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Making Walls, Fencing Borders and Living on the Margin: Understanding the India-Bangladesh Border

Ali Riaz

Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, D.C., USA
Department of Politics and Government, Illinois State University, Normal, IL, USA

'Today, a nation ringed by walls would only imprison itself.'
- Barack Obama, Speech at the UNGA, September 20, 2016.

'What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,'
- Robert Frost, 'Mending Wall'.

Abstract

Emergence of nation states in the nineteenth century naturalized borders and boundaries as both inclusionary and exclusionary measures. Territorial integrity was viewed as the most tangible expression of the sovereignty of a nation-state, thus confirming a state's monopolistic jurisdiction over a particular territorial unit. Since then a clearly defined and enforceable boundary has remained at the heart of the existence of the nation-state, the goal of which is to accentuate territorialist consciousness. In the past decades walls and fences have continued to be erected between nation states. Against this background, this paper examines broader questions such as: why do nation states feel the necessity to erect these walls and fences? How these walls and new modes of surveillance impact the lives of the people who live on the border regions? The paper examines these questions, specifically looking at the ongoing fencing of the India-Bangladesh border. The border fencing project of India had its origin in the violent protest and anti-Bengali pogrom in Assam in the 1980s, but the physical construction began in 1989. The project was initially opposed by Bangladesh, but in recent years Bangladesh government has embraced the idea. In this paper, the fencing is discussed within the broader question of border and how fencing has become the material and symbolic manifestations of state power. The examination of Indian official narrative of the Indian government shows that the issue has been securitized and blended with growing xenophobic discourse in Indian politics. The paper also explores the lived experience of those who lives in the border areas. For them borders become doubly exclusionary.

1 Introduction

With territorial integrity being viewed as the most tangible expression of the sovereignty of a nation-state, a clearly defined and enforceable boundary has remained at the heart of its existence. Thus, in the past decades more walls and fences have continued to be erected between nation states. In this context, this paper has three objectives: first, it underscores the significance of the border between India and Bangladesh, especially in the context of fencing the border by India; second, it critically examines the official Indian narratives for building the fences; and third, it explores the experience of people living on the borders. These questions are framed within the broader questions as to why nation-states feel the necessity to erect walls and fences? How do these walls and new modes of surveillance impact the lives of the people who live in the border regions?

This paper is presented in six sections. The introduction is followed by a brief background on recent global developments regarding building walls and fences and its relationship with the foundational ideas of nation-states. The third section provides background information about the borders between Bangladesh and India, focusing on the Indian government's ongoing project of fencing the border. The fourth section examines the rationale of such a project and its implications for the people living on the margin of the two nation-states. The fifth section discusses the lived experience of the residents of the borderlands. The final section offers some concluding remarks.

2 Walls and Fences: More than Ever Before

The fall of the Berlin Wall, globalization, and spectacular innovations in communication technologies in the twentieth century, promised a borderless world. We expected the emergence of a world where political

and geographical boundaries would have little significance and would not follow political boundaries. Yet, in the past decades more walls and fences have been constructed between nation-states. Elisabeth Vallet stated in 2004, 'At the end of the Cold War there were just 15 walls delimiting national borders; today, 70 of them are in existence around the world' (Vallet, 2004). By 2019, the number had reached seventy-seven (Hjelmgaard, 2018). Although the meteoric rise of real-estate mogul Donald Trump as a political figure in the United States and his ascendancy to the presidency with a promise of building a wall with Mexico brought the issue to the fore, building walls and erecting fences are taking place in various parts of the world. Vallet is correct in saying that 'borders were seen as open, soft, and purposely porous. They have become more and more closed, hard, and seemingly impassable. The fact is that as the global economy and cyberspace rely on open borders, the securitization discourse has led to the tightening of border crossings and, in some cases, to the closure and fencing of some borders' (Vallet, 2017). The Bangladesh-India border is a case in point.

This new wave of constructing walls and fences, despite being a part of the growing tendency of securitization of borders, should also be viewed as intrinsic to the nature of state power and its desire to create exclusionary and inclusionary spaces. The flawed argument that the weakening of state sovereignty has led to building walls in the face of globalization (Brown, 2010) fails to account for the fact that bounded, territorially defined, sovereignty has been at the core of state making. Emergence of nation-states in the nineteenth century naturalized borders and boundaries as both inclusionary and exclusionary. Territorial integrity was viewed as the most tangible expression of the sovereignty of a nation-state, thus confirming the state's monopolistic jurisdiction over a particular territorial unit. Since then a clearly defined and enforceable boundary has remained at the heart of the existence of the nation-states, goal being to accentuate territorial consciousness. That being said, we must be cognizant that no borders are permanent; 'in the current era borders are historically constituted entities that are (re)imagined and (re)fashioned in light of the present conditions' (Hussain, 2013, p. 6).

