
Much has been written on the Partition of British India and the creation of the states of Pakistan and India in 1947. A major theme in these writings is the creation of the international border between the two countries. What is remarkable about these writings is how limited their scope is. Almost all deal exclusively with the high politics leading up to the territorial division; and they are peppered with the names of certain middle-aged men: Louis Mountbatten, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohammad Ali Jinnah and, above all, Cyril Radcliffe. They also tend to be written from partisan positions, attempting to demonstrate how national interest – British, Indian, Pakistani – was served or betrayed by the fateful territorial decisions of the final days of colonial rule, and blaming individuals, parties or alliances for the outcome. And finally, these writings rarely address developments at the border after 1947. The border remains a mere symbol of partition, nationhood, and uprootedness – it has not become a subject of serious inquiry.

As a result, hardly anything is known about the border as a historical reality. How did the ‘Radcliffe line,’ made public in Delhi on 16 August 1947, turn into a social fact with a huge impact on the lives of millions of people in the second half of the twentieth century? How was it established, maintained, challenged and subverted? How could certain people turn it to their economic, political or social advantage? How did it affect social transformations in the borderland on either side? These are important questions for anyone wishing to understand the ways in which South Asian states developed, the extent to which South Asian economies became bounded by borders, and how national identities became internalised.

This paper presents a section of an ongoing study into the Bengal borderland. It looks at the eastern Partition which created an ‘East Pakistan’ separated by a 4,000 km border from India and Burma. The larger study examines how the
states went about identifying the border on the ground, demarcating it, and resolving border disputes. It also looks at how they policed the border and sought to establish control over the borderland population. Equally important are the ways in which borderlanders defied, ignored and subverted the border, and how they used it to escape state retribution in various ways. A third theme is how trade across the border became entangled in networks of illegality and corruption. This paper takes up another subtheme: the movement of people across the border. It is an important theme, not only because of the number of people involved and the economic significance of cross-border population movements, but also because these movements have become a major irritant between Bangladesh and India and are likely to keep the relationship between these states volatile well into the twenty-first century.

‘Coming home’

When the new border came into existence in 1947, people were found to move back and forth across it. Some of these movements followed well-established practices, others were new. The complexity of population movement across the Bengal border has not been analysed. Instead, our understanding has been hostage to a few dramatic narratives which conceal as much as they reveal. Here I give very brief outlines of these dominant views before suggesting a more nuanced approach to major cross-border population movements since 1947.

In the master narrative of Partition, the cruelty and violence of nation-building is epitomised by the intense suffering of millions of uprooted people who had to cross the border in order to save their lives. The conceptual model has always been the Punjab, where population exchange in 1947 was swift, massive, ruthless and almost complete: it has become the touchstone of Partition migration.¹ A second case which has received considerable attention is the movement of Bengali Hindus from East Bengal to West Bengal. This movement was less intensely dramatic because it started later, extended over a much longer time, and was less complete.²
In both India and Pakistan, Partition migration has been studied and interpreted overwhelmingly within nationalist frameworks. Attention was focused firmly on immigrants, who were seen as sons and daughters of the nation coming home, to the almost complete exclusion of emigrants, who were seen as abandoning the nation. In this view, the tragedy of the immigrants was that they were members of a nation whose territory had suddenly become confined between new borders and who found themselves excluded from that territory. Their trek across the border – the legal spatial delimitation of the nation – was a homecoming: they joined the nation to which they belonged and in which they had full rights. Their material loss, traumatic uprooting and suffering on the way were all sacrifices to the nation, and obliged the nation to take care of them.

But gradually the mood changed. Later immigrants found it more difficult to establish their national credentials, and their citizen’s rights were increasingly challenged. This erosion of immigration rights reflected a stronger territorialisation of national identities in the region. Those who had spent years on the other side of the border were seen as having acquired a measure of membership of that nation, making inclusion in their nation of immigration problematic. The erosion of immigration rights also reflected a history of conflicts over resources, especially land, between local populations and newcomers. Those who footed the bill for the ‘homecoming’ were not so much the spokesmen for the nation as those people, often in the borderland, upon whom the immigrants descended.

Moreover, the communal (Muslim/non-Muslim) basis for the creation of Pakistan and India was reinforced by experiences after 1947, as relations turned bitter and both state elites used communal symbols in their quest to establish and maintain power. Pakistan had been a communal entity from the start and non-Muslim immigration remained small. But in India, which claimed to be a homeland for all, including Muslims, Muslim immigrants were not welcome and, increasingly, Hindu immigration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh was resented.

The old spirit of welcoming immigrants into the national fold never died, and it would flare up whenever refugees
arrived in the wake of riots. But gradually it was nudged aside by a new approach. In East Bengal, immigration issues dropped from the public agenda as Muslim immigration tapered off sharply after the birth of Bangladesh. But in India a new discourse gained popularity as migration from Bangladesh, of both Hindus and Muslims, continued. This was the discourse of infiltration.

‘Infiltration’

The view that immigration was not a homecoming first developed in Assam and Tripura. Here many inhabitants saw post-Partition immigrants not primarily as fellow Indians being cast out of Pakistan and in need of help but as Bengalis moving into non-Bengali areas and taking over. In Tripura local protests took organised form right from 1947 when Seng-krak, the first anti-refugee and anti-Bengali political union, was established. It orchestrated clashes with immigrants and kidnappings when ‘refugee colonies’ were set up and ‘tribal’ land was given to Bengali newcomers. The immigrants became an important vote bank and soon Bengalis began to control Tripura politics, calling forth further protests by the local population. Major confrontations took place in 1953 and 1954 and these focused increasingly on the ownership of land. In an attempt to defuse the tension and return some lands which immigrants had occupied unlawfully, the alienation of ‘tribal’ lands was made more difficult by law.

The language of infiltration first surfaced in official discourse when, in 1962, the Indian government in parliamentary debates identified immigrants in Tripura and Assam as infiltrators and proceeded to expel them. It was also used in 1964, when,

about 2 lakh [200,000] people belonging to linguistic and religious minorities were physically seized by the police and left at the border without any kind of judicial process. The government had to stop the operation of the scheme after large-scale public protest and was convinced that the Foreigners’ Act, 1946 was not applicable in Eastern India.

In the same year, the Indian government started an international propaganda campaign on the topic of
‘infiltration’ from East Pakistan. And since then, it has become commonplace in Indian political debates to talk about infiltration. The term became widespread in the northeast during the Assam movement, started in 1979, which spoke to Assamese fears of ‘being swamped by foreign nationals’ as a result of ‘misplaced notions of national commitment’ and the failure of Indian laws to ‘prevent infiltration from Bangladesh.’ The Assam movement criticised an Indian law of 1950 which openly encouraged free entry into Assam of Hindus who were victims of disturbances in East Bengal. Prafulla Mahanta, the leader of the Assam movement, wrote with irony: ‘In secular India, the Hindu East Pakistani were permitted to settle as refugees and the Muslim Pakistanis were thrown out.’

Since then the discourse of infiltration has been elaborated in two ways. In public debates in northeast India, there have been attempts to strengthen the insidious connotations of the term ‘infiltration’ by using the hyperbole of ‘demographic attack.’ In the words of a politician in North Bengal,

the threat [of deliberate, large-scale and sustained infiltration by Bangladesh residents] is there: it is so profound that it may affect a demographic change in Indian areas around Bangladesh so much so that they may one day cease to be Indian territory. The idea of such demographic aggression against India has been there since 1958, but it has been put into practice with intensity after the emergence of Bangladesh as a nation.

