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# Anxiety, Violence and the Postcolonial State: Understanding the “Anti-Bangladeshi” Rage in Assam, India

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## Abstract

*Fear, insecurity and anxiety seem to be the enduring sources of genocidal impulses against the Bengali-speaking Muslim minorities of contemporary Assam, India. This paper explores how the tripartite matrix of the border, census and citizenship categories has become indispensable in inscribing fear and anxiety in contemporary Assam's body politic. Using insights from postcolonial states' practices, the paper shows how the state suffers from a persistent neurosis, characterised by an “incompleteness-anxiety”, and how attempts have been made to resolve this sense of crisis by mobilising the majority to align its Assamese identity in the direction of an imagined purified “national whole”. Further, the paper elaborates upon the implications of these anxieties with reference to Indo-Bangladeshi relations, in which Assam figures prominently both as a prime border state and as a place that is integral to the region's riparian borderlands as a whole. Moving away from the official discourses of contemporary Indo-Bangladeshi relations, which are guided largely by postcolonial cartographic anxiety, the paper points towards the creative possibilities of exploring the “relational registers” within the region's shared civilisational resources as an alternative, in which Assam can act as a bridge between India and Bangladesh.*

## Key Words

Cartographic anxiety, border, census, D-voter, Bengali-speaking Muslims, Assam Movement, AASU.

## Introduction

Fear, insecurity and anxiety seem to be the enduring sources of genocidal impulses against minorities across the globe. Contemporary Assam- one of the major states in India's Northeast region- has witnessed widespread violence and killings over the last few decades. Identity and population politics based on notions of ethnic, religious and linguistic markers have mobilised specific equations of belonging, equations charted on the matrix of the border fence, census numbers and the new category of D-voters, which was invented to identify citizens perceived to be of doubtful citizenship, all of which have come to embody a specific form of genocidal violence in contemporary Assam. At the centre of this political storm is the Bengali-speaking Muslim community- a minority community whose long history in Assam is part of the

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larger story of migration and settlement from neighbouring Bengali-speaking regions dating back to the plantation economies and labour practices of the British Raj.<sup>1</sup> Although this clash had previously been based along ethnic and linguistic markers involving Assamese and Bengali-speaking people, the state has increasingly deployed religion-based rhetoric of Hindu-Muslim communalism to characterise such tensions in recent times.

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The widespread rage against Bengali-speaking Muslims has influenced the dominant image of this community: an “enemy alien”, posing an existential threat to Assamese people, land and security.<sup>2</sup> The slogan “Bangladeshi go back” has echoed repeatedly in the popular media, which has represented Bengali Muslims as “foreigners” and “illegal” migrants. A day in Assam does not pass without the daily newspapers covering demands for the creation of a barbed-wire fence along the Assam-Bangladesh border and the use of spurious statistics as evidence of an unabated Bengali Muslim migration that is threatening the state’s demographic

profile. Stories and images of so-called Bangladeshi migrants in the state are also ubiquitous in the local Assamese press. Migration from Bangladesh is framed as Assam’s “most fatal malady”, a “plague” and a “ticking bomb”. Migrants are referred to as “infiltrators”, “encroachers” and “invaders”.<sup>3</sup> This representation of Bangladeshi migrants as a horde unlawfully occupying scarce cultivable land represents them as a threat to the cultural identity, economic wellbeing and national security of *Axomia*. This characterisation of Assam has drawn widespread attention to the Northeast region in India while creating the impression that the state is hovering at the edge of perpetual insecurities.

Speaking of violence and ethnocide in the age of globalisation, Appadurai has raised a fundamental question: *why do minorities across the globe appear to be so threatening despite the fact that they are so few in numbers and are powerless?*<sup>4</sup> One has to ask the same question in the context of Assam, where the much-vilified Bengali-speaking Muslims largely constitute a peasant community that is fairly underrepresented in government jobs, higher bureaucracy, the army and politics in general. To be precise then, it becomes important to ask: *how are the multiple layers of fear and anxiety of the majority manufactured and reproduced to construct the perceived threat?* To explore this question, this paper uses postcolonial theory that examines the nature of

modern states and their practices. In this regard, Sankaran Krishna's formulation of the postcolonial state's "cartographic anxiety" in relation to its body politics is a useful analytical tool.<sup>5</sup> Taking the broader meaning of the term, this paper explores how the tripartite matrix of the border, the census and citizenship categories has become indispensable in inscribing fear and anxiety in Assam's contemporary body politic. Further, the paper elaborates upon the implications of these anxieties in reference to Indo-Bangladeshi relations, in which Assam figures prominently both as a prime border state and as a place that is integral to the region's riparian borderlands as a whole.

