

RSC PP 2021/10
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
Global Governance Programme

POLICY PAPER

**Migration, borders, and security discourses
in the time of COVID-19: the case of
migration from Bangladesh to India**

Silvia Tieri

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ISSN 1830-1541

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Published in November 2021 by the European University Institute.
Badia Fiesolana, via dei Roccettini 9
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)

Italy

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With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
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Abstract

Migration has taken place throughout human history and continues to do so in the 21st century. In many recent instances, the states to which migrants are headed have framed migration as a security issue, i.e. a threat to their citizens' livelihood, safety, and cultural identity. Discourses that securitize migration, thus criminalizing immigrants, are not unique to the US and the EU, or to South-North migration: they pertain to South-South migration as well. This article draws attention to a case of migration and border securitization from the global South: the one concerning India-bound informal migration originating from Bangladesh. This, incidentally, is also the country of origin of large numbers of migrants that have made their way to Europe during the last decade. This article asks what the consequences of a securitized approach to the framing and managing of migration are, and whether they are worth the costs or are at all affordable for the countries involved. The article aims to assess the potential impact that securitized discourses have on Indo-Bangladeshi relations, and on the domestic politics of India and Bangladesh. To do so, it reviews the processes of securitization of the India-Bangladesh border and criminalization of Bangladeshi migrants in India's contemporary domestic politics with reference to recent (2019-2021) events and current affairs.

Keywords

Bangladesh; India; migration; securitization; borders

1. Introduction

Bangladesh makes international headlines in relation to selected critical issues: its remarkable economic performance and recent graduation from least developed country (LDC) status, the Rohingya genocide, climate change, and migration.

A young and densely populated nation, Bangladesh is a country of migration, including internal migration, immigration, and emigration.¹ Emigration is both formal and informal, and is directed to various destinations in Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and beyond. On the one hand, when it comes to formal emigration, the Gulf states historically receive the largest numbers of Bangladeshi workers, whose contract jobs support their families back home and the national economy, in which remittances remain of vital importance. On the other hand, informal migratory flows are directed to multiple destinations including Southeast Asian countries and Europe. For example, as has been frequently reported in European news in recent years, undocumented Bangladeshi migrants increasingly reach the European Union via various routes, including the notorious Italy- and Malta-bound ones that have migrants crossing the central Mediterranean from North Africa subject to exploitation by human traffickers and at times at the cost of their lives.²

Historically, neighbouring India has been a traditional destination for Bangladesh-originating informal emigration. With a much larger landmass, a larger economy, and embracing Bangladesh on all sides (except to the south, where Bangladesh meets the Bay of Bengal and Myanmar), to date India remains a relevant destination for Bangladeshi migrants.

As much as migration is a common occurrence in human history, contemporary politics have seen a securitization of migration and borders around the globe. Securitizing discourses are not limited to South-North migration but are common in South-South migration as well. The India-Bangladesh border and Bangladesh-originating India-bound migration provide cases in point. In India, migration of different types – state-to-state migration within the Union, economic immigration originating from outside India, immigration of asylum seekers – has been politicized for decades at the state, sub-regional, and national levels. At the moment, irregular migration from Bangladesh is a hot political issue in the states of the East and Northeast, and at the national level as well. Its politicization is not new but decades old. However, the relevance of migration and borders and the securitized discourse surrounding them have received new impetus following the promotion of divisive laws like India's NRC and CAA since 2019 and inflammatory migration-centred electoral campaigning in the same years. These are but some aspects of India's current Hindu nationalist turn, which has transformed India's political landscape in an openly anti-secular and Islamophobic sense.³

Based on the case of irregular migration across the India-Bangladesh border – India-bound migration in particular – this paper asks what the humanitarian and political costs of framing and managing migration through a securitized lens are. The paper argues that the pursuit of a securitized approach in the framing and management of migration carries important repercussions for the domestic politics of both countries involved and their bilateral relations. The Indian government's demonization of 'Bangladeshi immigrants', now supported by the CAA-NRC, is set to worsen fractures along religious and ethnic lines at a time when identity politics have turned dangerously

1 On the Bengal Muslim diaspora, see Claire Alexander, Joya Chatterji & Annu Jalais, *The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

2 The pandemic has further increased the already critical vulnerability of undocumented migrants on their journeys. However, in Europe arrivals have continued throughout the 2019-2021 period. Bangladesh features as the country of origin of large numbers of them, especially along the central Mediterranean route, where the first port of arrival is Italy. For example, on 8 May 2021 in the largest arrival of the year so far some 1,400 migrants reached the Italian shores, most of them having reportedly started their journey in nearby Tunisia, in the Ivory Coast or in Bangladesh. See: 'Migrants from Bangladesh among Top Groups Arriving on Italian Island', *InfoMigrants*, 10 May 2021; 'Bangladesh Top Source Country for Migrants Making Unsafe Sea Voyages to Europe', *Anadolu Agency*, 18 August 2021.