The borders also reflect, what Sankaran Krishna described as, 'the cartographic anxiety' of a nation-state (Krishna, 1994). National borders, the physical demarcations, have enormous symbolic significance too: they create a dichotomous division-–—'us' and 'them'—and they contribute to the construction of the 'self' and of 'the other' (Jones 2009, p. 291). Jones has aptly pointed to this binary: 'the border is a key site for the state to establish the binaries of power that frame the world as citizen–alien, nation–foreign, here–there, and we–they' (2012: 691), The walls and fences are adding to this binarization, as they also reflect the power asymmetry and unilaterality. While borders reflect an agreement between states, walls and fences are erected without the consent of each other. In agreement with Till, et al., (2013), we must recognize that walls are material and symbolic manifestations of state power. Therefore, understanding the growing number of walls and fences requires a blending of three aspects – the nature of the state, the binarization of power, and securitization.

3 Bangladesh-India Border

Except for a 170-mile border with Myanmar in the country's southeast and the opening to the sea through the Bay of Bengal in the south, Bangladesh is geographically surrounded by India. The fifth-longest land border of the world between Bangladesh and India is 2,582 miles (4,156 km)-long (by some estimations, the length of the border is 2,545 miles, 4,096 km). Among the five Indian states which share borders with six divisions of Bangladesh, West Bengal has the longest - 1,378 miles (2,217 km). Other states are: Assam (163 miles, 262 km), Tripura (532 miles, 856 km), Mizoram (110 miles,180 km) and Meghalaya (275 miles, 443 km). The Bangladeshi divisions of Mymensingh, Khulna, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Sylhet and Chittagong are located along these borders.

Although Bangladesh emerged as an independent state in 1971, seceding from Pakistan, the current border was demarcated by the Boundary Commission headed by Sir Cyril Radcliff appointed by the British colonial power in 1947. The borders were determined within the larger premise of maintaining 'contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims' but also with 'other considerations' including, but not limited to, 'natural boundaries.' The latter was not adhered to in all cases making the shape of borders between India and the then eastern part of Pakistan arbitrary.

Despite official demarcation and drawing the map in 1947, the marking of the border and enforcing the respective state's sovereignty in the border areas took quite some time. Seven years after the founding of Pakistan and India, a survey of the border between then East Pakistan and India was completed and actual markings began. The creation of the border guards in the 1960s was a key step towards the partition and enforcement of state sovereignty. This process has been described by Van Schendel (2005b) as a slow and uneven imposition of state sovereignty. Despite these developments, some land borders remained disputed and hundreds of enclaves within both countries stayed. A Land Border Agreement (LBA) to address these issues was signed in 1974 but wasn't implemented due to India's unwillingness until 2015 (Riaz, 2015).