In a report to the President of India in 1998, the Governor of Assam saw a sinister design behind what he called ‘demographic invasion’: to create a Greater Bangladesh, providing Lebensraum for Bangladeshis by ‘severing the entire land mass of the North-East, with all its rich resources, from the rest of the country.’ In reaction to such allegations, Bengalis in North-East India tried to create organisations to protect their interests.

There was a second way in which the discourse of infiltration was elaborated. This was done by politicians in other parts of India who detected illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and sought to deport them. In 1992-93, in an action code-named Operation Pushback, authorities in New
Repatriates? Infiltrators? Trafficked Humans?

Delhi and Bombay rounded up hundreds of suspected Bangladeshis and shipped them to the border with Bangladesh. Bangladesh refused to take them back, and the Indian government was forced to abandon the operation. Further deportations followed in 1994, 1997 and 2000.19 In 1998, police officers in Bombay arrested ‘infiltrators’ and escorted them to the West Bengal-Bangladesh border to hand them over to the border guards.20 Speaking of the deportation of ‘Bangladeshi infiltrators’ in the Maharashtra assembly, the Deputy Chief Minister said: ‘This is a question of Indianness, nationalism and patriotism,’ and he linked immigration from Bangladesh with ‘a well-organised conspiracy to infiltrate ISI agents into the country.’21

The discourse of infiltration was developed by local politicians in northeast India in the 1940s and 1950s to deny citizen’s rights, and particularly land rights, to immigrants from East Pakistan. In the 1960s it surfaced in Indian government statements in connection with the first mass expulsions from northeastern India. In the 1980s, it was taken up by Hindu fundamentalist politicians in other parts of India and by the 1990s it had become a core argument in national debates in India which sought to link immigration from Bangladesh with the planned subversion of India. The duty of any Indian patriot was not to welcome immigrants as repatriates, but to deport them as foreign agents out to destabilise India, Islamise parts of it, and ultimately annex them to Bangladesh.

In East Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, successive governments developed a bizarre counter-discourse: they simply denied that any of their citizens migrated to India at all.22 For example, in August 1998 the Prime Minister of Bangladesh stated: ‘We do not accept that there is any Bangladeshi national living in India. So the question of deporting any Bangladeshi by the Indian Government does not arise.’ As Indian border guards tried to push back what they named ‘Bangladeshi infiltrators,’ Bangladeshi border guards tried to foil the ‘push-in’ of what they considered to be ‘Indian citizens.’23 During Operation Pushback in India (which Bangladesh branded as ‘Operation Push-In’),

The deportation process suffered a severe setback in September 1992 when 132 deportees were sent to the
border. The [Border Security Force] tonsured their heads, stripped them and burnt their belongings. The event blew up into a diplomatic row when Bangladesh accused India of trying to push out West Bengal Muslims.24

From the point of view of the Bangladesh state, a porous border was clearly a welcome device to export jobs. No attempts were made to keep Bangladeshi labour migrants from crossing into India but their forced return was vehemently opposed. This created great problems for Bangladesh as a modern state. Happy to use its border to disown its mobile citizens, Bangladesh sought to protect the integrity of its border in other respects – unauthorised trade (smuggling) and unauthorised entry (Rohingya refugees from Burma, Indian border police, Jumma rebels from hideouts in India being cases in point). The ensuing ambiguity regarding the territorial integrity of the nation-state became one of the main problems of contemporary statecraft in Bangladesh.

Intellectuals in Bangladesh were equally unconcerned with claiming migrants to India as expatriate Bangladeshis.25 Contrasting sharply with the heroisation of successful Bangladeshi migrants to the North, there has been a deafening silence about the ingenuity, creativity and resilience of the much larger groups of Bangladeshi migrants to India, some of whom clearly also ‘made good.’ There was a serious problem in acknowledging these migrants as Bangladeshis because of the older tradition of seeing them as repatriates, and therefore as traitors to the nation, who opted for the rival nation of India.

By now, however, millions of Bangladeshis in India are truly transnational in three ways. First, they are not accepted as Indian citizens and live the shadow existence of illegal immigrants worldwide, a floating underclass who are in India but not of it. Second, their motives for crossing the border have long stopped being related to nationalist ideologies. Instead they join many migrants worldwide in pursuing the good life which is denied them back home – in terms of a decent income, freedom from oppressive social control, and prospects for a better future. And third, like their counterparts all over the world, they think transnationally when they remit money and make occasional visits back home. Unlike the
early ‘repatriates,’ they often retain contacts with Bangladesh through transnational networks of increasing complexity.

It is not impossible that in future Bangladeshi intellectuals will discover migrants to India as cultural heroes, people who despite enormous odds were able to survive in that huge society, creating new cultural and social forms of ‘transnational’ Bangladeshiness in the process. \(^{26}\) Till that time, the Bangladeshi discourse on migration to India is likely to be marked by denial, disdain and disinformation.

**Bengalis on the move**

The creation of the border affected a well-established population flow. The deltaic region of Bengal had long supported dense agricultural populations whose numbers were kept fairly stable by high mortality due to epidemic disease and natural calamities. In the nineteenth century, this population began to expand and in eastern and central parts of the delta increasing landlessness led to a stream of out-migrants looking for land in less densely populated parts of Bengal. In this endeavour, they were often encouraged by both the colonial authorities and landlords who were keen to expand their tax base. It was in this period that cultivators established themselves in the Sundarban wilds in the south, the Barind area in the north, and on chors (silt banks) in the major rivers of Bengal. Others moved into sparsely-settled non-Bengali speaking regions to the north, east and south – in the densely-settled west there was little scope for expansion. They followed the course of the Brahmaputra into the Assam valley and they settled in northern Arakan and Tripura. \(^{27}\) As the population continued to grow and the economy of Bengal stagnated, would-be settlers found it harder to find productive and safe land in Bengal. They moved onto islands and chors in the Bay of Bengal which were dangerously exposed to hurricanes and tidal bores, and they pushed further into areas where local populations increasingly began to resist Bengali immigration. \(^{28}\) This was the demographic scenario on which the Partition border impinged.

The creation of the border had two effects. First, the fairly unobtrusive movement of settlers out of Bengal suddenly became international migration. When it was
declared illegal to move without papers, the movement continued underground. Second, the throes of state formation in East Bengal led to additional out-migration after 1947, often in waves. Although the Indian discourse of homecoming identified these as political migrants (repatriates, refugees, displaced persons) and ignored the longer-term trend, the distinction between ‘economic’ and ‘political’ settlers was often of little importance to those on whose land they settled. The border gave resisters to migrant settlement a new argument that the state could hardly ignore, and the discourse of infiltration was constructed around that argument: no state could allow foreign nationals to cross the border illegally and simply occupy land and avail themselves of the services provided by that state. This formal argument gained power when it could no longer be maintained that immigration from Bangladesh was overwhelmingly ‘homecoming’ migration by East Bengal Hindus. The discovery that many, if not most, immigrants from Bangladesh were Muslims coincided with the emergence of political Hinduism (or Hindu fundamentalism) in India which was based on the tenet that Hindu India was under threat. It was through this political movement that the focus on Bangladeshi ‘infiltration’ became a national issue. In the Indian debate on ‘infiltration,’ questions of citizenship dovetailed with rising communal sensibilities.

Indian authorities took various positions in this debate, and these shifted under the influence of continuing migration from Bangladesh. The Assam government switched from the homecoming thesis to the infiltration thesis after violent anti-Bengali disturbances in the early 1980s. Authorities in Delhi and Bombay did the same after Hindu fundamentalist parties came to power there. Only the West Bengal government stuck to the homecoming line till 1999, when it, too, caved in and adopted the language of infiltration. These permutations were of great importance to the borderland. In the early days, both India and Pakistan welcomed immigrants and demanded that they be allowed to pass the border unmolested. A newspaper cartoon published in India in 1952 expresses indignation at the humiliations to which Pakistan customs officials subjected East Bengali Hindus migrating to India. The two countries were keen to ensure that migrants from India to Pakistan and from Pakistan
to India were treated in exactly the same way.\textsuperscript{34} This led to parallel and fairly uniform arrangements in the borderland.