3 Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy: building a kingdom of cruelty and fear', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, pp. 345-395; Diego Maiorano, 'India 2019: The general election and the new Modi wave', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, pp. 327-344; Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy', *Asia Maior*, XXXI/2020, pp. 331-375; Diego Maiorano, 'Democratic backsliding amid the Covid-19 pandemic in India', paper presented at the conference *US-China competition, COVID-19, and democratic backsliding in Asia*, EUI, Florence, 27 September 2021.

dominant and divisive. Moreover, India's securitized discourses and policies are met with criticism in Bangladesh and work to the detriment of India's reputation as a friendly and reliable neighbour. The result has been the deterioration of a relationship that – although not without problems – has been praised by the two governments as exemplary for more than a decade. Last but not least, India's securitized discourses and policies have the potential to adversely impact politics in Bangladesh as well, casting a shadow on the government's perceived pro-India stance. This comes at a time when the ruling party, Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, faces strong criticism from both liberals and conservatives due to its growing authoritarianism. However, its main challengers are the increasingly assertive Islamists, who have been vocal (and violent) in expressing their dislike of an India now seen as openly Islamophobic.

The paper proceeds as follows. It first reviews the historical processes that produced the securitization of the India-Bangladesh border and the criminalization of the Bangladeshi migrant in the politics of contemporary India. It reviews these processes in the light of relevant recent events including bilateral ministerial meetings, state visits, elections, laws, and instances of border violence which have taken place in the years 2019-2021. These developments overlapped in time with the COVID-19 pandemic and in some cases interacted with it. Lastly, the paper assesses the potential impact that such securitized discourse around immigration can have on India-Bangladesh relations and on the domestic politics of Bangladesh.

2. India as a destination of irregular migration

Why should Bangladeshis seek better livelihoods elsewhere, particularly in neighbouring India, leaving a country that has successfully graduated from LDC status and is considered Asia's rising star? This is what many Indians ask, not without disdain for a smaller and younger neighbour which has recently outperformed India as the fastest growing economy in South Asia and also on other development indicators.⁴ Indian right-wing and anti-immigration politicians have strongly voiced this concern, thus branding illegal immigration from Bangladesh as a threat and casting a shadow over the country's economic trajectory.

On the other hand, the Bangladeshi government has repeatedly stated that the idea that its citizens emigrate to India illegally and in large numbers is flawed and has used the country's economic growth rate as evidence. Foreign Minister Abdul Momen has been particularly vocal in rebutting allegations: «The perception that a lot of Bangladeshis are moving to India is not true because Bangladesh is doing pretty well ... It is the land of opportunity; it is a vibrant economy. When the economy is good, people will not move out of the country. So that perception is wrong».⁵ Thus, while countering Indian accusations, the Bangladeshi government also defends the country's development success story, as central to the history of the Bangladeshi nation as to the legitimacy of the ruling party, the Awami League.

Reality is often more nuanced and complex than either of the two official takes. Undoubtedly, Bangladesh's development trajectory has been stunning and has managed to lift millions out of poverty. However, the wealth deriving from economic growth has not reached all in equal measure. Instead, it has come at a high cost for many of those who have made it possible. Although Bangladesh's economy has experienced remarkably steady growth and maintained a relatively high growth rate (even during the pandemic), inequality remains an issue, as sections of the population become wealthier while many of those already in poverty become poorer. In addition to this, climate change threatens already fragile livelihoods in rural Bangladesh and has emerged as an additional push factor for internal migration and emigration.⁶ Furthermore, the country is among the most densely

4 'India Struggles but Bangladesh's GDP Rides High on Manufacturing, Export Boom', *Business Today*, 30 October 2019.

