

India-Bangladesh borderland: Voices of the tortured people of the border areas of Bangladesh



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Abstract The India-Bangladesh borderland serves as a vital crossroads, witnessing the convergence of diverse cultures, trade, and historical ties. The people of Bangladeshi borders seem that India has been our trusted friend since the emergence of our country. However, amidst this dynamic landscape, the border areas of Bangladesh bear witness to the anguish and suffering endured by its inhabitants. The experiences and perspectives of the tortured people residing in the border areas of Bangladesh, specifically focus on the impact of the India-Bangladesh border control operations led by the Border Security Force (BSF). Sometimes innocent people at the Bangladeshi border are being tortured by the BSF when they are trying to ensure their state security from any unwanted anomalies in the adjacent India-Bangladesh border. This study contributes to a better understanding of the complex dynamics at play in the India-Bangladesh border region and calls for attention to the plight of the innocent tortured people residing there.

Keywords: border, torture, security, culture, cooperation

1. Introduction

The coordination of border management plans on a bilateral and binational level, which aims to promote shared socioeconomic success while maximizing cross-border security cooperation and enforcement, is an example of cooperation (Stein 1990; Hataley and Leuprecht 2019). America and Canada have taken some initiatives to manage their longest border in this way for security and cooperation. However, the longest land border that India has with any of its neighbors is the 4096.7 km long border with Bangladesh (Smruti 2011), but the motifs of circulation gain significance from a boundary that is both fluid and dangerous and reveal the intersections of historical formations, commercial trajectories, and militarized contradictions (Sur 2013). The pinnacles of a very close friendship flourished briefly after Bangladesh's independence in 1971. A Bengali-speaking populace that was formerly bound together by various forms of social and economic interaction is now divided by a boundary. Due to their watchfulness, cross-border trading in this region was exceedingly sporadic and covert. Cross-border trade originally emerged between 1971 and 1975, but tighter regulations further stifled it. However, after the middle of the 1980s, these restrictions were removed, and smuggling increased more than before (Van Schendel 1993). Agrarian, sparsely forested, and densely inhabited, the border separates similar societies. In some areas, the border serves as the backdrop for a new, fortified fence that India is building to prevent what is known as "Bangladeshi infiltration and terrorism (Sur 2013)." the complex nature of India's borders with its surrounding nations, discusses the country's plan of fencing off some of its neighbours and examines whether fortifying and militarizing its borders is effective (Saddiki 2016). Concerns about security have heavily influenced India's neighborhood strategy. India's support for democratic movements and its opposition to extraregional presence is designed to maximize its security interest, rooted in its primary belief in a stable neighbourhood while fostering a cooperative relationship (Afroz, Shaheen 2012). Since 1986, the artificial boundary has negatively impacted local residents' traditional way of life by cutting them off from their families, local markets, and agricultural land (Prakash and Menon 2011; Saddiki 2016). The year after their country's independence, in 1972, two Bangladeshis were slain near the border, whereas the first Indian civilian was killed by BGB in 1990, and the BSF continues to do so to this day. A battle between the Bangladeshi and Indian borders occurred in the Syhlet district in 2001 (Hassan and Bala 2019). When BSF personnel shoot, kill, torture, or kidnap unarmed Bangladeshi civilians in border regions, international laws and conventions are broken. Members of the BSF also break into Bangladeshi territory without authorization, attack border residents, and shoot and abduct Bangladeshis. The border between India and Bangladesh is arguably the most perilous and bloodiest border in the world. Sixty Bangladeshi people were injured by the BAF from 2020 to 2022 (Adhikar 2020, 2021, 2022). It underlined that the BSF's actions are brutal to Bangladeshi citizens and to its own country. Indian Daily the Hindu (26 September 2013) claims that India-Bangladesh border security has become the main tension between these two countries. Das (2008) states that New Delhi has the longest border with Dhaka, but it is not attentively managed. He defined the border between India and Bangladesh as the "problem area of tomorrow". The balance of their various national interests is what led to the cooperation between the US and Canada along their shared border. The United States prioritizes



combating problems such as terrorism and illegal immigration, whereas Canada's top priority is facilitating trade. As a result, activities such as law enforcement, counterterrorism measures, intelligence sharing, and defense efforts aimed at detecting, disrupting, and deterring threats are included (Kent 2011). Since the AL-led administration in Bangladesh and the Congress-led alliance in India are both in power at this time, the asymmetry in relations between the two countries is more severe (Chowdhury 2013), and the misperceptions of one another in both countries appear to be the root of this unfavorable relationship. A succession of high-level visits that resulted in substantial security outcomes for both India and Bangladesh have caused a recent tectonic change in the bilateral relations between the two nations (Rather 2014a) but the torture of the BSF is not undermined, they are continuously killing and torturing innocent unarmed people who are unrelated to any crimes in the border areas. Human Rights Watch reported in 2010 that between 2000 and 2010, more than 932 Bangladeshis were killed by Indian border guards. Several dead and injured were small-scale border traders. Therefore, the aim of this research is to explain the voices of those innocent people injured by BSF in some border areas of Bangladesh.

