

INDIA'S BORDER FENCE WITH BANGLADESH

Passing through

This year, India expects to finish its quarter-century quest to fence the border with Bangladesh. The fence will cover 3,286 kilometres, making it the longest geopolitical barrier in the world. But this feat of nationalism is more flexible than its popular image suggests. So much passes through the fence – people, a shared language, cattle, garlic, saris, spices, cough syrup, metal utensils, and four millennia of Bengali history. For those whose lives unfold around the zero line it will take a lot more than barbed wire and a border security force over 240,000 strong to separate India and Bangladesh

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELIZABETH RUSH

West Bengal, India. In the distance two people walk along the border, one in orange, one in white. The first drops down the embankment, holding out his hand, helping the second. Together they wade through a slender canal, waist deep in purple water hyacinth. Five hundred metres to their left is a section of the famed border fence, but here there is nothing, just the mounting half-light into which everything dissolves. The two dots scramble up a trampled dirt path on the far bank. Then they are gone, lost in the folds of another country. The total cost of the journey: 500-1,000 Rupees one-way, depending on how close they were to the guards they bribed.

"Bangladesh is just over there," says Shoun as he points to a line of date trees. A smile rearranges the boy's delicate features, "I am proud to live here, with two different countries under my eyes."

But the country the young boy calls elsewhere was long a part of India. That is until 1947, when the British divided the region along religious lines. Muslims on one side (Pakistan) and non-Muslims on the other (India). A slapdash border conceived over a month and a half, running right down the middle of an area that had never before been an international border. This partition of India's Bengal region into West Bengal and East Pakistan – the republic of Pakistan's eastern territory, which became Bangladesh in a war of independence in 1971 – split a regional culture and economic network into two unequal halves. While India has become one of the most powerful industrialised nations in the world, Bangladesh has tried but failed to create the infrastructure vital to running a country free from corruption.

Over the past 25 years, India pumped billions of dollars into the construction of the world's longest border fence. Every year its ministry of home affairs spends an additional \$1.3bn to maintain and man this expensive and inefficient national defence project. India's famed fence is described as a modern Great Wall of China, an impenetrable partition designed to keep Bangladeshis out. But the reality scarcely resembles the image it promotes. In many places the fence is nothing more than sporadic posts with a few strands of barbed wire strung between them. The structure regularly stops and starts back up again, pausing for a few paces to accommodate that which passes through – farmers working the no man's land that lies between the two countries, refugees, trafficked women and children, billions of dollars of contraband goods upon which nearly half of Bangladesh depends.

India's parliament approved construction of the India-Bangladesh border fence in 1986, a measured response to regional fears of illegal Muslim immigrants tipping religious majorities in the Assam province. The fence was allocated comparatively minimal funds and construction began in 1989. But it wasn't until the Hindu nationalist rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a countrywide majority that efforts to "secure" the Bengal border began in earnest. The BJP used inflated estimates of the number of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants residing in India to win elections and unite Hindus against the perceived threat of Muslim refugees. In an effort to drum up nationalist fervour, the BJP associated Muslim Bangladesh not only with joblessness in India but with terrorist attacks inside India. When the "war on terror" took on global proportions

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after 9-11, national security officers in India, one of the world's most powerful democracies, started gesturing towards famous fences built by other superpowers – the United States and Israel in particular – in defence of their own. When asked to explain the border fence, Indians typically point to a rotating laundry list of national fears – illegal immigrants stealing Indian jobs, landless refugees altering the religious densities in already volatile hill tracts, transnational terrorist chains using Bangladesh as a hide-out for Islamic extremists en route to suicide missions in Mumbai. But does what India built actually protect against the bogeyman that Partition, the BJP and 9-11 all helped to create? The fence people talk about is a fable, sheltering by way of an imagined physical division. The actual structure is quite the opposite, penetrable

and porous – a perfect example of necessity's disregard for national politics and the identities they attempt to engender.

A string of small thatched huts lines the paved border road running parallel to the fence. Every 300 metres there is another lean-to and another man in uniform with a shotgun slung over his shoulder. India's Border Security Force (BSF) is 240,000-men strong. That's a 3,000 kilometre-long chain of camps, each approximately a third of a kilometre from the next, monitoring a line laid down in the sand half a century ago.

