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The Silent Strangers in the Eternal City

The Monumental Barrier Between Rome and Its Migrants

“I see the Colosseum daily on my way to work, but I’ve never been inside… I took some pictures of me with it in the background to send home, it is very old, very huge and beautiful with the lights in the evening… But I don’t know what it is about.” Dipu Sheikh (pseudonym).

Dipu is 28 years old and has lived in Rome for nearly four years, but his experience of the city is far removed from the glamorous image many might imagine. Dipu lives in a shared apartment with six other tenants in Torpignattara and works in a restaurant in Monti, one of Rome’s more affluent, tourist-heavy neighborhoods. “Torpignattara is almost like Bangladesh,” he tells me. “It is rundown, dirty, and full of Bangladeshis. You can speak Bangla and get by just fine.” Every day, on his way to work, he passes by some of the city’s most famous landmarks, including the Colosseum. For Dipu, these monuments hold no personal meaning, just towering reminders of a history that seems distant and irrelevant to his daily struggles.

For migrants like Dipu, even when opportunities to engage with these historical spaces exist, there is often a reluctance to approach them. The churches, for instance, are not just places of worship but repositories of art, history, and religious significance that migrants may find difficult to interpret or relate to. They do not merely represent a different faith but a different ‘worldview’, one that feels distant and foreign. This adds yet another layer to the feeling of being rejected by the Eternal City, where the cultural wealth of Rome seems impenetrable. Even the physical proximity to these monuments does not translate into cultural access or emotional belonging. Instead, the migrant feels the weight of a history that he cannot interact with meaningfully.

This is a paradox of Rome for many migrant workers like Dipu. While tourists flock to the Eternal City to immerse themselves in its rich cultural heritage, the very people who keep the touristic city functioning are often excluded from accessing or understanding this history. Dipu's home in Torpignattara reflects the social and economic marginalization of migrant communities, a neighborhood with strong ties to Bangladesh but little resemblance to the Rome celebrated in guidebooks. The grandeur of Rome's historical monuments, like the Colosseum, serves as a barrier, not just physically but symbolically, reminding migrants of their status as outsiders—strangers living in a city that never quite feels like home. While Rome markets itself as a cosmopolitan destination to global visitors, a sizeable portion of its own labor force composed of migrants, remains strangers from the very culture that the city thrives on. They exist within sight, even within reach, but remain part of a world that feels alien. This phenomenon, where the physicality of these monumental sites feels inaccessible to certain segments of the population, can be understood as a "monumental barrier"—a barrier created by the structures themselves, dividing those who partake in their history and meaning from those who only observe them in passing. The towering edifices become walls that separate Rome's most marginalized inhabitants from any sense of connection to the city's past and identity.

Consider the experience of Mohammad Asad, a Bangladeshi shop assistant who works in a small makeshift souvenir shop near Castel Sant'Angelo. The fortress-like structure, with its rich layers of history, captivates millions of visitors each year. For Mohammad, too, it remains a visually striking presence—towering just behind his souvenir shop. When asked if he had ever visited, Mohammad nodded, smiling modestly. "Yes, I went," he said, explaining that admission is free on the first Sunday of every month. A seasoned observer of the site's activity, he even gave advice on the best time to go: "You should go early to catch the line."

When asked what he thought of Castel Sant'Angelo, his face lit up briefly. "It's very

big and gorgeous," he remarked. He spoke about its impressive scale and beauty, suggesting I should visit it myself. But his voice grew quieter when I asked if he knew what it represented. He hesitated, then smiled with a mix of humility and sadness, saying, "That is beyond my knowledge." He explained that he studied only until grade 8 in Bangladesh before leaving school to work and help support his family. His village education, which provided him with limited means, left him unable to understand the historical information displayed inside Castel Sant'Angelo, even if he had wanted to.

Mohammad's experience embodies the monumental barrier in a different way. He has physically entered one of Rome's most iconic historical sites and marvelled at its architectural beauty, yet he remains disconnected from its deeper cultural and historical meanings. The knowledge that would make this site resonate with him is inaccessible, not only because of language but because of the vast gap in cultural capital—a chasm created by socioeconomic circumstances that forced him out of school and into the workforce. Despite the fact that he lives in the shadow of Rome's historic splendor, the full weight of its meaning remains out of reach, something he can admire but not truly understand.