2. Theoretical framework

Countries' and regions' political, social, and economic landscapes are significantly shaped by their borders. A nation's boundaries specify its interactions with surrounding states. Borderland experts such as Brunet-Jailly (2005) encouraged researchers to use a multipronged analytical lens to study borderlands, which includes looking at local processes/agent-level processes such as the culture and politics of communities along the border. According to Brunet-Jailly's (2005) conceptual framework for comprehending borders and borderlands, it is crucial to understand how the aspects of structure and agency interact with one another so that local cross-border cultural elements, such as a shared language, cuisine, or socioeconomic level (SES), can give people a sense of community. Despite being susceptible to the effects of historical, national, and regional geopolitical factors, the socioeconomic, political, and cultural facets of the daily life of the locals are still important (Banerjee and Chen 2013). Borders should be seen as social spaces characterized by various social identity indicators, such as culture and ethnicity (Schendel 2002; Paasi 2005; Newman 2006). Constructivists contend that shared belief and value systems also have structural aspects and significantly impact social and political behavior (Burchill et al 2005). Thus, the cultural affinity with the Indian part people, the inhabitants of the border of Bangladeshi areas, thinks the structure of their county's relations with India will be the basis of the constructivist idea that history denotes.

However, what is happening is now the India-Bangladesh border, which is coined as the deadliest border in the world. India follows the neo-realist policy, emphasizing the material structure of the balance of military power (Burchill et al 2005) when securing its border adjacent to Bangladesh. The structure of the system determines the nature of world politics, and it shapes the behavior or policy of individuals (Sutch 2007). India claims that the internal anomalies in the structure of the border of Bangladesh because of illegal trade, drug trafficking, insurgency, and terrorist movement are the critical causes of its current securing policy.

3. Historical context of the India-Bangladesh border

The international border between the republics of Bangladesh and India, also referred to as the Radcliffe line (IB), separates the eight divisions of Bangladesh and the Indian states. The Radcliffe Line was a boundary demarcation line between India and Pakistan, named after Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who was charged with dividing 450,000 square kilometers of territory with 88 million people based on religious lines (Read and Fisher 1998). The border has become a highly securitized political boundary, dividing a Muslim-majority population from a Hindu-majority one, which continues to dominate the debate over border politics (A View from the India-Bangladesh Border 2014). These states share 4096.7 km. of the border, the longest land boundary that Bangladesh and India share with any of their neighbours. The 1947 Radcliffe Award of the Bengal Boundary Commission, which split the British-ruled state of Bengal and people whom customs, kinship, and trade had historically linked into the independent states of India and East Pakistan, is responsible for the border's current location (Battle of Identities 2018).

India is a multinational country and has been this way since the colonial rule of Great Britain. Although in the long history of Indian civilization, there were different clans or empires that existed, India was an integrated entity during British rule until 1947. As the time of independence from the British empire came nearby, the clash between the Muslims and Hindus, the two biggest communities in terms of religion, gained pace. The pioneers of Independent India thought they would build a nation that was independent, culturally, religiously, and ethnically diverse, but M.A. Jinnah had another vision that Muslim Indians should have their pure land, which later became West Pakistan and East Pakistan (Dabova 2014). Greater economic and social factors caused Hindus and Muslims to maintain their distance from one another (Ranjan 2018). This mixed idea spread quickly, and ultimately India broke down into two.

By partitioning the Indian subcontinent, the international border between Pakistan and India was drawn, resulting in a poorly defined border between the two nations (Abedin 2021). The border dividing Bengal, which was hurriedly and clumsily drawn, caused tremendous migration and violent dislocation of Muslims travelling in the opposite direction and Hindus moving from newly constituted East Pakistan to India (A View from the India-Bangladesh Border 2014). The Nehru-Noon

Accord, which was signed in 1958, was an attempt to resolve the unresolved border problems with the former East Pakistan, where some of the disagreements were resolved, and others persisted even after Bangladesh was founded. (Dabova 2014) The West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura border conflicts were resolved by the Nehru-Noon Agreement on India-East Pakistan Border, which was signed in New Delhi on September 10, 1958. (Jamwal 2004)

After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the name was changed, but the border remained the same. The formation of Bangladesh brought about an entirely new situation, necessitating a reconsideration of boundary issues. The Indo-Bangladesh Agreement of 1974 was signed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. (Jamwal 2004) The border area is not only covered with hills and waterbodies but also plain land, which is suitable for farming until the last inch. Bangladesh, encircled by India from three sides, creates a critical issue of the Bangladesh-India border as a "bone of contention" between these two (Alam 2023). India, unlike a friendly neighbor, made a fence to stop interstate movement. That fence is electrified throughout much of its length (Land Boundary Agreement 2015). The current India-Bangladesh border fence line follows the same Radcliff line from the British Empire, which has caused tragedy in the past. It divided thousands of villages, towns, and cities with a united regional system of canals and communication networks. The border barrier is the main antagonist of the story because, with some exceptions, most Bangladeshis who live in border areas confuse the fence for the boundary and approach it without realizing that it extends approximately 137 meters into Indian territory (Bangladesh-India border 2021).

