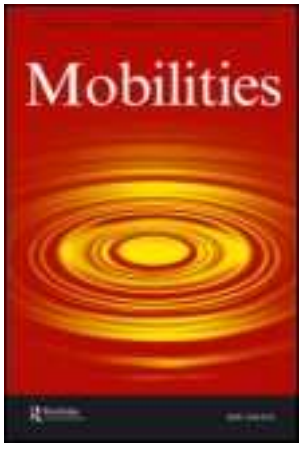

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Through Metal Fences: Material Mobility and the Politics of Transnationality at Borders

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Through Metal Fences: Material Mobility and the Politics of Transnationality at Borders

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ABSTRACT *This essay explores the changing material configurations of the India–Bangladesh border, the longest international boundary in South Asia. Following the entanglements of commodities and people, I engage in a dialogue with scholarship on informal transnational circuits, material cultures and sovereignty at borders. The interplay of sovereign violence, and what I call forms of sovereign indulgence, guides the politics of transnationality. Such politics transcend the well-investigated dichotomy of the privileged/deprived and articulate how commodities, people and border landmarks are ascribed with differing meanings. This essay shows how motifs of circulation derive meanings from a simultaneously fluid and dangerous border and expose the overlaps between historical formations, commercial trajectories and the paradoxes of militarisation.*

KEY WORDS: Material mobility, Transnationality, Border fences, Violence, Sovereign indulgence, 'Jungle passports', Temporality, India-Bangladesh border

Introduction

How do we comprehend the material landscape of borders that are formally closed and lethal, and yet accommodate a vast range of commodities that fall outside official bilateral trade? What may such circulations convey about material cultures, trans-border movements and sovereignty? Engagements with borders, as Donnan and Haller (2000, 9) argue, entail a re-thinking of conventional assumptions about the relationships between people, place, identity and culture. Scholars investigating the diversity of economic transactions in borderlands urge that market forces, plural fiscal practices and claims of economic citizenship shape political boundaries (Walker 1999; Chalfin 2001; Roitman 2005; Van Schendel 2005). However, transnational flows are uneven and often expose the inalienability of material and human mobility. If it is critical, as Cresswell advances, to locate the 'politics of movement' and explore how such politics derives meaning from social relations (2010, 21), the

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entanglement of commodity flows with border-crossings, is central to such an endeavour.

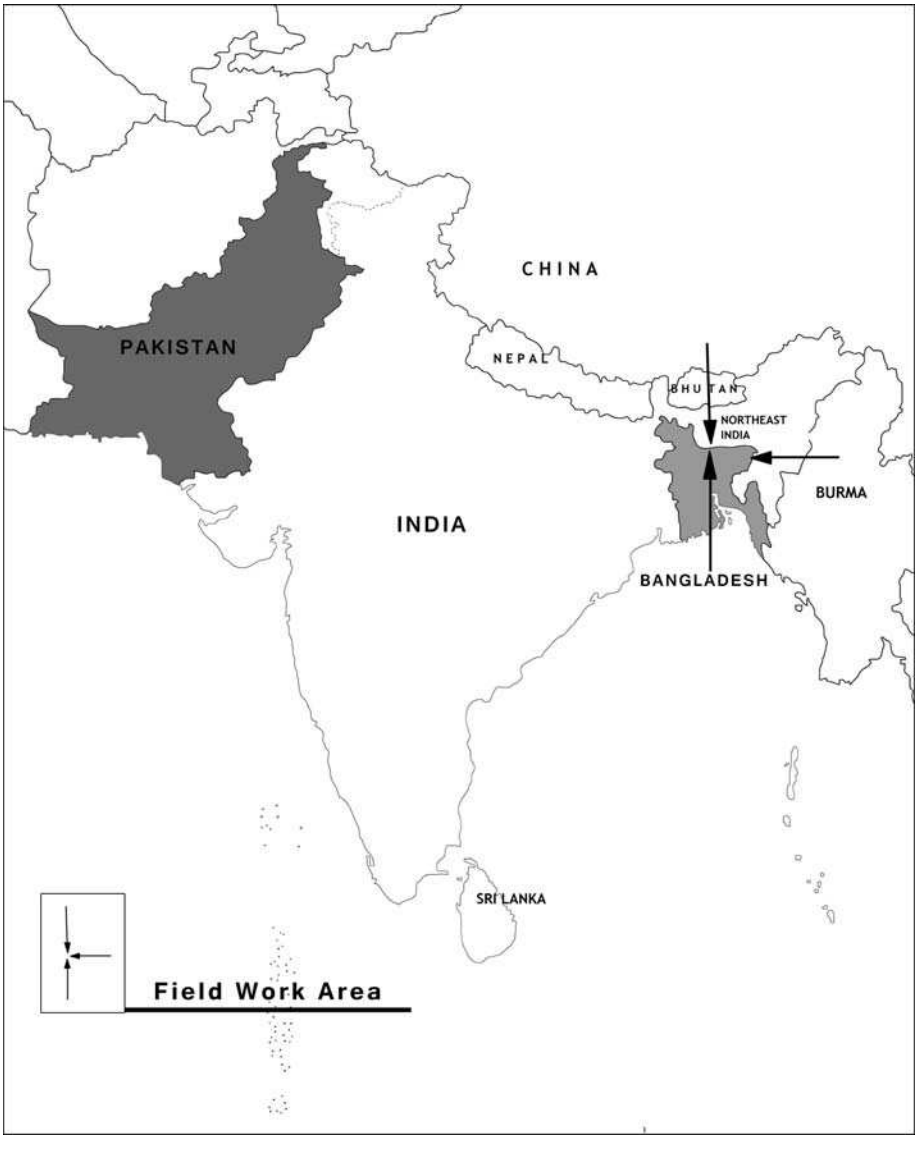
This essay explores the politics of transnationality by following the changing configurations of the India–Bangladesh border, the longest international boundary in South Asia. I argue that the interplay of sovereign violence and what I call forms of sovereign indulgence guides commodity circulations in borderlands. I show how material landscapes are shaped by the tangled histories of commodities and people, and from a simultaneously dangerous and fluid border. Partial estimates reveal that in the past decade, every third day, at least one undocumented Bangladeshi traveller was killed by Indian border guards at the India–Bangladesh border (Human Rights Watch 2010). However, cross-border shootings and torture do not mask the movement of commodities outside official trade. The total volume of smuggled goods from India to Bangladesh is estimated to be as high as $900 million or three times the volume of legal trade (World Bank 2006, xxiv). The figure is likely to be much higher as these estimates largely consider one-way movement of commodities from India to Bangladesh.