Fig. 1 *A vendor from a migrant background working in the shadow of Castel Sant'Angelo, one of Rome's most iconic heritage sites. Photo: Punny Kabir.*

This experience mirrors Georg Simmel's concept of the "stranger" (1950): an individual who exists within a society but is not truly part of it. For the migrant in Rome, this "strangeness" is both physical and symbolic. They move through the city's historic landscapes yet remain distant from its deeper meanings. The heritage sites that connect tourists to Rome's past instead serve as monumental barriers for the migrant, reinforcing their sense of estrangement and making it harder to claim a sense of belonging in a city so steeped in history. The monuments serve as visible, powerful reminders of their symbolic exclusion, standing as testaments to a cultural lineage that they can observe but never fully participate in.

Simmel's concept traditionally describes someone integrated into a society while remaining emotionally and spatially distant. Migrants like Mohammad Asad, who works in a small shop opposite Castel Sant'Angelo, find themselves both insiders and

outsiders. Despite living and working in the city, they feel more "strange" than the cosmopolitan tourists who briefly pass through. In Rome, this dynamic takes on a new layer with the city's influx of millions of tourists, each arriving to explore its historical grandeur. These visitors, though temporary strangers, come to indulge in the city's ancient ruins, churches, and artistic treasures, welcomed into Rome's symbolic space and encouraged to explore its cultural depths. Though they are not permanent residents, they are never made to feel excluded from the city's narrative. For the migrant worker who may have lived in Rome for years, however, the experience is often one of lingering estrangement. Their connection to the city is not shaped by curiosity or the desire to explore, but by labor. Rome's grand monuments, which to tourists symbolize culture and civilization, to the migrant can often signify exclusion and distance.

For someone like Dipu, who said Rome was not the "*bidesh*" (foreign land) he had imagined, the monumental architecture he passes daily—like the Colosseum, known to him only as "the big round one"—remains mysterious. When he asked a friend about it, the answer—a description of an ancient stadium—left him unmoved. What tourists perceive as symbols of Western heritage often remain inaccessible artifacts to many migrants. These architectural marvels tell a story of civilization and culture for visitors, while for migrant workers, they frequently serve as backdrops to a daily life marked by alienation and lack of access to cultural capital.



Fig. 2 *A bustling street in Rome's iconic Piazza Navona, a popular tourist destination home to significant heritage monuments, where migrants from the Global South are frequently seen working as street vendors. Photo: Punny Kabir.*

In Simmel's terms, the stranger here is not the visitor but the migrant whose daily routine entwines with the city's rhythms yet remains detached from its deeper meanings. The visitor, with fleeting yet meaningful engagement, can access Rome's history through guided tours, museum visits, and curated narratives. The migrant, however, navigates these symbols without context, encountering a city whose layers of history weigh upon them as an added form of exclusion. They move near these heritage sites, often working in their vicinity, but remain distant from Rome's narrative, in a state of silent yet constant estrangement.

The monumental barrier is particularly potent in cities like Rome, Athens, or Paris—epicenters of Western civilization, where symbols of ancient history, empire, and cultural achievement are deeply intertwined with a sense of European identity. These cities are more than urban landscapes; they are cultural narratives etched in stone and marble, revered as heritage sites that embody the ideals of Western civilization. In recent decades, however, economic migrants from the non-Western

world have arrived in increasing numbers, drawn by the hope for work and stability. Yet, they find themselves at odds with the very fabric of the cities in which they reside. The heritage these cities proudly display is meant to connect people to a shared cultural lineage, but for many migrants, it is an alienating force—a monumental barrier that separates them from the symbolic meaning these spaces hold.

The experiences of economic migrants like Dipu and Mohammad reaffirm that "shared heritage" is a fundamentally Western construct, implying a common cultural memory accessible only to those with the privilege and background to interpret its meanings. Tourists and elite cosmopolitans from across the world might indeed feel a connection to this shared past, educated to understand the significance of these spaces as markers of human civilization. For those outside this cultural orbit, however, especially economic migrants, this heritage is far from shared. It is a reminder of an exclusionary history that is celebrated yet inaccessible. This barrier is not like a luxury restaurant or a premium space where access depends merely on financial means. Unlike a high-rise rooftop restaurant that one might hope to visit one day with enough money, the monumental barrier is more complex. It is not simply an economic class issue that money could solve; it is a barrier formed by cultural distance and historical dislocation that can't be bridged by economic success alone.

In this sense, the monumental barrier represents a form of exclusion that is subtle but profound. It is rooted in education, cultural familiarity, and historical belonging. It is the inability to "decode" what these symbols mean, a chasm between those who have been culturally primed to interpret these symbols and those who haven't. For the migrant who labors in the shadow of Rome's architectural grandeur, the dream of "belonging" to the city's storied past feels as distant as ever. The barrier they face is monumental not merely because it is physically imposing but because it represents the weight of a history in which they remain unseen and unheard, more

present than ever yet still on the periphery of what these cities mean.