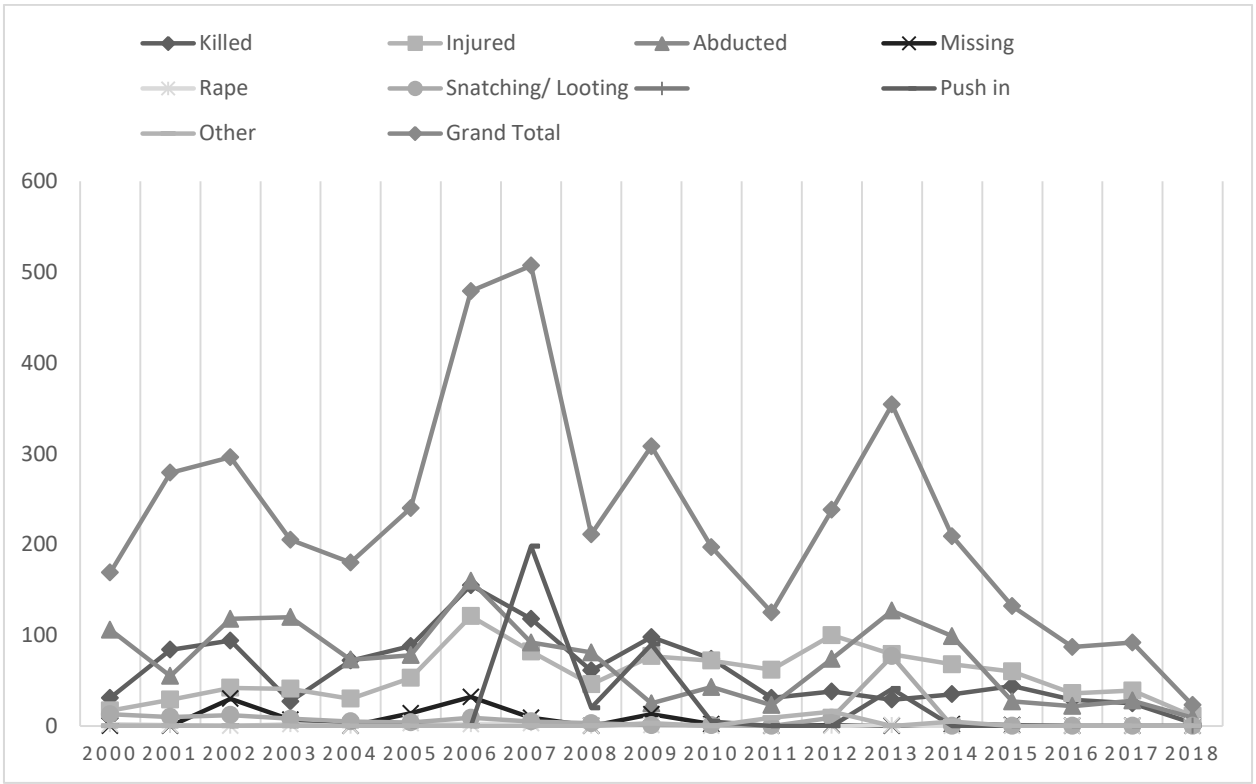
Referring to these developments, Jones informs,

> In practice, despite these attempts to bring the border into being, the borderlands functioned as they had before, with people crossing without consequence for many decades after partition. With extended families in both countries, many people made trips to visit relatives on the other side. People would also cross the border to go to work, attend festivals, participate in weddings, and even simply go to the market. The different regulatory and monetary systems on either side of the border also created new economic connections through smuggling networks that solidified business relationships (2012, p. 689).

The shared linguistic and cultural heritage among the people of both sides of the borders, particularly between West Bengal and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), played a crucial role in this relationship. Such close and informal relationships between people of the borderlands were also possible because of the arbitrary nature of boundary-making, which in turn made the border porous. It is also worth noting that despite heightened tension and wars between India and Pakistan, the border between then East Pakistan and India were relatively calm and far less hostile than the border on the West. The pivotal role of India in founding independent Bangladesh made the border less likely to be a place of hostility. However, domestic political changes in both Bangladesh and India not only transformed the overall relationship between these two countries, but also made the border contentious. Most importantly, it became the site of display of an assertive nationalism. This assertive nationalism was/is not exclusively a Bangladeshi phenomenon; rather, it became an essential identity of Indian politics and policymaking, beginning in the 1980s.

By the 2000s, the border between these two countries became one of the deadliest in the world (Walker, 2011). A report by the Human Rights Watch in 2010 documented excessive use of force by the Indian border guards, the Border Security Force (BSF), along the Bangladesh-West Bengal border and described the members of the BSF as 'Trigger Happy' (HRW, 2010). Incidents of killings remained unabetted over the past decades, although Indian authorities repeatedly pledged to refrain from 'shoot on sight policy' and use of non-lethal weapons. According to a Bangladeshi Human Rights Group, Odhikar, between 2000 and 2018, 1136 Bangladeshis have been killed by the BSF, while 1065 persons have been injured and 1360 have been abducted (see Figure 1)

Figure 1: Atrocities by Indian Border Security Force (BSF) against Bangladeshi Citizens, Bangladesh-India Border, 2000-2018



Source: Odhikar, 'Human Rights Violation by Indian Border Security Force (BSF) against Bangladeshi Citizens; 2000-2018', http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Statistics_Border_2000-2018.pdf

As the border areas are densely populated and largely inhabited by poor people, the victims have been farmers, small traders and on many occasions, children. One such incident, the killing of 15-year old Felani Khatun, drew international media attention in January 2011 when her dead body was photographed hanging on the barbed wire fence. Despite media coverage and condemnation by various Human Rights groups, to date nobody has been held responsible by the Indian authorities. This is a clear indication of the absence of accountability mechanisms, as noted by the HRW, 'because of the near total absence of effective accountability mechanisms for abuses carried out by members of the BSF, even the most serious abuses by border guards go unpunished. This sends a clear message that the Indian government finds such abuses acceptable' (HRW, 2010).

