but the disavowal sets up a scaffolding of normal everydayness beneath which the guilty pleasure of maligning immigrants grounds our uprooted lives in an intelligible routine. A mystery, a will to ignorance, stops us from knowing why we are truly averse to Bangladeshis, other than regurgitating the readymade reasons drilled into our common sense. Still we abhor them, for what matters more than individual motivations is our place in the bigger social system, the Other. Ethnic anger is a blissful way to reflexively align ourselves with the structure's edicts. Prior to us becoming Assamese and immigrants becoming despicable, before meaning conquers the body's dumb hapticality and the mind knows what it is thinking,²⁵ the lacks overlap to assuage the subject's and the Other's trepidation of perpetual emptiness.²⁶ The conspiratorial merger, nothingness snuggling up to nothingness, then whitewashes their union of anxieties as an alliance against a more vicious void—murderous immigrants—that can gulp reality into nihility like a black hole. We hate Bangladeshis because we crave to externalise something we hate about ourselves. What exactly is bothering us is secondary to the irredeemable fact of being bothered, since the primaevial lack transcends empiricity and comfort lies, notwithstanding its objectives, precisely in the recursive process of ostracism.

We Assamese, won't be famished—what if we always already are?

In the winter of 2018, I happened to clerk for a senior judge at the Gauhati High Court. He was my neighbour, and though younger than my dad by many years, they had grown up together, played cricket on the same paddy fields, and picketed shoulder to shoulder during the Agitation. On most evenings, after concluding court work and seeing off the staff, he invited me to his chamber for a customary cup of tea. There, with the brew getting colder, lying idly abreast heaps of dogeared files while

²² Lacan writes that the empirical subject locates itself in the Other's void and finds 'anew in the Other's desire the equivalent of what he is *qua* subject of the unconscious'. My being an Assamese emulates the Other's desire, unconsciously aligning my selfhood with the socio-symbolic norms of the collectivity. Jacques Lacan, 'Position of the Unconscious' in *Ecrits* (Bruce Fink tr, WW Norton and Co 2006) 716.

²³ The place where the voids overlap is called 'Jouissance, and it is Jouissance whose absence would render this universe vain'. In trying to experience nothingness, pronouncing the unpronounceable and deriving guilty pleasure out of what both the individual and her identarian collective lack, we generate an excess of standardised enjoyment that sticks out of quotidian routines and yet entrenches everyday life in a relational reality. Jouissance is this surplus, a kind of bliss that is enjoyed for its own sake without any use value. See Jacques Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious' *Ibid.* 694.

²⁴ Not on a definite person, not on a fixed collectivity, nor on a specific space or determinate culture, but, as I will clarify in due course, this blame is unloaded on the master signifier Bangladeshi that exists without any constitutive meaning.

²⁵ That is to say, in the symbolic order. The symbolic universe constitutes the invisible social and political forces that underlie reality as we visibly see it. The symbolic is a hermeneutic plane on which we unconsciously rely to interpret reality.

²⁶ It is only when the voids overlap that I realise 'how the very problem that was bothering me (the nature of the Other's secret) is already bothering the Other itself'. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World* (University of Michigan Press 1997) 50.

I waited for him to take the first sip, he began recounting Assam's failures. I smiled and nodded as he told me how the Assamese had lost all respect in mainstream India, how vote-bank politics had long deleted development from election manifestoes, and how numerous governments—from the colonial administration to our current dispensation—had forced unsustainable immigration down our throats. The script seldom changed. No sooner would he lament the presence of Bangladeshis than he would poignantly introspect: 'Perhaps we were damned to be fools, wasting years on streets and protesting with misguided vigour for changes that never came.'

The judge is not alone. Over the years, people who had wholeheartedly joined the Agitation have started regretting their participation. The sadness of foreclosed identification with an identity they had tried gestating, the guilt of not doing enough, the disconsolation that sets in after insurrection of the repressed—I frequently sense the unconscious archive of hopelessness speaking through my father's generation. For them, like for the judge, despair behaves as if Assam has lost its glorious figment. *Assam perhaps has indeed begun famishing*. Not sure what we have forfeited, but melancholic recollections of the Agitation tether us to the Bangladeshi object through a loss metaphorising socio-cultural decadence. The pretension of loss is a convenient escape from our ordinary lack, because the gaze that sees in immigration the cause of our backwardness also institutes an alternative reality against Bangladeshi bodies.²⁷ We covet unconditionally possessing them as personifications of the loss, in that all they are said to have destroyed dangles the allure of a greater nation against adversities. Without this gap in the status quo initiating desire for a better Assam, a flat terrain of positivity would supplant our symbolic loyalty to nationalist imageries. The judge, nevertheless, will not protest anymore. My parents refuse to believe that opening a new electoral front²⁸ can cure the habitual lethargy of those in the profession of governance. They hold their futile youthful activism at fault, so much so that maniac bondage to the loss has partly displaced their egos.²⁹ What vents out as an outward expulsion of the lack returns as melancholic attachment to

²⁷ The melancholic puts on a 'faked spectacle of excessive, superfluous mourning for an object even before this object is lost'. Since the void implies that the melancholic never had the object to begin with, converting it to a loss—something that has been subsequently lost—creates the fiction of a new reality whereas the melancholic remains attached to the existing objects via their absence, their loss. See Slavoj Žižek, 'Melancholy and the Act' (2000) 26(4) *Critical Inquiry* 657, 661.

²⁸ A new regional party—the Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP; meaning Assam Ethnic Organisation)—combining the state's two largest student unions has entered the electoral space after the 2019 anti-CAA protests. Along with another prospective party that is to be formed by Akhil Gogoi, a peasant leader facing UAPA (Unlawful Activities [Prevention] Act, 1967) charges for supposedly being a Maoist, the AJP hopes to offer a viable alternative to both the Congress and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). But this euphoria is a stale reckoning. After the Agitation, the student leaders of the movement had also created a new party—the AGP—only to repeatedly renege on their promise of implementing the Accord. Finally, years later, the AGP today is the BJP's ally in the state and supports them on the Citizenship Amendment Act. Thus, people in Assam are wary of the vested interests in political mileage. See Abhishek Saha, 'Explained: In Assam, New Regional Party Assam Jatiya Parishad Sets Up New Equations' (*Indian Express*, 17 September 2020). <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/in-assam-new-regional-party-assam-jatiya-parishad-sets-up-new-equations-6598482/>. Accessed 25 December 2020.

²⁹ See Darian Leader, *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression* (Graywolf Press 2008) 34–37.

bereavement. Bangladeshis are within us, erecting a self-image we dread to look at, internalised into our psyches as sombre names of death.

Death implies neither annihilating violence on Bangladeshis nor just the racialised threat that they pose. It is, instead, a hermeneutical field where every drive ‘represents in itself the portion of death’³⁰ which castrates the subject with ‘the signifier and nothing but the signifier’.³¹ Death is getting so bogged down in words that when language stops, signs of life too pass away. Even then life hinges on to its vestiges through the same language which, given the limitedness of expression, always excludes—castrates, splits—a part of subjectivity that fails to find the correct words, in fact any words at all. Death is not an eventuality but an impossibility integral to all life processes. Till the eighth grade, I studied in a school called Kendriya Vidyalaya, a network of central government-funded institutions spread across the country. Considering its national outlook, the curriculum there did not include a provincial language like Assamese. I and some of my fellow seventh-graders were hurt, offended that our mother tongue was deemed to not deserve the esteem of instruction. Being conscientious students, we decided to petition the principal. We were armed with a host of reasons why Assamese should be offered as a third language after English and Hindi, but the principal baffled us with an unforeseen counter-question: ‘Tell me, why do *you* want to study Assamese?’

Nonplussed as we were, my friend Haptarishi spontaneously answered, ‘because we are Assamese, sir.’

‘So will you stop becoming Assamese if you do not study the language in school?’

‘No.’

‘Do you think you are imperfect Assamese now? That would be a shame, is it not?’

‘Maybe ... I mean, no, we are not *very* imperfect.’

‘What does it mean to be an Assamese then?’

To this, we had an apt response: ‘Being an Assamese means respecting our own culture, caring for it, trying to nourish it, while also respecting other people and their culture.’

‘That means, you are Assamese only when you *do* certain things like respecting cultures?’

I do not quite recall how the conversation ended, but Assamese was never given as an optional subject at least during the time I was at Kendriya Vidyalaya. Back in the principal’s cabin, we knew that we would have been Assamese irrespective of how we answered his questions, if we did answer in the first place. At the back of our minds, our Assamese-ness was an instinctive fact. But every time we materialised the identity in words—or in action or any other mode of signification—we exposed it to the inescapable hazard of implosion, to the face of our incapacity to

³⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Jacques Alain-Miller ed, Alan Sheridan tr, WW Norton and Co 1981) 205.

³¹ *Ibid.* 257.

define it thoroughly, to the inaptitude of naming and calling it conclusively. Whenever we become Assamese, wresting that aspiration from the unconscious storehouse where we anyway are, we also incarnate in equal measure a principal sir who will block our path of identification with bemusing questions.

The Bangladeshi identity, in the token of a signifier, is a murderous vector dictating the interjection of language in the subject before it becomes a subject, splitting it into a conscious discursive self enunciated as Assamese and an unconscious master that injuncts our woken-up acts. The latter is the voice while the former—the empirical subject—is merely a mouth that calls me Assamese; the unconscious a driver who drives without being present and consciousness the passenger who falsely thinks she owns the car.³² We are dead evermore, harping on life through one identity or the other, since Bangladeshis are the unsolvable question that fades our Assamese-ness back to a voice without a mouth, like us in front of principal sir. Hatred, in this simulacrum, is an ethical duty to enliven my narrativised identities and in the same breath neuter the signifier's morbidity. The routine that kills my subjectivity also postures a psychic inertia of who deserves citizenship and who should be disenfranchised. Neither Bangladeshis nor rabid jingoistic tendencies are objects of the urge to effectuate our identities under the stamp of death. Rather, the recursive drive installs the loss at its core. The point of anti-immigration fervour is everydayness itself, like my conversations with the judge, routinising contempt in quotidian actions to remain fixated on melancholic mourning.