The emergence of the Indian discourse of infiltration, however, brought an end to this balance. As migration from East Bengal to India came to be seen as undesirable, measures were taken to contain it. Such measures were not taken on the East Bengal side of the border but their effects were noticeable on both sides. Three measures were of particular importance: border fencing, detection and identification, and deportation.

1) A fence around the border

Very short stretches of border, especially near customs posts, had been fenced from the late 1940s.\textsuperscript{35} In the 1960s, the Indian states bordering on East Pakistan proposed to the Delhi government to ‘erect a wire fencing \textit{all along} the land borders primarily to prevent infiltration into these States by Pakistani Muslims,’ but Delhi had not acted upon it.\textsuperscript{36} Especially politicians in Assam had been pushing for a fence along the entire border but not until 1985 were they able to place this issue on the national agenda.\textsuperscript{37} In 1986 the Indian government approved the Indo-Bangladesh Border Roads & Fence Project ‘with a view to preventing infiltration by Bangladesh nationals.’\textsuperscript{38} Progress was very uneven and it was slow. According to Indian press reports in 1998, ‘the total border fencing is about 190 km in West Bengal, 20 km in Assam and almost non-existent in Tripura and Mizoram.’\textsuperscript{39}

The border fence caused great offence in Bangladesh ‘because it humiliates and belittles us before the world.’\textsuperscript{40} According to existing agreements between the two states, nothing can be constructed within 150 metres of the border without the approval of both governments, so where the fence came up it created a 150-metre wide belt of no man’s land on the Indian side. When in 1999 the West Bengal government changed its mind about immigration and decided to contain ‘infiltration’ by fencing its border with Bangladesh, it found that no less than 450 villages were located within 150 metres of the border and would therefore lie in the fenced-off no man’s land.\textsuperscript{41} In parts of Meghalaya where a border fence had come up, cultivators on the Indian side reported that there
was an insufficient number of gates to allow them to work their fields; as a result, their counterparts from Bangladesh had taken over the 150-metre strip of Indian territory, cultivating right up to the fence.  

The social destruction which a border fence would bring to these villages may be deduced from a sketch of two of them:

Every time Nazir Rahman Bhuia moves from one part of his house to another, he crosses an international boundary. For the India-Bangladesh border at marker number 2033 runs right through his home in a village set in lush green countryside in the eastern Indian state of Tripura … the village has two names now – Motinagar on the Indian side, Dhajanagar on the Bangladeshi. The Indian village has electricity, the Bangladeshi has none. Both are inhabited by Muslims … Life goes on as usual, even when border guards show up occasionally. The villagers meet each other, celebrate marriages and bury the dead together. “We feel strange about the border running through the village like this, but we’ve adjusted to it,” says Bhuia.

A group wedding [was] celebrated in a West Bengal village – three brides and two grooms were from India, three grooms and two brides were from Bangladesh. Bengalis live on both sides of the border. “The marriages were solemnized in the village council office. The people have never recognized these border pillars that were suddenly erected,” adds the [Border Security Force] officer, who is responsible for policing a big part of the zanily zigzagging frontier.

In Assam, politicians were dissatisfied not only with the very slow progress of the fencing of the Indo-Bangladesh border, but also with the quality of the fence. A report by the Governor of Assam argued that the fence should be ‘of the same height as along Punjab’s border with Pakistan,’ and that observation towers, speedboats and floating border outposts were necessary.

A description of the Punjab border fence gives an idea of what the governor had in mind:

It is a formidable barrier, erected well inside Indian territory … at a cost of $85,000 a kilometer. It
consists of two 3-m high barbed wire fences with razor sharp concertina wire running in between. It also has what border policemen call cobras: five electricity wires fixed at different heights from the ground. At night the cobras come alive, along with powerful sodium vapor lamps that illuminate the fencing … Recently, one … itinerant worker was electrocuted near Wagah when he tried to crawl across during a brief power shutdown – standby generators came on automatically, roasting him inside the concertina.\textsuperscript{44}

In 1998, India was reported to consider erecting a 150-km electrified fence on the Bangladesh border, ‘charged with a low, non-fatal voltage, immigration officials said.’\textsuperscript{45} But despite the rhetoric, in the twentieth century the technocratic dream of sealing the Indo-Bangladesh border by means of fences, floodlights and motorised border patrols did not materialise. The cost of construction and maintenance would have been high, the political fallout for India’s relationship with Bangladesh considerable, and the efficacy of the fence doubtful. Occasionally, parallels were drawn with the most high-tech border sealing in the world, at the US-Mexican border, and the ways in which Mexican migrants were able to circumvent it. Clearly, as in the USA, the \textit{de facto} immigration policy of the Indian government was \textit{not} to make the Indo-Bangladesh border impermeable to the passage of ‘illegal’ entrants, for reasons to which I will return shortly.\textsuperscript{46}

In places where fences did come up, however, borderland society was not bisected. Borderlanders who wished to negotiate the border simply became more dependent on the mediation of local border guards and customs officials, cut holes in the fence, or crossed over in a fenceless section. There was no evidence to show that Bangladeshi migration to India was slowed down by the border fence; crossing the fenced border remained ‘as easy as slicing butter with a knife’

2) Detection and identification

A second line of defence against ‘infiltrators’ from Bangladesh was identifying culprits and sending them back to the Bangladesh side of the border. This was much more
difficult than it seemed. First of all, migrants usually travelled without identity papers (although there was a sizeable group of Bangladeshis who entered India on visaed passports and never returned). Second, there was little to distinguish newcomers from residents. They spoke the same language, might dress in Indian-made clothes smuggled into Bangladesh, and blended in very easily. Even if they spoke an East Bengal regional dialect, there were many established Indian citizens in the borderland who originated from the same regions. Third, there was always confusion about the cut-off point between ‘homecoming’ and ‘infiltration’ because local politicians, the government in Delhi and the Bangladesh government used different definitions. An agreement between the prime ministers of India and Bangladesh (the Indira-Mujib Pact of 1972) ‘tacitly provided that Bangladesh would not be held responsible for persons who had illegally migrated to India before the birth of the new Republic prior to March 25, 1971,’ and therefore the year 1971 was officially considered the beginning of ‘infiltration.’

Identification of Bangladeshi immigrants was further hampered by the fact that Indian borderlanders often protected them. Earlier immigrants offered newcomers shelter and support, employers were keen to exploit cheap labour and politicians were interested in expanding their electorate. Making use of the imperfect registration of Indian citizens and ample opportunities for forgery, many immigrants secured an ‘Indian’ identity by acquiring a ration card, a fraudulent birth certificate, or school certificate, by enrolling as voters and – ultimate proof of Indian citizenship – by availing themselves of the Election Commission’s identity card. And for those with money and connections it was not difficult to ‘manage’ a passport. As a result, administrative measures to detect immigrants failed dismally.

**Laws.** By the late 1990s, the Indian government was seriously revising the Foreigners’ Act, 1946, and a controversy was raging over the proposed repeal of the special anti-infiltration act for Assam, the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act of 1983, because it had failed to facilitate the deportation of Bangladeshis from Assam. According to one source, since 1983 about 300,000 people were screened under this act, but only 25,000 were tried by tribunals, and a mere
1,500 were deported as illegal immigrants. The total number of post-1971 immigrants from Bangladesh to India is unknown; Indian politicians and journalists usually quote a figure of 10 million, and the Indian government put the number ‘unofficially’ at 12-18 million, of which some 5 million might have settled in West Bengal.

