

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.

Malini Sur



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 affluence, 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 affinity 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

Many refugees such as Nurul Islam, Felani's father, have made a home in Assam, long after India and Bangladesh mutually consented to a legal cut-off date to end unauthorised migration (March 25, 1971). In the case of older settlers in this region and immigrants who have acquired Indian citizenship in Assam, frenzied detection drives and judicial trials of 'suspected Bangladeshis' add layers of ambiguity rather than fix the boundary between citizens and foreigners. Migration, land grabs and settlement issues unfortunately recur in gruesome violence such as in Nellie (1983) and Kokrajhar (2012) in Assam. These further complicate Assam's external and internal borders, especially since northeast India has been under prolonged military scrutiny and marginalized in India.¹⁶

Divided citizens

State repression at the India-Bangladesh border have brought about new forms of virtual protest, similar to social media-led anti-regime protests in Africa and West Asia. As India's cross-border shootings featured on conventional diplomatic platforms, cyber warfare raged over Felani's death. Appearing in early 2011 in 'Yahoo Answers' under the label of 'Government and Politics' and the subcategory 'Military', Amak (a pseudonym) protested Felani's killing to illustrate India's atrocities against Bangladeshis. While the responses to his post confirmed such atrocities, one counter held that Bangladeshis entered India without legal authorization. Yahoo presented a summary of questions that included, "How does it feel to kill someone?"

However, cyber activism also includes critical deletions, which do not preclude state surveillance. For instance, 'Ajay 1694' fleetingly surfaced on Wikipedia's India Border Security Forces page in 2012, requesting deletion of the section on Felani's image and killing. In his assertion that this impaired ties between friendly neighbours, he unknowingly echoed Bangladesh's initial disinclination to recognize Felani as a Bangladeshi citizen.¹⁷ As Ajay1694 disappeared, so did Felani's photograph. Images of Indian border guards and officers, and ammunition took precedence on the Wikipedia page. In September 2013, after the acquittal of the BSF constable who fired at Felani, a new Wikipedia page, entitled 'Killing of Felani', surfaced and along with it new writing on virtual walls. In January 2014, the 'Bangladesh Grey Hat Hackers' and the 'Bangladesh Cyber Army' attacked fourteen hundred Indian websites (including intelligence websites) to protest Felani's killing.

Felani's graphically photographed hanging body came to exemplify Bangladesh's geo-body and its unequal relationship with India. This was made explicit in a poster pasted on the walls of Dhaka in 2011. "Stop Border Killings" at the upper outer margin of the poster frames Felani's hanging image. Two subtexts are scripted along the lower margins. The first emphatically states, "Felani does not hang Bangladesh hangs"; the second subtext ambiguously attributes the authorship of the poster to the "public of Bangladesh" (both translated from Bengali). Bangladeshi activists ranging from cyber hackers and human rights organisations, to religious and political interest groups, ensured that Felani was recognised as a Bangladeshi citizen. Unlike digital images and texts that created and deleted evidence and left uneven trails, the poster of Felani's killing had concrete shape and form. However, its textual preciseness eroded Felani's trans-border identity and ironically disrupted the momentum her body had gained in photographs.

Wide-ranging protests in Bangladesh failed to make a significant impact in India. Felani's proximity to the international boundary encouraged Bangladeshi activists representing diverse interests to appropriate her as a Bangladeshi subject and refugee. However, in India, border policies are considered largely a matter of national security and 'Islamic' terrorism, and obliterated any claims to Felani being an Indian Muslim citizen or even a Bangladeshi migrant whose killing merited protest. Furthermore, her in-between status as neither an adult nor a child, and neither a victim of human and sexual trafficking nor an innocent Bangladeshi 'juvenile' who accidentally crossed borders, meant that she slipped from Indian interventions that privilege recovery and repatriation. If protests in Bangladesh took on bilateral colours as opposed to humanitarian ones, India's silence affirmed the inequality of its relationship with Bangladesh and its lack of commitment to zero border killings promised earlier. Above all, it conveyed smug superiority and denial of Indian 'Felanis' who cross borders without authorisation and labour under disconcerting conditions.

Unfortunately, digital images and cyber activism assumed similar connotations as problematic statistics, and cemented old rivalries and denials. These shifted attention away from urgent issues of livelihood and made people forget that even today, many angry teenagers march across the border for no other reason than angst against their parents. As a divided citizen, Felani's status was sidelined in Bangladesh, which claimed her as a victim of Indian atrocities, and in India, which ignored her predicament. Activists failed to recognise the conflicted narratives that border societies such as Indian and Bangladeshi enclave dwellers use to give meaning to their territorialities,

life circumstances and dilemmas even as they engage in para-legal activities,¹⁸ predicaments that structure lives like Nurul's and Felani's. Even if India's promised retrial of Felani's case leads to a conviction, it may not resolve the issues of everyday travel and the livelihood of border residents, and trans-border and mobile communities such as fisher folk and coal miners.¹⁹ Border residents' dependence on predatory brokers and guards will persist till issues including de-centralized passports, trans-border identity cards and work permits for labour migrants - proposed long ago - are tabled for discussion again.²⁰