There is, however, something peculiar about Bangladeshis, for we do not intend to entirely oust or deport all enemies of the nation. The immigrant's insignia of death entails our libidos clinging on to the slaughterous signifier, circulating around the loss it represents to recharge the lively energy that symbolic splitting depletes. Hatred, hence, is a ploy to recoup deprivation. But since primal nothingness is inexorable, opposition to immigration is a humdrum transcending both the illegal object and its subjective correlate, doomed to persist as long as Assam's future remains mnemonically bound up with a migratory past.

That Bangladeshis crowd out the state's welfare schemes, encroach on forests, foment communal disturbances, and fuel cross-border smuggling are familiar

³² The subject acquires identity only when language frames it so. Lacan calls the point of the signifier's intervention in the subject *point de capiton*. Here, the signifying chain acquires meaning retrospectively and splits, bars, or kills the subject into the subject of enunciation and that of the enunciated. The latter is our conscious empirical self occupying discourse, like the grammatical anchor *I*. However, it is the unconscious subject of enunciation which transcendently regulates what we experience or desire. There is always a beyond of language that keeps alive our attachment to the word. Apart from all that is intelligible about the subject, there is a part of the signifying chain from which she 'subtracts' herself. That is, the subject simultaneously figures as enunciated signification and operates as a lack mirroring the Other to enable enunciation in the first place. This speaking unconscious subject, hidden from plain view, comes out in those psychotic moments—hysteria, Freudian slips, or anxiety—when we feel like losing our conscious sense of being. See Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject' (n 23); also see Fabio Vighi, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious' in Stijn Vanheule, Derek Hook, and Calum Neill (eds), *Reading Lacan's Ecrits: From 'Signification of the Phallus' to 'Metaphor of the Subject'* (Routledge 2019).

grounds against their presence.³³ In 1998, SK Sinha, the then Governor, wrote in a report to the President of India that immigration will exert ‘dangerous consequences’ on the state and no ‘mistaken notions of secularism should be allowed to come in the way’ of banishing the illicit population.³⁴ On the flip side, popular critiques of Assamese xenophobia paint ethnocentrism as an easy excuse for the region’s social and economic deficiencies.³⁵ Both standpoints ignore how any attempt at rationalising jingoism is a political dexterity devised subsequent to the melancholic loss, riveted retrospectively as the genesis of majoritarian nationalism. Granted, so long as Assam remains in the abyss of human poverty, we will continue to sleep with our abhorrent selves. But hatred arises from the lack simpliciter, whose originariness the impoverished ego hides with some particular kind of loss. If immigrants have made us poorer, then logically we must have been a civilisation of plenitude before their arrival. Except, the truth is unimportant when the issue assumes the style of a loss, since losing something already suggests prior possession. Monetary growth may soothe contempt not because it will accomplish our hopes of restoring bygone grandeur. Sagas of past magnificence are myths. Economic progress and wealth accumulation, on the other hand, counteract bitter politics with the resultant madness of buying one thing after another. Money derails the regimen of abomination with repetitive obsession over commodities, captivating desire with fetishised objects protruding out of mundane routines. Otherwise, the ‘stuckness’ central to despising Bangladeshis day in and day out, the prosaicness, is a meaningless pulse that acclimatises us amidst the Other’s seductive shortcomings,³⁶ deflecting everyday life from the enigmatic defects we cannot pinpoint in the nation. Historical vindications, correct though they may be, fabricate backdated narratives to anchor the

³³ See, for example, Bishwajit Sonowal, ‘Immigration in Assam during Colonial Rule: Its Impact on the Socio-economic Demography of Assam’ (2018) 3(2) *International Journal of Innovative Studies in Sociology and Humanities* 10; Ankur Khataniar, ‘Migration as a Factor of Deforestation in North East India and Its Socio-economic Impact with Special Reference to Assam’ (International Conference on Trends in Economics, Humanities and Management, ICTEHM-14, Pattaya, August 2014) 67. <https://icehm.org/upload/6268ED0814008.pdf>. Accessed 25 December 2020; Anuj Kumar Das, ‘Migration and Its Socio-economic Consequences in Assam’ (2013) 3 *Social Sciences* 105; Chandan Kumar Sharma, ‘The Immigration Issue in Assam and Conflicts around It’ (2012) 13(3) *Asian Ethnicity* 287; Hiranya K Nath and Suresh Kr Nath, ‘Illegal Migration into Assam: Magnitude, Causes, and Economic Consequences’ (28 January 2011). <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1750383>. Accessed 21 November 2020; Sandhya Goswami, ‘Ethnic Conflict in Assam’ (2001) 62(1) *Indian Journal of Political Science* 123.

³⁴ SK Sinha, ‘Illegal Migration into Assam’ (Report submitted to the President of India by the Governor of Assam, 08 November 1998), GSAG 3/98. https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/illegal_migration_in_assam.htm. Accessed 25 December 2020.

³⁵ See, for example, Gorky Chakraborty, ‘Is Assam Mirroring the “Idea of India” on the Citizenship Amendment Bill?’ (*The Wire*, 04 February 2019). <https://thewire.in/politics/is-assam-mirroring-the-idea-of-india-on-the-citizenship-amendment-bill>. Accessed 25 December 2020; Udayon Misra, ‘Why Many in Assam See the National Register of Citizens as a Lifeline’ (*The Wire*, 24 August 2018). <https://thewire.in/history/history-nrc-assam>. Accessed 25 December 2020; Tapan Kumar Bose, ‘The Economic Basis of Assam’s Linguistic Politics and Anti-immigrant Movements’ (*The Wire*, 27 September 2018). <https://thewire.in/politics/the-economic-basis-of-assams-linguistic-politics-and-anti-immigrant-movements>. Accessed 25 December 2020; Gorky Chakraborty, ‘The “Ubiquitous” Bangladeshis’ (2012) 47(35) *Economic and Political Weekly* 7.

³⁶ Eric L Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (University of Chicago Press 2001) 98.

Assamese subject in the socio-symbolic relations eluding observable reality. Imagining a threatened nation memorialises a state of richness from which history begins in Assam. Presently having squandered that splendour, tales of socio-economic degradation and any blueprint to rectify it route the personal originary lack, now experienced as a loss, through the Other's collective nothingness, only to conversely invade our psyches with xenophobic agony.

Koka knew that Assam's redemption lay in the expansion of an industrious middle class. When I was in the third grade, he once narrated Manto's 'The New Constitution'.³⁷ I have forgotten the details over the years, like the fading contours of his face lingering as formless voices in my mind's nihilate canvas. What I do remember is realising that the Constitution is a forbidden aspiration, that detesting immigrants is a sad pardon for Assam's unachieved Constitution. *Koka* might have still envisaged wholesome development cutting across divisive lines, but not all iterations of legality pursue equitability. Today, the Assam Accord has become a biblical document, having attained the constitutional faith fitting a civil religion. Prolonged emphasis on Clause 6,³⁸ at the same time, has suppressed our failure in fructifying its socio-economic directives.³⁹ After all, we had cried '*tez dim, tel nidiu*',⁴⁰ as though a volitional sacrifice of blood would offset the castrating death that the signifier imposes while emblematically draining the state's oil resources. What is legal here: self-harm for self-capacitation, seditious blockades, our oil being sent to refineries elsewhere? All of it, or perhaps none of it. My friend Advait's father manned the forefront of pickets during the Agitation. He was detained and extrajudicially beaten on many occasions. When nothing worked, the authorities threatened to suspend his father—Advait's grandfather—from government service. Public defiance, according to him, was a constitutional expression of free speech, a legal demand to erase illicit names from voters' lists. Concurrently, brutalising protesters

³⁷ Ustad Mangu is a tonga-puller in pre-independence India, digesting the white man's scorn day in and day out in the heyday of colonialism before World War II. Once, he overhears his passengers discussing the upcoming Government of India Act, 1935—a legislation to usher nascent self-government and constitutional progress in the subcontinent, but within imperial supremacy. Ustad Mangu, sadly, mistakes the New Constitution as India's independence, acquiring newfound confidence from the postcolonial—in fact, decolonial—euphoria of the moment. In his zeal, he refuses to ferry a couple of white passengers. When they persist, he thrashes them to his heart's content. Of course, the 'New Constitution' could have never remedied Mangu's subalternity. Ultimately, the police promptly rounds him up like any other day in the Raj. Saadat Hasan Manto, 'The New Constitution' in *Mottled Dawn: Fifty Sketches and Stories of Partition* (Penguin 1997).

³⁸ Clause 6 of the Accord reads: 'Constitutional, legislative and administrative safeguards, as may be appropriate, shall be provided to protect, preserve and promote the cultural, social, linguistic identity and heritage of the Assamese people.' 'Problems of Foreigners in Assam (the Assam Accord)' (n 7).

³⁹ Clause 7 says: 'The Government takes this opportunity to renew their commitment for the speedy all round economic development of Assam, so as to improve the standard of living of the people. Special emphasis will be placed on education and science & technology through establishment of national institutions.' While certain developmental measures—like establishing an Indian Institute of Technology in Guwahati and a gas cracker plant in Dibrugarh—have indeed gestated, the achievements are scant and implementational delays long. For example, Bogibeel, a bridge over the Brahmaputra, was opened only in 2018, three decades after the Accord. Moreover, Assam's paper mills in Jagiroad and Jogighopa are languishing with multiple bankruptcies and have little prospect of revival. 'Problems of Foreigners in Assam (the Assam Accord)' (n 7).

⁴⁰ Translation: will give blood, not oil.

and threatening them with unemployment were equally lawful tactics for the police to maintain peace and order.

These stories on the margins of constitutionally justified clashes reveal why the *New Constitution* never arrives. Beyond every non-constitution reside too many constitutions, mired in the ordinary interpretive networks of Ustad Mangu's, *koka*'s, the police's, and Advait's father's aspirations. The *New* connotes deferral, the liminality of yet-to-be-here, such that every *New Constitution* already becomes a not-this. When I reread Manto's story years later in my Jurisprudence coursework, it was screaming to evidence the postcolonial fetishism with legal disorders and crony governmental collusions. Between *koka*'s telling and its taught reception in the classroom, I always rephrased Mangu's dejection as foolish infatuation with the same legal ruses which abandon us to the immigration problematic. That reinscribed the insolvability in legal structures, coarsening the us-versus-them rift into the statist designations of citizen-versus-foreigner, voter-versus-doubtful-voter, constitutional-versus-unconstitutional. Predating these reifications, however, the inhibitions inhere in us, as much as in immigrants. What might disclose our individual logjams within the collective national reality better than the reciprocity we force out of each other for provisional completeness, further supplemented by law's external aid in taming the Other's phantasmagoria?