4. Border security measures

The Indo-Bangladesh border passes through West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. It is categorized as flat/plain, riverine, hilly/jungle, heavily populated, and cultivation carried out until the last inch of the border. Both countries have put security forces to protect their border area. In Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), which was later named the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) is in charge of guardian the border area whereas the Border Security Force (BSF) is on duty for India.

Cross-border smuggling, terrorist activity, border fencing, human and drug trafficking, and border killing are common issues in the Bangladesh-India border. People from Bangladesh are frequently harassed, tortured, and even killed by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF). Bangladesh says that BSF forces kill innocent civilians, whereas the BSF asserts that its personnel fire at smugglers and belligerent migrants from Bangladesh (Alom 2023). India has constructed a border fence between India and Bangladesh, in response to cross-border migration, which is seen as a threat to India (Dabova 2014). The India-Bangladesh wall is a common case, such as the US-Mexico wall, electrized Zimbabwe border, Saudi Arabia-Yemen wall, Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan fence, and other walls, showing the desire of the nation-state to restrict cross-border mobility (Indo-Bangladesh Border Fencing Project 2023). The boundary between Bangladesh and India is different from other international frontiers because of its many unique characteristics, and controlling it involves much more than simply adhering to template orders and SOPs (Bangladesh-India border 2021). India has already constructed a barrier along the Bangladeshi border that is 3406 kilometers long to monitor human movement. It is unlikely to be a friendly movement by a neighbour.

The borderland has been turned into a high-security monitoring zone by the border barrier, which is occasionally electrified and other times is made up of parallel barbed-wire fences, marked by several border outposts and watchtowers that are patrolled constantly by the Border Security Force (BSF) of India and supported by a large number of intelligence operatives (Bangladesh-India border 2021). In the last three decades, India has invested much money to modernize its border security (Security Challenges 2023). The Indian government has implemented the "guarding and regulating" approach to secure its border to stop this unlawful smuggling, and both parties often have fruitful discussions regarding border management and general security-related matters (India, Bangladesh discuss security 2022).

5. The distress of the tortured people in the borderland of Bangladeshi areas

The people of several border areas of Bangladesh have been facing the atrocities of the BSF (Figure 1). At the time, BSF patrolled its borders to secure its territory, killing and torturing the border inhabitants of Bangladesh. Sometimes, some innocent people are being the victim of the heinous act of the Indian border security force. Torture has serious and enduring repercussions. Physically, victims may have severe wounds, persistent pain, and disabilities that prevent them from leading regular lives. The limited access to justice and lack of accountability for criminals is one of the major obstacles to alleviating the suffering of tortured individuals in these borderlands. The participants were selected from the Rajshahi, Chaipai, and Lalmonirhat districts of Bangladesh, and some news of tortured people was taken from secondary sources. Annual Human Rights Report of Ohikar in 2022, twenty-one Bangladeshis were Injured by the BSF.

5.1. Psychological trauma

The border between Bangladesh and India is well known as a difficult area with many intricate problems. The alleged psychological damage suffered by innocent people living in border regions due to the actions of the Indian Border Security

Force (BSF) is one of the issues brought up by human rights organizations and individuals. A man pseudo name Firoz, who has been tortured by the BSF in Nirmolchar, in the Rajshahi border area, explains his distress:

“My cowboy and I went to the Char for grazing the cattle suddenly, we noticed the two BSF men coming to us and ask for why we were there, I told them we were in the part of Bangladesh, and no sooner had I told it than they hit in my head with the gun..., after that, I cannot remember anything... my head was seriously injured, I cannot forget that distress of that day.”

He is now in psychological trauma and cannot concentrate on any work of him. This is the common problem of the tortured people on the border who participate in this research. Torture-related psychological trauma can have serious and protracted repercussions on people. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, sadness, sleep issues, flashbacks, and other psychological and emotional difficulties are among the symptoms that survivors may encounter. The quality of life, relationships, and general well-being of an individual can all be significantly impacted by these events.



Figure 1 The distress of tortured people in the borderland.