A diverse range of commodities traverse the international boundary at all hours, some visible and others obscured from public gaze. For reasons of national security and market demands, the states of India and Bangladesh prevent or facilitate informal trans-border trading. Transnational trade networks materialise through the journeys of traders and transporters who deal with a meandering borderline and heavily armed border guards. Material mobility is complicated by the peculiar nature of the international boundary. The border dissects an agrarian, partly forested, densely populated region and divides similar societies. In several stretches, rivers and numerous streams form the international boundary. In other parts, the border surfaces as a new fortified fence that India is constructing to control what is labelled as 'Bangladeshi infiltration and terrorism'. The material assemblages in border markets that dot the landscape reflect the lethal location and the porosity of the India–Bangladesh border. Some commodities get salience from a dangerous border, while others escape classification and circulate as fuzzy and ambivalent products, circumventing the label of 'illegality'. The trajectories of two commodities widely traded in border markets – clothing and fish – underscore the asymmetry of transnational flows.

While scholars of borders and transnational migration emphasise speedy and impeded circulations by contrasting the categories of privileged/deprived, it is critical to transcend this dichotomy as commodities, people and border signposts are marked with meaning in specific ways. These also extensively draw from conflicting histories of movement and settlement. Locating how the political, including those considered inconsequential, shapes the violent and the fluid disposition of borders is imperitive. This even as, even as many borderlanders resist and rebel (Van Schendel 2005, 173–174, 256–257) and others refuse to accept state policies surrounding trade and movement (Jones 2012, 687). Though scholars investigating the India–Bangladesh border have analysed the undocumented movement of people and commodities (Samaddar 1999; Van Schendel 2005), rarely has their convergence been studied. Engaging scholarship on material cultures in a conversation with illegal transnational trade, this essay shows how commodities come to acquire labels of ambiguity and danger, and how states target undocumented movement in specific ways. My contribution to the rich scholarship on border violence in this region (Samaddar 1999; Van Schendel 2005; Gupta and Sharma 2008; Jones 2009a,

2009b; Banerjee 2010) emphasises the intersections of sovereign violence and indulgence. While recognising the large-scale violence that prevails in this region, I assert that some patterns of material circulation occur easily *without* escaping the gaze of the state.

My claims on the politics of transnationality rest on fieldwork with trans-border traders, transporters and labourers in the border zone of India and Bangladesh. In 2007 and 2008, I lived in selected border villages and towns, and followed the construction work of India's new border fence with Bangladesh for 400 kilometres on both sides of the international boundary. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a very important part of this international boundary that straddles a region known as



Map 1. South Asia with arrows indicating fieldwork areas.

north-east India and five contiguous districts of Bangladesh. This stretch of the borderland is at once home to a heterogeneous mosaic of communities interconnected through kinship and trade, and zones of suspicion that are marked and patrolled in specific ways to control 'internal' political dissidence and 'external' threats (Map 1). These reflect the intersection of colonial mappings, post-colonial governance and communal histories of border-making and political profiling. Though trade happens in both directions, for analytic simplicity and the fact that human mobility from Bangladesh to India is politically marked as 'terrorism and infiltration', I confine this essay to clothing and fish that arrive from Bangladesh to border markets in north-east India. The final section of this essay outlines my initial reflections on border indulgence.

The Politics of Transnationality

The complex entanglements of people, objects and undocumented journeys offer tropes to explore transnational connections and identities. While the euphoria of interconnections prompts scholars to theorise de-territorialised identities, others caution that movement must be understood as mobility and enclosures (Cunningham and Heyman 2004, 293). Different social groups have 'differentiated mobility', and though some may do a lot of physical moving (like refugees) people are not always in control of their movement (Massey 1993, 61). While these discussions broaden the spectrum of movement and expose the interplay of power and difference, they do not transcend the dichotomy between the privileged and the deprived. For far too long, scholars have emphasised power relations by mapping the difference between highly mobile global entrepreneurs, and the troubled mobility of refugees and undocumented travellers (Massey 1993; Cunningham and Heyman 2004). As a departure, I argue that it is imperative to locate the political and the border landmarks that structure mobility, by comparing *among* undocumented flows. The privileged/deprived binary on which differences and power is crafted, eclipse the diversity of movement and the differential representations of border signposts.

The politics of transnationality is critical to the study of borders in South Asia, where most international boundaries divide similar societies. If present day South Asia's global interconnections inspire imaginations that transcend borders and emphasise shared histories, its regional existence embroiled in wars, border conflicts, and the construction of high-security fences are reminders of violent map-making. A 'movement driven' social science – in which all forms of movement and practices of dwelling and place making are taken into account (Büscher and Urry 2009, 100) – is critical to scholarship in South Asia for several reasons. The study of migrant subjectivities and border societies is an emerging field – a little more than a decade old (Samaddar 1999; Van Schendel 2005; Gupta and Sharma 2008; Banerjee 2010). These investigations offer important departures to state led, sedentary and security centric studies that equate border-crossings with political subversion (Ludden 2003b, 1061–1067; Van Schendel 2005, 4–5, 379).

It is also critical not to lose sight of the 'mobile' turn in the social sciences in South Asia, because as David Ludden reminds us, for centuries this region formed a massive spatial zone of interactions and circuits, where transnational cartographies of conquest and trade coexisted with local map-making aimed at sedentarising mobile societies (Ludden 2003b, 1062). Plural regimes of guarding borders that facilitated transnational trading on the one hand and border militarisation on the other, were neither

recent nor novel in these resource rich frontiers. Indeed, what is today the India–Bangladesh border shaped empires and trade routes, and connected South Asia with Southeast Asia. As nodes of global trading in opium, jute, tea, silk and other commodities, the north-eastern borderlands of South Asia were linked to Burma and China. These regions were governed by different kingdoms, militias and colonial powers (Ludden 2003b, 1062; Van Schendel 2005, 148). With the imposition of a new border with the partition of India (1947), existing trade routes were disrupted (Chatterji 1999, 228–234). The same routes became illegal and 'smuggling' flourished, (Van Schendel 2005, 156–157). Meanwhile new post-colonial states fought over produce and territory; acts of territorial intrusion and espionage, mapping border societies and controlling resources in borderlands shaded into one another (Sur 2012a, 86–88).