These developments are connected to the nature of the state. As both Bangladesh and the Indian state have undergone transformations, the border became a site of demonstration of the unquestionability of the state's power. Perhaps in no other place is the state's control over life and death of the citizens so vivid and so much a daily matter.

4 Fencing the Border

Both domestic politics and relationships with Bangladesh in the 1980s engendered the idea of fencing the border between these two countries. The Bangladesh-India relationship became tense because of several contentious issues, such as the water sharing of common rivers and India's support for ethnic insurgency in the southeastern part of Bangladesh on the one hand and Bangladesh's support for northeast Indian insurgents on the other. A proposal for fencing the border was first floated by regional political leaders in Assam. The proposal had its origin in the violent protest and anti-Bengali pogrom in Assam in the 1980s, where local Assamese leaders alleged that there is a considerable number of illegal migrants from Bangladesh and that this 'illegal migration' is changing the demographic composition of the state, both in terms of ethnicity and religion. The Indo-Bangladesh Border Road and Fence project to prevent 'illegal migration from Bangladesh' was incorporated in the Assam Accord signed between the agitating Assamese student organizations and the Indian central government in August 1985, which included the provision that 'the international border shall be made secure against future infiltration by erection of physical barriers like walls with barbed wire fencing and other obstacles at appropriate places.' (see Assam Accord, Annexure 10). The West Bengal government opposed such moves and initially resisted any fencing of its border with Bangladesh. (The implications of the Assam Accord have not been limited to fencing the borders but, by 2019, also turned into a test of citizenship, an issue I will return to later in the paper.) In 1998, a report on the 'illegal immigration into Assam' by the Governor of the state submitted to the President, specifically suggested fencing the border (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 1998).

The physical work of constructing the fences began in 1989, as phase I of the project. The project slowly progressed and by 1999, only 5% of the entire border, 854 km was fenced, mostly concerning West Bengal (Van Schendel, 2005; Shamsad, 2008; McDuie-Ra, 2014). 'In 2007, India decided to replace the entire 861 km. of fence constructed under Phase I in West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya, as most of this fence had been damaged by adverse climatic conditions and repeated submergence'(Shamsad, 2008).

In the 2000s, especially after 2001, the fencing project progressed rapidly and all resistance to it began to dissipate. In January 2004 the Department of Border Management was created within the Ministry of Home Affairs. According to the official description, the department has been created 'to pay focused attention to the issues relating to management of international land and coastal borders, strengthening of border policing and guarding, creation of infrastructure like roads, fencing and flood lighting of borders and implementation of Border Area Development Programme (BADP)' (emphasis added). By November 2007, 2529 km of fencing was completed; and within the next two years the total fencing reached 2649 km. As of 2018, 95 percent of the border was fenced (The Economic Times, 2018). By 2019, 2803 km of the border have been fenced and completion is scheduled in December 2020 (Firstpost, 2019).

These fences are not constructed along the zero-point line but 150 yards from the zero-point line inside Indian territory. Land owned by farmers and local people are situated between the fenced border and the actual border between these two countries. Most of these lands are used for small-scale farming and serve as the principle source of the livelihood of small farmers. 'To accommodate these Indian farmers, hundreds of gates were constructed and are operated by the border guards.' Although there are supposed to be locally arranged schedules of opening and closing of the gates, field research and conversations with the local populations revealed that often it depends on the convenience of the border guards, causing enormous hardships to the local people. Besides, there have been disputes over demarcation and the 150-yard buffer zones (Jamwal, 2004). One of the less discussed dimensions of the fencing project is the plight of the people who have lost their livelihoods, as their land has fallen between the actual international border and the erected fence. Prakash and Menon's work identified 90,000 people on

the border in such a situation (Prakash & Menon, 2011). The fencing project displaced people from their ancestral lands and created enormous hardships. A field study conducted in 2014 on the Indian border where fence has been erected found, 'As a result many houses were fallen [sic] within the geographical location between the line of partition and the border fencing. In the Karimganj district of Assam, there are 10 villages which are partially or completely fenced out after the creation of the border fencing' (Datta 2018: 46).