Identity cards. Other administrative measures had proved to be as ineffectual. Border guards often found it impossible to identify persons without some form of identification:

“How can we stop infiltration?” said Mr Balbir Singh Sahal, the [BSF] Sector Commander [at the West Bengal border, Nadia district], “We do not understand Bengali. These people speak the same language, wear similar clothes and look no different. It is impossible to distinguish between a Bangladeshi and an Indian. Also, many live in houses adjacent to each other. Indians should be issued identity cards immediately.”

Plans to issue identity cards to Indian citizens, especially in ‘sensitive’ border areas, were discussed for years, and floated in 1989, 1994, 1997 and 1999. Such drives did nothing to reduce immigration. On the contrary, a report from the fenced border at Dhubri (Assam) indicated that Indian citizens encouraged immigration because they earned money by conducting Bangladeshis through the border: they rented out their passports, identity cards and residential certificates to them. Even in the absence of such actions, identity card schemes appeared to be doomed from the start. Not only were they very expensive and labour intensive, but in the absence of a reliable national citizens’ register it was impossible to keep such schemes up-to-date. Most importantly, they were vulnerable to fraud:

An Indian reporter approaching some fresh Bangladeshi immigrants waiting for a train at New Cooch Behar railway station found that, as soon as he questioned them, they whipped out certificates issued by the chief of a gram panchayat (local council), showing them to be Indians. Although everyone was aware that one of a ‘mushrooming tribe of agents’ had procured these for them, no Indian state official was willing, or perhaps able, to check the veracity of these certificates.
In the same vein, Bangladeshis happily voted in Indian elections (as Indian borderlanders also did in Bangladeshi elections) because they could register as voters.\textsuperscript{56} Before elections, there would be enormous publicity about the cleaning up of the electoral rolls in the Indian border districts, but illegal immigrants with political patronage and armed with voter’s identity cards could not be sent away from the polling booth.\textsuperscript{57}

Clearly, it was impossible for the Indian state to handle the immigration of Bangladeshis administratively. Its main weakness was that it could not implement the laws and schemes that it devised because its registration of citizens was inadequate, it employed too few border guards, it could not trust those guards and other state personnel to put the interest of the state before their own interest, and it failed to check Indian citizens who encouraged illegal immigration and registration. It was no surprise that the state explored other means to rid itself of unwanted Bangladeshis: deportation.

3) Deportation

From their inception as separate states, both India and Pakistan practised the removal of unwanted individuals from their territories. There were several forms. Those who were considered a threat to the state could be externd, fugitives from the law could be extradited, and so could, from 1952, those who arrived without valid passports and visas. By far the most important form of removal in terms of numbers was the expulsion of minorities; local state representatives often played a role in this.

The deportation of people on the ground of their being ‘infiltrators’ or ‘foreigners’ first occurred on a large scale in India in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{58} In the 1990s deportation once more became a core issue in India. Public opinion was primed for these deportations by campaigns depicting Bangladeshi immigrants as a security risk and a burden on Indian society.

When waterlogging persisted in parts of Mumbai for three days, the Shiv Sena mayor blamed the illegal Bangladeshi population for the mess. “Their filth blocked up the gutters,” he said. In Delhi, the BJP added to its following by generating antipathy
towards Bangladeshi immigrants. As civic amenities came under strain, the hapless Bangladeshi immigrant became a convenient scapegoat. The president of the Delhi BJP argued: ‘Is our country a dharamshala [charity institution] that whoever wants to come and stay here can freely enter? It is a matter of national security … There is too much pressure on the resources here [in Delhi]. Outsiders should be removed.’ And the Chief Minister of Maharashtra linked immigrants with subversion when he said: ‘we cannot tolerate this nonsense whether it is a Bangladeshi or a Pakistani national indulging in law and order problem.’

Criminalisation, deportation and humiliation went hand in hand. Police squads would check out neighbourhoods, identify Bengali-speaking Muslims (who might be Indians from West Bengal) and herd them together.

Sitting inside his dimly-lit hut in Delhi’s Seemapuri, home to an estimated 50,000 Bangladeshi immigrants, 50-year-old Altaf Hussain still remembers the time his sons Milon and Haroon were caught by the authorities in the wake of an anti-Bangladeshi drive by the local BJP Government in 1994. They were paraded on donkeys, had their heads shaved, put on a train to Calcutta and, finally, forced back to Bangladesh at gun-point. For nine days, starving and without any familiar address to call on, the two brothers wandered around, until a Good Samaritan smuggled them back to Seemapuri.

Fourteen-year-old Nanu from Mumbai was rounded up but had no papers to prove that he was an Indian. With 14 other Bengali-speaking Muslims, he was taken to West Bengal by train. ‘After taking us to the jungle, the police told us to keep on walking and not look back or else we would be shot.’ Nanu alleged that, in the jungle, women in his group had been raped by [Maharashtra] police who were accompanying them.

The rough way in which deportations were carried out led to protests. Maharashtra police also chained the deportees, and tied their chains to railway coach windows. A senior member of the West Bengal government commented: ‘They are not cattle, to be pushed back under the cover of darkness. They should be treated like human beings.’
The deportations were a disaster for the deportees because the Bangladesh border guards refused to accept them as Bangladesh citizens. As a result, they would wander about the borderland till they found the means to return to their places of residence, or they ended up in West Bengal jails which soon ran out of capacity to accommodate them. Not deterred by Bangladesh’s attitude, the government in Delhi devised two new ways of identifying and isolating immigrants. In 1998 it was reported to be contemplating setting up detention camps near the Indo-Bangladesh border ‘to ensure the success of its “push-back” scheme of illegal immigrants.’ In these camps (dubbed Bangladesh Transfer Facilitation Centres) immigrants would be fingerprinted, photographed, and so on, and held till such time as Bangladesh would accept them as its nationals. In 1999 the government in Delhi sanctioned the setting up of a 3,500-man-strong Prevention of Infiltration Force (PIF) which it saw as ‘a second line of defence against infiltration’ and which would be deployed at some distance from the Indo-Bangladesh border.

Bangladeshi diaspora

None of the government measures taken in India were effective in disrupting the flow of Bangladeshi migrants across the border. Border fencing, identity cards, deportation drives and border detention camps were no doubt important rhetorical devices in Indian national politics but their impact on Bangladeshi immigration was immaterial. The same can be said about the violent campaigns of intimidation in Assam and Tripura in which many Bangladeshi immigrants, or their descendents, died.

The period since 1971 was one in which Bangladesh society rapidly developed global links. One result was a diasporic spread of Bangladeshis all over the world. The settler migration of earlier days continued but new flows of labour migration developed and emigration out of Bangladesh grew explosively as the country’s oversaturated labour markets were completely unable to accommodate growing numbers of labourers. Many Bangladeshis left from Dhaka airport, either as short-term labour migrants to the Gulf states and Southeast Asia, or as legal or illegal migrants to the
highly-industrialised societies of the North. Some boarded ships at the ports of Chittagong and Chalna. But the majority continued to cross the land border into India or Burma in their quest for a better life.