### (Re)Romancing the "Border"

Every time Nazir Rahman Bhuiyan, a villager in Bangladesh, walks on foot from one part of his own house to another, he crosses an international border, the recently fenced boundary between India and Bangladesh. A spokesman for the Indian Ministry of External Affairs said that the rationale for the fence is the same that compelled the United States and Israel to build fences between Mexico and the West Bank respectively: to prevent illegal migration and terrorist infiltration.<sup>6</sup> This "fencing" rhetoric has not only preoccupied official discourses about borders at the national level, but it has also got deeply entrenched within

regional politics in Assam given that the state, in India's Northeast, is located in a geopolitically volatile zone where there are a number of contested international boundaries with China, Burma and Bangladesh. Accessible only through the narrow "chicken-neck" area via the neighbouring West Bengal state, the Bangladesh borderlands in the Indian Northeast span territorially to form a triangular corner in Assam to down along the slopes of the Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills in the state of Meghalaya and further down through an elongated strip in the state of Tripura.

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It has become part of a constituency building political ritual on the part of the parties in government to pay physical visits to the border area and comment upon its progress.

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A major portion of the Assam-Bangladesh border is formed by the river Brahmaputra which flows along the border of the Dhubri district. The peculiarity of this part of the borderland is its porous nature as the landscape gets punctured by the Brahmaputra River and its myriad *chars* (riverine islands), which gets dried up during the winter months and thereby creating a perforated land bridge. This very nature of the border defies the cookie-cutter

image of a closely bounded national geography. Despite the porous nature of this landscape, the popular rhetoric of the Assam-Bangladesh border often gets carried away by the forces of “imaginative geographies”-the notion that a landscape can be easily “sealed off”. The rhetoric of erecting “barbed” fencing and sealing-off the border has become a stable marker of Assam’s regional politics. The intention to physically preserve the sanctity of the border, which is seen as being synonymous with building barbed fencing, reflects an irresistible obsession with the idea of an “alien” infiltration embodied by shadowy “foreign hands” that aim to destabilise the region and, by the extension, the nation. To begin with, what came to be the border between India and East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) post-1947 owed little to modern concepts of spatial rationality. The partition of the eastern territories was marked along the hastily and ignorantly drawn Radcliffe Line, and political pressures played no small part.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the partition process or the drawing of the border is in a sense an operation which seemed to be concluded in August 1947 was a matter open for contestation in days to come.

The idea of erecting a barbed-wire fence along the Assam-Bangladesh border is not a new phenomenon. It is rather a historical product of the Assamese elites’ imagined territorial construction that dates back to the 1950s. Chief Minister Bimala Prasad Chaliha of the former

Congress-led Assam government, for instance, launched a campaign to deport migrants who had settled in the state since January 1951. He, along with his party, advocated extensive operations to clear up the border area of migrants in order to better deal with what was then described as Pakistani infiltration. Although the Assamese politicians were not able to persuade the central government in New Delhi to embark upon specific actions against the threat of migration from East Pakistan, they did however manage to acquire a sanction for 180 additional police watch posts and to erect a barbed-wire fence in selected places along the Assam-East Pakistan border.<sup>8</sup>

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**In postcolonial Assam, Muslim minorities with cross-border family ties and lineages are seen as an existential threat to the border and national security.**

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The rhetoric of fencing the border resurfaced with new vigour in Assam’s politics in the wake of state-wide anti-foreigner agitation spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) in the late 1970s. The movement mobilised around the articulation of an *Axomia* identity against the “Others”, who were constituted initially by the general outsiders (*Bohiragoto*) including people from other parts of India and later by those who were considered foreigners (*Bidexi*), specifically the Muslim

minorities of Bengali origin. The AASU and later their representative political party, Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), played a pivotal role in giving rise to a *cessus-beli*—a fervent cry to save the homeland on behalf of the sons-of-the-soil. The movement’s heyday came to be defined by the rhetoric of recovering Mother Assam’s (*Axomi Ai*) lost sanctity by deporting all “illegal” migrants to the other side of the border.