The project which accelerated in the past years by the Indian government, and is almost completed, was objected to by the Bangladesh government when it was first proposed. The Bangladesh government in the 1980s opposed such a move as an effort to circumscribe the sovereignty of Bangladesh. On 20 April 1984, 'Indian and Bangladeshi troops exchanged gunfire … in a dispute over India's construction of a fence along the border', reported the New York Times (1984). The report further informs, 'Bangladesh has described India's plan to build the barbed wire fence along its 1,000-mile border as an "unfriendly act."' As the project continued, many Bangladeshis had described it as an effort to 'cage' Bangladesh.

But the situation has dramatically changed in the past decades. The Bangladeshi government has accepted it as a *fait accompli* as no international law prevents India from building it. Since the AL government came into power in 2009 and relationships between the ruling Awami League and the BJP have become very warm since the latter came to power in 2014, Bangladesh has not only dropped its criticisms but embraced the idea. For example, a joint statement of Sheikh Hasina and Narendra Modi, Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India, respectively, on 5 October 2019 says:

> Both leaders emphasized the importance of effective border management for ensuring a tranquil, stable and crime free border. Towards this goal, the Leaders directed their respective border forces to complete border fencing at all pending sectors at the International Border between both the countries at the earliest. Both Leaders also agreed that the loss of civilian lives at the border is a matter of concern and directed the concerned border forces to enhance coordinated measures to work toward bringing such border incidents down to zero (Live Mint, 2019).

Fencing the borders has been accompanied by infrastructure development in the border region, especially construction of roads to help with the movement of border guards, increased the number of border outposts and the installation of floodlights. According to the Indian Home Ministry, by 2010, 3361 km roads were built. The number of border posts have been increased in recent years; in 2009, the government approved 383 new border posts to add to the existing 802 posts. Almost 2840 km of floodlighting along the border was sanctioned by the government in 2008; at least 277 km was completed within a year. One can't disagree with the description of these floodlight lit borders by Reece Jones: 'The panopticon of the Indian state need not be imagined; it shines bright all night long for many of the Bangladeshi borderland residents.'

In April 2018, the Indian government under its comprehensive integrated border management system (CIBMS), installed a 'smart fence' pilot project on the Assam-Bangladesh border. Installed on a 55-km-riverine stretch, the modern technology will 'plug vulnerable gaps along India's borders', Indian authorities claimed. The authorities said at that time, technical surveillance and alarm gadgetry installed across the Brahmaputra river will be replicated in other places in the near future (NDTV, 2018b). The pilot project – named BOLD-QIT (Border Electronically Dominated QRT Interception Technique), under the Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS), was inaugurated in March 2019 (The Economic Times, 2019).

These developments, over the past decades, not only mark a geographical change in the border landscape but demonstrate the nation-state's notion of its reach and sense of sovereignty.

5 Indian Narratives for Building Fences

In the past decades, Indian politicians and policymakers have advanced three rationales for stricter border control with Bangladesh and securitization of the borders. Once celebrated cultural and historical ties between these two countries have now been replaced with fear and threats emanating from Bangladesh to India. The three rationales are: stopping infiltration, addressing security threats and reducing illicit trade.

These aspects and rationales reflect the mindset of the Indian policymakers and analysts, which needs to be contextualized within India's neighborhood policy. For a long time, India has adopted a regional policy akin to the Monroe Doctrine, which is occasionally referred to as the 'Indira Doctrine.' Indian regional security doctrine has been, according to Hagerty (1991), 'that India strongly opposes outside intervention in the domestic affairs of other South Asian nations, especially by external powers whose goals are perceived to be inimical to Indian interests'. Although India might not have been successful in implementing the Doctrine, 'it has been an article of faith for many in the Indian strategic community (Homes et al., 2009, p.45). Besides, Indian policies toward its neighbors have been shaped by

Kautilya's suggestion that immediate neighbors should be suspected at all times (that is, neighboring states are to be looked at as potential enemies, even if friendly relations prevail in the immediate present). Additionally, Indian perception about its neighbor was and still is - in the words of an Indian analyst - that it is "being surrounded on all sides by unstable democracies, conflict-ridden countries, militant activity, authoritarian leaders or weak government' (Gangopadhyay, 2012).

With such a security-centric and skewed perception, Indian policymakers and a significant section of the media have created a binary frame to understand Bangladesh: enemy / friend. In post 2009, with the return of the Awami League to power, the frame has become the mainstay of the Indian mindset: the incumbent AL is the friend, while any valid criticisms are viewed as a hostile act of 'an enemy'.