Famished or otherwise, we Assamese have surely acquired an unhealthy, toxic mental life while fighting over citizenship.

3 Act II: Foreclosure

*Hud hud hud hud hud hud hudai de
Apun pothar khon mukolai de*⁴¹

At times—maybe in the flurry of a compelling rhetoric, maybe due to my own frustrations—I do feel that *shooing them away* would be a good idea. If, hypothetically, immigrants agree to go back, Bangladesh accepts them, and India manages a humane transfer of population, I cannot help thinking that rehabilitation might give Assam a long-due respite and the proscribed people a new life. Yet, I wonder, what will happen to us without the Bangladeshi's service?

If nothing else, our derogatory generalisation of Bengali-speaking manual workers as Bangladeshis should show how heavily the state is dependent on immigrants for backbreaking jobs—construction labour, domestic help, fish mongering, and other informal sector activities. 'If you send Bangladeshis away, who will pull our rickshaws?' is a quip I often encounter. We can conserve our libido and shirk from 'lowly' work only within an isomorphic class hierarchy that apports productive life instincts within different ranks of labour as well as labourers. Labelling menial workers Bangladeshi objectifies the signifier—the notion of immigrants itself—into a pool of cathectic energy that our pursuit of pleasure expropriates from the

⁴¹ Translation: Hud hud hud hud hud hud shoo them away / Free our field of their presence. Sung by Zubeen Garg, music by Arup Dutta, from the album *Jonaki Mon* (2008).

outsider's gruelling work. 'Assam is a land of *lahe lahe* [slowly, slowly], we will till some land, catch some fish, cook a lunch. Why die in this foreign madness for commercial profits?' Idioms of this sort expose the subliminal immigrant labour feeding our attitudinal nonchalance, our libidinal dependence on impossibly, recursively recovering the loss for a guilty *jouissance*⁴² of not having to toil. But pervasive reliance on unconscious class diktats analogously subjects our ego to the capitalist clime for legitimacy. Ultimately, our moral compass ends up condoning the subordination of migrant workers, attacking as a corollary our flippant self with the remorse of indolence. Stricken with depressing culpability, unleashing inwards an onslaught of conscious shame, we turn against ourselves and end up accusing our own laziness for the Bangladeshi explosion.⁴³

Failure in universalising the laid-back Assamese way of life as an inviolable rule relativises us in a 'system of differences' that de-totalises majoritarian norms.⁴⁴ Capital facilitates signification in its symbolic weft,⁴⁵ within which class stratifications demarcate 'a traumatic limit' preventing 'totalization of the social-ideological field'.⁴⁶ *Shooing them away*, rather than obliterating their different approach to drudgery, marshals the corporeality of Bangladeshi bodies into a supply force that can satisfy our demand for both cheap labour and the unbridled bliss of dodging blue-collar work.⁴⁷ We will never evict the immigrant till she remains a desirable object affording, at once, the contrite enjoyment of not having to work and the actual labour while we relax. Consequently, we must keep her close at home where market discontent might not enter but class privileges do.

We know the immigrant intimately. In fact, many of us have grown up with Bangladeshis. Abida *didi* (sister) used to work at our place when I was younger. She would tend to the outsourced tasks of my middle-class regimen—folding clothes, tidying the bed, dusting the bookshelf, ironing my school uniform. Quite candid about her parents' passage from Bangladesh, *didi* gradually became an unexpected necessity in our household. She ate the same food as us, but from different utensils; had a toilet equally clean and equipped like ours, but in a different corner of the

⁴² For a brief definition of 'jouissance', see Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject' (n 23) 694.

⁴³ Freud writes that the cathectic energy stored in 'word-presentations' derives not from any perception or sense but from 'sources within the id'. As such, when the id attaches the ego to a lost object (cause of desire), the superego unleashes the death drive on the melancholic ego. Resultantly, the ego is forced to offer a maniac defence. See Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (James Strachey ed, Joan Riviere tr, WW Norton and Co 1960) 54–55.

⁴⁴ See Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan* (Verso 2013) 220.

⁴⁵ Slavoj Žižek, 'Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!' in Ernesto Laclau, Judith Butler, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (Verso 2000) 108.

⁴⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso 2008) 184.

⁴⁷ Lacan writes that in the capitalist discourse, the lack gets integrated into the structure and desire, instead of enabling subjectivity, becomes a question of gratifying demand. Capitalism pretends that whatever we desire can be achieved through this commodity or that—one merely must have the means to fulfil her demand. Consequently, the castrating and existential dilemmas about the self—e.g., who am I?—are replaced by a fetishistic urge to fulfil the corporeal tension of *jouissance* with commodities. See Stijn Vanheule, 'Capitalist Discourse, Subjectivity and Lacanian Psychoanalysis' (2016) 7 *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5145885/>. Accessed 28 December 2020.

house. Make no mistake, no one sadistically discriminated against her. Still she had the word Bangladeshi etched on her skin, so the class divide was not just a façade for prejudices but, more profoundly, a psychopathic defence against the dreadful realisation that there is nothing innate separating *didi*'s lot from us which accords us entitlements and them a life of privation.

Mischievous enjoyment does not come naturally or biologically to the subject without a moral framework that can be surreptitiously transgressed.⁴⁸ Minimal othering, as a daily affair, discreetly generates the outlawed bliss of benefiting from oppression while absolving us of the most *immoral* practices of apartheid. Be it Eid or Diwali, we picked gifts for *didi* no less enthusiastically than for our cousins, trying our best to be mindful of her likes and needs. Yet her presents were always cheaper than the rest and never bought from dazzling malls or other consumerist refuges. Looking back now, I feel we did have genuine empathy and care for her. But the signifier's mark on her body sucked us into a pre-given terrain of a social domination where abjuring the surplus enjoyment in othering for othering's sake would have precluded access to our enunciated Assamese identities.⁴⁹

Abida *didi* is just one person, but the subaltern⁵⁰ service-provider resides in most moneyed Assamese households. Gradually, what begins as a strictly economic exchange morphs into an intersecting assemblage of emotional discharges. Abida *didi* too was deeply concerned about our family. An estranged son and an abusive husband propelled her towards our household for affective actualisation. When we had shifted to Nagaon, a new neighbour recommended her as a 'good *Miyani*'.⁵¹ With time, augmenting emotional investment effaced overt insults like '*Miya*' and 'Bangladeshi' from the vocabulary of our interaction, maintaining the us-against-them dichotomy only through subtle, invisible segregation. Abida *didis* depict the Assamese middle class's attempt to depoliticise the familiar immigrant faces inhabiting private sanctuaries. We want to deport every foreigner except the Abida *didi* we care for, not necessarily exorcising the ghost of hatred but merely excluding certain immigrants from their embattled disenfranchisement. In doing so, we do not directly rid the personal space of statist categories. On the contrary, withholding the private labourer's political assertiveness typecasts her as a menial caterer of our

⁴⁸ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* (n 20) 123.

⁴⁹ For more on the difference between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the enunciated, see n 32. See Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject' (n 23).

⁵⁰ While I use the term 'subaltern' as a placeholder for the marginalised without much theoretical import, I do wish to deploy two specificities of this concept. First, the facelessness of subaltern groups resembles the anonymity of immigrants. Us not caring about who they are and what their exact life worlds are—beyond the loose denomination Bangladeshi, which in Assam implies no well-laid-out linguistic, religious, or national identification—testifies to their subalternity. Second, the immigrant does not have a clear-cut class consciousness. Once we employ her at home and romanticise her work as deserving more 'care', 'empathy', and 'love' than sufficient wages, this private display of emotions attempts to transform her into something more than a banal labourer. That is, we try to keep the immigrant as a subaltern and preclude her awareness of her class. In response, as with Abida *didi*, her state of exception devises an eclectic politics of interacting with the civil society through affective, emotional, aesthetic, and at times even statist avenues.

⁵¹ *Miya* is a derogatory term for Bangladeshi immigrants. *Miyani*, its feminine equivalent, colloquially connotes Bengali-speaking women engaged in cheap manual labour.

life processes, while we ride on that appropriated surplus to exercise freedom in the public sphere. Abida *didis*' smiles and tears flow as proxies of our helplessness with the immigration deadlock, empowering the Assamese to pretentiously forge a happy and equanimous household with the emotional leftovers of their dispossessed personhoods. *Shoo them away*, to the confines of our houses, encasing the affective debt on our families.

Abida *didis* are a fantasy, a spectacular requital of Bangladeshi forethought with Assamese love that is too good to be true. We live this fantasy individually, tweaking the plot with personal experiences. But knowing that our compatriots similarly survive in the shared dramatics of subaltern emotional servitude moulds an imagined community around the domesticated body. At home, my empathy for Abida *didi* might have no second, but what seeps out to the public space is only the signifier Bangladeshi as a vacuous unit of national cohesion.⁵² Our impassioned connections with some immigrants extricate them from the dampened symbolics of the market. Capitalism, Lacan says, forestalls the subject from realising that it is lacking and fragmented since market rationality seamlessly gratifies existential dilemmas with one commodity or the other.⁵³ If Bangladeshis accordingly become replaceable productive labourers then the signifier would forsake the marauding potential that intimidates us with disjuncture. Put differently, if they become fungible workers, then the fundamental quandary of our Assamese consciousness, the immigration stand-off, would dissolve into quiet economic abstractions.⁵⁴ Capitalist reality offers two choices: either we reassume our abandoned class positions as workers or we become ideal employers who exploit self-interestedly. It 'rejects the incompatible idea' of extraordinarily feeling for certain Abida *didis*, conditioning us to behave in public as if they are expendable and 'as if the idea had never occurred to the ego at all'.⁵⁵ Envisioning a hardworking Assam, at its bare-bones level, transforms the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural dimensions of the conundrum into a banal collision of two labouring classes, neutralising the representations of socio-historical uniqueness into unpronounceable—hence inaccessible—elements of what we are.⁵⁶ In retaliation, we give the toiling body a face and relegate it to private confines, reviving minimally the foreclosed routine of othering that is required to dialectically become Assamese. We love our household immigrants, but we love them exceptionally as

⁵² See Jacqueline Rose, 'States of Fantasy' in Justin Clemens and Ben Naparstek (eds), *The Jacqueline Rose Reader* (Duke University Press 2011).

