ELIZABETH RUSH

The Saree Express

"EVERY TRAIN IN BANGLADESH IS LATE," the stationmaster said, "but not the train to Hili, the train to Hili is always on time."

He pushed the tissue-paper-thin ticket across the counter. The frame wrapping around his window was losing little flakes of its poppy red varnish. "Make sure you are back by six tomorrow morning," he added, pulling at his mustache, frowning. A drowsy fog slipped through the single-room hall. *Hee-li.* On the stationmaster's tongue the town's name flirted with song but I was too tired to try to imagine Hili. The three weeks I had spent reporting on the India-Bangladesh border made thinking beyond the immediate difficult. Ehsan, my translator, and I turned our backs to the mustached man and entered the blue hour between day and night.

Smoke and the smell of something leaven carried us into Saidpur. We coasted down a rocky hill on the back of an oxcart and entered a vascular network of wide roads. Poured concrete and corrugated tin reigned. Low buildings hugged the ground. Over the railroad tracks we bumped and out into the suburbs on the other side of town only to find that the hotel Ehsan usually stayed at had been turned into an NGO with the same name. A shiny vinyl sign with an image of a woman and her very white teeth clapped against the chain link fence. Some twenty kilometers to our west the line between India and Bangladesh cut through the land, following no topography, scarring an otherwise steady expanse.

Hili, Bangladesh—a smuggler's so-called Zion, a tiny border town just about an hour south and west of Saidpur—was our real destination. According to Ehsan, Hili did not have any hotels. When not acting as my translator, Ehsan monitored election corruption in the Bengali hinterlands. If he was lying about there being no hotels in Hili—and I suspected he was—I knew he had a good reason. When I researched the India-Bangladesh border most of the stories were about the torture and sporadic killing of cattle smugglers by India's Border Security Force. But when I asked Bangladeshis about the border the answer was always the same: "Go to Hili, then you will understand."

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THE MORNING TRAIN TO HILI WAS PUNCTUAL, just as the stationmaster had said. The green-and-yellow striped Barendra Express clanked into the station as daylight turned the smoke from the *paratha* stands into a fleet of clouds. Originally part of the route connecting Kolkata and Assam, this line was built by the British and was once used to transport tea. Some hundreds of miles south of the Himalayan foothills and sixty years past the time when free travel between East and West Bengal was permitted, much was as it had been, with a few notable exceptions. This particular train now ran a hundred-mile loop. North to south and back again from Nilphamari to Rajshahi mostly along the border, all in Bangladesh. Across from Rajshahi, on the Indian side, the route resumed and ran between Lagola and Kolkata. The original link between the big city and the big mountains had been broken by the arbitrary international border the British gave the subcontinent as a parting gift.

Beyond my window the ochre land spread out long and wide in both directions. The aquifer was unusually low that year. And thanks to the rising seas, small amounts of salt water from the Bay of Bengal had begun to creep into it, filling hollow caverns beneath the surface of the earth, making the rice and lentils wilt. Ehsan and I walked down to the meal car and ordered two coffees each. The metal connectors between cars slammed together and the train leaned hard as we curved along a raised embankment.

The man across from me read aloud from a small spiral-bound notebook: "Twenty sarees, two packages of gold bangles, a flat of gold-plated earrings, fifty bags of *zeera*, five meal carriers, and a pouch of spoons." The young boy at his side punched a bunch of numbers into his Nokia. He checked his math again. The boss handed him a stack of money. The boy licked his forefinger and his thumb. He counted hundreds of worn taka frontwards and back.

The men stopped and stared. They looked down at my pad where I was scribbling my own notes and then up at my white cheeks, my white skin, my white wrists. I wrapped my shawl up around my head and kept writing. They quickly lost interest in me, returning to the everyday work of smuggling.