5 '«Bangladeshis Aren't Termites» – FM Abdul Momen Says Idea of Illegal Immigration to India Wrong', *The Print*, 27 March 2021.

6 Migration has also been framed as an adaptation strategy to climate change. See Katha Kartiki, 'Climate Change and Migration: A Case Study from Rural Bangladesh', *Gender and Development*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2011. On the (re)emergence of climate change as a cause of migration, see Etienne Piguet, 'From «Primitive Migration» to «Climate Refugees»: The Curious Fate of the Natural Environment in Migration Studies', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 103, No. 1, 2013.

populated (1,240 people per square km of land according to 2018 data) and its large population is among the youngest (with a median age under 28 years).⁷

As a consequence, many struggle to find opportunities to earn a sustainable income. For some daily wagers and ex-small farmers, seeking such opportunities in Dhaka and Chittagong (the country's main urban centres and key destinations for internal migrants from rural areas) is no longer a viable solution: these cities are swelling, and newly arrived workers find it hard to find employment. It is for this reason that India continues to represent a relatively attractive destination for many. This is, for example, the case documented in Percot's ethnography of the landless peasants of Moralganj, who in order to escape debt trap and underemployment back home in southwest Bangladesh prefer to work as waste-pickers and domestic helpers in Delhi and Bangalore, even though this comes at the cost of vulnerability, marginalization, and constant fear of deportation.⁸

3. Crossing and violence at the «porous» India-Bangladesh border

Most Bangladeshi migrants get into India from Bangladesh by illegally crossing the border that separates the two countries and runs for more than 4,000 kilometres over land and water. The Indo-Bangladeshi border came into being in 1947 as a consequence of the partition of British India, which marked the beginning of the process of decolonization and gave birth to independent India and Pakistan while partitioning Bengal.⁹ In 1971, former East Bengal was reborn as the Bengali- and Muslim-majority People's Republic of Bangladesh. West Bengal instead – mostly Bengali-speaking like Bangladesh but with a Hindu-majority population – had «remained» in India since the great partition of 1947. Today it is one of the states of the Indian Union and has the longest portion of the Indo-Bangladeshi border, the other chunks of which fall within the Northeast Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura. Therefore, the Indo-Bangla border, like many in Asia and the post-colonial world, is relatively recent.

Obviously, only those who can afford it travel via legal means and in relative security; most others travel illegally and remain vulnerable to poverty, violence, and exploitation. To make their passage across the border they often rely on human traffickers – *dalal* («middlemen») – who count on a cross-border network of contacts, including corruptible border authorities.¹⁰ Once on the other side, some migrants move to specific destinations and into jobs that have been prearranged through existing kinship networks.¹¹ Others try to establish their new lives on their own. Yet others leave after the promise of contract jobs, often arranged by the dalals themselves. These agreements are not always genuine and, as a result, migrants might find themselves working as bonded labour or sold as sex slaves in the case of women.¹² Many women are also trafficked as brides and destined to Indian sub-regions with highly skewed gender ratios where men resort to «buying women» in order to get married. Some enter these marriages willingly while others are unaware of the destiny awaiting them.¹³ In general, migrants' destinations are not limited to West Bengal and the Indian Northeast but might be elsewhere in India, well away from the border.

7 For the sake of comparison, the following data can be considered: India's population density is 455 people per square km of land (2018). Bangladesh's total population was 164.69 million (in 2020), and its total extension 147.6 thousand km (2018). By contrast, India's total population was 1,380 million (in 2020), and its total extension 3,287.3 thousand square km (2018). Source: 'Country Profile: Bangladesh', *World Bank Data*, 2021; 'Country Profile: India', *World Bank Data*, 2021.

8 Marie Percot, «Picking up the Neighbours' Waste»: Migration of Bangladeshi Villagers to India Metropolises', *Migration and Development*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2020.

9 In India's East, independence from the colonial yoke came along with the partition of Bengal, a vast and diverse region the territorial boundaries of which had been reimagined and altered multiple times in the course of history, and that in the political turmoil of 1947 ended up divided into West Bengal and East Bengal. East Bengal (then known as East Pakistan) became the eastern wing of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, from which it successfully seceded following the war of 1971, supported by an Indian military intervention.

10 Sharat G. Lin & Madan C. Paul, 'Bangladeshi Migrants in Delhi: Social Insecurity, State Power, and Captive Vote Banks', *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1995.