The overlaps of material mobilities, political identities and border militarisation demand that scholarship on borders and mobility investigate the intersections of transnational trade networks and material cultures. While scholars engaged with political and moral economies analyse market forces, quasi-legalities and plural systems of regulation at borders, others have raised critical questions on material cultures. The former advance that informal trans-border trade rests on converging authorities, interactions between state agents and borderland elites, as well as wealth creation and distribution (Walker 1999; Chalfin 2001; Roitman 2005; Van Schendel 2005). Among others, this body of scholarship asserts that distinctions between the 'legal' and 'illegal' are constantly subject to adaptations and manipulations (Heyman and Smart 1999, p 1, 10–11) and that 'borders, far from being geographically fixed or functionally stable, can be understood as a site of on-going negotiation between society and state' (Chalfin 2001, 202).

However, material landscapes and the assemblage of local and 'foreign' products that circulate in border markets also reflect the inalienability of objects and people. Therefore, the study of undocumented trade flows at borders cannot not stand apart from the scholarship that follow the 'social life' of commodities, values and politics. That objects have social lives, their trajectories and biographies may be analysed through circuits of production, exchange and consumption, and people who are connected to them, are among the important contributions of this body of work (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). Appadurai's reminder 'to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories … it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context' (1986, 5) is indispensable to investigations of flows that are marked as illegal and transgressive, or politically inconsequential. People who move or are compelled to move as migrants and refugees are also carriers of objects and cultural practices, and shape material cultures in spaces of resettlement. Objects recreate spaces of home even as they find commercial niches in larger globalised commodity chains through the movements of migrants and refugees (Tolia-Kelly 2004; Cook and Harrison 2007; Basu and Coleman 2008).

The material complex of the India–Bangladesh border, especially the regions that cut across north-east India and the foothills of Bangladesh, narrate the visceral connections of commodities–people–journeys in one analytic frame. The oscillating visibility of commodities and traders, and the differential border transactions that shape the material culture of this region, expose the persistence of some trade routes even as others run into troubled times. In this borderland, historical mappings, religious and political mobilisations leading to the partition of India (1947), the liberation war of Bangladesh (1971), a vibrant trans-border economy and everyday

border violence converge. The partition of India (1947) that created this borderline, divided similar societies and disrupted agriculture and trade (Chatterji 1999; Van Schendel 2005). The India–Bangladesh borderland as a point of material and emotional exchanges, and a space that is constantly de-humanised through acts of border violence, expose the asymmetry of transnational flows.

Material Landscapes

During the initial months of fieldwork, Indian and Bangladeshi border traders and transporters lamented that small-scale trans-border trade was declining. Traders pointed towards India's partly constructed new border fence with Bangladesh (Figure 1). They indicated the presence of heavily armed border guards who were seen patrolling the international boundary. The Indian Border Security Forces and the Border Guard Bangladesh, state recruited paramilitary forces were in-charge of border patrolling, and preventing unauthorised migration and smuggling. Even as some traders held that the fence would not make a difference to the vibrant border economy, others insisted that this multilayered structure would end all transactions by sealing the border. They conveyed that the fence would end old trade routes and kinship ties and create destitution and darkness.

The Border Security Forces in India and the Border Guard Bangladesh reaffirmed the intended closure of the landscape. Even in stretches where India's new border fence had not been constructed as yet, border guards clearly pointed out India and Bangladesh. Often, guards aggressively warned that I could not photograph 'Bangladeshi territory' from India or 'Indian territory' from Bangladesh. This, even if the territory was a meandering mud path cutting across rice fields or a stick with a plastic flag indicating the border. But most importantly, guards never failed to remind me that 'every illegal transgression' was punished. Sometimes for minor mistakes, a slap and a few kicks did the job for 'our own people'. If such beatings

Figure 1. India's new border fence with Bangladesh under construction in north-east India. Photograph: Author © Malini Sur

and short detentions were at one end of the spectrum, at the other, was cross-border shootings of undocumented travellers.

Torture and cross-border killings were not rumours in remote locations or hollow warnings to borderlanders and researchers alike to 'stay off' the border zone. Between 2000 and 2010, more than 932 Bangladeshi undocumented border-crossers were killed by Indian border guards. Several dead and injured were small-scale border traders. During the same period, at least 61 Indians were shot at for travelling without authorisation, again by Indian border guards (Human Rights Watch 2010). These rather partial estimates, confined to a little more than half the international boundary and only cases investigated and recorded by human rights organizations, indicated that preventing 'illegal migration' and 'terrorism' was definitely prime on India's border agenda. The scale of violence was likely to be significantly higher, if one considered the entire region, included the atrocities and torture committed by Border Guard Bangladesh and deaths of Bangladeshi and Indian border guards in border conflicts.

Cross-border shootings signalled that 'un-official' trans-border trading was equated with political subversion and crime. Though scholars have emphatically asserted the difference between commercial trajectories and crime, (Donnan and Wilson 1999, 10; Abraham and Van Schendel 2005, 23–24) their easy integration is a reminder that trans-border commodity flows are often, without empirical evidence, equated with 'infiltration' and 'terrorism' (Jamwal 2004, 14–15, 33). The words 'illegal migration, smuggling, terrorism, border trade and joint patrolling' figured conspicuously in the minutes of border conferences that happened periodically between India and Bangladesh. State policies in India and Bangladesh were united in their emphasis on ending everything 'illegal'. Top on India's agenda was that Bangladesh should hand over political dissidents who had sought shelter across the border and control unauthorised movement. Meanwhile, Bangladesh urged that India should encourage bilateral trade. Bangladesh patrolled its boundary with India, with the intention of preventing unauthorised movement and smuggling of alcoholic syrups and cheap alcohol especially from some parts of north-east India where taxation on alcohol was less. All sources appeared to confirm that unofficial trans-border trade was diminishing, and that 'smuggling' and 'illegal' border-crossings were punished with detention, torture, and death.