Men clustered around every flat surface in the meal car. Little notebooks and piles of money, the keys to their self-made kingdoms, lay on the octagonal tabletops that had been painted white over and over again. Behind me sat a collection of the train's conductors. Shotguns and ammo belts clinked on their faded, blue-uniformed shoulders. They were the least preoccupied of all, lazily sipping their morning tea, completely uninterested by the surrounding flurry of last-minute preparation. I had never seen a

ticket collector carry a personal arsenal, but then I had never seen men planning smuggling missions on a commuter train either.

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TWO WEEKS EARLIER I HAD BEEN in Kolkata, on the other side of the fence, charming my way into formal meetings with Border Security Officers and policymakers. I was researching the role economics and security played not only in the building and maintenance of India's fence but also in Indians' perception of the wall. Twenty-five years in the making, India's border fence was the longest geopolitical barrier in the world and would be completed that year: 3,286 kilometers of three-meter-high barbed wire, guarded by the 240,000 employees of India's Border Security Force. Those who lived far from the fence spoke of it as "a modern Great Wall of China," an "impenetrable partition." But the closer I drew to the thing itself the more I realized just how far popular perception was from reality. Porous does not even begin to describe the fence. The sheer volume of what passes through is mind-boggling. Millions of dollars in contraband goods move from India into Bangladesh every single day—drugs, luxury items, and the everyday stuff upon which life depends: sugar, soap, onions.

I wanted to know what motivated the incredible disparity between the image of the fence and the reality, so I started to ask around.

"Tell me about cross-border traffic," I would ask

"Nothing crosses the border. No goods. No people."

"What purpose does the fence serve?"

"To keep unwanted immigrants and Islamist militants out."

And so on. Almost all of the answers I received were simply false, a propagation of the myth that India's border fence had truly severed India from Bangladesh.

Desperate for some scrap that had traction, I decided to take a day off and visit a friend of a friend, Supriyo Sen, a filmmaker living just south of Kolkata's famous Kali Temple. When I arrived, his wife was milling about in her house slippers, preparing for an afternoon at the Asiatic Society. An auntie was called over to sip tea with the foreigner. We shared news of people we knew in common and talked about the weather. And those things alone might have been enough to drain the pervasive false feeling that had accumulated in my brain and limbs. But as the day grew red and warm, Supriyo excused himself and invited me to retreat to his office to watch the

third in his cinematic trilogy about India's borders, a short documentary called *Wagah*.

In the opening shot three children fly a kite. At first they are totally engrossed by the challenge of getting it off the ground. As the little white triangle lifts higher and higher into the sky the children let out more string. Suddenly the little boy laughs at something. The shot widens and you can see a bird flying above the border fence.

"Birds do not know that here and there are not the same," the boy says.

A hundred years ago, here and there *were* the same. Kolkata was the cultural capital of Bengal and of all of India. The British, in cleaving East and West Bengal in two, had separated Kolkata's factories from the raw goods they processed, causing the capital city to fall into a sharp decline just after partition. By the sixties, India was able to irrigate large sections of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, manufacturing the agricultural breadbasket they lost, reinvigorating the growth of the increasingly Westernized middle class. Bangladesh, on the other hand, struggled to compete for the same international business that India's advanced industrial sector cornered, and began to rely on India for many of the luxury products that their own factories simply could not produce as well or as cheaply. Compound this double setback with the reality that India's upstream irrigation had reduced the flow of the Ganges into Bangladesh by fifty percent and you get a vision of Bangladesh today—powerless, dependent, and thirsty.

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"ON THE OTHER SIDE, in the Indian Hili, I have a partner. I call him and tell him what I want, and he orders the goods from Kolkata," Jhid explained as he looked over the list of items he was expecting to pick up. Jhid was one of about two-dozen traders congregated in the Barendra Express's meal car. He specializes in women's goods and ready-made vests.

All of the towns on the Bangladeshi side north of Hili have secret traders. Jhid said he buys for half of the stores in Saidpur. Behind him stood Sirajul, who procured products for stores in Philburi. And across the way was Nurul who purchased for Nilphamari. Bangladeshis complain that smuggling is the second-largest industry in the country, trailing only textile production. Informal human chains, sometimes tens if not hundreds of people deep, carry millions of dollars in illegal goods to and from and across the India-Bangladesh border every day.