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Bengal, estimates that 80% of residents are involved in cross-border trade. Night falls fast close to the equator and with the darkness an entirely different world comes caterwauling in. Suddenly the roads echo with the hollow clomp of cow hooves. Silhouettes dart through the tree shadows. A few spindly dirt paths are lit with candles. Informal human chains, often tens if not hundreds of people deep, move millions of dollars of contraband goods into Bangladesh every day. And the 240,000 guards whose job it is to protect India from cross border movement make a great deal of money by facilitating exactly what they are expected to stop.

"India and Bangladesh are like brothers who have been separated," says Supriyo Sen, a Bangali-born director whose documentary films about India's borders have won him numerous prizes; "there is so much to love inside of your brother. But also it is a relationship that is not without hatred." A hundred years ago Bengal was the hub of India's intellectual renaissance and the epicentre of modern Indian identity. But the abundance – both agricultural and intellectual – that lifted this region above the rest was dependent upon the economic interlocking of Bengal's two halves. The factories ringing the colonial capital of Calcutta (now Kolkata) processed the raw materials reaped from the alluvial land known today as Bangladesh.

When Bengal was split, farmers in the east lost not only a market for their materials, but also the means to process them into saleable products. The factories that had turned the east's raw jute into sacks and spun its cotton into string suddenly lay across an international border. Post-partition, the Indian state of West Bengal faced an entirely different set of problems. Food shortages ravaged Kolkata. In the 1960s India launched the Green Revolution, an agricultural initiative that irrigated large sections of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana. By turning areas of north India into the breadbasket that was lost when half of Bengal became another country overnight, India was able to continue to fuel its industrial development.

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are displaced in the Ganges-Brahmaputra river basin as a result of riverbank erosion every single year, and many of them flee to India in search of a better life.

"I consider trying to cross to India," says Faharul, a 15-year-old Bangladeshi boy; "the land is stable and opportunities are better there." Last year a flood ripped Faharul's village in half. Nearly 600 homes fell into the river. When the water receded a fine layer of sand blanketed the landscape, rendering large swathes of once-fertile earth unproductive. The farmers in Allatoli now have to cross this veritable desert on foot just to reach land rich enough to grow lentils. "I blame Farakka," says a village elder who has lived through two of these devastating floods.

Of the 59 major rivers that flow into Bangladesh, 54 go through India first. India is currently planning a massive

hydroelectric project just 10 kilometres from the border, damming the fourth largest river in the region. "Bangladesh is water, water is Bangladesh," says Chowdhury Sarwar Jahan, a Bangladeshi hydrologist specialising in groundwater recharge. "The negative effects of Farakka will be quite similar if the Tipaimukh dam on the Barak River happens. I am afraid that history is repeating itself." As was the case with Farakka, India refuses to consult Bangladesh about this proposed dam.

One of the most densely populated and lowest-lying countries in the world, Bangladesh is extremely vulnerable to hydrological shifts; imprudent upstream water management is a key factor in producing the very poverty and landlessness that forces Bangladeshis to seek refuge across the border.

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While 18% of Bangladesh's sanctioned imports originate in India, only .01% of India's imports come from Bangladesh. The single most important Bangladeshi export to India is not jute or cotton, as history might suggest, but a toxic fertiliser called anhydrous ammonia. Despite minimal and declining import tariffs, Bangladesh cannot compete with India's cheap labour, cheaper resources and astonishing output. Bangladesh exports readymade garments and raw materials for the textile industry the world over, but India buys next to nothing.

Still, Bangladesh cannot help but need what comes from India. Leather is one of the most valuable Bangladeshi exports, which it sources in the form of live bovines, almost entirely from India. Throughout much of India, both the slaughter of cows and the movement of the animals across international lines are illegal. Despite these religious regulations turned national laws, tens of thousands of contraband cattle magically arrive in Bangladesh every single day.

