

Spectacles of militarization¹

In September 2013, a United Nations population factsheet reported that Asia hosted the second-highest number of international migrants (after Europe) and the largest number of refugees.² The factsheet contributed to explosive debates on the India-Bangladesh border, a product of political events in 1947 and 1971. It corroborated that there were 3.2 million Bangladeshis residing in India. Indian political parties quickly used this data to validate India's fear of 'infiltrating' Bangladeshis. Bangladesh predictably rejected the statistics. The release of the UN report in 2013 coincided with civil society protests in Bangladesh over India's 'shoot to kill' policy at the border. The same month, an Indian border constable, Amiya Ghosh, who had shot fifteen-year-old Felani Khatun, was acquitted. Felani's body hung from India's new border fence with Bangladesh. The fence – a project under construction – substantially re-configures the border landscape that cuts across heavily militarized northeast India, which shares complicated boundaries with Bangladesh.

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IN UNDERSCORING THAT nine out of ten refugees were located within a small group of developing states, the UN report echoed what Aristide Zolberg argued thirty years ago. He advanced that tensions produced by the disintegration of imperial states and the emergence of new post-colonial states in the mid-20th century were refugee-producing processes and accounted for the large number of refugees in developing regions.³ Joya Chatterji, in her recent historiography of the Bengali diaspora, agrees with Zolberg. She convincingly shows that the partition of the Indian subcontinent (in August 1947) and the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent Bengali nation state (in 1971) led to significant internal displacement and international migration in South Asia. These population movements were greater in scale than from South Asia's devastated borders to Britain and other advanced economies.⁴

Given the global emergence of high security barriers and deep suspicion of Muslim migrants, it is important to realise that everyday mobility, political violence and territoriality need to be investigated in one analytic frame. Despite prolific scholarship on the partition of the Indian subcontinent that attend to violence, trauma and agency,⁵ the narration of border-crossings as interweaving locations of loss and abjection on the one hand, and material and social possibilities on the other, remains challenging. How do we write about people who cross borders without documentation, who experience state violence but also 'work the border'? How do we engage with violence through bodies that move across borders as much as those that are trapped in abjection and inertia? How do we condemn border violence in one voice in regions where maps and migration precariously divide states and militarize small regions, adding to multiple border predicaments?

I suggest that the term 'divided bodies' may be useful to engage with the socio-political and intellectual possibilities that are derived from unscripted/unofficial border-crossings in militarized borders. Without necessarily denoting causality, this indicates that border-crossers fall back on the structural deficiencies of barriers, while simultaneously being at the receiving end of state repression. Divided bodies enable scholars and activists to respond to the grief and loss that structure migrant lives, interrogate fragmented statistics and fractured solidarities, and critique cultures of militarization. I will briefly engage with these themes along the border zone straddling northeast India and Bangladesh, whose old and new maps deeply trouble me. I will begin with Felani's life.

Missing bodies

Felani's life was unexceptional. Like many adolescents in South Asia, she had dropped out of school. Given the region's interlinked geographies, her adolescence in India was to lead to an early marriage in Bangladesh. On a cold

and foggy January morning in 2011, Felani was travelling with her father Nurul Islam, who lived in Assam in northeast India. Islam had paid money to border brokers for the journey.⁶ If Indian border guards had not shot her, she would have added another number to the United Nations' population data on international migration and to the undifferentiated statistics of Bangladeshis in India. But her violent killing exposes how the United Nations' classification of 'international' and 'bilateral' erases differences that shape migratory regimes and their precarious outcomes.

Hilary Cunningham and Josiah Heyman have convincingly brought these distinctions to bear upon migration studies. They argue that since movement stands at the cross-roads of power and resources, it shapes mobility and enclosures. They also remind us that the opening and closing of borders testify to differential privileges and rights.⁷ While it is true that the lives of Bangladeshis and Indians with advanced degrees are vastly different from those of their less privileged counterparts, it is clear that the outcomes of their border-crossings label them as 'knowledge' and 'labour' migrants. With the United Nations computing 'international' and 'bilateral' migrant stock on the basis of where people were born and have come to reside, we are left speculating about their absence, deprivation and injuries. Furthermore, since intellectual division of labour in computing data on migrants is based on the living versus the dead, migrants who face torture and die while crossing borders form another set of statistics gathered by human rights organizations.