The AASU found a resolution in the reconciliatory Assam Accord of 1983, signed between the movement leaders and Rajiv Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister at the time. To address the infiltration of the so called “illegal” Bangladeshis, the movement leaders made the demand to completely “seal off” the Assam-Bangladesh border and proposed the construction of a fence. In response, the Indian government approved the Indo-Bangladesh Border Road and Fence project in 1986 to prevent illegal (or irregular) migration from Bangladesh. Subsequently, a two-phase project to build a fence got sanctioned. The AASU’s identity politics and notions of territorial sanctity and demands for a fenced border, followed by the central government’s authorisation of such projects, coalesced into a specific discourse in which the border fence itself emerged as a vital symbol and barometer of Assamese nationalism. For instance, the title and contents of a recent widely cited state publication, the *White*

*Paper on the Foreigners’ Issue*,<sup>9</sup> which was prepared by the current Congress government in Assam, provides an update of the fence project’s progress. These measures illustrate the extent to which the construction of a border fence has become a signifier for the “foreigners’ issue”. Consider, for example, a brief segment from this document: “a total of 228.118 km of new fencing was sanctioned under Phase-I&II, out of which, based on field conditions, the actual required length was 224.694 km. Against this 218.170 km of fencing (97.1%) has been completed”.<sup>10</sup> The detailed description of the project, the various units of measurements, proportions and projections delineate the coordinates from which to measure the states’ own progress in establishing its identity. The fear and anxiety around fencing the border have also been accentuated through certain speech acts and gestures of the politicians. It has become part of a constituency building political ritual on the part of the parties in government to pay physical visits to the border area and comment upon its progress. These visits embody a stocktaking exercise, which seeks to update and reassure the state’s anxious people of the status of the construction project. The completion rate of the fence has thus become one of the barometers for judging political leaders’ efficiency and the seriousness of the state’s concerns with the border.

While the issue of fencing has become the Holy Grail for politicians at the regional and national level, the Indo-Bangladesh border has been converted into South Asia's killing field. The increasing militarisation and securitisation of the Indo-Bangladesh borderlands- a densely populated area interspersed with paddy fields and grazing areas along with forested lands- have contributed to untold miseries for poor Muslim peasants who live on the either side of fence. In a recent report, Human Rights Watch described the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) as "trigger happy" for the unit's involvement in indiscriminate killings and torture of unarmed migrants. The report estimated that well over 1,000 people have been killed over the last decade.<sup>11</sup> A reporter from the *Guardian* newspaper commented that while a single casualty by US law enforcement authorities along the Mexican border makes headlines, the deaths of hundreds of villagers at the hands of Indian forces have been ignored and no officials have been prosecuted so far.<sup>12</sup> In postcolonial Assam, Muslim minorities with cross-border family ties and lineages are seen as an existential threat to the border and national security. This territorial phantom pain, emerging out of the porous and fluid Assam-Bangladesh borderlands, is a cautionary reminder to guard and "seal" the border with metal and guns.

## The Census and Its Political Arithmetic

In 1997, S.K. Sinha, a former governor of Assam with a previous career in the Indian Army, submitted a report to Indian President R.K. Narayanan. With a sense of great anxiety and urgency, Sinha concluded in the report that Assam was at the verge of a "silent and demographic invasion". The report estimated that 4 million Bangladeshi migrants were in Assam, with another 5.4 million in West Bengal, 0.8 million in Tripura, 0.5 million in Bihar, 0.5 million in Maharashtra, 0.5 million in Rajasthan and 0.3 million in Delhi. The report claimed that this pattern of unabated illegal migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh was irreversibly altering the demographic complexion of Assam and thus posed a grave threat to Assamese identity and compromised national security.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, army and intelligence bureau officials have devoted considerable efforts into devising a quantitative analysis of data from various sources, including the Indian census. At the time when the noted MIT political scientist Myron Weiner wondered about whether there exists some numerical threshold of "overforeignisation" that triggers reactions from the natives,<sup>14</sup> several Indian scholars were busy with the task of estimating the number of so-called "illegal" Bangladeshi migrants in Assam. Nath et al., using the Leslie