They were not always headed for Indian or Burmese destinations, though. Some Bangladeshi migrants used Burma as a corridor to employment in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Japan, and many Bangladeshi migrants used India as a corridor to employment in Pakistan and the Middle East. The term ‘exfiltration’ was coined in the Indian press to describe the movement of Bangladeshis from India to Pakistan. In the 1990s it was estimated that there were about a million Bangladeshis in the Pakistani city of Karachi alone. The heavy barbed-wiring of parts of the Indo-Pakistan border led Bangladeshis to opt for the most dangerous routes. One was through the hot, parched wasteland of the Thar desert and the Rann of Kutch. Here one group of nearly 40 Bangladeshi migrants, mostly women and children, died of thirst in the early 1990s. Another route was through the unfenced border (or, more precisely, line of demarcation) between Indian-held and Pakistan-held Kashmir:

Well organised brokers charge money for accompanying them from their native places to … West Bengal and to places near the international border in Jammu and Kashmir. Throughout their journey, they are accompanied by different brokers, who leave them near the border for crossing over to Pakistan.’ If Pakistan-bound Bangladeshis were apprehended by the Kashmir police, they were not booked or produced before a court. Instead, according to senior police officers, ‘the best way to get rid of them is to huddle them into a Calcutta-bound train without ticket.’ Homeward bound Bangladeshis returning from Pakistan, however, were arrested under the law of the land. Some of these infiltrators, after completing their jail terms, remained lodged in police lock-ups for repatriation for many years.

The search for a better life was no longer oriented primarily towards finding a plot of land. Increasingly, Bangladeshi immigrants in India and beyond were looking for cash incomes. ‘In Calcutta and Delhi, they appear to have carved out a niche for themselves as domestic helps, construction labourers and ragpickers. In Mumbai, they are
crucial as weavers and zari workers. Even among those who stayed in the borderland, wage earners became more important. Many of the rickshaw-pullers and day labourers in Indian border towns such as Agartala (Tripura), Silchar (Assam), or Siliguri (West Bengal) were Bangladeshis. According to one report, 10,000 rickshaw-pullers in Siliguri came from Bangladesh illegally.

The Bangladeshi diaspora took many shapes and involved many different groups. Some migrants bravely set out on their own, others took the assistance of relatives and friends, and yet others put their fate in the hands of agents. And then there were those who were forced into migration. The cross-border trafficking of human beings came to be noticed from the 1980s but may have existed much longer.

At the border, the distinction between migration-by-consent and trafficking was not always clear. For example, groups of Bangladeshi women being ferried across the Ganges to India in the 1980s thought they might get a factory job in Calcutta, or a husband in Bihar. Such groups were often taken by train to Calcutta, accompanied by local women who might themselves be migrants. ‘A Bangladeshi woman settler who is now residing in Guma [24-Parganas, India], told the survey team that her principal vocation was trafficking in women. She accompanies a group of women every evening by train from Guma to Calcutta.’ Often it was only after the women reached their final destinations (in India, Pakistan, the Gulf states or Southeast Asia) that they realised they had been tricked: often they were sold to brothels.

In the case of many women and children, however, it was not consent or enticement but force or sale which brought them to the border. Kidnapping was common, especially of young children, even babies, but some parents sold their children; in this way, about 15,000 children were believed to cross the border every year. Young girls were sought after as domestics and especially as sex workers. Boys aged between 2 and 12 were in high demand in the Gulf states as jockeys in camel races. Young girls were said to ‘command a high price as they are likely to be free from HIV/AIDS,’ and,
In West Bengal, children used as jockeys in camel races are the most expensive, followed by those used for prostitution, while those pushed into begging or used as labourers cost the least. In Bangladesh, the prices are said to be very low, with the average ranging between Rs.1,000 and Rs.5,000.\textsuperscript{51}

As these migrants passed through the borderland, they might experience special exploitation but also protection. On the one hand, border police of both countries would charge women money for crossing the border.\textsuperscript{82} If the money was not given, sexual assault was a possibility. ‘Some women had their first experience of “trading” their bodies when they were raped by the police at the border for failing to pay the money they would need to buy their way into India.’\textsuperscript{83} On the other hand, borderlanders have been known to resist trafficking in women and children. In northern Bangladesh, an old woman was beaten to death by a mob charging her with having abducted children, and train passengers on routes from the border to Calcutta attacked or detained people they suspected of being traffickers and their victims.\textsuperscript{84}

Human trafficking was doubtless the most exploitative and humiliating form that the Bangladeshi diaspora took. But most emigrants who passed the borderland were not being trafficked; they were labour migrants in search of a good life rather than human chattels. The volume of Bangladeshi emigration shows clearly that there was a strong and sustained demand in India and beyond for the cheap labour provided by Bangladeshis. If there were indeed some 10 million illegal Bangladeshis in India, there were obviously millions of Indians keen to employ them. And yet, in Indian discussions about ‘infiltration,’ the contributions which these millions of Bangladeshi workers obviously made to the Indian economy went largely unnoticed. As Indian politicians built careers on ‘infiltrant bashing’ and stressed the costs of these illegal immigrants in terms of law enforcement and state services, they were supported by many who themselves employed cheap Bangladeshi domestic, agricultural or industrial labour. ‘Infiltrant bashing’ served not only as a vote-getter, it also kept Bangladeshi labour immigrants stigmatised and vulnerable, and therefore cheap and pliable.
Emigration and the borderland

In 1947 a border was imposed on a region whose population dynamics were expansionary. For several decades the official discourse in India ignored this, as the official discourse in Bangladesh continues to do. Most of the population expansion took place over land and the border turned into a whistle-stop on the outward journey of East Bengali migrants. As Indian political discourse increasingly conceived of the border as a war zone – an area where the nation was vulnerable to hostile invasion –, crossing the border began to require more circumspection in certain sections where surveillance was stepped up.

There is no evidence to suggest, however, that emigration was effectively hampered. On the contrary, new forms of assistance and exploitation sprung up on both sides of the border. Labour contractors, cross-border guides, providers of documents, border guards and many others could now earn better money off migrants. As the state sought to regulate migration but was clearly unwilling to invest sufficient energy and resources in reaching that goal, it created opportunities for organising cross-border migration rackets and for a more effective fleecing of migrants. In some sections of the borderland unassisted crossing remained as easy as ever, but where surveillance had increased, migrants became more and more dependent on the services of borderland brokers. These brokers could well have positions in the state which they used to their own advantage. In 1993, a journalist visiting Cooch Behar observed,

I found Congress and CPI(M) politicians joining hands to bring Bangladeshis in Matador vans from the border and then putting them on to the Teesta-Torsa Express bound for the Nizamuddin railway station in Delhi.

The borderland brokers took advantage of two sets of circumstances which originated outside the borderland. The first was the forces which continued to compel inhabitants of Bangladesh to seek a better life abroad. The Bangladeshi diaspora will show no signs of slowing down as long as scarcity and instability continue to predominate in the Bangladesh economy, thwarting the life chances of millions. Second, the discourse of infiltration which Indian politicians
developed in their quest for state power had the effect of increasing the stakes and making the role of cross-border migration brokers ever more lucrative.

Solutions cannot be expected from more rigorous border surveillance by the Indian state or from the ostrich policy adopted by successive Bangladeshi governments. The Indian discourse of infiltration points ominously to demonising cross-border migrants and a future of anti-Bangladeshi pogroms. The Bangladeshi discourse of denial is no more than a short-term diplomatic device and fails completely to address central issues of citizenship. By seeking to criminalise the Bangladeshi diaspora and turn it into a numbers game, politicians in both countries gamble with the life chances of individual migrants.

What we need is a much better understanding of cross-border population movements which takes account of the perspectives of the migrants themselves. We are likely to find that individual migrants have individual reasons to leave or enter Bangladesh. Analysis should take place at the level of the living strategies of individual people fleeing environmental degradation, intense economic exploitation, political harassment, stifling family relations, or a future which they fear holds no promise. Their contributions to the Indian economy as well as to that of Bangladesh need to be made visible, as do the patterns of circular migration in which many of them are involved, and the cross-border networks of support in which migration is embedded.

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Notes and References:


3 Menon and Bhasin, Borders & Boundaries (1998) is one of the first studies to try and overcome this bias by looking at women refugees crossing the Punjab border in both directions.