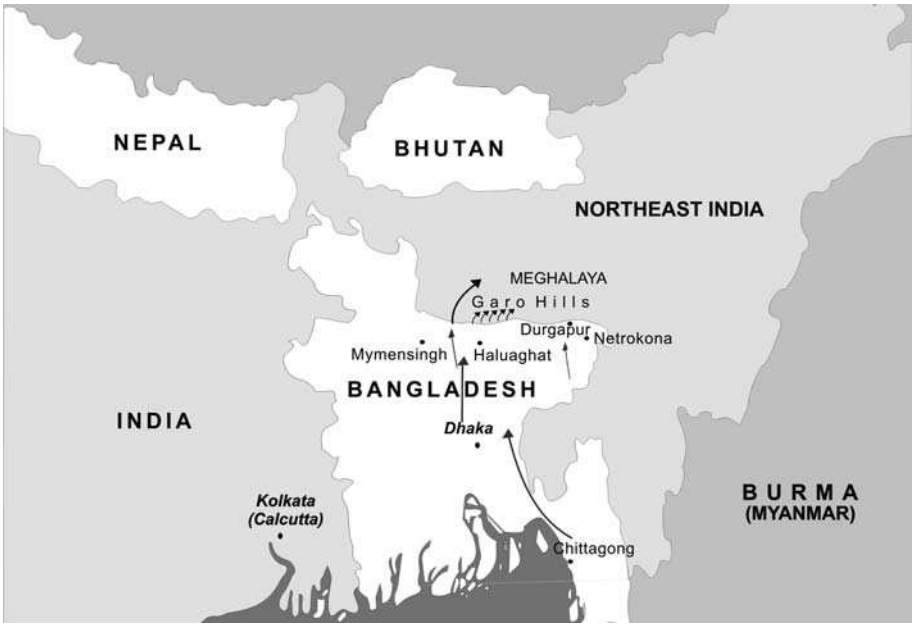
Narratives of material loss, stringent border patrolling and indeed the large-scale firings, death and torture, could not conceal the vibrant cross-border economy. In villages nestling the international boundary, at all times of the day and night, traders and transporters negotiated fences, river boundaries, and forests that represented the border. Labourers carried heavy timber on their shoulders and baskets filled to the brim with oranges, oil and sugar. Others dragged sack-loads of electronic goods and guided large consignments of cattle from north-east India to Bangladesh. From Bangladesh, fish, garments and textiles, cosmetics, vegetables, edibles and crockery arrived in north-east India on the backs of traders and transporters. Even as both states officially emphasised the pitfalls of smuggling, a vast range of commodities traversed the international boundary. Often, border guards and customs officials were bribed to facilitate cross-border flows, at other times, they merely looked away.

At the weekly and bi-weekly border markets popularly known as *haats*, commodities, local and trans-border traders, border guards and shoppers assembled. With guns and wireless, guards watched closely for signs of 'infiltration' in markets in north-east India, even as traders and labourers sat and drank tea at stalls. These circulations addressed the material needs of regions that straddled the hills of north-

east India, and the foothills and plains of Bangladesh, that were cut off from market linkages with district towns. Stringent border patrolling and greater scrutiny of products labelled as 'made in Bangladesh' often transformed everyday commodities into subversive ones and paradoxically escalated the desire for possession. These included religious objects such as bibles, and objects of everyday use such as cosmetics and soaps. At the same time, border fencing signalled distance between India and Bangladesh, and the circulation of Indian commodities met with occasional disapproval among border residents in Bangladesh.

Circulating Garments and Decayed Fish

Despite the armed scrutiny of Bangladeshi products in India and the condemnation of Indian products in Bangladesh, subsistence trading between the hills of north-east India and foothills of Bangladesh was supported by border societies and state agents alike. Such trading was sharply demarcated from trading in harmful substances and high profits, labelled as 'smuggling'. Priests and village leaders ensured that escalated border patrolling did not hamper the flow of subsistence commodities (Sur 2012a, 141, 2012b). Colourful garments manufactured in export industries in and around Bangladesh's capital city Dhaka and textiles woven in diverse locations ranging from the Chittagong Hill Tracts to the district of Mymensingh in Bangladesh, found eager consumers in north-east India (Map 2). Similarly, border residents in the hills of north-east India awaited the arrival of fresh fish. These commodities had similar trajectories – they were in high demand in north-east India and travelled along the same route. Both commodities were also politically uncontroversial unlike illicit trading in arms, drugs and alcohol.



Map 2. Commodity Flows from Bangladesh to north-east India.

I accompanied Kakoli, an Indian national to a border market in north-east India close to the international boundary. We were early for Christmas shopping but Kakoli insisted that a survey of rates was needed. This survey as I soon understood was not just confined to border markets in north-east India. Because after all, if prices were cheaper in border markets in Bangladesh, Kakoli would walk across, drink tea at her cousin's and then take a cycle rickshaw to the nearest market. But one needed to be a little cautious, as she was not a 'regular'. Border guards were getting strict with patrolling and new faces at border gates and near India's partly constructed fence appeared suspicious. Unlike traders who arrived every morning from Bangladesh and departed by late afternoon, Kakoli did not travel regularly. Even as she bargained, many Bangladeshi traders who I had met in the initial months of fieldwork in border markets and who had 'taking many risks opened their hearts to me,' invited me to spend Christmas in Bangladesh. Some asked if Kakoli would send sarongs made in north-east India, through me.

In border markets in India, Bangladeshi traders functioned as suppliers. Unable to own stalls as foreigners, they retailed textiles and garments with Indian traders and collected money and unsold goods at the end of the day. Subsistence traders, who travelled with one bag or one basket of goods fleetingly paused between border camps located at the international boundary. Bangladeshi border guards indicated India's new border fence and occasionally warned women traders. Indian border guards inspected bags and purchased tee-shirts at discounted prices. Even during our initial interactions, some matter-of-factly and others mischievously communicated that they were travellers by 'jungle passports' indicating that travel happened without official papers and permits and party through the forested landscape that straddled north-east India and Bangladesh. Some even hired labourers to drag bags of clothing to the international boundary and invited me to travel with them.