Although borders that divide states such as Bangladesh and India are legacies of shared pasts, migration figures and questions of legality lead to explosive political debates. Bangladesh has questioned the United Nations' enumeration on the grounds that it merely reproduced biased official Indian projections. Tellingly, apart from Indians imprisoned in Bangladesh, there is no discussion on unauthorized border-crossings from India to Bangladesh, despite the large numbers that travel for trade, to shop or to maintain kinship ties. The relative porosity of the border ensures that those escaping political persecution and natural disasters, or migrating for work (travelling without legal documentation) collapse in predicament and statistics.

In this unstable landscape, India is constructing a new border fence with Bangladesh. The fence effortlessly shape-shifts from a matrix of wires and metal pillars through which Indians and Bangladeshis enquire about divided families and gossip, into a site of closure and suffering.⁸ An infrastructure of violence, it shapes migrant bodies, and reinstates Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson's compelling formulation that in national cartographies impinging upon bodies, 'border maps' are also 'body maps'.⁹ Mutilated and dead bodies are found along the fence, bodies that are being increasingly photographed and digitally circulated.

Above: India's new border fence with Bangladesh under construction in Meghalaya, Northeast India (2007) Photograph: Malini Sur

Digital bodies

Bangladeshi activists circulated digital images of Felani's tortured body with captions describing her journey from northeast India to Bangladesh, cross-border firings, injuries, postmortem and burial. These images disrupted sequence and temporality, and Felani surfaced in various frames. A bleeding upside down female body on a fence; a body with hands and legs tied to bamboo poles; a horizontal body with a bullet to the chest; a dangling body and a ladder next to it; a partly stitched swollen body covered with a plastic sheet; a border guard looking away from the hanging body.

Felani's tortured form supported a Human Rights Watch report. Aptly entitled 'Trigger Happy', the report underscores excessive militarization along the India-Bangladesh border and documents India's indiscriminate use of force. It estimates that Indian border guards have shot dead at least 1000 undocumented travellers in the past decade.¹⁰ Felani's post mortem, which revealed a bullet to her chest is condemnable, given the large number of two-way crossings at the India-Bangladesh border.¹¹ The statistics were alarming because the study was limited to a little more than half of the 4,096 kilometre boundary, excluded the heavily militarized border regions of northeast India and failed to investigate human rights abuses committed by Bangladeshi border guards. Willem van Schendel called the India-Bangladesh border a 'killer border' long before Felani's gruesome end due to excessive political violence, and Indian and Bangladeshi border guards' use of excessive force on both sides. Advancing that borders between 'friendly states' generate extreme violence, the author calculated 2,428 cases of injury, abduction and killings, including that of border guards, within a short span of five years.¹²

In projecting border violence and militarization as recent, escalating and limited to the Indian side, we forget that what is today the India-Bangladesh border, sits uncomfortably on a troubled zone. For centuries, this region has been armed in various ways, even as suspected traitors and dissidents were disarmed. Here, rebels and militias have sought refuge, smaller territories have been coercively appended, and border guards and peasants have raided granaries and cattle. Village elders as well as the archives remind us that militias, the police, dissidents and border residents have battled each other along these political margins, even as they collaborated on border vigilance.¹³

Furthermore, the zone straddling northeast India and the foothills and plains of Bangladesh is central for an understanding of the India-Bangladesh borderland as a zone of a continuity and contestation. India and Bangladesh officially sanctioned the first experimental border market the same year Felani Khatun was shot.¹⁴ A legacy of old trade routes, in weekly markets known as border *haats*, bordering the state of Meghalaya (northeast India) and Kurigram (Bangladesh), trans-border traders legally conduct business up to a maximum of \$50 and officially travel without passports.¹⁵

