

The Thwarted Flows of Bengal

Reflections on the India-Bangladesh border

By Samuel Berthet

The border between Bangladesh and India has created an artificial rift within a space connected by intense circulations. Thrown into illegality, the many migrants who continue to circulate between the two States face heightened risks of exploitation and increasing marginalisation.

From the eastern to the western points of the Himalayan plateau, the rivers of the Bengal Delta trace out a vast network of river traffic routes open to Southeast Asia. Unified Bengal – present-day Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal – was the central hub of the Northern Bay of Bengal,¹ a space that also included Arakan, north Burma, southwest China, the states in northeast India, and north Odisha. The traffic that ran through it made it a major locus for the construction of the world economy.

Oblivious to circulation within this space, the delineation of the India-Bangladesh border (the fifth largest in the world and also the most fragmented) has created human flows and made illegal immigration a structural phenomenon.

The process of creating an internal and external partition across this space transformed free and shifting border zones, formerly spaces of negotiation and trade, into rigid borders. Both religious and based on administrative division of land, the India-Bangladesh border was

¹ Rila Mukherjee, *The Northern Bay of Bengal, 800-1500 CE: A History Apart?* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 2013).

imposed to the detriment of networks of sociability born from intense circulation and complex interdependencies. The true significance of analysing the ambivalence between map and land lies here. Of Bangladeshi migration to India, how much was generated by the border and how much pre-existed it? In what framework can we place the recent plans for corridors within the Northern Bay of Bengal, a space in which Bangladesh, Bengal, and northeast India all hold a central place?



The border between India and Bangladesh flies in the face of both geomorphological realities and human circulation.

Partition: from exodus to migration

‘Partition’ is the accepted term for the creation of the India-Pakistan border in 1947, which then resulted, in 1971, in the border separating India and Bangladesh. In 1905, an initial attempt at partition between west and east Bengal by Viceroy Lord Curzon led to violent resistance towards the British colonial administration under the auspices of the *swadeshi*

movement. *Le Temps*, a French moderate newspaper with quasi-official status, wrote on August 21st, 1906: 'In the eyes of Hindus, the major damage caused by this territorial division (...) was that it gave formidable ascendancy over the Hindu minority to the Muslim majority in the new province and split up the Hindus' homeland in an arbitrary fashion (...)'. The newspaper interpreted the first attempt at partition as 'a wrong that can still be righted (...) because the Bengalis' discontent was beginning to spread among the 300 million inhabitants of this vast empire'. In the same newspaper, three days later, the promotion of religious identities pursued by British authorities in India gave rise to the following comment: 'It would be imprudent to consider encouraging, as some are already doing, the aspirations of the Muslim minority in a direction that is hostile to Hindus. Divide and rule is a short-lived maxim of government'.

From 1909 onwards, the division of the Hindu and Muslim electorate reshaped the political landscape, placing religious identity at the heart of the political game. Nationalist aspirations began to take on an exclusively religious dimension in the work and propaganda of several representatives of the Hindu and Muslim communities. In the 1930s, the plan to separate the Muslim and Hindu populations into two separate territories was born, driven by Mohammed Jinnah, leader of the Muslim League, an opposition party to the Congress. In 1947, this project came into effect with the creation of Pakistan. Both its name and constitution reflected its religious identity, unlike India, which, under Prime Minister Nehru, was framed as a secular nation. However, Hindu nationalist culture continued to develop in India in the domestic sphere, also finding some support in the spheres of power.

The border between Bangladesh and India was set up in two main stages. Partition proper took place on August 15th, 1947 and divided the British Empire in India into two parts, with East Bengal made a part of Pakistan. This division took the notion of religious territoriality to its extreme. The two parts of the Pakistani territory were separated from the Indian territory by about 1,500 kilometres. West Pakistan stretched from the Punjab and the Sindh to Afghanistan and Iran, while East Pakistan included East Bengal, the Chittagong region and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a hilly region with a mostly tribal, non-Bengali population where Muslims made up no more than 3% of the population.