"Smuggling is the second largest industry in Bangladesh," says Aminul Ehsan, the communications director of Rupantar, a Khulna-based NGO specialising in corruption and egalitarian development. "Yes, there is smuggling in India, but in India smuggling is by no means half of everything, the way it is here."

The export of live cattle from India is banned. But an Indian cow, once it makes it to Muslim-dominated Bangladesh, is surreptitiously legal. Upon arrival, a 500-taka (roughly \$7) customs tax is levied and the animal is no longer officially considered contraband. For many of Bangladesh's poorest residents – from rural herders to leather workers in Dhaka – cattle are vital to survival. You can find "Bangladeshi" beef almost anywhere in the world – in Dubai or Abu Dhabi as a slab of sirloin, in Paris as a designer handbag, in the US as a pair of faux Italian-made boots.

"That is where the cattle cross," says Korban Ud-Dui, the headmaster of a local madrasa pointing to a trodden patch of grass on a nearby embankment. "One man gets 10 or 15 cows together, he yokes them with a rope, and walks out into the paddy field. He waits for the right moment then pushes them into a small river that separates India from Bangladesh, the man swims across with the cows, and when they reach the other side they are no longer illegal."

Unlike the herders, who can blend in on either side of the fence, the cattle are obviously imports. Cows from the upper reaches of India are massive compared to Bengali stock. In Bangladesh they sell for roughly 40,000 taka each (\$500) on average 32,000 more taka than their Bangladeshi counterparts and around six times the animal's worth in an Indian district where it cannot be killed.

Out of the 27 kilometres of Lagola that abut Bangladesh, only seven are fenced. Still, animals pass through the fenced section with relative ease. Romjun, a local cattle trader explains: "When you get to the fence you hold a metal cup full of water against the wire. The water in the cup catches the clanging sound that comes from cutting the wire. Then you are through. It is not so hard. Fence or no fence it is the same, as long as you pay the right people."

In Lagola, there are cattle everywhere. But in Rajshahi, Bangladesh – just over the river and sometimes through the fence – trading cattle is an institution. Many of Bangladesh's border towns have cattle *haats*, or markets, set up to deal with the exceptional number of bovines that come across the border. The City Haat (only one of 10 cattle-specific *haats* in the Rajshahi district) sells roughly 3,000 animals per week, the number quadrupling for the month leading up to Muslim festival of Eid Ul-Adha.

Mohmat Atiqur Rahman holds the lease for the City Haat, a privilege he acquired by giving the government millions of taka per year. Local rumours suggest that Rahman may have had to kill off adversaries to obtain such a precious lease. When so much of the country's GDP is dependent upon commodities procured through illegal measures, violence and corruption have a way of defining even the most seemingly innocuous of institutions. The *haat* officially collects 3% on the sale of each head of cattle which, at 3,000 head per week, is as the Bangladeshis say *bhoooh taka* (a lot of money). But everyone in town knows that the 3% service charge is only one of many ways that Rahman and his City Haat capitalise on their prized position in Bangladesh's famous cattle corridor. Last October Nurul Islam, a chatpati seller at



Rajshahi's busiest *ghat* (a transport point along the river where cattle and goods arrive), began keeping tabs on the number of cattle crossing into Rajshahi. "I was frustrated because the men who make the big money on the cows

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are from another place, but they are earning all of the money in Rajshai and keeping it for themselves," Islam says. According to him, a "mafia boss" will make an arrangement with a *ghaital*, or ghat lessee (another government-regulated position), buying the right to move cattle through the port. The boss then hires local men to go to India and collect the cattle he has purchased and paid the border guards to ignore.

Fed up with a system where local herders risk the most and benefit the least, Islam and his friend Eshamel set up an informal checkpoint at the *ghat*. For every cow that passed the stand, they asked the herder to produce the import paper declaring that the customs tax had been paid. "It was just before Eid, and in a single day about 2,000 out of the 4,000 cows that passed had the paper. It was one of the only ways we could prove the corruption," Islam says. A fake import paper costs about one fifth of the official one. "The mafia bosses give the *ghaitals* a little extra money to be lax and they pick up the fake import papers at the *haat* – the same *haat* Mohmat Atiqur Rahman probably paid for with blood and money.