Matrix method, estimated the number of undocumented or illegal migrants in Assam and calculated that there were 830,757 illegal migrants between 1971-1991 and 534,819 between 1991-2001, which brought the total to 1,365,574 over the 30 years from 1971 to 2001.<sup>15</sup> Goswami et al. used the Survival Method to study the 40 year period between 1951 and 1991 and came up with 2.9 million immigrants in Assam, and concluded that out of this figure, 0.9 million (31%) were interstate migrants and 2 million (69%) were international immigrants. Further, of the two million international immigrants, 0.69 million (24%) were legal and 1.3 million (45%) were illegal migrants.<sup>16</sup> In addition to these prominent studies, there have been, of course, innumerable other instances of research devoted to identifying conclusive numerical evidence that can show how the Muslim community has grown, and how this growth negatively affects Assam. When Indian statistical figures seem inadequate, researchers turn to proxy measures, such as calculating the proportionate decrease in the Hindu population in various districts of Assam, or even measuring the population change in neighbouring Bangladesh to ultimately come to the same conclusion: the alarming growth in the number of Muslim immigrants to Assam. The state appears to be under the grip of a Malthusian fever where terminologies like “demographic invasion”, “demographic

aggression”, “demographic time-bomb”, “influx” and “infiltration” regularly occupy titles of news report as well as academic publications in journals and books.

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The rationalisation and naturalisation of statistics or rather *state-tricks* to authenticate the varieties of claims as an improvisation to unsullied personal accounts signifies the establishment of the sacrosanctity of numeral facts. At the heart of this hysteria with numbers is the Malthusian poster boy of Assam, C.S. Mullan, the superintendent of census operations in 1931, who was posted to the region during the British Raj. Mullan was the chief author of the Census of India 1931, which for the first time used the term “invasion” in the Assamese context. He instigated what has since the 1930s evolved into a “hate campaign” in the state. To provoke the Assamese against the Bengali, Mullan wrote, “wheresoever the carcasses, there will the vultures be gathered together- where there is waste

land thither flock the *Mymensingh*”. He had further added that “it is sad but by no means improbable that in another thirty years Sibsagar district will be the only part of Assam in which an Assamese will find himself at home”.<sup>17</sup> Noted historian Amalendu Guha described Mullan as an irresponsible European civil servant who, in an effort to predict the future, “mischievously” used the word “invasion” to describe the migration of people from East Bengal’s Mymensingh district at a time when no national boundary existed.<sup>18</sup> Mullan’s verdict on the Bengali invasion makes it possible for those inclined to historicise and authenticate the threat of a Muslim invasion back to days of the British Raj.

To a large extent, the legacy of Mullan’s Census Report 1931 initiated the Assamese-Bengali conflict. The growing hatred towards the Bengalis was primarily guided by the Assamese middle class’s envy, given that the Bengalis occupied a majority of the lower tier administrative jobs in colonial times, especially in the plantation and railways, which were often denied to the Assamese as a matter of policy. The colonial administrative system played no small role in racialising occupational and employment hierarchies, which embittered relations between the Bengali and the Assamese middle class.<sup>19</sup> This history, however, has largely been obscured. In post-independence India, a mutual mistrust got channelled into many conflicts

surrounding the hegemonies of language and ethnicity. Assam witnessed extensive violence under the rubric of the *Bongal Khedao* movement, which sought to evict Bengali settlers in the 1950s and 1960s. The AASU during the 1980s further fuelled these issues and caused indiscriminate violence and death. In Nellie, a small town not far from the state capital, around 3000 Bengali Muslims were massacred. The majority of these victims turned out to be women and children. In response to the AASU leaders’ demands at the time of the Assam Accord, the Indian government, eager to resolve the problems associated with this agitation, dropped all charges against those who were accused of committing the atrocities in the Nellie riot. As a result, those who had instigated or participated in the riots were never tried for their crimes.<sup>20</sup>