11 *Ibid.* See also Swagato Sarkar, 'The Illicit Economy of Power: Smuggling, Trafficking and the Securitization of the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland', *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2017; Marie Percot, «Picking up the Neighbours' Waste»: Migration of Bangladeshi Villagers to India Metropolises'.

12 Swagato Sarkar, 'The Illicit Economy of Power: Smuggling, Trafficking and the Securitization of the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland'.

13 Thérèse Blanchet, 'Bangladeshi Girls Sold as Wives in North India', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2005; Ravinder Kaur, 'Marriage and Migration: Citizenship and Marital Experience in Cross-Border Marriages between Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Bangladesh', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, No. 43, 2012; Rimple Mehta, 'Barbed Affect: Bangladeshi Child Brides in India Negotiate Borders and Citizenship', *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2019.

Figure 1. Map of Bangladesh



Source: Downloaded from *United Nations* (<https://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/banglade.pdf>). The map might reproduce territorial boundaries that are contested by multiple actors. No endorsement is intended.

The relatively recent demarcation of this territory (where the border now lies) as an «international border» contrasts with the movement of goods and people that has been taking place for centuries and with the aspirations of those who are in search of better livelihoods on the other side.¹⁴ Securing the border is a goal that both the Indian and the Bangladeshi governments have repeatedly committed to, and especially in the case of India there is a complex set of interests in getting it sealed (as is further detailed below). Despite this, the border has in practice remained «porous», as it continues to see the movement of goods (particularly debated in the Indian media is the case of cattle smuggled from India into Bangladesh), of people who frequently move in and out, even daily, and of course of migrants, especially Bangladeshis, who hope to get to the other side for some time or for good. The securitization of the border on the one hand and the continuing trans-border mobility on the other are irreconcilable in the way they conceive and make use of the space of the border. The clash between them produces violence, which marks the border – an everyday space for many borderland dwellers and a space of hope for migrants – as a space of fear, precarity, and death.

Border violence takes many forms. On the one hand, while patrolling the border Indian authorities have clashed with smugglers or been subject to attacks which have in some cases turned deadly.¹⁵ For example, in 2019 an Indian soldier was reportedly shot dead from across the border by the

14 For more details on the history of the Indo-Bangladeshi border, see Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland. Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, London: Anthem Press, 2005.

15 'Locking Horns at the Border', *The Indian Express*, 20 July 2020.

Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), the agency which controls the border on the Bangladeshi side.¹⁶ In August 2021, two personnel of the Border Security Force (BSF), the Indian counterpart of the BGB, were killed on the border in the northeastern state of Tripura, allegedly in an ambush by militants of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), which is banned in India as a terrorist organization.¹⁷ At the same time, the «gaps» in the border sealing are not limited to still unfenced land tracts or hard-to-fence riverine portions. Some officials from both the Indian and the Bangladeshi sides contribute to keeping the border porous as they are involved in the illegal traffic of goods and people, from which they reportedly benefit through bribes, cuts on «shipments» smuggled to the other side thanks to their connivance, or even sexual favours.¹⁸ That the border authorities play such a role is documented in ethnographic accounts of border crossing and border life,¹⁹ in studies on informal cross-border trade, and by the occasional investigations carried out on officers, local police, and politicians. The latest case emerged in India in early 2021 against the backdrop of approaching elections in West Bengal.²⁰

On the other hand, border authorities reportedly harass people who inhabit border areas on both sides. They also shoot to kill.²¹ The victims of these border killings are not only people allegedly involved in illegal activities – like smugglers, traffickers, undocumented migrants – but also dwellers whose fields or grazing areas are located in the proximity of the border.²² Cross-border movements are not unidirectional but go both ways. Both Indians and Bangladeshis move across²³ and are victims of border violence, including border killings. However, it is worth stressing that most of the victims are Bangladeshis.