Although migration between Bangladesh and India has a long history, since the 1980s it has been described as 'infiltration'. There are no reliable data on the extent of Bangladeshi migrants into India, the number reported in the media have varied significantly. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), a religio-political party with a highly exclusionary and divisive political agenda, since the late 1980s, began concerted propaganda against the alleged 'illegal Bangladeshi migrants'. The resolution passed by the BJP National Executive Committee in April 1992 marks the watershed moment in the discourse about 'illegal Bangladeshi migrants' and signaled the future strategy of the BJP. Claiming that over 15 million Bangladeshis had illegally entered India, without any evidence to support the claim, the resolution stated, 'the influx constitutes a serious strain on the national economy, a severe stress on the national society and withal a serious threat to the stability and security of the country' (Quoted in Shamsad, 2008). However, the first official statement by the Government of India regarding the extent of Bangladeshis' migration into the country came on 6 May 1997. Union Home Minister Indrajit Gupta informed the Indian Parliament that there were nearly 10 million undocumented immigrants, largely from Bangladesh, residing in India (Shamsad, 2008).

In the subsequent years, the political discourse as well as the political landscape has changed – not only that BJP emerged as a major political force, but also anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment have become its main political ideology with tacit acquiescence from other parties. The victory of the BJP and ilk Shive Sena in 1999 institutionalized the 'hysterical narrative of infiltration of Bangladeshis' as reflected in the Group of Ministers Report in 2000 appointed by the Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani. The report estimated that 15 million Bangladeshis are residing in India illegally. Since then, all political parties irrespective of ideological orientations, joined the bandwagon. For example, in 1999, West Bengal's Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, a Communist Party leader, suggested the deportation of illegal immigrants, portraying illegal flows from Bangladesh as 'a major headache for many Indian cities.' Press reports quoted Basu saying that 'West Bengal is bearing the brunt of the infiltration and the state's economy is being adversely affected' (Rediff, 1999).

The xenophobic discourse was mainstreamed by the BJP since it came to power in 2014. Rhetoric and actions against Muslim communities throughout the country, but targeting those in the bordering states, particularly Assam, became the central plank of the BJP's campaign. In September 2018, BJP President Amit Shah described the alleged migrants from Bangladesh as 'illegal infiltrators' and 'termites' (Aljazeera, 2018). In April 2019, Shah not only reiterated his description, but also promised that 'his party will throw them out after coming to power at the Centre for a second term' (Reuters, 2019). The Chief of the Indian Army, General Bipin Rawat, commented that 'influx from Bangladesh is proxy war by Pakistan with the help of China' (NDTV, 2018a). The Bangladesh government did not react to these statements (Mahmud, 2018).

This is not to deny migration from Bangladesh, but the exaggerated number and portrayal as a menace have contributed to a xenophobic mindset in India. Even the official accounts of the number of alleged 'infiltrators' provides a picture that is inconsistent with the BJP and ilk's rhetoric. According to a press report, 'Between 2014 and 2019, the number of infiltrators apprehended in West Bengal came down to 379 from 2,260. In Assam, the numbers came down from 101 to 94, while in Meghalaya, it decreased from 64 to 11. In Mizoram, the number of infiltrators apprehended has been reduced to seven from eight and in Tripura, the numbers declined from 101 to 94' (Firstpost, 2019).

The religious dimension of the discourse cannot be ignored. The government's willingness to amend the citizenship law to allow Hindus to be treated differently is telling (The Times of India, 2016).

The national security rationale, initially appearing as a corollary to the 'infiltration', found a life of its own after three separate developments in 2001. The first was the Indian Supreme Court's observation in a public interest litigation case; the second was the terrorist attack in New York on 11 September and the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT) of the Bush administration, and the third was the victory of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led coalition with Islamist parties as partners in Bangladesh. In February 2001, during a hearing of a Public Interest Petition filed by the All India Lawyers Forum for Civil Liberties (AILFCL), the Chief Justice and two other Justices of the Supreme Court

expressed concern that undocumented migrants from Bangladesh might pose a threat both to the economy and security of the country. They said that the 'Bangladeshi migrants were eating into the economy of the country and had to a large extent become a security threat' (The Times of India, 2001)

Immediately after the attacks in New York on 9/11, the Indian government led by the BJP not only extended unqualified support to the so-called GWOT launched by the USA but also portrayed the battle as its own too. The attack on Indian parliament in December only fueled this line of argument. Rupal Oza pointed out that the geopolitical boundary narratives of the global war on terror, which represent the world as a binary of good and evil, were mapped onto historical communal conflicts between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia (Oza, 2007). Referring to Oza, Reece Jones noted in 2009 that communalism has been reframed as terrorism by India and that even after change in leadership in the Indian state, the situation has not changed (Jones, 2009). With the return of BJP to power in 2014, the binary has now become the permanent frame of reference for understanding the India-Bangladesh relationship.

