

KILLING FIELD IN INDO-BANGLADESH BORDER LINE: APPRAISAL FOR A WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Being located in between Indian mainland and its adjoined seven sisters affirmed Bangladesh's strategic importance in this South Asian terrain. Whether this rooted deep in the historical past or in the present times, the synergy and complementarities between Bangladesh and India are evident; no question on that. But firing and torturing incidences in the borderline of both these countries are creating troubles for many decades. This paper at first attempts to search the significance of borderland related studies, why such study is important for the South Asian region to decrease borderline firing incidents. In doing so, the paper focuses on the existing literature. This article also figures out the mayhem happening in Indo Bangladesh boundary area including the contemporary phenomenon. Finally, the paper has undertaken to explore some way forwarding measures that might help both the countries' people.

INTRODUCTION

"It is in a sense about the way objects move, but it is more decisively about the way in which moving objects and people are identified, assimilated, marginalised or rejected."

–Jonathan Friedman¹

Bangladesh and India- two next-door countries have a shared ancient and common heritage, linguistic and cultural ties. Bangladesh, which lies on the extreme east side of India has a greater share of population in a comparatively small land, occupies a visible corner of the South Asian map and shares an amicable and decent history with India.² The destinies of India and Bangladesh are, and will invariably remain, inextricably intertwined; the geographical truth is like that.

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¹ Jonathan Friedman, *"Cultural Identity and Global Process"*. SAGE Publications Ltd, 1994.

² The whole sub-continent was under the British rule and in 1947 it got independence but at the same time United India was partitioned into India and Pakistan. Pakistan was comprised of two parts East Pakistan and West Pakistan. Another partition was there in 1971 when East Pakistan (Bangladesh) backed by military patronage of India got independence from West Pakistan. Thus it did not only give birth to Bangladesh on the world map as the youngest South Asian country but also based a solid edifice for the disintegration of Pakistan. (From http://aisc-india.in/AISC2013_web/papers/papers_final/paper_196.pdf).

These commonalities should not conceal the prevailing problem of border issue- one of the most contentious problems endemic in bilateral relations. The problem with border is not unique in India-Bangladesh relations as most of the countries have border problems in one form or another. The Nobel laureate Octavio Paz of Mexico and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau of Canada had suggested that the nearness of their countries to the USA was both a blessing and a curse.³ Bangladesh's relationship with India has a similar complexity.⁴ Except for the district of Sylhet, as it was earlier a province of Assam, during British colonial rule, Bangladesh was a part of the province of Bengal. The eastern chunk of Bengal with the district of Sylhet together made up East Pakistan, because of the partition of India in August 1947, and later day Bangladesh. A British Judge, Sir Cyril Radcliffe led the Boundary Commission, drew the 4,096 k.m. border between India and East Pakistan. The Border goes through rivers, canals, villages, markets, agricultural lands and tropical forests. Hardly any distinguishing geographical features are there for marking and differentiating the border. Over the last 69 years, almost the whole length of the border has been demarcated; this was a Herculean task indeed. However, few kilometres of undemarcated stretches remain as sources of misunderstanding and tension between the two neighbours. In addition, again as remnants of our colonial past, there were a number of enclaves and adversely possessed land (APL), which resolved only very recently.

Bangladesh is situated between latitudes 20-34' and 26-38' north and latitudes 88-01' and 92-41' east, with an area of about 147,570 sq km. Maximum extension is about 440km in the E-W direction and 760 km in the NNW-SSE direction.⁵ The Entire country is bounded by India on the east, west and north and on the southern part is the Bay of Bengal. A small strip of the frontier with Myanmar on the southeastern rim also exists. India and Myanmar are the immediate neighbours of Bangladesh with conventional borders. The land border with Myanmar is about 243 kilometres while that of India extended over 4,025 kilometres. Neighbours of Bangladesh but not sharing borderlines; are Nepal, Bhutan and China; of which Nepal is the nearest country (distance from Bangladesh is about 13.7 miles/22km), then Bhutan (distance is 13.7 miles /22km from Bangladeshi border) and China (distance is 60 miles or 100km from Bangladesh). That means a prolonged sharing border with India has made it crucial for Bangladesh to maintain a quality relations with its larger neighbour.

³ Dr. Ahrar Ahmad, "Indo-Bangladesh Relations: Context, Concerns, Hopes – A Review Essay", *Journal of Bangladesh Studies*, Vol.11, No.1, 2000, pp. 22-30.

⁴ Dr. Ahrar Ahmad, "Indo-Bangladesh Relations – A Long View", *FPRC Journal*, focus: India-Bangladesh Relations, Foreign Policy Research Center, New Delhi, India, Vol.4, No.1, 2013, ISSN 2277 – 2464, pp.48-58.

⁵ *Banglapedia*, available at: <http://www.banglapedia.org/HT/B_0207.htm> (accessed on 17 March, 2014).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

After the emergence and development of the nineteenth-century Westphalia state, nation-state sovereignty is equated with border inviolability. "These ideas of state sovereignty and territoriality were diffused from Europe to the rest of the world"⁶ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that had since been in practice with the expansion of the Westphalian nation-state system to the entire globe.⁷ The end of the Cold War and the subsequent transformation of the global distribution of power from a bipolar to a multipolar edifice had intense ramifications on the perception of security.⁸ In many ways, the border with Bangladesh is more difficult for India to manage than even the border with Pakistan. The Bangladesh border is the lengthiest land border that India adheres with any of its neighbours. Several Indian states, together with West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura, attach a total of 28 Bangladesh districts at the border.⁹

Whereas official records suggest that only 6.5 kilometres of land along the Comilla-Tripura border is considered as officially disputed by the governments of both countries. Though the number of authorised transit points for goods and people is limited along the border, for all practical purposes it has remained open. The border area between India and Bangladesh is heavily populated and intensely underprivileged. On both sides of the border, many people have also lost their farms and livelihoods to river erosion. Without getting any other way illegal cross-border activities have flourished by local people, such as cattle-rustling, trafficking in persons and narcotics etc. Many researchers from Bangladesh and India have found one of the major reasons of border killings to be mostly related to illegal cattle trade from India to Bangladesh.

The fact which breeds and flourishes the illegal trade of cattle is the high demand of beef in Bangladesh. The local market is unable to meet that demand. About three million cattle (cows) per year are needed in Bangladesh where a large majority of population usually needed eating beef (Muslims constitute 88% of 160 million in the country). The local market apparently can supply only about one million cattle, leaving a gap of two million cattle. The shortfall

⁶ Peter Andreas, Timothy Snyder, *The Wall Around the West: State Borders and Immigration Controls in North America and Europe*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield), 2000, p.96.

⁷ Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World*, (Malden, MA: Polity Press), 1997, p. 255.

⁸ D. Lake and P. Morgan (ed), *Building Security in a New World*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, pp.38-91.

⁹ West Bengal has a border length of 2216 km; Tripura, 856 km; Meghalaya, 443 km; Mizoram, 318 km and Assam, 263 km. "Fencing and Floodlighting of Borders," Report of the Ministry of Home Affairs, available at: <<http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/Fencing.pdf>> (accessed on 18 March, 2014).