Conclusion

Felani reminds us that migrants include those travelling under precarious conditions alongside legally protected travellers. She compels us to recognize that scholarship and protest must engage with complicated and transnational lives that link homes, workstations and trading hubs straddling border fences. Felani's tortured form correlates short and hurried walks through rice fields and forests that separate India and Bangladesh with migrant burial grounds in scalding deserts that form a part of the United States-Mexico border. Since the term international migration obscures critical distinctions and profiles migrants on the basis of the living, the dead, refugees and others, scholars and activists must read across distinct statistical slots to compile and read migration-related data. Added, rather than subtracted, this will inform us about the diversity of moving, settling down, dying and grieving that shape migratory regimes. Felani epitomises South Asia's complex games of territoriality and links Bangladesh's troubled geography with Assam's post-colonial history. As India and Bangladesh orchestrate joint parades along a border that was never a conventional war theatre, we are reminded once again that this border rests on uneasy friendships. Till we expand our dissenting horizons, images of Felani's tortured body will continue to sporadically haunt our collective conscience.

Malini Sur is a Research Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore (arimali@nus.edu.sg).

References

- 1 This article has been abridged and reproduced with kind permission from *Economic and Political Weekly* 46 (13): 31-35
- 2 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. *Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2013 Revision* (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2013); www.unmigration.org
- 3 Zolberg, A. 1983. 'The Formation of New States as a Refugee-Generating Process', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 467: 24-38; pp.36-37
- 4 Chatterji, J. 2013. 'Dispositions and Destinations: Refugee Agency and "Mobility Capital" in the Bengal Diaspora, 1947-2007', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55(2):273-304; p.274
- 5 See, Banerjee, P. 2010. *Borders, Histories, Existences: Gender and Beyond*, New Delhi: Sage Publications; Das,

V. 1995. *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press; Menon, R. & K. Bhasin. 1998. *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press; Butalia, U. 1999. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Karachi: Oxford University Press; Bagchi, J. & S. Dasgupta (eds.) 2006. *The Trauma and the Triumph*, Kolkata: Stree.

- 6 Odhikar's Fact Finding Report: 'Teenage Girl Felani, killed by BSF firing', 7 January 2011/District Kurigram-Bangladesh, <http://tinyurl.com/felaniBSF>
- 7 Cunningham, H. & J. McHeyman. 2004. 'Introduction: Mobilities and Enclosures at Borders', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 11(3):289-302, p.293
- 8 Sur, M. 2013. 'Through Metal Fences: Material Mobility and the Politics of Transnationality at Borders', *Mobilities* 8(1):70-89, pp.81-82
- 9 Donnan, H. & T.M. Wilson. 1999. *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*, Oxford: Berg, p.129
- 10 "'Trigger Happy" Excessive Use of Force by Indian Troops', Human Rights Watch, New York, December 2010.
- 11 See, also Ahmed, R. 2011. 'Killing thy neighbour: India, and its Border Security Force', *New Age Bangladesh*, 10 December 2011
- 12 Van Schendel, W. 2005. *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, London: Anthem Press, pp.300-302
- 13 Sur, M. 2012. 'Jungle Passports and Metal Fences: Living on the Border between Northeast India and Bangladesh', PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam, pp.72-80
- 14 On older boundary making see Ludden, D. 2003. 'The First Boundary of Bangladesh on Sylhet's Northern Frontiers', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* 48(1):1-49
- 15 Sur, M. 2012. 'Bamboo Baskets and Barricades: Gendered Landscapes in Northeast India-Bangladesh borderlands', in Kalir, B. & M. Sur (eds.) *Transnational Flows and Permissive Politics: Ethnographies of Human Mobility in Asia*, Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, pp.135-136
- 16 Baruah, S. 1999. *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press
- 17 Ahad, A.M. 2013. 'Felani is not the end (a photo essay)' <http://tinyurl.com/felaniphoto> - accessed 11 May 2015
- 18 Cons, J. 2013. 'Narrating boundaries: Framing and contesting suffering, community, and belonging in enclaves along the India-Bangladesh border', *Political Geography* 35:37-46
- 19 Gupta, C. & M. Sharma. 2008. *Contested Coastlines: Fisherfolk, Nations, and Borders in South Asia*. New Delhi: Routledge; Jones, R. 2009. 'Agents of Exception: Border Security and the Marginalization of Muslims in India', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27:879-897; Hussain, D. 2013. *Boundaries Undermined: the Ruins of Progress on the Bangladesh/India Border*, London: Hurst; Samaddar, R. 1999. *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*, New Delhi: Sage.
- 20 Banerjee, P. et al. 1999 'Indo-Bangladesh Cross-Border Migration and Trade', *The Economic and Political Weekly* 34(36): 2549-2551

Below: Agricultural fields along the Northeast India-Bangladesh border - the elevated mud path indicates the international boundary (2008)
Photograph: Malini Sur