The victory of the BNP with its Islamist allies in the October 2001 election, irked the Indian establishment. Indian political and security establishments always had an uncomfortable relationship with the BNP (Riaz, 2019). There are several underlying factors for such relationships but the BNP's foreign policy orientation and its support for the northeastern Indian insurgent groups played key roles in this strained relationship. Due to the Islamist partners of the BNP-led alliance, a section of the Indian media and analysts began portraying Bangladesh as the hotbed of Islamist extremism immediately after the election. By 2005, Bangladesh experienced a small but growing threat of violent Islamist extremist threat, but the growing menace was limited to Bangladesh and ostensibly these groups did not have any regional or global agenda. Yet, India used this as a security threat and insisted that fencing the border is necessary to prevent them from entering its own territory.

The formal trade relationship between Bangladesh and India is lopsided in favor of India. It has been so for decades, but the trade deficit has increased substantially in the past decade with the Bangladesh Awami League in power since 2009. Of the current $9.85 billion formal trade between these two countries, the deficit stands at $7.35 billion (Rahman, 2019). The trend over the past decade shows an increase in deficit rather than a decline (DCCI, 2019). In addition to formal trade, informal trade along the borders have been very common. These trades are often described as illicit or as smuggling. Researchers have identified the difficulties in understanding and explaining these 'illicit flows' from the dominant state-centric framework (Van Schendel, 2005a). The Indian state insists that the fence will control the flow, particularly of illicit goods, and increase revenue from legal trade. Interestingly, as of now, estimates show that informal trade is benefiting India more than Bangladesh. One estimate of 2017 suggests, 'there is $3.2 billion of informal trade or Indian smuggled goods coming to Bangladesh while goods amounting to $300 to $400 million go to India from Bangladesh' (Nour, 2017). Fencing, establishing state approved official crossing points and heightened surveillance, has not stopped illicit trade; instead informal arrangements between the traders/smugglers and the border guards have continued.

While the Indian establishment continues to argue along these three lines, the question of border and 'illegal migration' has assumed a different dimension and has become an important element of national discourse. This is obvious in the National Registry of Citizenship (NRC) exercise in Assam. Although apparently the 1985 agreement between the Indian Central Government, the State of Assam, and the agitators was an effort to address issues of regional economic development and bring an end to the seven-year agitation by the All Assam Students Union, it unleashed a process which has the power not only to determine who has 'crossed the border illegally', but what Indian citizenship means. The agreement stipulated March 25, 1971, the date of Bangladesh's creation, as the point of departure; that is, a person who has entered Assam before then was deemed to be an Indian while those who came after that 'cutoff' date were foreigners (i.e., Bangladeshi) and therefore, to be identified and 'sent back.' The movement of the AASU, initially billed as against the "outsider", was transformed into a movement against "foreigners". The invisible border, through this agreement, became an integral part of the notion of citizenship. With the interjection of the Supreme Court beginning 2013, various institutional actors, such as the bureaucracy, became entangled in the politics of identity in a highly polarized society where religion has been pushed by Sangh Parivar as the principal marker, and the issue of migration, of crossing the border, brought to the forefront of politics. The final list of NRC, published on 31 August 2019, concluded a four-year long process which 'excluded' 1.9 million people of Assam (Regan & Suri, 2019) and practically made them stateless. This is described by analysts as 'the Great Indian Disenfranchisement' (Agrawal & Salam, 2019). While those who are excluded will have the opportunity to go through a quasi-judicial process called Foreigners Tribunal (FT) to establish their citizenship but considering the incompetency and inefficiency of the NRC process (for example, the draft list excluded 4 million people), there is little hope for those who are excluded. But the entire NRC is not only about who is or

who is not a citizen in the legal term, but what constitutes citizenship in contemporary India, who determines citizenship and how the discourse of citizenship is framed, propagated and consumed.

6 Living on the Margin

The questions as to how the people living on the borders experience their lives and perceive their relationship with the states have been issues of significant discussions in the past decades and addressed by a host of researchers within the Borderland Studies. There is growing recognition that a state-centric approach to understanding the socio-political dynamics is inadequate, but it is also recognized that borders and borderlands are products of the territorial aspects of statehood.