When I asked Jhid about his role in this informal network he explained, "Me? Really, I am only in charge of transport. I control twenty-five women, they are my," he paused, looking for the right word, "my human mules."

Every other car on the train was stocked with a seemingly endless supply of women. A sea of dusty sarees. The chatter was quieter, like hundreds of tiny bells being struck. Heads rested on shoulders, on sacks of rice, in hands. As I walked out amongst them I relaxed. Joy, or something like it, actually entered my body in the form of an estrogen contact-high. For months I had been reporting in India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, and during that time I was always proving to the men I interviewed and worked with that I, a young woman, was perfectly capable, able to do the task set before me. Here, on the Barendra Express, my abilities were no longer questioned. I could have sworn something passed between those women and myself, something intimate and unknowable. We were all experts in the art of solitary prowess.

In Hili the train emptied. The women disembarked and walked boldly to the best patch of shade beneath the acacia tree, or over to the colonial-era train station with its small cupola and red brick walls. They leaned their backs against the baked clay and waited. Like a giant letter *C* a brick wall encircled the Hili train station. Four meters high, India erected this portion of the border fence in 1996.

Not ten minutes after the Barendra Express had pulled into the station, boys and girls were running along the top of India's multibillion-dollar defense project, their bare feet padding along the sun-warmed brick, their arms heavy with ornamental wedding sarees. The children scurried down bamboo ladders propped up against the wall every fifty meters or so, handing off armfuls of sparkly fabric to those who went before. So easy were their movements, so malleable and determined their little bodies. And then I realized they were doing what those who lived in India's capital cities had told me was impossible. Those children were climbing right up and over India's impenetrable wall. The BFS guards watched but did not shoot.

The children ran over to the women from the train and dropped the contraband goods at their feet. They did not linger in Bangladesh. A little boy handed a package of sweater vests to Jhid. Before I could whistle he had returned to India. Jhid slipped a polyester vest over his head. He wrapped a pashmina shawl around his neck. The peasant women from the train were transformed. Suddenly I was surrounded by middle class mothers seeing their daughters off in marriage, by Dhaka-dwellers attending NGO fundraisers. The worn blue-grays and yellow-grays and red-grays of the old sarees were all covered over.

That's when I finally understood—the women who rode the Barendra Express carried the contraband sarees through the country on their bodies. Human mules for sparkly smuggled goods. One slender woman, her thick black hair pulled into a ponytail, her forehead beading with sweat in the midday heat, draped a ruby swath of chiffon over her arm. She pulled the chiffon back and draped it again, as though it were her own, as though she were about to visit someone whose eyes would trace every inch of her body. Few showed as much reverence for the glittery cloth. "She has not been a courier for long," the grandmother seated beside grumbled as she tossed her own saree over a shoulder. The youngest girls were adorned with gold-plated bangles and tear-drop necklaces. They looked like my nieces playing dress-up. Shy and lovely, those girls looked at me with quixotic and curious expressions, unsure of whether they wanted my attention.

Without formally offering, Jhid became my guide to Hili and the art of smuggling sarees. As he whisked me through the torturous midday sun he explained how he became involved in the trade: "I worked in a jeans factory for many years but my mother got sick and I couldn't support her. I made about $35 a month in the factory, so I started doing this. Now my mother is well. She works for me." He pulled harder at my arm. "Come, meet her."

We walked from oasis of shade to oasis of shade looking for his mother. First we found Bano, her sister. She was a beautiful woman with a wide, moon-like face. When she saw my camera she pulled close the man nearest to her and posed. They squinted and gave sturdy smiles in unison. Jhid's mother was just a few leaf-shadow-islands further. Her hair was gray and wiry. She was wearing a ruby saree covered in gold sequins. On her head, an absurd snow hat that she would also smuggle away from Hili. For every item Jhid's mother got to Saidpur she would receive twenty taka, a little less than twenty-five cents.