The deployment of a communal line- the Hindu-Muslim binary- to deal with the Bangladeshi migrant issue has allowed politicians to stretch India’s current border insecurities. The early protagonists in the anti-foreigner movement in India’s northeastern states had not discriminated against migrants on religious grounds. The right-wing elements in Indian politics, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), however, have singled out religion, specifically Islam, to underscore questions of population movements across India. The BJP is well known for popularising the

idea of “competitive breeding”, which argues that Hindus in India will soon be outnumbered by Muslims. Along with its Hindutva-oriented collaborators like the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the BJP has criticised erstwhile official policies towards Bangladeshi migrants as being overly lenient and accommodating. After successfully politicising the religious dispute in Ayodhya (1992), the BJP unleashed nation-wide propaganda against Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants. The party’s ideologues published populist articles and full-length books on the issue and organised systematic campaigns (speech acts) to mobilise people against the threat of illegal migration. The captions of the leading BJP ideologue Baljit Rai’s essays, such as *Demographic Aggression Against India: Muslim Avalanche from Bangladesh* and *Is India Going Islamic*, stoked people’s fear of Bengali Muslim infiltration.<sup>21</sup> These polemical writings and speech acts made the distinction clear between a Hindu “refugee” and a Muslim “infiltrator”. Publications in this vein also take care to inform the public that more than 15 million Bangladeshi Muslims have settled in various parts of India and warn Indians against the “grim consequences of the exodus of Muslims from the Islamic and densely populated country called Bangladesh”.

Such writings have dramatically re-instilled prevailing beliefs about

quantitative rationality and the sacrosanctity of numbers into the body politic of Assam. The various iterations of counting and classifying minority Muslims on the basis of census data reflect both an enduring anxiety and efforts to somehow name and categorise the problem in order to bring it under control. These projects of enumeration, even when executed in good faith, rationalise and naturalise population politics based on numbers and bolster notions of competitive-breeding (the majority being outnumbered by high birth-rates among minorities). Meanwhile, the state’s role in upholding an image of a homogenous and pure Assamese nationhood goes unexamined.

## Legal Citizen vs. Illegal Migrants

Rastam Ali, from Borpayek in Nellie, Assam, is 45 years old and a small trader by profession. His father, Kalam Shah Ahmed, was a cultivator and an inhabitant of the same village. Rastam had been qualified to vote in India up until 1996, and had even exercised his voting rights twice. Suddenly in 1996, Rastam became a “D-voter” and was ineligible to vote. Ironically, his brothers and other family members somehow were not marked as D-voters. Like Rastam Ali, a large number of Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam recently have come under a new category of citizens, the “D-voters”,

where the letter “D” stands for doubtful or disputed citizenship status.<sup>22</sup> This new classification is a by-product of revisions made to the National Register for Citizenship (NRC, the electoral roll) in the late 1990s in Assam whereby the letter “D” has been marked against the names of many previous voters, who could not prove their Indian citizenship status to the officers especially appointed for the verification purpose. According to the Government of Assam’s recently published *White Paper on Foreigners’ Issue*, the letter “D” (doubtful/disputed) was marked against a total of 2,31,657 people who could not prove their citizenship.<sup>23</sup>

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The juxtaposition of discourses on the border, census and citizenship categories as a part of a larger story reveals some of the processes by which the “minority” comes to be performed by the “majority”.