Tourists arrive in Rome drawn by its grandeur, eager to immerse themselves in its storied past and cosmopolitan charm. They walk its ancient streets, seeking the echoes of emperors and artists, indulging in curated experiences that promise a taste of history and global sophistication. Yet beneath this polished allure, another Rome thrives—one shaped not just by monuments, but by the quiet, persistent imprints of those who call it home. Their stories may not yet have a place in the dominant historical and cultural canon, but they are shaping the city's future. Migration is, after all, a process that transcends cultural and political boundaries—one that, in many ways, defines the city itself. Migrants, however, do not align with the popular imaginary of cosmopolitans as affluent, educated elites who navigate global cities with ease. Instead, their experiences reflect an alternative cosmopolitanism—what Agier and Fernbach (2016, 76) describe as "the experience of those women and men who experience the concreteness and roughness of the world."

While tourists experience Rome through fleeting engagements with its artistic and historical grandeur, migrants leave a more lasting imprint. They carve out spaces of belonging within an often unwelcoming urban landscape, weaving together languages, cuisines, and traditions that challenge rigid notions of national identity. Skrbis and Woodward (2007, 735) describe this as "everyday cosmopolitanism"—the cosmopolitanism embedded in "what people eat, watch, listen to, shop for and buy, and dream about." Migrants engage in cultural exchanges driven not by leisure but by necessity, a survival-driven cosmopolitanism that unfolds in the peripheral neighborhoods where they settle, far from the polished commercial centers that cater to tourists and expats.

As Werbner (2006, 497) notes, there are multiple cosmopolitanisms coexisting in late modernity, each with its own history and distinctive worldview. In Rome, this multiplicity is evident in the contrast between the mainstream cosmopolitanism

found in gentrified spaces and the marginal cosmopolitanisms of working-class migrant districts. The former is shaped by curated experiences designed to appeal to mobile elites, while the latter emerges from a collective need to sustain livelihoods in the city. Thomas Nail (2015, 193) reminds us that migrants have historically played a critical role in reshaping urban spaces, noting that "while states and other institutions have slowly opened the polis walls over the course of civilization, there has always been a group on the other side forcing them open or tearing them down—the migrants of history." Migrants are not just passive seekers of inclusion; they actively forge their own forms of cosmopolitanism, shaping new cultural landscapes beyond the boundaries imposed upon them.

This dynamic was evident in a small café in Torpignattara, where I met a Bangladeshi migrant who had invited me to hear about his journey from Libya to Italy. As we entered, he greeted the Italian waiter with familiarity and introduced me as a newcomer to the neighborhood. To my surprise, the waiter smiled and responded, "Buon giorno," followed by "*amar bondhu*" (Bengali for "my friend") with a proud smile. I was caught off guard. I looked at my companion, who chuckled. "This is my regular spot," he explained. "We teach each other bits of our languages." It was a small exchange, barely a few words, but it carried a weight beyond its simplicity. It spoke of routine, familiarity, and a quiet sense of belonging that many migrants struggle to find. Here, in this unassuming café, language wasn't a barrier—it was a bridge. And perhaps, in the midst of their own everyday lives, neither the Bangladeshi worker nor the Italian waiter thought much of it. But to an outsider like me, this moment, seemingly ordinary, was a quiet assertion of presence—a cosmopolitan exchange outside institutional frameworks, born from everyday life in a migrant neighborhood.

Migrants, like the waves of newcomers before them, are leaving their mark, even if it remains unrecognized in Rome's dominant historical imagination. Their presence unsettles the illusion of an uninterrupted European past, yet they remain excluded

from the meanings attached to the city's grand symbols—its ancient ruins, imperial relics, and Renaissance masterpieces. These monuments, which stand as testaments to power, conquest, and civilization, reflect a history that often disregards those who arrived later, those whose labor sustains the city but whose stories are not commemorated in its marble and stone.

However, this exclusion does not render them passive. Rather than merely navigating the city as outsiders, migrants transform its social fabric through their daily lives, forging cosmopolitanisms of survival, exchange, and reinvention. In the very neighborhoods that lie beyond the monumental core, they cultivate new cultural landscapes—not the ones found in polished guidebooks, but those emerging in the rhythms of work and community, in linguistic adaptations, in shared meals and evolving traditions, in the hybrid spaces they claim as home. Their histories may not yet be carved into Rome's facades, but they course through its streets, subtly reshaping its identity.

Urban spaces are never static. Just as the city's ancient ruins were once the backdrop of ordinary life, today's migrant neighborhoods are actively shaping the Rome of tomorrow—not in the permanence of stone, but in the fluid, living imprint of human presence.

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