4 Thus in 1964 a policy was introduced under which no direct rehabilitation was to be given to the ‘new migrants’ from East Pakistan in West Bengal, i.e. people who had arrived in India after 1 January 1964. Report of the Committee of Review on Educational Facilities for New Migrants from East Pakistan to West Bengal (Calcutta: West Bengal Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, 1968), in Prafulla Chakrabarti Papers, IISH*.

5 On raids by West Bengal landlords on immigrant East Bengal squatters, see Chakrabarti, The Marginal Men (1999), 82-83. Similar conflicts between in East Bengal, see petitions by locals against immigrants from West Bengal and Assam in the Rangpur border area, and against ‘a gang of Kabulies’ who squatted in Parbatipur, Dinajpur (*87, *229).

6 Over the years, a veritable jungle of legal and political nomenclature would develop to refer to cross-border migrants in India and Pakistan. Here we do not concern ourselves with the niceties of distinguishing refugees, evacuees, mohajirs, repatriates, displaced persons, bastutyagi, bastuhara, asroyprarathi, shoronarthi, etc. Not only were these differences of little or no concern in the border areas, but definitions also differed between India and Pakistan. For example, in the Pakistan (Protection of Evacuee Property) Ordinance, 1948, refugees from Pakistan to India were considered to be ‘evacuees’ and those fleeing the other way ‘refugees.’ What Pakistan called an evacuee, India would call a refugee.

7 It did not disappear completely. In June 1979, following riots in West Bengal, 20,000 Indian Muslims were reported to have entered Bangladesh. Azizul Haque, ‘Bangladesh 1979: Cry for a Sovereign Parliament,’ Asian Survey, 20:2 (1980), 228; cf. The Bangladesh Observer (24 June 1979).

8 In 1947 the local population of Tripura consisted of many linguistic and religious groups. The majority religion was Hinduism. They are usually referred to as ‘tribal,’ a term which has
meaning only in connection with the legal category of ‘scheduled tribes’ in the Constitution of India. The Maharajas of Tripura had begun attracting Bengali Muslims as agricultural labourers and sharecroppers, and Bengali Hindus as professionals and clerks. In the 1870s, 36% of the population had been ‘non-tribal’ (i.e. mostly Bengali), a figure that rose to 48% in 1931, 63% in 1951, and 71% in 1971. Gayatri Bhattacharyya, *Refugee Rehabilitation and Its Impact on Tripura’s Economy* (New Delhi/Guwahati: Omsons Publications, 1988), 93.


10 In 1948, the Tripura government for the first time released almost 800 km$^2$ of tribal reserve land ‘for increasing land revenue, economic growth, and particularly for refugee rehabilitation.’ Bhattacharyya, *Refugee Rehabilitation* (1988), 17-20. 


12 Parliamentary debates on the issue had been going on since May 1961. In August 1962, the Home Minister, L.B. Shastri, informed the lower house that about 45,000 Muslims had ‘infiltrated’ into Tripura; his deputy reported 250,000 to 300,000 ‘infiltrators’ in Assam over the preceding 10 years and similar ‘infiltrations’ were alleged to have taken place in Manipur and West Bengal. By late 1962, according to Indian sources, some 50,000 Muslims from Assam and some 16,000 from Tripura had been evicted. Pakistan refused to identify them as *Pakistani infiltrators*; instead it described these deportees as *Indian Muslims* and complained about the Indian action. It set up an equity committee which reported that almost all deportees were Indian citizens. It also held that over 520,000 Muslims were evicted from India up to mid-1965 (Jha, *Indo-Pak Relations* (1972), 271-286). In 1962, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee adopted a resolution stating that it was ‘of the confirmed opinion that the infiltration of Pakistani nationals without valid travel documents into Assam is likely to endanger the security of the country’ (Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, *The Tussle Between the
From mid-1962, 'India started deporting from Assam and Tripura persons whom it called Pakistani infiltrators.' Jha, *Indo-Pakistan Relations* (1972), 242 (italics added).


In July 1965, the Chief Minister of Assam claimed that over one million ‘illegal Pakistani infiltrators’ had entered Eastern India between 1951 and 1961, and provided an uncannily precise breakdown – 220,961 in Assam, 459,494 in West Bengal, 297,852 in Bihar, and 55,403 in Tripura. ‘Assam Expels More Than Half of 220,000 Infiltrators,’ *The Statesman* (28 July 1965); cf. ‘126,000 infiltrators still in Assam,’ *The Statesman* (15 December 1965).

The title of a book by the leader of this movement and later Chief Minister of Assam, Prafulla Mahanta, emphasises the point: *The Tussle Between the Citizens and Foreigners in Assam* (1986; quotes are from 86, 89, 116). He dedicated this book ‘to the law-abiding and Constitution-following citizens of India residing in Assam who have waged a relentless tussle against the invasion of illegal foreigners masquerading as minorities playing to the designs of the political tricksters and economic exploiters.’ For a description of widespread anti-Bengali agitations in Assam in 1960-61 driving about 45,000 refugees into Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Darjeeling districts, see Saroj Chakrabarty, *With Dr. B.C. Roy and Other Chief Ministers (A Record upto 1962)* (Calcutta: Benson’s, 1974), 450-460, 488-490.


Ajoy Bose, ‘Nation in migration,’ *Time* (11 August 1997); Anindita Ramaswamy, ‘BJP’s Oust Bangladeshi drive hots up,’
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Indian Express (16 September 1998); ‘Delhi police not up to “find and evict” task,’ The Times of India (10 June 2000); Brajesh Upadhyay, ‘Police find the going tough in drive against Bangladeshis,’ The Times of India (22 June 2000). Deportations have also been reported from Uttar Pradesh: ‘UP police in N Bengal to send back 225 Bangladeshis,’ The Statesman (7 October 1999).

For an early use of the term ‘physically pushing out,’ by the Indian Home Minister in 1963, see Jha, Indo-Pak Relations (1972), 279.

The government of Maharashtra claimed that it deported over 8,000 Bangladeshi ‘infiltrators’ between 1982 and mid-1998. In a twist to the drama, many of the deported claimed to be Muslims from West Bengal, and sympathisers tried to free them when trains reached railway stations in West Bengal, leading to exchanges of fire between Maharashtra and local policemen. The government of West Bengal also opposed the move. Rajasthan and Gujarat also deported suspected Bangladeshis. ‘Joshi to deport Bangladeshis from Mumbai,’ The Daily Star (13 October 1997); ‘Bengal protests Maharashtra’s action,’ The Hindu (25 July 1998); ‘Maharashtra to fight stay on deportation of “Bangladeshis,”’ Rediff on the Net (27 July 1927); Dev Raj, ‘Rights-India: Deportation of “Bangladeshis” targets Muslims,’ Inter Press Service (3 August 1998); Udayan Namboodiri, ‘Illegal Immigrants: Political Pawns,’ India Today (10 August 1998); Kalyan Chaudhuri, ‘Protest in West Bengal,’ and R. Padmanabhan, ‘The deportation drive,’ Frontline (15-28 August 1998); ‘India acts against alleged Bangladeshis infiltrators,’ BBC News (4 February 1999).

ISI (Inter-Service Intelligence) is Pakistan’s foreign intelligence agency. Indian politicians and journalists often suggest that Bangladesh, wittingly or unwittingly, is helping Pakistani agents to enter Indian territory. ‘Deportations of illegally residing aliens will continue, says Munde,’ Times of India (10 April 1999).