Figure 2. Traders at a border *haat* (market). Photograph: Author © Malini Sur

'But where is the immigration check-post?' I asked. The border outpost is 'enough for us' they asserted, even if these specific outposts did not have the mandate of immigration functions. After all, they were known faces 'the regulars' at the border who travelled and traded in this region. In the months that followed, when I asked Bangladeshi traders for directions to their homes in border villages so that I could visit them, they rattled off important signposts, assuming that I would cross over from north-east India. Often in one breath traders narrated – an Indian border outpost, a Bangladeshi border outpost, a church, a local market and a tea stall. Sometimes the sequence changed. However, in all narratives of transnational geographies the convergence between sites of religiosity, trade, recreation and border vigilance was apparent. Border-crossings were not laced with anxieties of encountering a 'border outpost'. Their journeys were unlike many other undocumented traders who evaded these landmarks, when bribing was not possible or when border guards refused to give consent for trans-border movement. The partly truncated landscape where the construction work of India's new border fence was progressing in parts and the presence of armed border guards, also did not generate anxieties. Spatial markers like border outposts that were symbols of national flamboyance transformed into ordinary landmarks for garments traders.

The blurring of state operated paramilitary spaces and civilian spaces, generated a sense of spatial ambivalence that were mapped on to clothing. Traders were hardly conscious of their role as pivots in globalised routes – that at once connected Burma, Bangladesh and India. These interlinked sites of production from factory and home based weaving centres in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and factories and warehouses in the suburbs of Dhaka were connected to Tura, Baghmara and other district towns in north-east India. Even while conveying that clothes often travelled

Figure 3. 'M.R. Product' stoles of unknown provenance displayed at a border market. Photograph: Author © Malini Sur

from far away distant locations, traders asserted the temporality of flows – that such trade had happened for generations. While hand woven clothing was traded in this region for long, 'foreign' garments and textile trade flourished since the 1970s. Garments shipped to Bangladesh as a part of development aid and relief, found their way into north-east India. Elderly traders emphasised that they had all done 'relief' for years. More recently, with Bangladesh emerging as a leading exporter of garments and textiles globally, markets close to Bangladesh's hill and foothill borders with India stocked and retailed garments that were 'rejected' for exports. Often traders living close to the border, travelled to Bangladesh's capital city Dhaka to procure garments at cheaper prices. Finally, Bangladeshi traders physically transported consignments across the border to north-east India.

As I travelled with Shefali and others on their procurement trips in Bangladesh, garments received intense scrutiny. Shefali opened each piece of clothing and minutely checked for defects in tee-shirts and trousers, mostly unlabelled and marked with coloured blue and red flags. Stoles and sarongs manufactured in Bangladesh, bypassed such scrutiny. These were neatly cased in plastic sheets. Among the well-known brands of stoles and sarongs were M.R. Textiles and S.R Textiles. The former included a glossy printed label of warning against duplication of *ornas* as these stoles were popularly known in some stretches of the borderland. Thus, 'honourable buyers and sellers' were warned of duplicate designs and copied labels circulated in markets and were advised to check the monogram of 'authencity' titled as 'M.R. Product – Export Quality'. However, the label of 'authenticity' was not linked to a specific geographical location where 'M.R. Product' were made. Places and sites did not matter in producing 'authenticity'. Ambiguous locations and fuzzy branding defined trade in clothing (Figures 2 and 3).

At border markets in north-east India, garments and textiles hung from pegs and were laid out. These commodities exposed the visibility of a vibrant trans-border economy and the relative ease of crossing a partly fenced and armed border region. The motif of clothing – garments and textiles – in north-east India was commercially and culturally proximate to Bangladesh. The overlaps in attire were evident among Indian and Bangladeshi traders alike, even when ethnicities differed. Women's clothing were a combination of stitched and unstitched garments – tee-shirts or cotton blouses and stoles manufactured in Bangladesh, and machine woven sarongs of north-east India. At border markets in north-east India, Bangladeshi traders did not conceal their national identities, most legitimised their presence by insisting that trade between the hills and the foothills was eternal and that no one prevented them from coming to north-east India (Sur 2012b, 141). As I sat in Shefali's house in Bangladesh late evening, she complained about 'all this dragging clothes to India' and the increased deployment of troops near the border. However, the next morning, she woke up early and set forth for the border.

Even as Shefali and others, sitting at a tea stall in a border market in north-east India, vouched for the high quality of unbranded bright tee-shirts and woven cotton stoles as 'genuine' products, the smell of rotting fish emanated from the nearby fish stalls. Curiosity about the declining quality of fish evoked sharp reactions from Indian traders. After all as a trader in a border market emphasised 'Why should it matter where the fish arrived from? Fish is fish, and since this consignment is not that fresh, I am charging a low price'. Such responses were later replaced by narratives of border anxieties and monetary loss associated with fish trading. Those who could afford had graduated to 'investing' in this trade through money lending and

earning interests, rather than trading itself. The rest of the traders negotiated everyday anxieties of crossing heavily guarded borders.

Fish trading entailed manually transporting fish caught in Bangladesh in small metal containers to the hill regions of north-east India. Fish like clothing, is a mundane commodity of exchange and trade in this region. Earlier, this trading happened just before day break so that fish could arrive at dawn in the designated border markets in north-east India. But border fencing and armed patrolling in this region and greater scrutiny directed at Bangladeshi Muslim men who trade, ensured changes in time and spatial diversions. From a relatively lightly guarded border region, escalating militarisation and terror attacks in Indian cities has increasingly led to the profiling of Muslim border-crossers as 'infiltrators' and 'terrorists'. Along with changes in the timings of catching fish, storing them and crossing borders, routes were now more complicated. For Muslim traders and transporters, travelling to north-east India was not easy. Often Bangladeshi traders arrived close to the international boundary and let Indian transporters manually carry consignments or wade through the shallow waters of the numerous streams that intersperse this region. Sometimes border guards were bribed to make passage for goods. When border guards refused bribes or traders evaded guards, routes were even longer. Indian fish traders, who sold fish that were in high demand in the hill regions of north-east India, complained that fencing and border patrolling delayed and disrupted supplies. Consumers often walked away without purchasing fish or purchased fish for heavily discounted prices. Unlike garment traders, Bangladeshis involved in the fish trade were invisible at tea stalls and border markets. The empirical imbalance is a statement on the limitations of conducting research with traders labelled as 'Islamic terrorists' in dangerous borderlands. Even as bureaucrats insisted that these 'unruly and crime infested backwaters' have progressed to idyllic locations where there was 'excellent crime control' and 'no smuggling', border guards, especially Indian border guards, emphasised 'shoot to kill' policies. The diversions and increasing dangers resulting in delays and monetary losses exposed the targeting of Muslim traders.