⁵³ Lacan writes that 'what distinguishes the discourse of capitalism is this: the *Verwerfung*, the rejection, the throwing outside all the symbolic fields ... of what? Of castration.' Tersely, this is the foreclosure of castration. Jacques Lacan, *Je Parle Aux Murs: Entretiens de La Chapelle de Sainte-Anne* (Jacques Alain-Miller ed, Seuil 2011) 96, cited and translated in John Holland, 'Editorial: Capitalism and Psychoanalysis' (2015) 8 *Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 1, 2.

⁵⁴ In other words, if Bangladeshi becomes just another signifier without its castrating potential, then it would no more split our conscious Assamese selves from the unconscious speaking subject and let us call ourselves Assamese.

⁵⁵ Freud's strongest statement of foreclosure is found in this essay, where Strachey and Anna Freud translate the verb *verwirft*—which, when nominalised as *Verwerfung*, becomes foreclosure—as 'rejects'. See Sigmund Freud, 'The Neuro-psychoses of Defence' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol III (James Strachey and Anna Freud trs, Hogarth Press 1962) 58.

⁵⁶ See Jacques Lacan, 'Commentary on the Graphs', *Ecrits* (n 22) 862.

Bangladeshis. Hauling them away from the market hampers the burgeoning of Bangladeshi marginality into a class consciousness, restoring them as peculiarly ‘inassimilable signifiers’⁵⁷ that cannot be harmonised anywhere, be it in workers’ struggles, our families, or the society. It is this reappearance of the non-integrable Bangladeshi mark on Abida *didi*’s body which strengthens the gulf between our toilets, gifts, and utensils. For all she does in someone else’s house, we capitalise on Abida *didi*’s emotional vulnerability by discreetly upholding her carceral Bangladeshi-ness. We *shoo her away*, closer to our families, in the private sphere where Bangladeshi difference is intimately incubated and then instrumentalised as a homogenous, unitary fantasy for national togetherness.

Assamese nationalism, albeit a mass movement uniting disparate social gradations, was launched with the middle-class reinvention of dormant cultural folklores.⁵⁸ The phantasmatic trope of the tender-hearted household help, likewise, perpetuates an elitist discourse quilting variegated hues of xenophobia. Regardless of whether one can afford a maid or if she has an Abida *didi* in her life, pragmatically relating to the movement itself ratifies the collective knowledge of the signifier Bangladeshi’s inassimilability.⁵⁹ Our repressive trends have operationalised a symbolic index of who deserves which gifts and who is a citizen to what extent. Law too is a wielder of such taxonomic violence. Not entrapment in ghettos, nor zombification in dehumanising detention camps, legal persecution, in its most wide-ranging version, works as an epistemology of our prosaic stigmas.

A case in point would be the Supreme Court’s verdict in *Sarbananda Sonowal v Union of India*.⁶⁰ Ruling on a petition filed by the previous Chief Minister of Assam, the Court struck down the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act, 1983 (IMDT Act).⁶¹ Passed during the Agitation, the IMDT Act devised a tribunal system for detecting illegal immigrants based on complaints from eligible citizens. This quasi-judicial chaos was shielding foreigners in plain view, and thus the Court declared the Act unconstitutional. The three-judge bench found it ‘elementary’ ‘that a person who has illegally come from Bangladesh to India and is residing here for his better economic prospects or employment etc. would never disclose that he has come from Bangladesh but would assert that he is an Indian national and resides in India.’⁶² Here, the Court resonated its fear of the unknown: the panic jittering the social netherworld that immigrants who speak and look like us would turn the Assamese into a minority in Assam. A Bangladeshi never wants to be a Bangladeshi, the Court educated us. But Abida *didi* was frank about her Bangladeshi lineage. Even

⁵⁷ See Jacques Lacan, *Seminar III: The Psychoses, 1955–56* (Jacques Alain-Miller ed, Russell Grigg tr, WW Norton and Co 1993) 325.

⁵⁸ Baruah, *India Against Itself* (n 7).

⁵⁹ Lacan writes: ‘The symbolic function presents itself as a twofold movement in the subject: man makes his own action into an object, but only to return its foundational place to it in due time. In this equivocation, operating at every instant, lies the whole progress of a function in which action and knowledge [connaissance] alternate.’ See Jacques Lacan, ‘The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis’, *Écrits* (n 22) 236.

⁶⁰ *Sarbananda Sonowal v Union of India* (2005) 5 SCC 665.

⁶¹ Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act 1983.

⁶² *Sarbananda Sonowal v Union of India* (n 60) [42].

though other immigrants may not be as straightforward, they go about their precarious lives inevitably bearing the signifier's imprint, silently digesting slurs and foregoing resistance. If the Court intently wanted to deport 'such Bangladeshi nationals who [had] illegally crossed the international border and taken up residence in Assam',⁶³ there was ample persecuted brawn appearing Bangladeshi enough, living in downtrodden villages, beleaguered sand bars, and unsanitary slums, that could have been subsequently illegalised. After all, the recently concluded NRC exercise proves that law creates its conditions of criminality and interdiction in hindsight.⁶⁴ The Court, like us, could see Bangladeshi blots on the national fabric, but the mysterious Other was staring back at it, disturbing its clarion vision with a perplexing lack and ambiguating who exactly a foreigner is.

This absence underlying clear sight—the indeterminacy assailing our otherwise certain awareness of what constitutes an immigrant—situates a vanishing point which we consider our own failure.⁶⁵ The Court knew that foreigners exist but nevertheless wanted something more than the IMDT Act; the Assamese know that trivial labourers are Bangladeshi but still cannot evict them; I know that Abida *didi* is an immigrant and yet disregard her impermissibility. We find new ways to call immigrants Bangladeshi, and then newer still. Equivocality provides the tabooed pleasure of hermeneutical addiction, kindling one interpretation too many. From the emotional insecurity of Bangladeshi presence in middle-class households to judicial pronouncements on sealing citizenship airtight, the phantasmic immigrant sews the Assamese homeland with its homogenous, empty significations.

If every home has an Abida didi who must not be shooed away, then most immigrants have already been rehabilitated—but only as Bangladeshis, and to be so unchangingly.

4 Act III: Infantility

*Biswa bijoyee naba juwan
Biswa bijoyee naba juwan
xaktixali Bharator
Ulai aha, ulai aha*

⁶³ Ibid. [81].

⁶⁴ Entry into the NRC required proof of legacy. This could be inclusion in the 1951 NRC or copies of electoral rolls up to 1971, property records, Permanent Resident Certificate, and certain other documentary evidences. For marginalised groups like internal migrants and landless labourers, these documents were a prohibited privilege. Two million people were excluded from the final draft, and although many of them could have been in Assam for a generation or two, the lack of documents ended up making them illegal immigrants. Therefore, the NRC is not an objective measure of whether one had crossed over before 1971 or after. Rather, its restrictive documentary focus co-opted the anonymity of subaltern populations and created criminals out of perfectly legal individuals. See generally Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, 'Nationwide NRC: Here's a List of Documents You May Have to Furnish if Assam Is the Model' (*The Wire*, 21 November 2019). <https://thewire.in/government/india-assam-nrc-documents>. Accessed 28 December 2020.

⁶⁵ See Lacan, *Seminar XI* (n 30) 83.

*Xantan tumi biplobor*⁶⁶

In school, I despised the music class. Every Monday and Thursday, they would ferry us in a queue to an under-construction terrace, making us sit on the floor over towels that we religiously carried from home. I loathed being smeared with thick dust, as a part-time teacher perfunctorily worked her harmonium, forcing a bunch of tone-deaf second-graders to repeat lyrics after lyrics. ‘*Biswa bijoyee naba juwan*’, she would sing. ‘*Bisssso vijay najawaaaaaaan*’, we would retort, half in slander, half in anticipation of the lunch break. Midway through the song, a stanza would go, ‘*ulai aha, ulai aha, xantan tumi biplobor*’.⁶⁷ *Biplob*, meaning revolution. We did not know that. But we did know that our friend was named *Biplob*, and whenever this line came, the whole class jeered and pointed fingers at the poor soul. The entire point of singing this song—or *Biplob’s gaan*,⁶⁸ as we had christened it—was to mock him petulantly.

Our deviation from the music teacher’s set routine, which itself became a routine, chased instinctual pleasure amidst the school’s regimented deference of enjoyment. The teacher, by her admission, was trying to ‘revolutionise’ the ‘young, impressionable’ minds of Assam’s future. She raised us to a habituality where *Biplob* could mean nothing except revolution, and we were supposed to not only inherit this signification but also substantiate it with meaningful action. Yet we refused her unilateral reality and resisted postponing pleasure while being taught a socially useful rhyme. The livid teacher would then shout at us: ‘A bunch of hooligans, that’s what you have become! Don’t you feel sorry disrespecting your motherland? Your parents have fought for it, you’ll realise when you grow up.’ The horror of punishment, coupled with the overwhelming guilt of blaspheming a sacred Thing, would bring us kids back to the disorienting reality. When the song would begin anew, we would sing all the stanzas diligently, unconsciously imbibing that *Biplob* means revolution, not our friend, and we were growing up to be revolutionaries. Then again, what does revolution mean?

Of course, the music period demonstrates shrewd recurrences of ideological indoctrination. More so, it illumines how austerities for a national dream do not oppose pleasure but voluntarily necessitate postponement, salvaging the ego and letting the agent of enjoyment live.⁶⁹ We consciously agreed to not taint the song, unbinding the untapped inner joy of proudly singing to our motherland. For

⁶⁶ Translation: The world-triumphing youth / The world-triumphing youth / Of powerful India [Bharat] / Come out, come out / You are the ward of revolution. Originally composed by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and popularly rendered by Dr Bhupen Hazarika in the 1939 film *Indramalati*.

⁶⁷ Translation: Come out, come out, you are the ward of revolution.