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AN HOUR PASSED. THE CHATTER slowly died. A group of young men in fatigues walked by and everything changed. Their batons were over their heads. One black stick came down on a woman's back. She was wearing amethyst. The color of protection. The women seated with her scurried away and the circle of guards tightened. The sticks rained down one after the other after the other. I can still hear the thud of wood on flesh.

The old woman released the hidden cumin sacks slung like a child beneath her saree. I couldn't tell how she did it exactly, but with the next

blow the treasured spices came tumbling down to the ground. As the satchels landed on the parched earth they made a crinkling sound. The guards stopped hitting her then and stooped to pick up the contraband. Jhid pushed me through the crowd of people.

The old woman grasped the guard's ankles and banged her forehead against his patent leather shoes.

"I lost everything," she screamed, taking her legs up under her body, pulling her face even closer to his feet. "I lost everything." She wailed it again and again. She begged them then to leave just a few of the spice bags behind.

"Take a picture." Jhid whispered in my ear. "You can do it." I did not want to capture this woman's suffering. But I wondered if that was the correct impulse or the truest one. I thought of Carolyn Forché then, whose work in El Salvador had inspired what some call modern poetry's greatest task—to witness and work against forgetting. We must disassemble the wall of comfort we have erected between personal and political experience, I thought to myself. I held my camera to my chest and pressed the shutter. I was too scared or ashamed to hold the camera to my face. The photograph is blurry. All you see are fingers gripped around ankles.

Before the guard wrestled free he dropped three of the bags of zeera back on the ground. When he left, those who had backed away moved forward again, a human shroud tossed over the suffering. One offered her a hand up. The woman wrapped in the purple saree allowed herself to be pulled to sitting, but no more.

"It's a matter of luck." A grandfather pressed those words into my ear, trying to do what exactly? To soothe me or explain? His breath smelled like betel. "Five percent have none, but the other ninety-five percent, they have plenty of luck." His tongue clicked softly against his teeth.

Ehsan and Jhid and I watched the guards walk down the tracks, carrying the zeera back to their tin outpost. "They could stop the smuggling if they wanted to. But this, this is egregious. This is just violence to fill quotas, to make it seem like they are trying to stop smuggling," Ehsan said. "Many people in Dhaka are paid to dole out border positions. The money you make at the border is notoriously good and reliable." For the first time in the short history of our partnership he did not appease me with a smile.

We stood on the tracks and watched two more caravans of soldiers walk out amongst the women. No one ran. To run would attract too much attention. They sat still and prayed not to be amongst the chosen.

The second woman was not so ready to release her goods. She rolled onto her back when the billy clubs started to come down. She was trying to protect the spices, the very spices whose safe passage had already been secured by a small bribe. Furious and impatient, the young guard bent over and ripped at her clothes. Now the dulse-colored satchels emerged from beneath her body. And then out came a brand-new plastic-wrapped saree. Unlike many of the women, she had chosen to carry her saree underneath her plainclothes.

She lay on the ground for a long time after that. Her legs twisted one way and her torso twisted the other. And all of her spices and her saree gone.

According to Jhid, these goods would eventually make their way to the stores in the surrounding villages. And the border guards would be triply wealthy—once for their salaries, once for the bribe the traders paid to guarantee the safe passage of the contraband across the border, and once for the sale of what the guards had approved for passage and then taken by force.

Bano stood beside me—lucky, untouched, and watchful. The glitter on her wedding saree caught the light and sparkled hard against it.

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JUST BEFORE DEPARTURE I WALKED through the Hili stationmaster's office. Some of the most beautiful sarees I have ever seen were laid out across his desk. When I emerged from the WC the sarees were gone. The stationmaster smiled, the women seated nearby smiled, I smiled. Not one of us said a word.