It only took two weeks for those who control Rajshahi's cattle trade to put a stop to Islam and Eshamel's efforts. "The muscle men came and took Eshamel to a *char* [an island in the river]. They broke his hands and legs. The police did nothing. They could not do anything because they were bought. Eshamel was a rower before. But now he cannot row, and he cannot walk," Islam says as he stares out across the river to the desolate sand-spit between India and Bangladesh where Eshamel was beaten and where, come dawn, the cattle will cross by the thousands.

In Bangladesh, you cannot throw a stone without hitting something that came across the border illegally – a sparkly wedding sari, a sprinkle of cumin, a serving of *goru bhuna*. And the network protecting the third largest source of imported goods is vast. The extent to which Bangladesh is dependent upon illegal Indian imports hampers the country's ability to develop outside of the black market money that pervasively works its way both up and down. In Nurul Islam's case not only were the police involved, so was the local municipal council. When Kinu Mia, the proverbial godfather of Rajshahi's cattle trade and the man who had Eshamel beaten, wanted to speak with Islam, he simply put a warrant out for the boy's arrest. And when Eshamel was mugged, the local news media refused to cover the story.

In the Ward 9 Commissioner's Office, Kinu Mia told Islam: "You are a *puti* fish and I am a big fish. You should stay a small fish or else I will cut your body into a thousand pieces and sprinkle them around the *char*."

Despite, or perhaps more accurately in concert with, all of the institutional yet illegal international traffic, the border between India and Bangladesh is one of the world's bloodiest. According to Kirity Roy, president of the Masum Foundation, a Kolkata-based watchdog organisation partnered with Amnesty International to stop extrajudicial killings along West Bengal's border, approximately 13 people are tortured on the border every day. Since 2000, over 1,000 have been killed by the BSF in Bengal's borderlands.

Many understand the persistent violence along the India-Bangladesh border as an indiscriminate but necessary byproduct of policing such a porous region. But in the larger context of an illegal billion-dollar industry in which those who guard the border are wholly involved, the halo of violence begins to throw a different light.

Perhaps the most telling part of India's fence is the fact that most of those who guard it are imported from the country's 27 other states. "The BSF guards don't speak Bengali," says Roy. "It's a very big problem." A typical posting ranges from three months to a year, which all but obliterates the chances of a *jawan* feeling accountable to the Bengali community in which he serves. Prostitution is rampant at the border, with local women – both Indian and Bangladeshi – citing BSF guards as their biggest customers. In January, a video of BSF men publicly stripping and beating a cattle herder made headlines. Despite the recent order revoking the BSF's right to shoot-at-sight those attempting to cross, the guards still have legal impunity, which might go a long way towards explaining the five reported Bangladeshis shot and killed in the second half of last year. Boredom, racism, masculinity and a lack of small bribes are all regularly blamed when violence erupts on the border. But few speak of an equally basic reality: India imports guards to a region whose language they cannot understand and whose history and culture is not their own.

The BSF and, to a lesser extent, the BGB (Border Guard Bangladesh, the significantly smaller and less brutal force patrolling Bangladesh's border) could, if they wanted, cut down on the illegal cross border movement that their presence is supposed to hamper. But many of those who work the border pay for the privilege, knowing all too well that policing the zero line means granting permission to cross. "Soldiers and officers try to influence the posting positions in Dhaka and Delhi, buying a position at the border because it is a known money making spot," says a local customs agent at Benapole, the busiest land port in Bangladesh.

What happens at the border is more a rote display of force, rather than a real attempt – by those on either side – to stop the movement of goods and people. "What a charade," Aminul Eshan says. "The guards don't actually intend to stop anything. The violence inflicted on those poor and desperate enough to be caught in the cross-fire is despicable." If the border produces money through its porosity, the fence produces an image made reliable through the violence it necessitates.

The fence itself might then be best understood, not as a real protection against illegal international movement, but as a physical manifestation of India's profoundly powerful state-centric social imagination. To be a nation democratic and attractive enough to need such a wall – isn't that what they have spent the past half a century pursuing?

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