⁶⁸ Translation: *Biplob’s* song.

⁶⁹ Freud writes that the secondary process of the reality principle binds our free-flowing libidinal energy to objects and ideas, such as the Bangladeshi immigrant or the Assamese motherland. This preserves the ego and puts it in service of nurturing those things which the superego considers beneficial for civilisational progress. But ‘this does not imply the suspension of the pleasure principle.’ On the contrary, deferral of pleasure and monotonous subjection to the rigours of reality occur ‘on behalf of the pleasure principle; the binding is a preparatory act which introduces and assures the dominance of the pleasure principle.’ See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (James Strachey tr, WW Norton and Co 1961) 56.

a fleeting moment, devoutly pronouncing the lyrics felt as if we had reached an equilibrium, a safe space unperturbed by both capricious mischiefs and patriotic disservice. We never stopped taunting *Biplob* but slowly understood that our little devilment would have to be followed by a serious round of chorus. Mockery first, patriotism second—the former instituting our desire for the latter, placing in the first disjointed vocalics a surplus obstacle which properly singing the nationalist ode temporarily overcame.⁷⁰ Pleasure deferred itself, rerouting its attainment via a justified patriotic mode rather than classroom indiscretion, inaugurating the Assamese nation with jouissance as a wedged Otherness between the signifier's excision from *Biplob*'s person and its resultant entrenchment in revolutionary reveries.

But there is no surety that singing about an anti-foreigner uprising would weed out immigrants. The only certainty is death, a homeostasis exceeding the extinction or culmination of life. For death, the void which births life,⁷¹ dwells in our passions as the aftermath of chaotic pleasure,⁷² probabilising the equilibrium of calmness that fulfilling desires takes us back to.⁷³ Living death ill-fatedly in the roster of life fills us with a de-energising negativity,⁷⁴ and so does the propulsion behind our everyday hatred of Bangladeshis. Although recursive abhorrence provisionally ignites the fractured subject's pretence of being alive as Assamese, jingoistic revelries are exhausting us bit by bit. The more we contumaciously chisel the nation today, the more we push ourselves on a diversion to subjective elimination. Once the drive dies so would the enunciated identity, breaking apart its animative cathexis on the Bangladeshi object. *Biplob*, revolution, alienated my friend from himself, as we insatiably sang our hearts out to an impossible homeland espousing self-consuming violence.

The music period might have ended nearly fifteen years ago, but we are still trapped in an ebb of juvenility. Nationalist demands insinuate an almost infantile attachment to the maternal caregiver.⁷⁵ Yenning to identify with a motherland, to satisfy her reverently; fearing an emasculating foreign penetration into the common mother; articulating national completeness like a babyish cry of hunger, weeping unconditionally for the feminine caregiver's attention and projecting her abrasive disciplining character onto harmful immigrants—our illusory homeland

⁷⁰ Derrida tells us that 'the reality principle imposes no definitive inhibition, no renunciation of pleasure, only a detour in order to defer enjoyment, the waystation of a difference (Aufschub).' See Jacques Derrida, 'Notices (Warnings)' in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Alan Bass tr, University of Chicago Press 1987) 282–283.

⁷¹ This is what Derrida calls 'life death'. Ibid. 285.

⁷² Jacques Derrida, 'Paralysis', *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (n 70) 360.

⁷³ Pleasure always tries to attain this equilibrium and get rid of excitation. For instance, consider how sexual pleasure ending in an orgasm takes us to a provisionally balanced state free from the urge that was previously building up.

⁷⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (Verso 2008) 288–289.

⁷⁵ What I discuss here, more specifically, is the pre-oedipal stage. This part of psychic development, when the child yens for one-to-one identification with the mother, sets the stage for the phallic intervention of the father and the development of sexual desire. For a case study on Freud's conception of the Oedipus Complex, see for example Sigmund Freud, 'Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol X (James Strachey tr, Hogarth Press 1909).

retroactively introjects childhood memories.⁷⁶ These fantasies, tormented with the imminence of detachment from the feminine comforter, imagine a wholesome motherland before reality calls out its implausibility. Such past fears of foreign invasion unfold only when the helpless child has lost his mother to external masculine machinations, sowing seeds of uncertainty in him but also inciting a guarded understanding of an *I* against a *them* who steals his caregiver. Here, the invasive signifier has already latched onto a signified body, anthropomorphically segregating people into legitimate and illegitimate citizens.⁷⁷ ‘For six-hundred years no one could disturb indigenous Ahom rule in Assam. The Mughals came but failed, nineteen times. Then came the Burmese. They tortured us recklessly and sold off Assam to the British. Then came Bengalis from within India. And now we have Bangladeshis.’ In this chronology, Ahoms—themselves having emigrated in the 13th century from Mong Mao near the present Myanmar-China border⁷⁸—are good familial foreigners, a masculine castrating agency who dominated Mother Assam but also infused potency into her constituent children.⁷⁹ Bangladeshis are bad, because their fast-growing numbers may monopolise the mother away from her indigenous wards. Repressed infantile traumas regularly re/emerge in the ethnonationalist imaginaries pierced with detested foreignness, so much that the frightening ‘assumption of castration’,⁸⁰ the visceral inability to repay maternal attention, underwrites us with a bastardised desire to once again become one with the motherland. The fear of small numbers⁸¹ is a brooding fate destined for this impulse.

Predatory nationalism paranoically targets numerical minorities as irritants that disable majoritarian ascendancy over the claimed territory.⁸² Statistical methods like census aid in factually establishing the distance between cultural unity and political sovereignty over the nation. Bengalis, however, are not a miniscule group in Assam.

⁷⁶ These behaviours are a shorthand to identify pre-oedipal traits. The pre-oedipal is not a strictly chronological stage of psychological development. It is a fantasy of unity with the mother which is imagined in hindsight after the oedipal castration has already happened—after the father has monopolised the mother, reifying the child’s sexual desire for her. Lacan uses the term ‘pre genital’ to designate the pre-oedipal fantasies predating castration, ‘insofar as they are organized by the retroactive effect of the Oedipus complex’. See Jacques Lacan, ‘On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis’, *Ecrits* (n 22) 462.

⁷⁷ See Jacques Lacan, *Seminar IV: The Object Relation* (Alma Buholzer et al. trs, Earl’s Court Collective 2018) 11. Accessed 09 April 2021.

⁷⁸ See Edward Gait, *A History of Assam* (1st edn, Pragun Publications 2012); Swarna Lata Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (Munshiram Manoharlal 1985).

⁷⁹ Kakar argues that while oedipal conflict in the West creates tensions between the child and the father, in India, ‘carrying the weight of a strong pre-oedipal feminine identification and lacking a vivid, partisan father with whom to identify, the boy is more likely to adopt a position of “non-partisan” feminine submission towards all elder men in the family.’ See Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytical Study of Childhood and Society in India* (Oxford University Press 1978) 134.

⁸⁰ Jacques Lacan, ‘On Freud’s “Trieb” and the Psychoanalyst’s Desire’, *Ecrits* (n 22) 723.

⁸¹ Arjun Appadurai, ‘Fear of Small Numbers’ in *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Duke University Press 2006).

⁸² *Ibid.*

Composing around 29 per cent of the population,⁸³ they foist a perpetual impediment to Assamese linguistic supremacy. The final draft of the NRC too left out nearly two million people,⁸⁴ comprising a good 6.4 per cent of the state's strength.

We may still advocate deporting every immigrant, but we know that Bengalis, and even some Bangladeshis, are here to stay. Assamese preponderance will have to assimilate the hindrances instead of terminating them. Hence we tend to interpellate Bengali residents as Assamese-Bengalis—*Assamese* denoting a primary cultural affiliation and *Bengali* underlining the irrelevance of the language they speak at home. In fact, numerous Bengalis have long mentioned Assamese as their primary language in census interviews. This has been a tacit compromise between Assamese speakers and Bengalis who wish to remain here, locating a middle ground for alleged Bangladeshis to inhabit in the forbidden ethnoses. But recent jingoistic surges have shattered the delusion of acculturation, prompting many to reclaim their *Miya* otherness through poetry and literature.⁸⁵ Adding nefariousness to it, some political commentators from West Bengal with no stakes in Assam whatsoever, vying for political mileage in their constituencies, are beseeching Assamese-Bengalis to state their first language as Bengali in the upcoming 2021 census.⁸⁶ The state unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rode on these ethno-linguistic fissures to mollify anti-CAA anger in 2019. Although the Central Government portrayed the CAA as a benevolent relief for minorities in Muslim-majority subcontinental countries, the BJP dispensation in Assam tactfully proclaimed that enfranchising Hindu Bangladeshis was necessary to stifle the rise of a Bengali power group.⁸⁷ Bangladeshis predominantly vote for the anti-Assam, communal All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), while the new Hindu citizens would not only affirm Assamese as their mother tongue but also join forces with indigenous parties to defeat the AIUDF and its accompanying foreign transgressions—so did the government justify the CAA, especially in regional media. These uncanny political and ethno-cultural arrangements accentuate that the term Bangladeshi has no fixed meaning. The Agitation initially demanded 1951 as the cut-off date for entry from East Pakistan, then pushed it

⁸³ 'Distribution of the 22 Scheduled Languages—India/States/Union Territories', *Census of India* (2011). <https://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/Language-2011/Part-A.pdf>. Accessed 31 December 2020.

⁸⁴ Zeba Siddiqui and Zarir Hussain, 'Assam Leaves Nearly Two Million People off Citizens' List, Fate Uncertain' (*Reuters*, 01 September 2019). <https://in.reuters.com/article/india-politics-citizenship-idINKCN1VM133>. Accessed 09 December 2020.

⁸⁵ See Shoab Daniyal, "'I Am Miya': Why Poetry by Bengal-Origin Muslims in Their Mother Tongue Is Shaking Up Assam" (*Scroll.in*, 14 June 2019). <https://scroll.in/article/930416/i-am-miya-why-poetry-by-bengal-origin-muslims-in-their-mother-tongue-is-shaking-up-assam>. Accessed 01 January 2021.