Fences and Flows

Among the recent transformations in the partly forested and densely populated north-east India-Bangadesh border is the construction work of India's border fence. In 1986, India started constructing a new border fence with Bangladesh (Van Schendel 2005, 212). The new fence is imagined as deterrent for unauthorised immigration and smuggling. India proposes to fence 3286.87 kilometres out of the total length of 4096 kilometres (approx.) international boundary. The construction work of the fence in the specific regions that I investigated started between 2000 and 2007. Sometimes, the new fence replaced old feeble fences and fence-like structures. At other times, it coexisted with these. In many stretches, fencing was not possible on account of low lying areas or river borders, villages located near the demarcation zone (Ministry of Home Affairs India, 2005–2006). There were also numerous enclaves in the region; smaller territories of one state located within and surrounded by the other state.

The fluctuating pace of construction was not only due to infrastructural glitches but exposed the convergence of political engineering, social movements against Bangladeshi immigration and competing claims over land. Despite bound-

ary pillars and other fortified structures, the India–Bangladesh border was not well defined. Discussions on land disputes and demarcations between India and Bangladesh were inconclusive. Often fence construction was hampered by land acquisition issues. Land acquisition in various states of north-east India, a region through which almost half the international boundary between India and Bangladesh cuts across, was politically explosive. This is also because the region's geographic and political connections with mainland India were feeble and contentious (McDuie-Ra 2012).

Despite being formally closed and requiring passports for travel and permits for official trade, the India–Bangladesh borderland pulsated. The commodity circulations in this region exposed the persistence of intersecting trade routes, material cultures and borderland identities, reflecting the mobile disposition of this frontier for centuries. As Ludden reminds us about this frontier, mobility persisted despite the imposition of several complicated borders imposed by Hindu, Mughal and European colonisers and oppressive taxation and settled cultivation imposed on a heterogeneous mosaic of matrilineal communities (Ludden 2003a, 4–5, 49). Even as the material and political foundations of marking boundaries were being laid, in the north-eastern borderlands of South Asia, several communities emphasised their difference from dominant regional, provincial and religious mappings. For instance, many called themselves 'frontier people' and guarded a distinct identity (Misra 2006, 200). With the partition of India in 1947, the trans-border existence of communities who were non-Hindu and non-Muslim like *adivasis* (partially translated as indigenous) were marked by ambiguities, as compared to Hindus and Muslims who represented the dominant religions (Van Schendel 2005, 46–49). Bangladeshi garments and textile traders are *adivasis* who share affinities with many states in north-east India. These communities experienced state building and border making through multiple displacements and relocations, and everyday transnationality in the socially diverse agrarian frontier (Bal 2007, 160–171; Sur 2012a, 77–89, 2012b).

In post-colonial India, several *adivasi* communities like the Khasis and the Garos who live along the north-east India–Bangladesh border emphasise their transnational connections with Bangladesh. Further, they assert that the Khasis and the Garos did not feature in discussions that led to the partition of the Indian subcontinent and how their divided predicament should be addressed. These claims to interconnected landscapes explain the surprisingly smooth circulation of garments, textiles and other subsistence commodities. For many decades, the Khasis and the Garos, among others, have demanded the official recognition of trans-border ties. Several Khasi organisations petitioned to the Government of India to constitutionally legalise subsistence border trade that existed since 'time immemorial'. One petition listing items of subsistence trade, emphasised that official export and import policies did not consider the everyday requirements of border communities (Kakoty 2005). The petition stated:

> The present system of declaring an area as an export and import route will not solve the problem of the thousands of poor people as they are not in a position to involve themselves in the intricacies of export and import … people … want to barter one or two baskets of their perishable items in exchange for fish, etc. (as cited in Kakoty 2005)

Similarly the Garos living in border zones of north-east India, whose lives also straddle the India–Bangladesh border have demanded that subsistence trade between the two states be recognised. Thus, starting with an experimental border market in the West Garo Hills in 2011 where Bangladeshi traders can travel without passports and are able to trade in commodities within the value of US $50 (Talukdar 2011), by mid-2012, India and Bangladesh expanded to three border markets (one in the Khasi Hills of north-east India and one each in Kurigram and Sunamganj districts of Bangladesh). Notwithstanding these officially sanctioned markets, subsistence trade is widely prevalent without explicit official policies. The border-crossings of garment and textile traders draw from shared histories, where moving from one part of the borderzone to another, despite the imposition of new border fences is not seen as transgressive either by states or border communities.

Garments traders in border markets (where subsistence trading was not official) emphasised that they were travellers by 'jungle passports' and *not* smugglers. Furthermore, no one, not even the border guards, prevented them from crossing the north-east India–Bangladesh border. The expression 'jungle passports' circulated among *adivasis* such as the Garos and implicitly laid claims to spaces on both sides of the border. It involved using the forested landscape of the region for subsistence trade and labour, and maintaining kinship ties. Journeys by 'jungle passports' also accounted for the visibility of Bangladeshi garments and textiles in north-east India. Garments and textiles circulated as if killer fences and armed border guards were non-existent in this landscape. The fluidity and visibility derived from the political location and state surveillance of *adivasi* Bangladeshi border communities as inconsequential to India's economic and political sovereignty.