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The classification of a large number of Bengali-speaking Muslims as D-voters surfaced as non-urgent political issue in the state following the aftermath of the 2012 riots in the Kokrajhar district of lower Assam, which witnessed violent clashes between the ethnic *Bodos*<sup>24</sup> and Bengali-speaking Muslim settlers. These Kokrajhar riots provided momentum to the existing debate about illegal Bangladeshi migrants in Assam and

reinforced the immediate need to update the NRC. With reference to the conflict, a former Election Commissioner of India advocated prompt revisions to the NRC to expedite the deportation of those found to be “illegal migrants”.<sup>25</sup> Factions of the local leadership reflected similar sentiments. Sammujal Bhattacharya, a prominent AASU adviser, commented in the aftermath of the riots:

We want speedy identification and deportation of illegal migrants. The demography of Assam is under threat, indigenous communities are turned into minority all because both the Centre and the state have used them as vote banks and tried to legalise the illegal migrants. The fallout has been violence.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, the BJP in Assam made the issue of deportation a central component of the party’s election campaign ahead of India’s forthcoming 2014 general election.

The latest storm in the teacup in Assam is the issue of citizenship and the debate centres on counting and classification methods to update the NRC. The matter has become intensely contested with many cases pending at the Supreme Court of India. A number of Public Information Litigation (PIL) cases have been lodged both by AASU supporters and civil society organisations representing the interest of Bengali-speaking Muslim minorities in Assam. Meanwhile, the present Congress-led government, which has been ruling

Assam since 2001, has had a series of discussions with the AASU with regard to the preparation of specific modalities to update the NRC. Under increasing pressure, the state pushed back the cut-off year by 20 years and agreed to define the “indigenous” people of Assam as those whose names figured in the NRC in 1951, and this list is to be tallied with the 1971 voter list to ascertain their descendents. Moreover, in consultation with the AASU, the state government fundamentally altered the enumeration rule of the NRC through an amendment.<sup>27</sup> These changes have provoked protest from Bengali-speaking Muslims.<sup>28</sup>

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Within the realm of Indo-Bangladeshi diplomatic relations, Assam has been a significant reference point and that Assam’s regional identity politics has cross-border implications.

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These recent political developments in Assam have reinvigorated questions about how the state determines who is a citizen, indicating an upsurge of “autochthony” that is increasingly becoming an unexpected corollary of democratisation. What is acutely troubling is the widespread usage of the prefix “illegal”, both in official and non-official discourses, to distinguish

between the native ethnic Assamese and the migrants. A well-known Assamese historian holds that hiding behind the term “illegal” is the connotation that a human being is condemned and reduced to an extent where his/her very existence is “criminal”.<sup>29</sup> At the same time the laws regulating citizenship, particularly with regard to minority communities, have become increasingly restrictive. The outcome of this politics of belonging- nourished on persistent anxieties of being “outplaced” and “outnumbered”- has been violent. This violence has been sustained through the creation of a new label for the minorities, particularly the Muslims- the D-voters- the doubtful or disputed citizens of the state. The D-voters have been made the constant reference point to remind people of the importance of protecting valuable and scarce resources, like land, state entitlements and deterring any hindrances towards achieving the developmentalist goal. The classic project of nation building in Assam is to be executed through the renouncing of Bengali-speaking Muslims.

## Towards an Alternative

The juxtaposition of discourses on the border, census and citizenship categories as a part of a larger story reveals some of the processes by which the “minority” comes to be performed by the “majority”. Appadurai argues

that predatory identities emerge in the tensions between majority identities and nationalist identities.<sup>30</sup> Using this insight in the case of postcolonial Assam, this article shows that Assamese identity has attained a predatory status wherein the majority strives to close all gaps between itself and all that is marked to embody the purity of the national whole. This group has successfully mobilised the “incompleteness of anxiety” to merge and align national purity with Assamese identity. Krishna’s

conceptualisation of the postcolonial nation-states’ cartographic impulses is evident in the case of regional politics in Assam. The fantasies of sealed borders, a desire for quantifiable precision in population census and the efforts to define citizenship to conclusively separate legitimate citizens from the “illegal and deportable” have become indispensable requirements of today’s democratic politics. Needless to say, these expressions of democratic politics are also responsible for unaccountable violence. This has put a heavy premium on the lives of those who seem to be, in one way or the other, untraceable, illegible and uncountable. It appears that postcolonial Assam has

reached an aporetic stage in its quest for modern nation building, where Muslim minorities have been made an eyesore.