In 1964, Pakistani Foreign Minister Z.A. Bhutto stated: ‘It is inconceivable that hundreds of thousands of Muslims … would surrender the safety and security of their homeland in Pakistan to migrate with their women and children to the uncertainty and perils awaiting them in a hostile land beyond the border’ (Jha, Indo-Pak Relations (1972), 276-277). But until 1982, ‘while denying large-scale out-migration, Bangladesh at least took back infiltrators handed over by the Indian BSF. But after 1982, they refused pointblank.’ Partha S. Ghosh, Cooperation and Conflict in South Asia (Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 84. In 2000, Sheikh Hasina Wazed, then the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, echoed Bhutto’s statement when she declared on television: ‘Why should Bangladeshis go to India?’ [11 June 2000 #396]

Ironically, in Bangladesh itself a parallel discourse of infiltration was developing at the same time. Here it was directed against the Rohingyas, cross-border migrants from Arakan (Burma) who sought refugee status. At least 100,000 of them, who were not housed in camps, were considered illegal, uncleared or residual refugees, or merely ‘arrivals.’ In 1999, at least 1,700 of them were in Bangladeshi jails on the charge of illegal border crossing. A


25 For example, see a recent research paper on international migration from Bangladesh which gives details on the number of Bangladeshis in the UK, Japan, the Middle East, etc., but completely ignores the much larger emigration to India. Raisul Awal Mahmood, ‘Emigration Dynamics in Bangladesh,’ *International Migration*, 33:3/4 (1995), 699-726.


29 Passports and visas were introduced in 1952.

30 In 1991, a question was put before the West Bengal Assembly whether the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)’s campaign plank of a large-scale influx of Muslims had any factual basis. In his response, the Chief Minister of West Bengal presented figures to show that of the 39,000 persons caught trying to enter India in the first half of 1991, 28,000 were Muslims. ‘Basu opposes ration cards for infiltrators,’ *The Statesman* (2 August 1991).

31 See Ashok Swain, *The Environmental Trap: The Ganges River Diversion, Bangladeshi Migration and Conflicts in India* (Uppsala:
Uppsala University, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, 1996).

32 These massacres left more than 3,000 dead and over 400,000 homeless. Mohan Ram, ‘Eyeball to eyeball: The issues that triggered the massacres in Assam State in February remain unresolved, and both sides are standing firm,’ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 120:20 (19 May 1983), 29.


34 There were several agreements on the treatment of out-migrants, e.g. the Agreement between the Government of India and the Government of Pakistan dated the 8th April 1950 (Nehru-Liaquat Agreement).

35 E.g. in Hili (a border crossing in Dinajpur/West Dinajpur) a fence put up by Pakistan in 1955 ‘with a view to preventing the free movement of smugglers, both Indian and Pakistani’ elicited a protest from India (*505).


37 By means of the Assam Accord between the Indian government and the leaders of the Assam movement. Earlier, in the 1960s, they had not been able to push Delhi beyond sanctioning 180 additional police watch-posts on the Assam-East Bengal border and erecting barbed-wire fences in selected places. Another suggestion at that time, ‘to clear a stretch of territory all along the border between Assam and East Pakistan so that the security forces of the State and the Centre might gain the mobility needed to prevent fresh infiltrations,’ was never implemented. In the 1990s, the Indian government even went so far as to float a plan to settle ‘the families of ex-servicemen and retired Indian soldiers’ as a 10-km wide human belt along the borders; this plan was torpedoed by several border states. Jha, *Indo-Pak Relations* (1972), 280, 283; cf. ‘Evacuation of border people, Union Plan makes little progress,’ *The Statesman* (14 April 1965); Sanat K. Chakraborty, ‘Human belt to control cross-border migration,’ *The Northeast Daily* (23 November 1999).

38 This project, budgeted at Rs. 3.7 billion in 1986 (revised to Rs.8.3 billion in 1992 and Rs.10.5 billion in 1998), involved the construction of 900 km of border fence, 2,800 km of border roads and 24 km of bridges along the Indo-Bangladesh border in the states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Twelve years later, according to government sources, 800 km of fence, 2,100 km of roads and 17 km of bridges had been completed, and the project was supposed to be completed by March 2001 (Bangladeshi sources reported that only 541 km had been fenced). In mid-1999, the government gave a new date of completion, 2007. Embassy of India (Washington D.C.), *Union Home Secretary chairs a high level empowered committee* (www/indianembassy.org/, 1998); ‘Border incidents: BDR, BSF to hold meeting from Oct 24,’
The Daily Star (12 October 1999); ‘Centre to complete border fencing by 2007,’ Assam Tribune (20 August 1999).

39 Udayan Namboodiri, ‘Illegal Immigrants: Political Pawns,’ India Today (10 August 1998). In 1997 the Home Minister of Tripura said: ‘There were repeated communications between the Centre and the State over the question of fencing the border with Bangladesh. In 1995-96, a stretch of 490 km was considered for fencing. This was duly communicated to us. But till date the budgetary provisions have not been cleared by the Centre.’ Rakesh Sinha, ‘Strife-worn Tripura banking on Gujral Government to come to its rescue,’ The Indian Express (19 May 1997). As for Mizoram, as late as 1999 the fencing of its border with Bangladesh was still no more than ‘under active consideration by the Home Ministry,’ according to the Prime Minister of India. ‘Plan to stop influx in NE soon: PM,’ Assam Tribune (23 May 1999).

40 President Ershad, quoted in Ghosh, Cooperation and Conflict in South Asia (1995), 85. Some Bangladeshi soldiers were killed and injured when they attempted to dismantle a fence which Indians were erecting along the border in Assam. Salamat Ali, ‘Trouble flares up on Bangladesh border,’ Far Eastern Economic Review, 124:18 (3 May 1984), 12.

41 ‘Bengal to take up border fencing,’ Rediff on the Net (5 January 1999). The harmful effects of the fence on West Bengal border villagers were also brought up in the Indian parliament in 1996. Lok Sabha Debates, Session II, Budget (17 July 1996). On the India-Pakistan border, where 450 km were fenced, 380 fencing gates were made, of which 280 were operational in the late 1990s. To facilitate farming in the no man’s land, a Border Security Force (BSF) spokesman explained, these gates would be opened one hour after sunrise and closed at 6 p.m. ‘No cause for alarm over Indo-Pak border fencing gaps: BSF,’ Rediff on the Net (7 March 1998). For a similar arrangement at the fenced stretch of border at Dhubri (Assam), see ‘Breaching the frontiers effortlessly,’ The Hindu (15 April 1998). Villages in 24-Parganas, West Bengal, challenged the building of the fence in the Calcutta High Court which ‘ordered the local authorities to find a solution’ [Ganguly, 19 September 1999 #397]. Groups of cattle smugglers were also reported to try to disrupt the construction of the fence, attacking BSF personnel in Malda with sophisticated weapons. ‘Cattle smugglers attack BSF,’ The Statesman (27 June 2000).


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46 Cf. Kearney, ‘Transnationalism in California and Mexico.’

47 B.G. Verghese, India’s Northeast Resurgent: Ethnicity, Insurgency, Governance, Development (Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1996), 39. This was also the cut-off point enshrined in the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act of 1983. Under this act the government of India agreed to detect and deport foreign nationals who entered Assam after that date (Mahanta, The Tussle (1986), 109). In 2000, however, an accord between the government in Delhi, the state government of Assam, and the major political party pushed that date back to 1951, causing a storm of protest and further confusion (‘1951 to be cut-off year for indigenous peoples: AASU,’ The Sentinel (12 April 2000); ‘Indigenous definition sparks row in Assam,’ The Northeast Daily (17 April 2000); ‘Definition of indigenous people in ’51 census report,’ The Assam Tribune (3 May 2000)). For a brief overview of immigration legislation, see ‘Assam’s problem of foreign infiltration,’ Oriental Times, 2:9-10 (7-21 July 1999).