4. The securitization of the Indo-Bangla border

From an Indian perspective, the Indo-Bangladeshi border is critical for bilateral relations with Dhaka, for domestic politics concerning India's Northeast, and for Indian trade and connectivity with the broader eastern neighbourhood, which besides Bangladesh includes Myanmar and Southeast Asia. The border not only separates Indian and Bangladeshi territory but also marks the delicate territorial connection between mainland India and its Northeast sub-region. West Bengal aside, the remaining chunk of the border on the Indian side falls within the territory of the above-mentioned states of the Northeast: Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura. Geographically the Northeast area – which in addition to these states also includes Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, and Sikkim – is linked to mainland India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor, also known as the «Chicken's neck», with China to its north and Bangladesh to its south. From a domestic point of view, the Northeast is considered one of India's borderlands because it features a high concentration of populations that are otherwise ethnic and religious *minorities* on an all-India scale and because its integration in the Indian core has been late and turbulent. The area has been a theatre of armed separatist movements for decades. The central government counterinsurgency gave rise to accusations of human rights violations which mar India's democratic record and its legitimacy in the area. The extended insurgency-counterinsurgency period has also left a deep scar in people's memory and influenced the development of democratic institutions.²⁴

16 'BSF Soldier Killed In Firing By Bangladesh Guards At Bengal Border', *NDTV*, 17 October 2020.

17 '2 Soldiers Killed In Ambush Along India- Bangladesh Border In Tripura', *NDTV*, 3 August 2021.

18 Swagato Sarkar, 'The Illicit Economy of Power: Smuggling, Trafficking and the Securitization of the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland'.

19 *Ibid.* See also Marie Percot, '«Picking up the Neighbours' Waste»: Migration of Bangladeshi Villagers to India Metropolises'; Pallavi Banerjee & Xiangming Chen, 'Living in In-between Spaces: A Structure-Agency Analysis of the India-China and India-Bangladesh Borderlands', *Cities*, Vol. 34, 2013; Rimple Mehta, 'Barbed Affect: Bangladeshi Child Brides in India Negotiate Borders and Citizenship'.

20 'Explained: CBI's Probe into Cross-Border Cow Smuggling Trade and Its Widening Net in Bengal', *The Indian Express*, 7 January 2021.

21 Saleh Shahriar, Lu Qian & Sokvibol Kea, 'Anatomy of Human Rights Violations at the Indo-Bangladesh Borderlands', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2020.

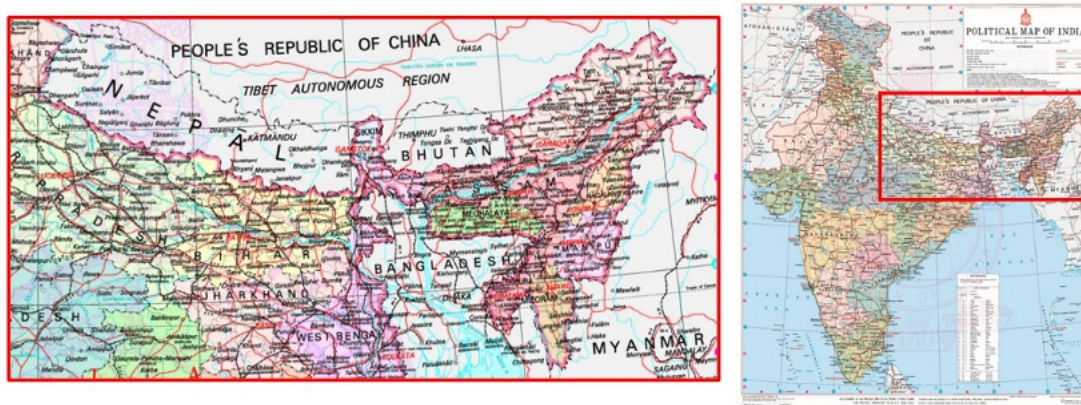
22 'Trigger Happy. Excessive Use of Force by Indian Troops at the Bangladesh Border', *Human Rights Watch*, 9 December 2010.

23 Baniateilang Majaw, 'Indo-Bangladesh Borderland Issues in Meghalaya', *South Asia Research*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2021.