The 1947 Partition was followed by mass massacres between the different religious communities, essentially Hindu and Sikh on the one hand, and Muslim on the other. The total number of casualties remains unknown today. No sooner had they been created than the two nations were the stage for the massive re-appropriation of exiles' wealth and land by members of the now majority religion. Partition led to the exodus of over 14.5 million people, with some 11 million fleeing to the Punjab and just over 3 million to Bengal, already bled dry by the huge famine of 1943-1944. Unlike the Punjab, the flow of refugees and migrants from East Pakistan to India continued over the years to come. In March 1971, on the eve of Independence, more than 4 million migrants were counted just in the Indian state of neighbouring West Bengal, making up 10% of the state's population. In Calcutta, they made up 27% of the population.

On December 16th, 1971, thanks to India's military help, Bangladesh gained independence after ten months of conflict with Pakistan. During the conflict, the Pakistani army conducted a genocide, denounced by representatives of international civil society but not officially recognised by global bodies. 10 million refugees were taken in by the Indian government. While West Bengal was the destination of most refugees, the other states neighbouring Bangladesh also took some in, particularly Assam and Tripura, but also all the territories of the Indian union.

Today, the number of illegal Bangladeshi migrants living in Assam is estimated at over 6 million. A rise, far above the national average, in enrolments on the electoral register drew attention to this immigration. In the neighbouring state of Tripura, population shifts have changed the demographics, with the tribal populations, previously in the majority, now in the minority. Bangladeshi immigration has also combined with other migratory flows, particularly from Nepal and other Indian states, in particular West Bengal and Bihar, in a context of a high population growth rate and increasing tensions surrounding identity. In certain states in northeast India, these tensions have led ethnic regionalist movements to demand that certain restrictions on internal movement, established under British colonial rule and abolished after Indian independence, be reinstated.

Manufacturing illegality

Even before the first attempt at Partition, the relationship between East and West Bengal was characterised by economic imbalance. Factories were mainly in the west, while the fertile east provided raw materials. Substantial population flows between East Bengal and neighbouring regions had therefore already taken place during the period that preceded the border division. Partition further heightened this imbalance, as industry was no longer concentrated in another part of Bengal but on the other side of a border separating two Nation-states.

During the genocide of the Liberation War, Hindus and intellectuals were the Pakistani army's main targets. Their assassination or migration, along with the Pakistani army's destruction of the infrastructures of what would become Bangladesh, further exacerbated the disparities between the newly independent country and its Indian neighbour. The development of the textile industry in Bangladesh over the last two decades is largely based on the low cost of labour, which makes it attractive even for the Indian job market.

Alongside legal flows and a massive number of visa applications at Indian consular services in Bangladesh (around 500 000 per year), the India-Bangladesh border also gave rise to illegal human circulation. The first waves of migrants from East Pakistan, whether at the time of Partition or during the Liberation War, were considered refugees. From the 1980s

onwards, however, and particularly after the 1983 'Illegal Migrant Act', migrants from Bangladesh were considered illegal. However, while this law established the illegality of migrants from Bangladesh, it did not provide any real reception and regulation policy. Data concerning migrants therefore remain very hit and miss. Media estimations put the number of Bangladeshi emigrants in India at 20 million, but do not distinguish between times of migration or types of migration (seasonal migrants, medical tourism, refugees, family reunification, etc.). They also sometimes mistakenly group together workers from West Bengal and workers from Bangladesh under a generic Bengali identity.

This illegality makes it easier for Bangladeshi migrants in India to be exploited. They form a captive electorate, at the mercy of local politicians who exchange voting cards for votes, in a legal context where voting cards serve as proof of identity. At the same time, the political classes denounce this immigration as a threat to the country's territorial integrity. And yet, these migrants play an ever-increasing role in the economy of the states neighbouring Bangladesh and of India in general. Illegal immigration itself also represents an important economy on both sides of the border, through the activity generated by smugglers, fake documentation, paid collusion of state representatives, savings sent home, and, above all, exploitable labour available at lower prices than the Indian market for tasks Indian workers consider beneath them.