Two hours after the Barendra Express dropped us off, it rolled through again, right on time and headed back north. Illegal enterprises simply cannot thrive without the cooperation of the authorities on some level. Bribing border guards and conductors in order to push your contraband across and through a state-run apparatus is expected. But the active participation of the country's largest public transportation network? That I had not expected. Bangladesh's outdated transportation system is crumbling beneath the weight of the country's 142 million inhabitants. Often trains are five and six and seven hours late. Sometimes they simply fail to arrive. But someone somewhere had been paid a lot to make sure the track was always clear for the Saree Express.

When it reappeared the women all launched to their feet with a ferocity I had yet to witness. Getting on board was like fighting for a place in a storm. This was the most vulnerable time. The guards strode through the teeming

women, zeroing in at random. I stood back for a moment and counted five being beaten, but then it was difficult to keep track and Jhid was pushing me up into the compartment.

"Get on, get on," he kept saying. His voice was thick and strong and stood out against the general disorder that had descended upon Hili.

We pulled away from the station and the guards returned to their headquarters about a fourth of a kilometer down the line, having done all that they would do for the day. Some of the men were already napping by the time we passed.

On board, Ehsan and I pushed through the crowd, which felt more immense, more agitated and hostile than the group of women we had ridden down with. Everyone was sweaty and scared, smashed up against each other, a mess of dust and gems.

Ehsan constantly looked back to make sure I was still with him. Sometimes I held my arms above my head to squeeze through a narrow pass, the walls around me constructed by immovable women. A spot on the return train was not something anyone was willing to compromise. After four or five cars like this Ehsan stopped. He pushed aside a heavy metal door and dragged me into a small compartment, first class.

"We will upgrade our tickets when the conductor comes through," he said.

I protested. "I want to go back out there and talk with more people." I was overcome with a feeling not of curiosity so much as deep admiration.

"You go," Ehsan said, "But leave your camera and your bag here. I will watch it for you. There are too many people too close together outside, and your things are not safe."

I found Bano and Jhid. Bano had lost half of her goods. A guard in Hili had beaten her and taken the saree she stashed under the glittery one she wore. The dust gathered in spots on her clothing: a blossom on her bottom and one on her back. Bano, at least, was a family member of the trader and so she would not have to shoulder her financial loss alone. When the train stopped, Jhid leaned out the window to monitor his women. If any left the train he made a note of who it was and immediately they were moved onto a list of those who might lie about being beaten by a guard to account for some loss of goods.

When I got home I would spend months trying, in vain, to figure out who controlled the Barendra Express's schedule. No one returned my emails or my phone calls. And who could blame them? In April of the following year, the Minister of the Railroads, Suranjit Sengupta, resigned after allegations

surfaced around his collecting bribes for the illegal allocation of positions within the railroad department. He was arrested in a minibus with his two personal secretaries and $86,000 in cash, roughly fifteen times the amount a saree smuggler could hope to make if she worked every single day for twenty-five years.

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ON OUR LAST NIGHT TOGETHER EHSAN AND I WALKED through the market in Saidpur. We had spent weeks together, and during that time he became a dear friend. We were reluctant to part.

We turned a corner and there they were. The saree stalls. From a slight remove, the saffron and pink and emerald and ruby silk looked like a modern art installation—the surfaces just surfaces—thin lines of various colors, alternating randomly, neatly stacked.

"I need to bring back a present for my wife, Naipur," Ehsan said as we strolled through the narrow alleyways. Honey tunnels in a hive. There were pashmina paisley scarves like the one Jhid had wrapped around his shoulders in Hili that morning. And next to the shawls were the sarees—brighter and even more dazzling now that a vacuum had sucked up all the dust. The silver and gold sequins hand-sewn onto long swaths of perfect factory-made Indian chiffon were dazzling. Ehsan asked one of the vendors to display a few. The man sat just above our waist level on a little platform. He unfurled a jade saree with metallic rhinestones. I asked him to show me something pink and silver, of the princess varietal, to bring back to my nieces.