48 There was also a category of borderlanders who were genuinely unclear about their ‘national’ identity. In numerous villages ‘the international border cuts right through the homes of villagers, putting them into a dilemma regarding their nationality.’ ‘Indo-Bangla border in Karimganj only in name,’ The Assam Tribune (31 August 1999).

49 ‘Centre may repeal Migrants Act,’ Indian Express (12 August 1997); ‘Proposed amendment of Foreigners Act: Advani seeks in-depth study by Law panel,’ The Hindustan Times (7 January 1999); Utpal Bordoloi, ‘Cabinet to consider repeal of Illegal Migrants Act soon,’ Deccan Herald (17 January 1999).

50 Dasgupta, ‘Thinking with the head,’ The Daily Star (6 May 1999). According to an Assamese M.P., however, between 1996 and 1999 about 250,000 Bengalis and Nepalis were single out as foreign nationals under the act. The Assam government sought court permission for their deportation but the courts identified only 4,000 of them as foreigners. According to the governor of Assam, 9,600 persons had been identified as foreigners since 1983. ‘Move to annul IMDT Act: Fresh Plot to deport Bengalees from Assam,’ The New Nation (25 February 1999); Kashyap, ‘Diminishing Assam Border?’ Indian Express (16 December 1998).

51 ‘Centre, 5 states to file affidavits on immigrants,’ Assam Tribune (13 July 1999); ‘Problem of infiltration worse in Bengal: Joshi,’ Hindustan Times (2 August 1998); Namboodiri, ‘Illegal immigrants’: ‘1.5 crore Bangla aliens in country,’ The Assam Tribune (12 May 2000).

52 Alok Banerjee, ‘Where two nations slip into each other,’ The Statesman (29 May 1993).

53 As early as 1964, the Indian Home Minister proposed issuing identity cards to all inhabitants of the border areas of Assam. Jha, Indio-Pak Relations (1972), 280. George Iype, ‘To weed out illegal immigrants, government plans to issue I-cards for Indians and foreign nationals,’ Rediff on the Net (13 June 1997). For the failure
of a similar identity card project started in 1989 on the Pakistan border, see Mihir Mistry, ‘Thin dividing line raises identity issues,’ *Times of India* (19 June 1999).

54 ‘Breaching the frontiers effortlessly,’ *The Hindu* (15 April 1998); cf. Anil Maheshwari, ‘The face behind the mask,’ *Sunday* (15 August 1998). Another technique, allegedly practiced in Karimganj district (Assam), was for Bangladeshi women to cross the border and give birth in India, thereby automatically conferring Indian citizenship on their babies. ‘Citizenship by labour!’ *The Sentinel* (5 April 1997).


56 See e.g. the description of Nabinnagar village, straddling the border the Nadia/Kushtia border, in Banerjee, ‘Where two nations’ (1993).


58 In early 1964, ‘special officers with a judicial background were appointed to scrutinize cases of Pakistani infiltrators’ and later that year statutory tribunals were introduced under the Foreigners’ (Tribunals) Order 1964. Employing a term from the anti-colonial movement, the Indian authorities referred to the orders they served on suspected infiltrators as *Quit India* notices. ‘Assam Expels More Than Half of 220,000 Infiltrators,’ *The Statesman* (28 July 1965).

59 Namboodiri, ‘Illegal immigrants’ (1998); Ramaswamy, ‘BJP’s Oust Bangladesh drive hots up’ (1998); ‘Joshi to deport Bangladeshis from Mumbai,’ *The Daily Star* (13 October 1997). West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu stated that illegal settlers from across the border were ‘a major headache for many Indian cities.’ Chanda, ‘Basu asks Hasina’ (1999).

60 Namboodiri, ‘Illegal immigrants.’


62 Maheshwari, ‘The face.’

63 According to West Bengal’s Home Minister. ‘Bengal to take up border fencing,’ *Rediff on the Net* (5 January 1999); ‘Beyond the courtesies,’ *The New Nation* (26 November 1998).

64 ‘Dhaka not cooperating on deportation issue,’ *Hindustan Times* (18 October 1999).

65 At the same time the All-Assam Students’ Union demanded that people living in the no-man’s land be ‘cleared’ and relocated, that Indian border guards be authorised to shoot on sight anyone found in the no-man’s land, and that patriotic Assamese youths be recruited into a ‘second line of border forces.’ ‘Centre to complete border fencing by 2007,’ *Assam Tribune* (20 August 1999); ‘Mizoram for infiltration prevention force,’ *Assam Tribune* (5 July 1999); ‘AASU for strict surveillance along border,’ *The Telegraph* (26 August 1999); ‘Border fencing work not satisfactory: AASU,’ *Assam Tribune* (26 August 1999); ‘Centre tells State Govt:
Strengthen second line of defence along border,' *Assam Tribune* (1 June 2000).


67 The complex migration patterns across South Asian borders are little studied. For example, large numbers of Rohingya Muslims from Arakan (Burma) are known to have migrated through Bangladesh and India to Pakistan, and from there to the Gulf countries, where over 200,000 were thought to reside in the 1990s. Bertil Lintner, ‘Distant exile: Rohingyas seek new life in Middle East,’ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 156:4 (28 January 1993), 23.


68 As well as 200,000 Burmese, many of whom were Muslim Rohingyas from Arakan who crossed three borders to reach Karachi. Sumit Ghosal, ‘Barrier to cross-border flesh trade sought,’ *Indian Express* (16 May 1997).


73 In the late 1990s, Bangladeshi migrants had to pay agents about US$100 to get to Pakistan and about $4,500 to get to Europe. Chakraborty, ‘Agents’ (1998); ‘Bangladeshi youths struggling’ (1999).

74 Cases of trafficking of children within East Bengal were not unknown. In 1949, in reply to an Assembly question, it was revealed that young boys, kidnapped from eastern districts of East Bengal, were sold to ‘ghatu hunters’ from Sylhet who turned them into *ghatus* (dancing boys) (*281; cf. *East Pakistan District Gazetteers: Sylhet* (Dacca: Government Press, 1971), 114).

76 ‘Border crime on the rise in West Bengal,’ *The Statesman* (15 April 1992). Numerous newspaper reports attest to the fact that women played a prominent role as agents in the trafficking of women and children from Bangladesh.

77 According to the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association, about 500 Bangladesh women were illegally transported to Pakistan every day in early 1999. A Pakistani lawyers group estimated that there were over 200,000 undocumented Bangladeshi women in Pakistan in 1998. Nadeem Qadir, ‘Experts warn of rising child prostitution in Bangladesh,’ *Daily News* (3 February 1999); *Asian Migration News* (15 January 1998).

78 E.g. ‘Child traffickers held with 2 babies,’ *The Independent* (8 July 1999); ‘Trafficking in children on the rise in Nilphamari,’ *The Independent* (19 July 1999); P.T. Jyoti Datta, ‘Bid to check child trafficking through Indo-Bangla border,’ *Business Line* (1 June 1999). Children of Muslim Rohingyas (refugees from Burma in Bangladesh), were thought to be especially targeted by child traffickers. *Asian Migration News* (15 October 1998).


81 I.e. between about $25 and $125. ‘27,000 Bangladeshis trapped’ (1998); Sanghamitra Chakraborty, ‘Repatriated Bangla children may never see their real families again,’ *Times of India* (19 April 1998).

82 At the Benapol-Bongaon border crossing ‘local auto-rickshaw drivers, handling agents and small hotel-keepers reported that men accompanying girls and women across the border [were] a common sight, and that these men did not even bother with forged documents, they handed over the money quite openly as they came across the border.’ Sleightholme and Sinha, *Guilty without Trial*, 42.