The easy circulation of clothing also draws attention to the ephemeral disposition of fences as fortified structures. India's new border fence is shaped by differing mobilities. Despite heavy patrolling and militarisation, the fence is no longer a spatial barrier to all undocumented flows. It retreats in prominence as a grand architecture, without necessarily compromising its role in maintaining India's national sovereignty. Even as construction engineers tend to the fence and Indian and Bangladeshi border guards patrol the region with guns and wireless radios, garments and textiles easily circulate. At the same time, even stretches of the north-east India–Bangladesh border that are yet to be fenced or have old feeble fences remain lethal for other circulations. It is therefore critical to expose how India's new border fence has different representations for different commodities and how the political location of commodities is closely tied to the location of people who trade in them. In these contrasts the interplay of sovereign indulgence and violence becomes evident.

Sovereign Violence and Indulgence

If travel and trade by 'jungle passports' direct attention to the fluid dispositions of the India–Bangladesh border, difficult and anxious border crossings of fish traders and their hesitation to cross over to north-east India, illustrate its lethal and dangerous predicament. I have emphasised that it is imperative to explore the simultaneity of fluid and dangerous journeys. Even as *adivasi* traders' negotiated the borderland with relative ease and safety, in precisely the same locations, the troubled journeys of Muslim traders signal the extreme de-humanisation and state repression that

prevail in this region. For both Indian Muslims (of Bengali origin and residing in border regions of north-east India) and Bangladeshi Muslims, proximity to the international boundary is suspect. The profile of fish traders as 'Islamic terrorists' haunts the Indian imagination of unauthorised Bangladeshi migrants. Indian Muslim borderlanders engaged in trans-border trade with Bangladesh are seen to compromise India's national security.

The material decomposition of fish, that draws attention to the object even before it is visible – reflects the 'politics of movement' at borders (Cresswell 2010). Decay in this context is not merely a statement on the form or the perishable substance of the commodity, but a statement on the political – the dangerous and the transgressive at borders. The stench of rotting fish re-inscribes the communal foundations of what is today the India–Bangladesh border. These foundations are based on the polarised and opposing political projections of the two majority religions of South Asia – Hindu and Muslim on which the partition of India (1947) was decided. In the mass political mobilisation that led to the partition of India, nationalist and provincial political parties used the opposing meanings of Hindu and Muslim for political canvassing. The violent and communal partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 that created new post-colonial states (India and Pakistan) and led to colossal loss, mass displacement and the persecution of religious minorities (Muslims in India and Hindus, *adivasis* and others in Pakistan). In 1971, after a prolonged war, Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation state and what was formerly the East-Pakistan–India border region became the India–Bangladesh border. Despite more cordial diplomatic ties between Bangladesh and India, the India–Bangladesh border has been conflict ridden for decades – extreme state repression and border violence has even led to its nomenclature as a 'killer border' (Van Schendel 2005, 296).

The widespread dehumanisation of the India–Bangladesh border reflects the troubled predicament of religious minorities. For instance in India, policies that aim at identifying and deporting 'illegal Bangladeshi immigrants' often result in the harassment of impoverished Indian Muslims (Ramachandran 2003, 640–641, Roy 2008, 17). Bengali speaking labour migrants circulating in India and those living close to border regions, are embedded in zones of suspicion and distrust as neither Indian citizenship nor migrant illegality can be easily established (Sur 2012b, 97–98). Such registers of imprecision are evident at the international boundary – where Indian border guards' physically push out suspected 'illegal Bangladeshis' towards Bangladesh and Bangladeshi border guards prevent 'foreigner intrusion' from India.

Existing communal identities get mapped onto new discourses of terror by embellishing the image of Muslim enemies who are 'violent and evil' and placed outside modernity (Jones 2009a, 883). In north-east India, they further complicate existing issues relating to unauthorised immigration and land loss, competing claims over resources, the intense militarisation of the region and its troubled relationship with mainland India (Baruah 1999). Material decompositions also direct attention to the communalisation of India's new fencing project and border militarisation. Muslim borderlanders in India and Bangladeshi Muslim traders, anxiously and fearfully experience the border. Furthermore, feeble fences or even their absence induce perennial sense of alert and fear among Muslim traders. This is especially for exchanges that are outside pre-arranged deals with border guards.

The political boundaries of states are locations where the excessive use of force and state violence is apparent. Such violence as Agamben reminds us, is neither an

aberration nor exercised as an exception (Agamben 2005). Declaring a 'state of exception' and suspending the law, is not extraordinary argues Agamben, but defines the new political order – what he calls the 'global civil war'. Tensions produced by the alternating suspension and imposition of law create zones of legal void, where bodies are reduced to 'bare life', stripped of human and political forms. Agamben's bare life draws attention to conditions under which killing is not regarded as a crime (2005, 3–9). The excessive use of force at borders, ranging from airports with biometrics and scanners to land borders with checkposts, illustrates why Agamben's emphasis on the state of exception is relevant. It is therefore not surprising that Agamben's formulation of the state of exception has had a profound impact on scholars of migration and borders (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007; De Genova and Mae Puetz 2010). Inspired by Agamben's insights on the state of exception, scholars assert that the India–Bangladesh borderland is ruled by border guards and the might of the gun (Van Schendel 2005), and transforms into a 'zone of exception' (Jones 2009b, 301).

However, along with border violence, counter narrations of state policies have also engaged scholars of borders and border societies. Among important contributions that enrich the conceptual vocabulary of movement are narratives of flight linked to questions of resistance (Scott 2009), differing moralities of people who engage in trans-border activities (Abraham and Van Schendel 2005) and acts of refusal (Jones 2012). Scott's engagements with large-scale peasant mobilities in response to agrarian transformations, sedentarisation schemes and oppressive taxation have inspired scholars to engage with resistance that falls outside overt political actions. In analysing how the civilisational trajectories of hill societies differed from wet rice cultivation, the author emphasises that rather than being untouched by the progress of civilisation, hill societies in Asia preferred to place themselves out of reach of the state (Scott 2009, 22). While the movement of the Garos and the Khasis, their claims to transnational connections and their assertions for constitutional recognition of trans-border trade partially draws from the political landscape of hill societies; the historical and the post-colonial predicament of cultivators from the plains, in this case Muslim cultivators, were also tied to questions of flight in complicated ways. The latter fled from the colonial province of eastern Bengal to escape oppressive British colonial taxation and in response to schemes of colonial land mapping and settlement in Assam. Their arrival and settlement in Assam was politically controversial. Competing claims and contestations persisted through the early post-colonial period. The chequered existence of fish as a commodity for trade draws from this history of population movements, taxation and land settlement. Therefore, flight from oppressive taxation and predatory states, that underlies Scott's intervention, stretches far beyond hill societies and exposes spatial and political fluidities merging the boundaries of the hills and the plains.