24 Alex Waterman, 'Normalcy Restored? The Lingering Drivers of Insurgency in Northeast India', in M. Raymond Izarali & Dalbir Ahlawat (eds.), *Terrorism, Security and Development in South Asia*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2021, pp. 99-120; Vibha Arora, 'The Paradox of Democracy in the Northeast and the Eastern Himalayas', in Vibha Arora and N. Jayaram (eds.), *Routeing Democracy in the Himalayas*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2013, pp. 101-32; Dixita Deka, 'Living without Closure: Memories of Counter-Insurgency and Secret Killings in

Additionally, this Indian sub-region is a reason for anxiety for New Delhi because it is one of China's gateways to the Indian subcontinent. As a consequence, the proximity and activeness of China is a weighty factor in determining India's position vis-à-vis its Northeast. The recent clashes in June 2020 between the Chinese and Indian armies on the western Himalayan Line of Actual Control re-emphasized the volatility of the Northeast as a theatre of ongoing India-China rivalry.²⁵ Moreover, China also remains a crucial intervening variable in India's relations with Bangladesh. Beijing is a key development partner and investor for Dhaka, and it has recently attempted to get involved in two matters that are close to Delhi's interests: the Rohingya crisis and, most importantly, the sharing of Teesta river water, which is a long-standing Delhi-Dhaka bilateral issue.²⁶ Furthermore, Delhi's Look East Policy – which under Modi became the Act East Policy – has among its strategic objectives to enhance the connectivity of India with Bangladesh and Southeast Asia through the development of India's land-locked Northeast.²⁷ Hence, although less volatile than the Indo-Pakistani border in the west or the nearby Indo-Chinese border lying to the north, the Indo-Bangladeshi border is also of extreme geopolitical relevance for India.

Figure 2. The India-Bangladesh border and India's Northeast



Source: Zoom-in of the *Political Map of India (English)*, downloaded from *Survey of India, Government of India*, URL: <https://surveyofindia.gov.in/documents/polmap-eng-11012021.jpg>. The map is reproduced unaltered except for the addition of a red square to enable reading. The map might reproduce territorial boundaries that are contested by multiple actors. No endorsement is intended.

The Indian state of Assam started fencing the Indo-Bangladeshi border in the 1960s in phases, and India's central government did in the 1980s. Prevention of illegal immigration has represented a vital goal of the fencing endeavour since its inception. With the fence, India aims to keep its territory secure from a number of threats that are considered to be pouring in through the border. In so doing it has securitized the border itself. McDuire-Ra identifies three component narratives of the fence: controlling infiltration, national security, and monitoring trade. Overall, the border fencing projects India as politically and economically developed vis-à-vis a backward neighbour. By contrast, Bangladesh is depicted as a security threat. It is a source of India-bound migrants, ready to drain Indian economic resources; it is home to anti-India sentiment and Islamic terrorism; it is a shelter for

Assam', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2021.

25 Micheal Safi, Ellis-Peterse Hannah & Davidson Helen, 'Soldiers Fell to Their Deaths as India and China's Troops Fought with Rocks', *The Guardian*, 17 June 2020.

26 The Teesta is one of the many trans-border rivers shared between India and Bangladesh. It springs from the Himalayas in India's Sikkim, runs through India's West Bengal and then enters Bangladesh. Dhaka and New Delhi have sat at the negotiation table multiple times but no agreement has been reached on the matter. In addition to the two national governments, also the Indian state of West Bengal is a key stakeholder in the dispute and opposes further water sharing. Recently, China offered Bangladesh an engineering scheme aimed at altering the riverbed for increased manageability. See: Silvia Tieri, 'Bangladesh 2019-2020: Issues of Democracy, Disasters, Development', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 294, 302; for further details, see: Amit Ranjan, *Contested Waters: India's Transboundary River Water Disputes in South Asia*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2021, Chapter Three: 'Water Disputes between India and Bangladesh'.

27 M. Amarjeet Singh (ed.), *Northeast India and India's Act East Policy: Identifying the Priorities*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2019.

anti-India Northeast militancy,²⁸ and it is a base for illegal economic transactions. Accordingly, while working as a shield from the threat of flood-like Bangladeshi immigration, the border also represents an essential component of India's counterinsurgency in the Northeast on the one hand and of its participation in the global «War on Terror» on the other.²⁹ In any case, «the major issue driving border fencing in India is migration from Bangladesh».³⁰

The Covid-19 pandemic produced a subtle alteration of this narrative and its intrinsic power relations, although tacitly and temporarily. In late April 2021, Bangladesh shut the border with India while the latter was undergoing its «second wave» and facing an unprecedented oxygen shortage. The border closure – which affected people crossing but exempted goods carriers – was initially declared for two weeks but was subsequently extended in May and again in June.³¹ The logic underlying the measure was obvious: containing the risk of the virus spreading into Bangladesh over the border. Hence, the state of emergency caused by COVID-19 normalized a measure that would normally be diplomatically unviable, especially for a smaller neighbour like Bangladesh in its relations with India. Moreover, from the point of view of the securitization of the border, it framed India – and not Bangladesh – as the source of unwelcome imports and as a security threat.