⁸⁶ Arunabh Saikia, 'In Assam, Campaign Urging Bengali Muslims Not to List Assamese as Mother Tongue Has Sparked Protests' (*Scroll.in*, 09 June 2019). <https://scroll.in/article/926022/assam-drive-urging-bengali-muslims-not-to-list-assamese-as-mother-tongue-could-become-explosive>. Accessed 01 January 2021.

⁸⁷ See for example Himanta Biswa Sarma, 'My Speech on #CAA from Assam Legislative Assembly' [video] (Facebook post, 13 January 2020). <https://www.facebook.com/himantabiswasarma/videos/my-speech-on-caa-from-assam-legislative-assembly/1105942576420623/>. Accessed 01 January 2021.

to 1966 in the Accord, and finally settled for 1971⁸⁸ in the Citizenship Act.⁸⁹ After more than 30 years, the CAA shifted the limit again to 2014.⁹⁰ Transient delineations of Bangladeshi illegality underscore how the word rejects any meaning, pointing to itself and making sense only through other qualifiers. Concisely, it is a master or pure signifier.

As a master signifier, Bangladeshi derives from the Other's attic of signs without context, and thus meaning. But it is not a random master signifier. Melting history into itself, positing a radical alterity that no self wants to embrace, Bangladeshi is a signifier whose deeds are evil,⁹¹ for it splinters the unity of the Assamese subject. We think of them as a vacuous people intent on destroying not just Assam and the Assamese but everything that tumbles down their depthless void. Here Assamese nationalism meets pan-India xenophobia. Across the ideological spectrum, there is a consensus that illegal immigrants must be weeded out of the country. Otherwise, they would first wither Assam, second capture India, and then proceed to subdue 'London', 'America', and other places where they are present. The evilness of Bangladeshis defies any telos, since they will devour civilisation altogether to fruitlessly substantiate their lacking personhoods.⁹² Yet they are not evil in the banal, rational tradition of Nazi Germany. By branding them 'primitive', 'classless', 'barbarians', we deny Bangladeshis a systemic rule of malevolence and disdain the people as irrational hedonists itching to fill their nothingness with cultural debris.

If they are evil, are we not the same? Do our high-genocidal purges not demote the Assamese to the same pages of time that contain Hitler's blemishes? Some reckless comparisons in mainstream media would answer in affirmative,⁹³ but I oppose the hasty generalisation of Assamese xenophobia as neo-Nazism. Our authoritative voice forbids killing, though some desires and inclinations may at times be murderous. Nazi Germany ordained the contrary. There, the transcendental order was to kill

⁸⁸ For a brief note on how the cut-off date was effectively shifted to 1971 by amending the Citizenship Amendment Act, see the discussion on Clause 6 of the Assam Accord in n 7. 'Problems of Foreigners in Assam (the Assam Accord)' (n 7).

⁸⁹ 'Assam Accord' (1985) 20(33) *Economic and Political Weekly* 1369.

⁹⁰ See the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 (n 10) s 2.

⁹¹ As Rose says, evil denotes a deeply unsettling fear without any determinate location. We would happily claim that our most fundamental understanding is of the self, yet we cannot satisfactorily answer what and who exactly the *I* is. Similarly, we know of the bewildering fears and anxieties that the evil (Bangladeshi) provokes, but what is the content of evilness, where precisely is the evil, or who is speaking of someone as evil, are questions that defy answers. Jacqueline Rose, 'The Body of Evil: Arendt, Coetzee, and 9/11' in Clemens and Nappastek, *The Jacqueline Rose Reader* (n 52) 170–175.

⁹² Eagleton conceptualises the evil as an irrational impulse to substantiate the symbolic void within oneself, endlessly killing the signifiers of death responsible for its castration. See Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (Yale University Press 2011).

⁹³ See Nizam Pasha, 'In the Idea of an "All India NRC", Echoes of Reich Citizenship Law' (*The Wire*, 26 August 2019). <https://thewire.in/rights/assam-nrc-assam-nazi-reich-citizenship>. Accessed 01 January 2021; Suraj Gogoi, 'Psychology behind NRC Mirrors Narrow, Dominating Side of Assamese Language, and Its Fragile Nationalism, Cultural Identity' (*Firstpost*, 20 October 2019). <https://www.firstpost.com/india/psychology-behind-nrc-mirrors-narrow-dominating-side-of-assamese-language-and-its-fragile-nationalism-cultural-identity-7526031.html>. Accessed 01 January 2021; Nazimuddin Siddique, 'A Response to Hiren Gohain: The NRC Is a Product of Xenophobia in Assam' (2020) 55(14) *Economic and Political Weekly*. <https://www.epw.in/node/156735/pdf>. Accessed 04 December 2020.

Jews, though a great many Germans found it downright obnoxious. Assamese mass movements have time and again highlighted that the rule of law, even at its fatal most, cannot pacify the deep-seated cracks in our ego and solve the immigration issue. Rather than adopting law to kill Bangladeshis, non-violent subversive politics, in principle, is our revolutionary or *biplobi* strategy.⁹⁴ Fashioned as civil disobedience, the precondition to join the movement is individual will, not superior instructions. Our democratic protests—albeit they seek deportation en masse, which no doubt is pathetic—have become avenues for self-actualisation, outdating the contingency on an outward object for identity. Nazi Germany was obsessed with expunging the signifier. On the other hand, we are interested in keeping our protests alive, holding apart the master signifier Bangladeshi and all its negative significations of the nation. We might be a contemptuous, odious people, as much as anyone else. But superficially likening Assam to Fascism or Nazism is theoretically imprecise; it forces the nationalists into a cocoon, as a defence mechanism, where they intuitively disregard cogent criticisms too.

The self, scarred with the badness of others, revolves in vanity around itself, casting its own image and admiring it like a person worth looking up to. Narcissism is visible across nationalist movements, but we Assamese are becoming unsustainably self-obsessed. An uncle of mine happens to be a renowned Assamese poet and a darling of cultural advocates, at least he was until recently. In September, he published a poem comparing certain putative Ahom kings to bus drivers and ‘handymen’—the local lingo for conductors. The bus was figurative of the Assamese civilisation. Short-sighted ethnic organisations unsurprisingly missed this metaphor and could not control their cathartic indignation on seeing the great kings astride trifling workers. What followed were mortal threats, expletives, and the usual obscene tricks of a dented narcissist. Chauvinistic ideologues could not tolerate a cut on the motherland’s specular image that was embossed upon the serene waters of mundane hatred. Indeed, we have fixed a mirror before ourselves. The reflection therein is a gestalt, a whole belying the disjointed sense of our bodies that we cannot fully see without exterior projection.⁹⁵ We are smitten by our own picture. Anyone who tarnishes

⁹⁴ For instance, when violence broke out last December during the anti-CAA demonstrations, there was unanimous condemnation of any destructive action against the police as well as against immigrants. I hear from my mom that back in 1979, when Khargeshwar Talukdar was beaten to death by KPS Gill’s baton and he became the Agitation’s first martyr, *koka* heard the news over radio on the morning news. He is said to have poignantly sighed and remarked, ‘so, the first spot of blood.’ The previous night on 10 December, my dad, like other youths from the neighbourhood, stood guard on the road, determined to not let Begum Abida Ahmed, the former President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed’s wife, file her nomination from the Barpeta constituency for the upcoming state Assembly elections. Gill, who was then an IGP (Inspector-General of Police) in Assam Police, intended otherwise. He escorted her personally and ensured that the nomination was filed in the wee hours of the deadline. Khargeshwar Talukdar was killed that day. But it could have been my dad or anyone else. This digression apart, the point is that violence, without denying that it has occurred, is in principle an exception in Assamese nationalism and not the rule like Nazi Germany.

⁹⁵ See Jacques Lacan, ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’, *Ecrits* (n 22).

this splendid subjective transference,⁹⁶ Bangladeshis or my poet uncle, inarguably becomes a shadow of repulsion triggering aggressive discharges.

5 Act IV: Future anteriority

O mur apunar dex
O mur sikuni dex
Enekhon xuwola, enekhon xuphola
*Enekhon moromor dex*⁹⁷

The same music class where I learnt *Biswa bijoyee naba juwan* also taught me *O mur apunar dex*. Three schools and ten years later, just before graduating the twelfth grade, I came across some kindergarteners singing the song in a carpeted auditorium too posh for the old, dilapidated terrace. A music class with full attendance: clearly, they were being forced to sing in line with the State Government's directives. The kids followed their teacher's tones automatically but blurted out a fairly legible permutation of Assamese pronunciations. I wondered how many could actually understand the lyrics. Barely a few, I learnt after the class while trying to strike up a conversation with them. Apart from native Assamese, the group comprised Hindi speakers and other North-Easterners for whom the song was an alien modulation. Still, they all knew the song by heart, carolling it not desultorily but as an authentic retort to my comments on their poor Assamese skills.

What buttressed their Assamese-ness was the incantation, not meaning, nor signification. In skeletal phonetic singing, the kids sought a response from the amorphous entity to which they were acquiescing—that is, the Other, the symbolic nation, or me as a representative of the Assamese heritage—to double up my question into an answer about their subjecthood. Empty language fosters nationalist identifications. The hollow act of singing anthems and odes—as contextual articulation not contingent on a referent⁹⁸—engraves the becoming of someone, through performative narratives, with the future anterior of what I will have been once the song's vision is realised.⁹⁹ When we sing *O mur apunar dex*, even without grasping the lyrics,

⁹⁶ Transference implies the redirection of (the cause of) a person's feelings for someone or something towards the analyst. Whoever sings praises of the nation, even if we ourselves do in front of a mirror, receives the redirected love that we have for the motherland. Whoever disrupts this exchange gets categorised in the same rungs as Bangladeshis.

⁹⁷ Translation: O my endearing country / O my speckless country / So euphonious, so bounteous / Such a beloved country. This is Assam's state song. Written by Lakshminath Bezbarua and set to music by Kamala Prasad Agarwala.

⁹⁸ For example, when I was young, I used to think that *apunar* in the song meant 'your'. In Assamese, *apunar* is also the deferential second-personal possessive pronoun. Therefore, instead of O my *endearing* country, I believed for a long time that the lyrics meant O my-your (thus, our) country. Clearly, both are different referents. If the nation Assam is to be represented unflinchingly by this song, then it must separate itself from such an easily misunderstood object and its flimsy significations.