Scholarship on borderlands and transnationality has also produced rich conceptual vocabularies to imagine mobility through cognitive and moral maps, and the assertions of border societies. These counter narrations of movement enrich discussions on power; space and territoriality by considering the viewpoints of those who challenge and refuse state restrictions on movement. It also offers critical departures to the overemphasis of the privileged/underprivileged divide in migration studies that I underscored earlier. Among important contributions are 'mental maps' of borderlanders that re-structure and scale the margins of states (Van Schendel 2005, 376) and 'spaces of refusal' (Jones 2012) that offer scope to comprehend alternative

configurations of space and flows. Thus, borderlanders operate on a different set of codes and moralities than states (Abraham and Van Schendel 2005, 22) and refuse to accept state led markers of territory and restrictions on movement like the use of passports for border-crossings (Jones 2012, 696). While alternative connotations of space and movement capture the tensions and the plural meanings of borders and transnationality, they often place states, state agents, official policies and border societies at asymmetrical and divergent scales of space, time and exchange. Such engagements privilege moments and dispositions where states are 'absent' and therefore trans-border movement occurs and other instances where states are 'present' but actions of state agents like border guards who accept bribes are distinguished as individual acts of discretion and corruption.

As a departure, I argue that what is often constructed as individual actions of border guards reflect written and unwritten state policies – policies of violence and policies that favour some forms of undocumented movement to address material needs. After all, if unauthorised and impoverished Bangladeshis have emerged as dubious voters who shape the outcomes of democratic elections in India, it is because India's border policies have conditionally favoured trans-border movement and settlement. While in several instances, protecting national space entails protecting national borders by preventing the movement of commodities/people, in many others, patterns of movement are desired for winning electoral outcomes or because they are politically inconsequential. Thus, the predicament deriving from the simultaneity of a dangerous and safe border emerges from the differential gaze of states – where states target movement in specific ways. Inconsequential transnational flows broaden the spectrum of the political at borders. They indicate actions of benevolent dismissal.

In other words, the gaze of the state include acts of 'looking away' and 'not bothering'. 'Looking away' reflects begin dismissal and political inconsequence. It *facilitates* cross-border movement without documentation – what I call forms of sovereign indulgence. Indulgence derives from erasure and the insignificance of border-crossers rather than through monetary exchanges like bribery. Textile and garments traders are imagined as a mass of helpless and impoverished *adivasi* women who do not threaten India's national security or compromise Bangladesh's border agendas. In Bangladesh, they are not imagined to be alcohol smugglers unlike *adivasi* men. Their journeys at day break to India and their departures back to Bangladesh contrast with the journeys of fisher folk and transporters who navigate the international boundary with anxieties and threats to life, and at additional costs like bribing border guards. The premise of difference and the enactment of domination, in the case of garments and *adivasi* women materialises *through* undocumented movement and through metal fences. The visibility of garments from unlabelled tee shirts to woven stoles that hang on pegs underlie the profile of people who are engaged in their trade – who are not marked as 'terrorists' and 'infiltrators' but are dismissed as politically insignificant.

Conclusion

Foregrounding the overlaps between material configurations, human movement and metal fencing, this essay narrated the politics of transnationality at borders. Trading in clothing and fish emerged from the vagaries of such undocumented movement. The unevenness of transnational flows exposed the juxtaposition of commodities

with a vast range of spatial practices, and the different representations of India's partially constructed new border fence with Bangladesh. While some commodities were neither actively patronised nor ferociously prevented by states, others considered mundane and morally ambiguous came to acquire dangerous and transgressive meanings.

The assemblage of commodities in border markets exposed the interplay of violence and indulgence, and offered two important departures to the study of borders and transnational migration. Firstly, it eroded the overemphasis of the privileged/underpriviledged divide as the favoured distinction upon which scholars of migration and borders theorised difference, power and domination. Secondly, I asserted the non-predatory dispositions of states and state agents at borders, without necessarily losing sight of the large-scale de-humanisation and border violence. While it is important to remind proponents of de-territorialisation that material spaces are created by the crossing of dangerous borders, the fact that undocumented journeys may also be relatively unquestioned by states is critical for scholars studying border societies and violence in South Asia.

Arguing that the India–Bangladesh border is protected and securitised in plural ways, this essay contrasted how danger was mapped onto mundane commodities like fish while being displaced from another equally mundane commodity like clothing. Marking and displacement reveal that the edges of national territories are protected through different kinds of strategies that discerns among diverse trans-border flows. It is important to bear in mind that the states of India and Bangladesh have not fashioned this border with a view of facilitating legalised and de-centralised everyday movement. In the almost 4096 kilometres long boundary that links six divisions of Bangladesh with five states of India, there are a total of only eight immigration checkposts on both sides of the international boundary. While passports and visas needed for border-crossings may not be within the realm of possibilities for most borderlanders, the spatial layout and the politics that govern border management is also structured to induce high dependencies on states and informal economies than to facilitate everyday and legal trans-border movement. Therefore, it is apparent that everyday travel and trade *with documentation* is not a priority for India and Bangladesh, despite political posturing to the contrary.

Spatial practices that emerge from borderlands that are at once home to a vast range of fluid unscripted flows and reflect the most gruesome forms of border violence, is a reminder of how material, political ambiguities and uncertainties shape one another and define borderlands. The interplay of violence and indulgence is critical in explaining the political predicament and the changing material configurations of India–Bangladesh border. Here, the hunting of 'dissidents and exiles' in the hills and the marking of 'Islamic infiltrators', coexists with ambiguous movements. Vibrant and decayed materialities underscore these. Illustrations from the India-Bangladesh border remind us that predatory and indulgent formations leave material imprints and confer different meanings to borders and metal fences through time.

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