The fifth longest border in the world is also, as mentioned above, the most fragmented. It created 123 Indian enclaves in Bangladeshi land and 74 Bangladeshi enclaves in Indian land: 197 enclaves out of the 250 that exist worldwide. Willem Van Schendel has examined the concept of citizenship in these enclaves, where inhabitants find themselves deprived of access to both circulation and the State.² Until the 2015 ratification of the exchange of enclaves (the application of which remains to be studied), inhabitants had to use a passport and obtain a visa for any travel outside their village. As none of their villages had administrative or consular services, these citizens were de facto forced into illegality. Moreover, territorial divisions prohibited inhabitants from accessing the surrounding markets, just as it prohibited inhabitants of surrounding villages from accessing their market.

The extremely fragile legal and economic situation of these inhabitants made them vulnerable to all sorts of injustice. Just like the old French lodges in India, the enclaves offered outlaws a refuge beyond the jurisdiction of their State. As all legal economic activity was effectively made impossible in the enclaves, the border generated a clandestine economy based on violating legal circulation. In turn, this clandestine economy fostered the development of larger scale networks of illegal immigration, which became structural for both countries. Despite repeated negotiations since 1958 and various decisions by their respective Parliaments, the two nations' failure to resolve the issue of the enclaves' status proved, until 2015, the incapacity of both States to view the border in terms of different modes of circulation and

² Willem Van Schendel, 'Stateless in South Asia, the making of the India-Bangladesh enclaves', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 61, n° 1 (2002), p. 115-147.

transnational citizenship. In May 2015, the Indian Parliament voted an agreement for exchanging the territories of the enclaves, making a potential evolution of the situation conceivable. Official Indian experts testified that the exchanges took place properly. However, the implementation and impact of this agreement remains to be studied.

In order to justify a very slight loss of territory, the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs foregrounded the possibility of better securing the border and thereby containing circulation, thanks to a less fragmented delineation. As for the Indian Prime Minister, he has often reiterated his desire to welcome Hindu Bangladeshis. While the situation of the enclaves seems on the point of being resolved, the religious divide and the obstacle to circulation at the origin of the India-Bangladesh border project have not been called into question.

Collective beliefs about the border

Dividing the British Empire in India up according to religious affiliations fuelled a climate of tension and generated suspicion of members of religious minorities. This is particularly true of cases where these minorities were in the majority in neighbouring countries, for example Hindus in Pakistan and Bangladesh and Muslims in India.

With Bangladesh almost completely hemmed-in, this generated an obsessive relationship to the border and designated India as the neighbour surrounding and stifling the country. Although Bangladesh acquired its independence thanks to India's logistical and military support, India did not win the favour of most Bangladeshis. On the contrary, in their collective beliefs, India embodies the omnipresent, Machiavellian, and exploitative Other, draining their national resources. These collective beliefs are also fuelled by executions of Bangladeshis by Indian armed forces at the border between the two countries, tragedies that regularly make front-page news in Bangladeshi media. In the context of a strong contraband economy in the border zone, these executions also concern Indian citizens, but in much lower proportions.

Popular perceptions of India in Bangladesh continue the legacy of anti-Hindu animosity born in the early-twentieth century in East Bengal, when many Hindus still held privileged positions and the first religious antagonism became clear. While this resentment remains strong, it is nevertheless an anachronism in modern-day Bangladesh insofar as Hindus are now in the minority and marginalised. It also reflects a certain amnesia about the different forces involved in the Liberation War. This stance has been largely fuelled by the reactionary forces, under Pakistani influence, that took power in Bangladesh in 1975. Violence against religious minorities is frequent, particularly against Hindus, but also against certain strands of Islam considered deviant. Furthermore, the transnational nature of religious identity is bolstered to the detriment of regional and cultural affinities, through massive worker immigration, tourism

of economic elites to the Middle East, and the establishment of satellite television, social networks, and religious schools supported by the oil emirates.