It is also important to note that within the realm of Indo-Bangladeshi diplomatic relations, Assam has been a significant reference point and that Assam’s regional identity politics has cross-border implications. India and Bangladesh have not been able to arrive at any consensus regarding the vital issues that concern both parties, such

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Breaking this impasse involves undoing the remaining shell of the Westphalian nation-state framework and looking for “relationality” within the historical register of this contiguous region between India and Bangladesh, in which Assam can play the role of a bridge.

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as regulating cross-border migration, reviving the older ties of commerce with Assam through border trade and sharing the water of the mighty Brahmaputra River. Although the Indian state persistently pushes the “Look East Policy” to

develop the Northeast as a growth corridor with South East Asian countries, it neglects to meaningfully engage in this regard with its nearest neighbor Bangladesh. It is quite ironic that Bhupen Hazarika, Assam’s foremost cultural icon, spent his lifetime writing and advocating about the significance of the *Xomnonoy* (confluence) of the rivers Brahmaputra, Ganga and Padda (reference to Bangladesh) in contributing to the a shared cultural history of the

region over centuries. And yet neither Hazarika's vision nor his reference to shared civilisational resources has found any place in current diplomacy. In a poll conducted in Bangladesh, Hazarika's song "*Manush Manusher Jonno*" ("Humans are For Humanity") was chosen as the second most favourite song after the Bangladesh national anthem.<sup>31</sup> Although Assam shares a long history of cultural, social and economic exchanges with the territories of Bangladesh, civilisational resources from this riparian

borderland remain unacknowledged in diplomatic ties between India and Bangladesh largely due to the forces of cartographic anxiety that this paper has addressed. Breaking this impasse involves undoing the remaining shell of the Westphalian nation-state framework and looking for "relationality" within the historical register of this contiguous region between India and Bangladesh, in which Assam can play the role of a bridge.

## Endnotes

- 1 They are referred to as the *Na Asomiya* (New Assamese) who settled in the Brahmaputra valley during the colonial period and pioneered the jute plantation.
- 2 See, Priyanka Upadhyaya, "Securitisation Matrix in South Asia: Bangladeshi Migrants as Enemy Alien", *Consortium of Non-Traditional Security Studies in India*, at <http://www.rsis-tsasia.org/resources/publications/research-papers/migration/Priyanka%20Upadhyaya.pdf> [last visited 22 June 2013].
- 3 For a detailed account of media representation of the issue, see Ksenia Glebova, "Most Fatal Malady: Media, Migration and Identity in Assam", *Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group Publication*, at <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/rw%20files/RW38/2.Ksenia.pdf> [last visited 12 March 2013].
- 4 Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2006.
- 5 Krishna uses the term "cartography" to encompass representational practices- not only a line on the map, but also all kinds of coercive and bloody practices that produce moments of suspension in postcolonial societies. See, Sankaran Krishna, "Cartographic Anxiety: Mapping the Body Politic in India", in John Agnew (ed.), *Political Geography: A Reader*, New York, Arnold, 1997, pp. 81-92. See also Sankaran Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka and the Question of Nationhood*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- 6 Cited in Rizwana Shamshad, "Politics and Origin of the India-Bangladesh Border Fence", paper presented at the 17<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Melbourne, 1-3 July 2008, p. 1, at <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/mai/files/2012/07/rizwanashamshad.pdf> [last visited 4 May 2013].
- 7 Redcliffe destroyed all his notes and papers related to the boundary awards before he left India. In deciding the borders, his Boundary Commission was instructed to draw its lines on the basis of 'contiguous majority areas'; it was also to take into account 'other factors'. But neither these factors, nor the unit of the area to be divided, was ever specified whether it was the district, or smaller sub-units like *tehsils* or village that should serve as the unit in which 'majorities' and 'minorities' were determined, was left contentiously ambiguous. Redcliffe knew nothing about India other than the five perspiring weeks he spent there, trying with maps and pens to fulfill his impossible duty of devising a judicious cartography. Cited in Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, New Delhi, Penguin, 1999, pp.200-2001.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

- 9 Government of Assam, Home and Political Department, *White Paper on Foreigners' Issue*, 20 October 2012, pp. 29-31.
- 10 Ibid.
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