5. A long-standing humanitarian and political issue: border killings

So far, the border has been fenced – but only partially – in a bid to keep a check on infiltration. In early 2021, India and Bangladesh renewed their pledge to secure its yet uncovered portions.³² As mentioned, the border is guarded by the Indian BSF on one side and the Bangladeshi BGB on the other. The two agencies hold semestral director general-level meetings, where their commitments to bring border killings to zero have been reiterated multiple times but to no avail. In fact, killings of Bangladeshis at the hands of BSF have continued throughout the last decade, decreasing in 2016 but then surging again and recording a decade high in 2020, with 51 Bangladeshi citizens shot dead in that year alone.³³ As for 2021, yet more cases have unfortunately been recorded. According to a report by Bangladeshi human rights NGO Odhikar, by June 2021 four Bangladeshis had been killed, six injured, and one tortured by the Indian BSF.³⁴ This brings the total number of (known) Bangladeshi victims since the year 2000 to 1240.³⁵

As a result, while endangering the lives of those who live near the border or attempt to cross it, continuing border killings have also turned into a thorny issue that mars Indo-Bangladeshi bilateral relations. While the Indian authorities reiterate that they only fire when under attack and that the victims are criminals, the killings are considered extrajudicial since criminals should be consigned to civilian authorities and not shot dead. Moreover, as mentioned, the people shot dead on the border are overwhelmingly identified as Bangladeshi citizens. Delayed justice in cases concerning Bangladeshi victims of border killings – as in the notorious murder of unarmed teenage girl Felani Khatun in 2011 – also adds to people's indignation on the matter.³⁶ In addition to this, the killings continue in spite of the two governments' commitment to bring them to zero, Dhaka's requests to Delhi to exercise restraint, and Delhi's pledge to use non-lethal

28 Historically, Northeastern militant groups have sought sanctuary across the border.

29 Duncan McDuie-Ra, 'The India-Bangladesh Border Fence: Narratives and Political Possibilities', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2014.

30 Duncan McDuie-Ra, 'Tribals, Migrants and Insurgents: Security and Insecurity along the India-Bangladesh Border', *Global Change, Peace and Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2012.

31 'Bangladesh extends border closure with India till June 30 due to Covid-19', *Business Standard*, 14 June 2021.

32 'India, Bangladesh Agree to Speed up Border Fencing', *The Hindu*, 27 February 2021; 'About 76 Pc of India-Bangladesh Border Covered by Fence: MHA', *ANI*, 3 August 2021.

33 'Statistics of Human Rights Violation by Indian Border Security Force (BSF)', *Odhikar*, March 2021.

34 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (January-March) 2021', *Odhikar*, March 2021; 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (April-June) 2021', *Odhikar*, June 2021.

35 The number of recorded border killings is in all likelihood an underestimate.

36 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (January-March) 2021', p. 40; 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (April-June) 2021', p. 37; '10 years of Felani killing: family's wait for justice continues', *The Daily Star*, 7 January 2021.

weapons.³⁷ For these reasons, border killings cause outcry among Bangladeshis and are perceived as a purposefully bullying behaviour inflicted on Bangladesh by India as a dominant neighbour.

While the border is officially presented as one of the many issues on which Dhaka and Delhi cooperate and conduct ongoing dialogue, the endurance of the problem and the positions maintained by the two governments on the occasion of ad-hoc talks show a lack of common ground. For example, in 2020 the second biannual BSF-BGB meeting of the year took place in Guwahati, the capital of Assam, where the question of illegal Bangladeshi migration has been highly politicized for decades. As a result of the talks, the two parties agreed to conduct joint night patrols and construct single-row fences in priority patches of the border. However, they continued to differ on the extent of the infiltration. In fact, the BGB Director-General denied BSF's reports of large numbers of Bangladeshis crossing into India.³⁸ A few months later, in March 2021, Indian Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Jaishankar paid a visit to Dhaka ahead of a trip by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh, scheduled later in the same month. Interacting with his Bangladeshi counterpart Momen on various aspects of bilateral ties, on border killings Jaishankar remarked that crime remains the outstanding problem.³⁹ This seemed to suggest that crime makes killings continue, in other words that as long as crime continues the killings will not stop. The statement seemed to implicitly justify the killings and caused resentment among many in Bangladesh, more so because it was not followed by any rebuttal by the Dhaka government.⁴⁰