As for the Indians, the absence of any migration policy,³ means the border maintains phantasies about risks of surges and destabilisation. The border separates the country from a threatening Other, perceived as a relay for terrorist activities and a support base for anti-Indian armed organisations. Indeed, Bangladesh was used as an arms supply route, and perhaps even a support base, by representatives of separatist groups from the United Liberation Front of Assam. However, this did not prevent the separatist movement in question from making opposition to Bangladeshi immigrants one of the rallying cries of its propaganda.

In the context of these fears and reactions against circulation from Bangladesh, a plan emerged to build a wall and ultra-secure border posts, following the North American model, with large avenues lit by powerful projectors. This plan has only been partially implemented to date, mainly at the border of the state of West Bengal. It flies in the face of both geomorphological and human realities. The border crosses huge rivers with shifting courses, mangroves, and steep hills on soft soil, not to mention, of course, the coast of the Bay of Bengal. Building a wall reflects a very map-based conception of territory, with no regard for human experiences and the topographical reality of the land.

This plan also ignores a political and economic reality where substantial numbers of Bangladeshi migrants have been made into a captive electoral base for local politics and into a labour force dependent on the business world. Is it in the best interests of the latter for illegal migratory flows to be stemmed or to be normalised?

Fragmenting land and identity

The religious aspect gave ideological justification to Partition. The colonial administration's system for controlling land and tax was used to delineate the India-Bangladesh border. The enclaves were the legacy of Mughal administrative control, which had remained incomplete on its eastern fringes. These administrative units were then used by the British East India Company when it set up its tax system and again by the British Crown to delineate the border between the two countries.

This approach to tax, and later territoriality, based on administrative land divisions, caused deep upheaval throughout the peninsula and particularly in the so-called tribal regions

³ Irene Khan, 'Population Displacement in South Asia: Advocating a New Approach', 2010, <http://www.calternatives.org/resource/pdf/Population%20Displacement%20in%20South%20Asia%20-%20Advocating%20a%20New%20Approach.pdf> Published online 25.12.2010, consulted January 28, 2017.

of northeast India and Bangladesh.⁴ Fixing tax based on administrative divisions of land redefined social affiliations. This was particularly clear in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the southeast part of Bangladesh bordering India, where social structure was based on itinerant agrarian practices, collective ownerships of plots, and a system of tolls adapted to these practices. The reification of territorial units and sovereignty based on a fixed tax system reconfigured identity strategies, with effects that can still be seen today.⁵

Furthermore, in the 1930s, ‘excluded areas’ were created for regions with a tribal majority and these included the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The administration had discretionary power in these areas and there were restrictions on non-tribal populations settling there. The official aim of these ‘excluded areas’ was to protect tribal populations from predation by the plains populations. However, for the British colonial powers, it was also a way of ensuring direct control over the resources in these regions and creating buffer zones in the eastern confines of the empire.

The new, extremely restrictive, regime of circulation between the plains and hills regions hindered the multiple synergies at work between them – trade, matrimonial ties, etc. Excluding these tribal regions from the national political game then played a significant role in their marginalisation during decolonisation. It also fostered antinomical identities between the populations of the hills and those of the plains, worsened by the stranglehold the respective armies on each side of the border had over these regions.

Territoriality was redefined in a way that essentialised topographical identities, setting the populations of the hills against those of the plains. In line with this opposition, there was also an exercise in administrative power that now worked only one-way: from the plains to the hills. Together, these two factors led to the idea that the hills’ tribal identity was characterised by isolation and a simplistic nature, compared to the plains populations engaged in an evolving ‘civilising’ process.