⁹⁹ Lacan argues that we become someone by losing ourselves to the object of language, not as a figment of history but in 'the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming'. See Lacan, 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis' (n 59) 247.

we pretend as if we *will have* become Assamese in a definite future despite all odds where nationalist representations no more remain incidental to the song's textuality but unite with our mind, body, and actions. Deferring the Assamese nation to a tomorrow—come it may never—implants it today as a future-perfect¹⁰⁰ 'possibilization of [an] impossible possible'.¹⁰¹

We behave as though Assam will have undeniably achieved its broken nationhood tomorrow—a patriotism so wishful that it 'looks forward to a future anterior of achieved solidarity and thus nurses the present'.¹⁰² My granduncle enrolled his daughter in an English-medium school but his son in an Assamese school. The son, untrained in speaking proper English, could never wrap his head around his father's quirky decision.

'I could have spoken Assamese at home and gone to an English-medium school at the same time. The importance of Assamese is dead, this is the age of English,' the son would complain.

My granduncle, himself educated in the US, was a devout lover of the Assamese language. He would reply: 'So what? Future generations in the family will marvel how you were an aberration in honing the language when everyone was jumping on the English bandwagon.'

For him, the true worth of Assamese had already been redeemed in the future and the need was just to pre-emptively prepare his son for that rendezvous. In the later stages of his life, stricken with Parkinson's, he could barely utter anything except a scant few words in his mother tongue. The daughter's children, who did not speak any Assamese, had no way to converse with him. The children hardly cared. But it surely was heart-breaking for the mother to see her father staring at the ceiling fan, muttering gibberish, while her kids could say nothing to comfort him. Her brother, the son, was the only person who could invoke coherent phrases out of my granduncle's mouth. Assamese won over English; the son was one up. Perhaps the future did send its tryst back.

Like the son's Assamese education, patriotic songs are prudent today because they will have become true tomorrow. Imagine writing a postcard. Addressing the letter, closing it with the sender's signature, transposes the event of signing to an already-happened future where the receiver has—but currently *will have*—got the post. The dispatch saves its future by virtually separating from the author and knitting an illusion of having reached the addressee.¹⁰³ Similarly, nationalist anthems, in order to travel throughout the motherland without individual proprietorship, never bank on a pre-given setting. Different people sing the same songs in different places.

¹⁰⁰ The future anterior is unlike Derrida's future to-come, which 'resists even the grammar of the future anterior'. Jacques Derrida, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (University of Chicago Press 2013) 97.

¹⁰¹ See Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (George Collins tr, Verso 2005) 29.

¹⁰² See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Harvard University Press 2012) 72.

¹⁰³ See Jacques Derrida, 'Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2)' in Peggy Kamuf (ed), *Without Alibi* (Stanford University Press 2002) 75; for de-centring and iterability, also see Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context' in *Limited Inc* (Gerald Graff ed, Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber trs, Northwestern University Press 1988).

We were taught the Assamese renditions of ‘We Shall Overcome’ and ‘Ole Man River’ in school as ‘patriotic melodies’, simulating an incomparable lifeline for the state without replicating the Civil Rights momentum. For translation across locales, nationalist verses decentre their performative context, sever the imagined genesis in a collective past, and flout any stable present to be iterable in various situations. What remains is the future anterior, encasing the nation’s sentimental pull, thrusting the toponymy of Assam on a forward march where we will have materialised its social, economic, and affective quotient into political sovereignty.

*Enekhon xuwola, enekhon xuphola, enekhon moromor dex.*¹⁰⁴ Bountiful, euphonious, beloved. Love is in the air, we sing of it yearningly but return to knowing that Assam is famished, smothered, and contested once the song ends. Emotions, therefore, must wait a bit longer till our love letter reaches the motherland, subduing her opponents and converting the *will have to has happened*.

But that final goal is bound to evade the present, always suspending the future in an endless slippage of political (in)completeness. Beginning from the void without precedence like everyone moors the hybrid Assamese identity in irremediable differences with our fellow residents.¹⁰⁵ If not immigrants, then we will find alterity in Indian Bengalis, or Marwaris, or other North-Eastern peoples, or even mainland Indians against whom separatism used to rage in the 1990s and 2000s. Who we are is a function of who others are and we are not. Assamese nationalism is precisely a *longue durée* to subsume these social antagonisms within political dominance. In our case, the immigration impasse has been instituted by political intercessions. The Chief Commissioner of Assam, towards the end of the nineteenth century, wanted to cultivate the region’s unproductive wastelands and riverine sand bars. Although only a few immigrants arrived then, the wholesale onset of peasants from Sylhet and Mymensingh at the turn of the next century drastically altered the scenario.¹⁰⁶ The bifurcation of Greater Sylhet into an eponymous division in East Pakistan and Cachar in India further intensified a citizen/alien binary among people who had long cohabited in the Surma-Barak Basin.¹⁰⁷ No doubt colonial capitalism started the problem, but martial persecution during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War brought throngs of Bengali refugees to Assam’s doors. In short years, electoral rolls swelled up exponentially. When Students’ Union leaders noticed as many as 47,000 new ‘Doubtful Voters’ while preparing for a by-election in 1979, they instantly connected the inexplicable surge with these recent incursions.¹⁰⁸ Thus began the Agitation.

¹⁰⁴ Translation: So euphonious, so bounteous, such a beloved country.

¹⁰⁵ Though Bhabha writes with reference to the postcolonial clime, social difference constitutes all identities, not just those composing the Assamese nation. See generally Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge 1994).

¹⁰⁶ Debarshi Das and Arupjyoti Saikia, ‘Early Twentieth Century Agrarian Assam: A Brief and Preliminary Overview’ (2011) 46(41) *Economic and Political Weekly* 78; Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland* (Anthem Press 2004) 210–211.

¹⁰⁷ Sanjib Baruah, ‘The Partition’s Long Shadow: The Ambiguities of Citizenship in Assam, India’ (2009) 13(6) *Citizenship Studies* 593, 599.

¹⁰⁸ Reddi, ‘Electoral Rolls with Special Reference to Assam’ (n 6).

Today, we are mainly pursuing a political resolution: disenfranchisement, correcting delinquent voters' lists. 'Never mind, we may not be able to deport Bangladeshis. But they must not get voting rights. If they can't vote, then immigrants can't wield real power to harm us. Just delete their names, that's what the NRC should do.' We override the misdeeds of imperial misadventures with a presumed power sharing struggle—overpower social history with political demographics—and disguise the classist, hateful socius as a primarily political issue. Inevitably, the solution too must be political, a legal claim fitting representative democracy.

Insurgency nowadays retains little appeal in Assam. Militaristic secessionism has transformed into a feeble appetite for autonomy and a much bolder call to reclaim illegally encroached lands, illicit electoral rolls, or the constitutional socialscape at large. But these manoeuvres can never entirely consist in the legal domain, even if our rhetoric says so. Every political decision is singular to an extent. If produced completely with a rule, it would be no decision but merely continuation. Feeling that something is wrong about the status quo impels change, provoking a claim exceeding the tried-and-tested 'juridico- or ethico- or politico-cognitive deliberations'.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, choosing one possibility out of infinite variants cannot claim the universality of being right—or even being decidable, something that inherently quells the alternatives through choice—without contingency on an existing structure for legitimacy. We fight against the 'porous legality'¹¹⁰ which has allowed immigrants to stay only to secure our politics as lawful, symbiotically arresting the dislocation of both legal efficacy and Assamese potency. 'Assamese Indian', 'democratic activism', 'federal autonomy'—these commonplace phrases complement our renegade nationalism with genial epithets. Dependency on Indian democracy or state law indicates that our lacking selves require a supplement from the outside for strength, while we obsequiously harvest extrinsic grace to cover the originary lack and dispel the loss afflicted by immigrants.

*O mur xuriya mat, oxomor xuwodi mat, prithivir kotu, bisari zonomtu, nupuwa korileü pat.*¹¹¹ If Assam has what no one else does, then why do we have to rely on unscrupulous political leaders and the step-motherly Indian polity for self-realisation?

I do not contend that Assamese nationalism would fizzle away without its stalwarts. Since the electoral demise of the Assam Gana Parishad in 2001, till the 2019 anti-CAA protests, there were no mass mobilisations against immigrants and the

¹⁰⁹ Ernesto Laclau, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony' in Chantal Mouffe (ed), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (Routledge 1996) 55.

¹¹⁰ I borrow the expression 'porous legality' from Lawrence Liang. Liang uses it in a positive manner, connoting a distrust for the myths of law—like the rule of law and access to justice—that enables disenfranchised social movements to negotiate with the political economy through a variety of extra-legal means. I, on the other hand, use it negatively to denote the Assamese people's dissatisfaction with immigration and citizenship laws for allowing Bangladeshis to drive through the gaps of legality and participate in our political and civil society formations. Lawrence Liang, 'Porous Legalities and Avenues of Participation' in *Sarai Reader 05: Bare Acts* (2005) 6. <http://archive.sarai.net/files/original/8d57bfa1bc b57c80a7af903363c07282.pdf>. Accessed 09 April 2021.

¹¹¹ Translation: O my melodious voice, the soothing tune of Assam—nowhere in the world will you ever find, even if you scour through life.