5.2. Social stigma and isolation

The prevalent fear and intimidation methods used by the BSF are crucial components contributing to social stigma. Because of worries about retaliation, increased harassment, or even their physical safety, torture, and abuse, victims may be reluctant to speak out about their suffering. Another participant at Shibgonj in Chapainabaganj district talked about social isolation:

I lost my left leg after being tortured by the BSF in my paddy field. From this I can't work, now I depend on my family. Sometimes the local people neglect me by calling that I have lost my leg because of participating in illegal trade at the border. Therefore, it is challenging for me to stay with family and local people for this fake condemnation.

It may be difficult for survivors to seek assistance or justice due to this silence, which can help foster a culture of concealment and denial. Furthermore, the stigma may be made worse by the deeply ingrained societal conventions and attitudes that exist in some communities about victims of abuse. As their experiences undermine the idea of security and protection offered by the state, survivors may suffer blame or shame. Families could be concerned about the potential drawbacks of being linked to victims, such as social rejection or reputational harm.

5.3. Lack of access to support and rehabilitation

Access to help and rehabilitation in situations where people have experienced torture or other cruel treatment is crucial for their well-being and recovery. Assisting those in need, fighting for their rights, and working for their rehabilitation are all important tasks for organizations and NGOs focused on human rights and refugee concerns. A victim of Lalmonirhat district shared his experiences:

“I am now paralyzed after being injured by the BSF at the border. The family has finished all property for my treatment. I can't work now; my only son is working to run the family, and I am very helpless. everyone just came to hear my condition, but no one helped me economically...”

This is the common speech of almost all seriously injured people. Bangladesh is obligated to safeguard the rights and welfare of everyone living within its borders, including those who have endured torture or other cruel treatment. The



government and international organizations should collaborate to guarantee that torture survivors have access to the resources they need, including medical treatment, psychiatric counselling, legal assistance, and rehabilitation services.

5.4. Loss of trust in institutions

Local population's sense of fear and insecurity when it happens in the setting of border regions, where tensions and vulnerabilities are already high. The BSF's efforts, which are intended to secure the border and uphold law and order, should be conducted within the bounds of the law and morality. A victim of Charghat, Rajshahi district, condemns the government:

"Why is BSF killing and torturing the innocent people of all the border areas of an independent country such as Bangladesh? We do not have any news of killing people on any border of the world. The government should defend it strongly."

Thus, they blame the government. Rebuilding trust is a difficult task requiring patience, diligence, and sincere commitment. The government must make a real effort to show that respects human rights, is prepared to redress historical wrongdoing, and is committed to abolishing torture. By doing so, they can start to help the victims of torture regain their trust in the organizations that are supposed to look out for them and defend them, promoting a sense of fairness, safety, and community among all. A cycle of violence and hatred can continue if trust is lost. People who believe the government has mistreated them may be more likely to turn to unlawful activity or support extremist ideas in an effort to have their complaints heard.

6. Conclusions

The borderland between India and Bangladesh is a crucial geopolitical, economic, and social area. More than 4,000 kilometers of the border between the two nations' different cultures and scenery. This border region has frequently been the scene of transnational operations, including smuggling and illegal trade. People who live in Bangladesh's border regions, as a result, have to deal with a variety of problems and difficulties. The difficulties faced by the people and groups living in Bangladesh's border regions have been brought to light by voices from these locations.

They have experienced accounts of torture, uprooting, violations of human rights, and financial hardships. A thorough and multifaceted approach is needed to solve the issues of the tormented individuals in Bangladesh's border regions. As part of this, concerns about border security, international cooperation, and the socioeconomic advancement of the impacted areas must be addressed. Finding long-term solutions that put the welfare of the impacted populations first requires collaboration between India and Bangladesh. India can think about the external threat from its nonbordering countries, but it can encompass activities with neighboring countries such as law enforcement, counterterrorism measures, intelligence sharing, and defense efforts aimed at detecting, disrupting, and deterring threats (Kent 2011). Thus, the heinous activities of the BSF will be decreed on the general people of the borderland of Bangladesh. The establishment of measures to protect the rights and welfare of those who live in border regions, as well as the strengthening of bilateral ties between the two governments, are crucial. These initiatives should focus on enhancing the borderland's infrastructure, giving residents access to essential services, fostering economic opportunities, and guaranteeing that everyone's human rights are protected.

Ethical Considerations

In exploring the article titled "India-Bangladesh Borderland: Voices of the Tortured People of the Border Areas of Bangladesh," it is imperative to address the intricate web of ethical considerations embedded within this subject. Delving into the experiences and perspectives of the marginalized individuals residing in the border regions demands sensitivity, respect for cultural nuances, and a commitment to preserving their dignity and privacy. The ethical responsibility lies in accurately representing their narratives, avoiding potential exploitation or sensationalism, and prioritizing informed consent during data collection and dissemination.

Conflict of Interest

This research article does not include any conflicts of interest. There are no conflicts of interest in conducting, publishing or distributing this research.

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