This complex and fragmented regional context between India and Bangladesh was the backdrop for attempts to activate circulation corridors in the Bay of Bengal extending beyond the limits of current political zones. Can this be understood as a desire to overcome the obstacles that modern borders pose to human circulation?

⁴David Vumlallian Zou and M. Satish Kumar, ‘Mapping a Colonial Borderland: Objectifying the Geo-Body of India’s Northeast’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 70, n° 1 (February 2011), p. 141–170.

⁵Willem Van Schendel, ‘The invention of the “Jummas”: State formation and ethnicity in South Eastern Bangladesh’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 6, n° 1, (Feb. 1992), p. 95–128.

Reconfiguring the routes of the past

A range of initiatives have contributed to a regional reconfiguration placing the Northern Bay of Bengal centre stage once again. These include plans: to build deep-water ports in Bangladesh and Burma, along with corridors leading there from China and India; for a trilateral motorway across India, Myanmar, and Thailand; to build Sittwe Port, connecting it with the state of Mizoram in India, near the port and special economic zone of Kyaukphyu under Chinese control, connected to a pipeline in Yunnan; to reopen the Chinese-Indian border post in Nathu La in Sikkim; and to reconstruct the Ledo Road (or Stilwell Road). Nepal and Bhutan, whose proximity to the Bengal Delta is often overlooked, are also affected by plans for corridors to the Bay of Bengal and human circulations of different types – labour, tourism, students, medical tourism, etc.

These projects look to the past for legitimacy, referring back to traffic routes such as the Southwestern Silk Road or the Ancient Tea Horse Road. However, the corridors they mention were often based on different trade structures and territorial divisions from those contemporary Nation-states want to establish. These corridors were made up of segments with overlapping regional political entities that contributed to this trade, while using their strategic position as a bargaining chip. The trade networks using these corridors extended beyond the limits of large political groups and, to some extent, escaped their control. These networks and circulations, established over the centuries before the Christian era and active until the nineteenth century, were not determined by control of administrative land divisions or by regional and religious exclusiveness.

These plans have met with varying degrees of fortune due to the geo-strategic power struggles of alliances between China and Pakistan, on the one hand, and, since the 2000s, India, Japan, Australia, and the United States on the other, with Bangladesh and Burma using their cooperation as a bargaining chip. Moreover, India has long proved reticent to opening up its borders to China, as the two countries continue a long-standing dispute in which the Chinese government refuses to recognise the validity of the border in question, known as the McMahon line.

These plans show how flows and traffic routes persist above and beyond political divisions and any resulting fragmentation. However, while the countries in the Northern Bay of Bengal are looking to rebuild the traffic routes within this space, the territoriality created by the contemporary borders of these Nation-states is an impediment to this project. Although the trans-regional circulation of goods and raw materials lies at the heart of these projects, the question of human circulation has not been addressed.

Conclusion

Elaborated by historians, particularly Fernand Braudel, the notion of ‘space’, which extends beyond regional and state borders, provides an understanding of the stakes of contemporary circulation around the India-Bangladesh border. Since the end of the twentieth century, the Nation-states of the Northern Bay of Bengal have shown their willingness to reopen the trade corridors that existed before their borders were drawn up. At the heart of this space, the border between Bangladesh and India has resulted in the extreme fragmentation of these traffic routes. It has also given rise to a process marginalising and exploiting migrants, particularly since the 1980s. The border is the stage for one of the most substantial illegal migratory flows in the contemporary world, but also one of the least well understood.

The India-Bangladesh border highlights the consequences of the imbalances created by a conception of territoriality that is singular, religious, and based on administrative land divisions. The question arises as to whether this border is not in danger of being overtaken by the flows it exploits, and sometimes generates, by forcing them into illegality. In this sense, human circulation between India and Bangladesh sheds useful light on the challenges of contemporary territoriality.

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