Students' Union had mostly taken a back seat in the state's affairs.¹¹² During these years, we compensated for the vertical leadership deficit with a curved 'affective value', stitching 'the group through the process of horizontal identification' among its constituent members.¹¹³ Our togetherness chiselled out a sociability that reimbursed the Indian political establishment's aloofness. Forgotten and forfeited, we built the nation right there and then as an everyday fact of mundane iterability, collating our political articulations under the title of Assam. On Facebook posts, lavatorial graffiti, and printed Che Guevara T-shirts, in casual talks, vernacular publications, and shared daydreams, the signifier Assam continues to be routinised in contradistinction with Bangladeshis. Stimulating the homeland in this unconscious automatism ensures that the nationalist who sends a postcard with his future-perfect identity 'receives from the receiver his own message in inverted form'.¹¹⁴

The future anterior may never transpire. But the *will-have-ness* guarantees the half-formed subject that the event has happened in the future, whereas the present circularly receives signs of its fulfilment in a time capsule. Whenever I hear of my father's exploits during the Agitation, I feel no nostalgia. I did not live through that period. Instead, I start bearing the brunt of a time ahead which waits upon me to retrieve his dispossessed rebellious vigour. What was taken away from him must come back to his remains, to his son. Only then does desire make sense, overruling the suicidal depression of being incurably voided. For the dispatcher who sings the nation retains his trace on the patriotic letter as a metaphorical subject to whom the motherland *will have* returned despite its current possessor, Bangladeshis or otherwise. In this traverse, the nation's frame might change as we keep on rewriting the signifier's course.¹¹⁵ Fluid cut-off dates and evolving electoral arrangements prove the shifting trajectories of what the word Assam represents. Nevertheless, it will arrive at its destination; not at some historically immutable origin but wherever and however Assam today is, such that the here-and-now itself is the terminal.¹¹⁶

Bangladeshi disenfranchisement proportionally implies our impossible citizenship. Their subalternity highlights our deficient privilege; their statelessness our

¹¹² After the student leaders who had spearheaded the Agitation stepped into electoral politics with the formation of the AGP, student organisations diversified into university-level elections and new sites of advocacy. See Kaustubh Deka, 'Youth Activism and Democratic Politics in India's Northeast: 2014 Election in Perspective' (Policy Report No. 14, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy 2015) 47–52. https://www.thehinducentre.com/multimedia/archive/02670/Policy_Report_No_1_2670863a.pdf. Accessed 09 May 2021.

¹¹³ See Jacques Lacan, 'British Psychiatry and the War' (2000) 4 *Psychoanalytical Notebooks of the London Circle* 9, 11.

¹¹⁴ See Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on the "Purloined Letter"', *Ecrits* (n 22) 30.

¹¹⁵ Lacan says that the signifier will always reach its destination. Derrida, disagreeing with him, argues that it may as well not. For Derrida, what is construed as the destination depends on the text's frame, and the signifier often shuttles between different intersubjective relations within varying frames and sub-frames. This is not an irreconcilable difference but an issue of textual limitations, which Barbara Johnson harmonises in her own take on Poe's 'The Purloined Letter'. I will delve more into it in the next footnote. See Jacques Derrida, 'The Purveyor of Truth' (1975) 52 *Yale French Studies* 31.

¹¹⁶ Johnson writes that the signifier arrives at its destination, such that wherever it is in the signifying chain is its provisional destination. See Barbara Johnson, 'The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida' (1977) *Yale French Studies* 457.

nationlessness; their invisibility our myopia; they, us. What we experience as disjuncture is impetus for collective imagination, forging the nation through repetition ‘not of sameness but of otherness’.¹¹⁷ Apart from foreigners, Assam itself is its other. Every iteration of the signifier establishes it anew, evoking not a pre-existing nation but instituting it simultaneously as an ontological space in the phoneme of that voice. The timeless past and a better future, rather than being different temporal registers, are fantasies reposed in the nation’s present inventory of rhetoric. We are all jailmates in current discontents, performing our ordinary¹¹⁸ desire for citizenship, nationality, and subjectivity in the discursive ground of everyday antagonism.

*O mur upoza thai, O mur Oxomi Aai, sai lou ebar, mukhoni tumar, hepah mur poluwa nai.*¹¹⁹ Our longing will never be sated. If it does, there will be no libidinal energy left to propel us to what will have happened. Devoid of the *will-have*, the present will disintegrate into singularly experienceable temporal units free from desire or hatred. Without aspiration there is no nation.

6 Epilogue: What am I?

Human existence irrupts from nothingness and jostles itself to its expressible limits in negation. Not this, not that—then what am I?

I left Assam for university in 2017, my first permanent stint outside the state. I was ready for the usual stereotypes, but the total expanse of mainstream ignorance was unbelievably startling. Someone once remarked, ‘you are from Guwahati? I thought you were from Assam.’¹²⁰ Coming from a fellow undergraduate educated in a two-hundred-year-old illustrious convent, the carelessness took me aback. But soon I realised innocent oblivion was more comforting than patronising knowledge. An acquaintance once tried edifying me that Assam’s capital is Dispur, not Guwahati.¹²¹

‘Bro, I am telling you, the capital of your state is Dispur and not Guwahati.’

‘It’s the same thing. Dispur is a locality in Guwahati.’

‘Still bro, Dispur is the capital. I know, have read in *general knowledge* books.’

¹¹⁷ See *Ibid.* 504.

¹¹⁸ One may argue that for immigrants, citizenship and nationality are questions of life and death beyond the ordinary. True, they live in a state of exception coloured by the absence of these bestowals. But necropolitical forces spatialise the exception into a nearly permanent state of being, where temporal emergency becomes unbending normalcy. Thus, citizenship—privileged or prejudiced—is an ordinary matter in the sense of everydayness, and death is common to all in this hermeneutical operation—physical or symbolic, annihilating or melancholically self-consuming, but real in every case. See generally JA Mbembé, ‘Necropolitics’ (2003) 15(1) *Public Culture* 11, 11–14.

¹¹⁹ Translation: O my land of birth, O my Mother Assam, let me see your face once more, for my longing hasn’t been sated.

¹²⁰ Guwahati is the capital of Assam.

¹²¹ Dispur is a locality in the city of Guwahati where the State Assembly and Secretariat are located. Other government offices are spread throughout the city. It is geographically and administratively impossible to tell Dispur apart from Guwahati. For example, they both have the same municipal corporation and the same police commissioner.

‘And I live there. Wouldn’t I know better?’

‘But bro, Dispur is the capital.’

He was serious, not joking. At least I hope so, because having read up and then promoting one’s misinformed cognition is a better defence than showcasing thoughtlessness.

Another common jibe I regularly receive is being supposedly ‘Chinese’. Assam does not even border China, I tried reasoning. When that did not work, I offered my racialised body itself as a defence: my skin is brown, my eyes are visibly sized, my family follows Hinduism, and I do not eat dogs or snakes. Differentiating myself from our ‘mongoloid’ neighbours, however, did not prove to be of much help either. The signifier’s affect, after all, is not contingent on anthropomorphic meaning. Finally, I acceded to the taunt: ‘Yes, wish I could be Chinese! At least would have lived in a better country with a higher GDP, smoother roads, and tastier food.’ Magically, I was liberated from the imposed South-East Asian lineage. That is, only to be called a ‘Bangladeshi’ and ‘Bengali’ nowadays.

Assam is a depraved memory which no one wants in their grey cells. Last February, we organised a 12-hour sit-in protest against the CAA at Jindal Global University. The dissident move involved boycotting classes, but we were afraid of losing out on attendance. So we mailed and texted our professors to cancel classes. Some of them did not relent, hence we suspended our raging defiance and promptly attended their lectures, returning to the protest once the roll was marked. It was a resistance of convenience, but resistance nonetheless. When our repository of Urdu poems and catchy slogans ran dry, people began taking turns to convey how grateful they were for the support community at university. One guy stood up and remarked: ‘All this positivity is nonsense! Do you know of the persistent violence in Kashmir and Assam? Two states that have suffered the worst.’

No one clapped, no one said anything in support. I could have relished the discomfiting silence much longer, but right then someone else came on the dais. ‘Alright, since the last speech was so negative, I have something optimistic to say. I was afraid how hostile college might be, but events like this make me feel comfortable ...’ We went back to clapping and sloganeering and fuelling misplaced gusto, ending our charitable boycott with the national anthem.

After my first year in college, I returned home as a tenacious adherent of the left-liberal ecosystem. The immigration myth had injected too much hatred into Assam, and I was intent on making my parents more ‘progressive’. From breakfast to car rides, I let them know how ‘distasteful’ and ‘regressive’ anti-Bangladeshi politics was. In response, my father just took me to Khargeshwar Talukdar’s¹²² birthplace in Bhawanipur near Barpeta and asked, ‘would you like to explain to his family why their martyred son’s death was regressive?’ Next year we visited the remoter parts of Assam where I had grown up. As I met our old friends and neighbours, mom kept revealing how some of them had lost their ancestral homes during the Agitation. They were common Assamese, like anyone else in the state. Yet Bengali-speaking Muslims had burnt their villages, and I am sure I could not have mustered the

¹²² See n 94. Khargeshwar Talukdar was the Agitation’s first martyr.

courage to tell them that we did something similar in Nellie.¹²³ Dolly Aita used to stay next to the house where my dad spent his childhood. We still live there. She was married in Rangpur, presently in Bangladesh. During the partition, she migrated to India along with her sons. Her eldest son, given his upbringing and education in the erstwhile East Bengal, could not speak Assamese properly. When the Language Movement was at its peak in the 1960s, proposing the replacement of Bengali with Assamese as the state's official language,¹²⁴ he was once stopped by a mob and coerced into proving his indigenous credentials. He could not even utter two sentences in chaste Assamese without a Bengali accent. In anger, the mob hacked him to death. How do I embrace these contrasting stories of loss and violence without resorting to whataboutery, while still cherishing my Assamese-ness?

Be it racist taunts or heedless protests, pogrom or martyrdom, I do not want to tuck away any dissonance in my identarian warehouse. But if I am not Indian enough and Assamese enough and humane enough, what am I?

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

¹²³ The Nellie Massacre happened mostly in 14 villages around Nellie in central Assam on 18 February 1983. Building on simmering ethnic tensions and opposing the unwanted imposition of Assembly elections that year, rural peasants and indigenous mobs killed anywhere between 2,000 to 10,000 Bengali Muslims. See Makiko Kimura, *The Nellie Massacre of 1983: Agency of Rioters* (1st edn, Sage Publications 2013).

¹²⁴ A fair demand, I would argue. When Assam was ceded to the East India Company in 1826 via the Treaty of Yandabo, it was placed in the Bengal Presidency. Since then, Bengali had been the language of instruction in the region. The movement was staunchly opposed in the Bengali-majority Barak Valley. Interestingly, Bengali Muslims (the most indelible Bangladeshis today), along with indigenous Cacharis and Manipuris, called for a peaceful resolution of the ongoing violence by upholding Assamese as the state's sole official language. See generally Sandhya Goswami, 'Assam's Language Question: A Political Analysis for the Period 1947 through 1961' (PhD thesis, Gauhati University 1990) 180. https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/67093/12/12_chapter%205.pdf, Accessed 06 December 2020.