Among the issues the Borderland Studies have tried to answer is how the inhabitants negotiate between different identities they face due to their physical location on the margins. Unlike many other borders where physical borders between states also marks differences in culture, language and practice, the Bangladesh-India border brings together people who have similar cultures and languages and, in many instances, have long familial ties. It is now well recognized that borders shouldn't be considered only as physical space but also as social space. The lived experience of those who inhabit the borders are distinctly different from other citizens. As Van Schendel has pointed out in his seminal work on the Bengal Borderland, after more than 70 years of creating the boundaries, the border has remained an emotive issue and some are yet to accept its legitimacy (Van Schendel, 2005, p. 2).

Regarding the lived experience of the inhabitants of the borderlands, extant studies have largely provided two conflicting perspectives. One has argued that inhabitants of the borderlands engage in practices that challenge state sovereignty by refusing the existence of both countries, while the other has argued that instead of refusal of the states, their practices indicate a convergence. The former perspective highlights the practices which bear the mark of resistance, the latter, on the other hand, show how the residents have negotiated with the states' violent presence in their daily lives. Hussain's ethnographic study of a border community on the Bangladesh-India border (Hussain, 2013) is an excellent example of the latter. Jones (2012) has argued for the former, describing the Indo-Bangladesh border as a 'space of refusal'.

The presence of the state in the borderlands in the form of the fences and of the border guards have other implications too. We regularly experience humiliation and occasionally physical assault, said several inhabitants on the border of West Bengal and Bangladesh when I visited the border in 1999. Such allegations were echoed on the other side of the border, from Jessore to Rajshahi. Years later, my trips to some of these places didn't gather entirely different responses. Instead the inhabitants have insisted that fencing has not only increased surveillance but also contributed to increased violence.

Those who live on the borders feel that their loyalty to their respective states are suspect and they are subjected to suspicions by state agencies, particularly border security forces. The state agencies impose stricter rules along the border which in many ways restricts movement, and influences social, political, economic and civic life. These are contrary to the fundamental rights accorded to the citizens. As such, a border which is supposed to create a line to exclude others, creates 'others' within its own boundaries by taking away the rights of the citizens it claims to protect. This is how borders become doubly exclusionary.

7 Conclusion

This paper underscores the importance of studying the border between Bangladesh and India, especially in the context of erecting fences and increased surveillance. Although the fences along the Indo-Bangladesh border were proposed in the 1980s, based on domestic considerations, external considerations have accentuated the process of building them in recent decades. Portrayal of Bangladesh as a hotbed of Islamist militancy, where groups are ready to export the menace to India and growing anti-Muslim sentiment within the country, engendered by Hindutva political forces, have created a narrative supporting the fencing project. Equally important to note is the role of the post 9/11 so-called Global on Terror (GWOT) narrative; the geopolitics of border control and framing relationship within the binary of 'good' and 'evil'. As such, the discussion on the Bangladesh-India border is deeply connected to global geopolitics. It will be erroneous to ignore this aspect and examine the fencing project in isolation.

As in many borders, the physical space remains contentious and increased violence by the Indian border guards shows that the Indian state is inclined to project its sovereignty with force. The Indian narrative of erecting fences, as an inevitable development to ensure its security, does not bear out because it hasn't faced any security threat from the Bangladesh side of the border. Besides, experiences of other borders inform that: 'The security benefits yielded by fortifying and strengthening borders tend to evaporate over time. First no border is

impermeable (with the exception of the DMZ in the Korean Peninsula, perhaps). Therefore, any fortification will induce a logic of transgression, with circumvention strategies such as the drilling of tunnels, the ingenuity of basic smuggling stratagems (scales, scissors to cut through) or on the contrary sophisticated ones (submarines, drones, catapults) and the use of new migration routes. In the long term, therefore, the lack of cooperation across the border may trigger greater security concerns as mafias and organized crime take control of the border crossing process. Fortified and strengthened borders will actually generate new problems that cannot effectively be addressed separately from both borderlands: the border is no longer a line but a zone' (Valett, 2017). The lived-experiences of the residents are dictated by the presence of the state, its embodied representations as border guards, and the residents' continuous effort to subvert and accept the state's sovereignty and authority. There is no reason to believe that building walls and erecting fences will change this mode of their interactions with the states.

Endnotes

1 An earlier version of the paper was presented at the International Political Science Association (IPSA) World Congress 2018, Brisbane, Australia, 21-25 July 2018.

2 See Assam Accord, Clause 9 (1), https://web.archive.org/web/20180909102748/https://assam.gov.in/documents/1631171/0/Annexure_10.pdf?version=1.0

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