At the basis of the problem is the fact that the two governments swear by very different versions of the reality of cross-border movements. While the Indian government and various politicians have for decades pointed out that a constant flow of illegal Bangladeshi migrants crosses the border to enter India, Bangladesh continues to deny these allegations.⁴¹ A general lack of comprehensive data on the phenomenon and in particular the lack of data acknowledged by both governments complicate efforts to analyse the issue and contribute to keeping it enmeshed in political narratives. A few years ago, on publication of the long-awaited 2011 Census of India, some argued, census data at hand, that the issue of irregular Bangladeshi immigrants is over-politicized in India, that in reality they are far less numerous than most imagine. Instead, the census data show that the number of Bangladesh-born people residing in India «fell substantially across almost all states of India and especially the major hosting states along the border – West Bengal, Assam and Tripura».⁴² The demonization of clandestine Bangladeshi immigrants, however, continues. For years Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)⁴³ politicians have quoted figures as high as 20 million, although they have failed to back them with reliable sources.⁴⁴

6. The politicization of immigration in India's East

Indeed, Bengali immigrants, and specifically Bengali Muslims – hence «the Bangladeshi» – have been criminalized for decades. Immigration of people of Bengali ethnicity from the territory that is today Bangladesh has been framed as a threat to the cultural and economic wellbeing of local populations in several Indian states at different points in time.⁴⁵ However, nowhere has it been as vehemently politicized as in the Northeastern state of Assam. There, the question of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants remains *the* key political issue to date.

37 'BSF Must Use Non-Lethal Weapons on Border, Bangladesh Tells India', *The Hindu*, 21 July 2021; 'Bangladesh Once Again Requests India to Use Non-Lethal Weapons at the Border', *The Daily Star*, 27 February 2021.

38 'Reports of large-scale Bangladeshi ingress into India denied', *The Hindu*, 25 December 2020.

39 'Killings along India-Bangladesh Border Because of Crime: Jaishankar', *The Hindu*, 4 March 2021.

40 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (January-March) 2021', pp. 39-40; 'India's Message on Border Killings Is Loud and Clear: Like It or Lump It!', *The Daily Star*, 11 March 2021.

41 '«Bangladeshis Aren't Termites» – FM Abdul Momen Says Idea of Illegal Immigration to India Wrong.'

42 Chinmay Tumble, 'India Is Not Being Overrun by Immigrants', *LiveMint*, 28 July 2019.

43 The BJP is a Hindu nationalist party. It is currently in power at the federal level and in various Indian states.

44 'India and Bangladesh: Migration Claims Fact-Checked', *BBC News*, 21 February 2020.

45 Vanita Banjan, 'Illegal Bangladeshi Migrants in Mumbai', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 70, No. 4, 2009; Sujata Ramachandran, '«Operation Pushback»: Sangh Parivar, State, Slums and Surreptitious Bangladeshis in New Delhi', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2002; Rizwana Shamshad, *Bangladeshi Migrants in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017, Chapter Four: 'The "infiltrators" of Delhi'.

Univocally determining who is who and where one belongs can prove a difficult task in the case of areas where migratory movements have taken place over the centuries along different routes and under the aegis of different state powers. This is further complicated by the inheritance of colonialism, which among other things in the case of Assam-Bengal gave an impulse to migration and altered the borders of these sub-regions. In Assam and greater Bengal, large-scale movements of Bengali people have taken place at least since eastern India came under colonial rule, making today's demarcation of identity categories such as «Bengali», «Bangladeshi», and «Assamese» not always straightforward. These identities instead have changed according to the politics of the time.⁴⁶ Additionally, the borders of Assam (hence of Bengal) have been altered more than once. The latest most important alteration was arguably the passage of Muslim-majority Sylhet from Assam to East Pakistan with the 1947 partition.⁴⁷

Initially, in Assam, anti-Bengali xenophobia was also targeted at Hindu Bengalis. However, it turned with particular vehemence against Bengali Muslims after the BJP came into power in the state. In her recent book on «Bangladeshi migrants in India», Shamshad convincingly argues that while earlier Assamese xenophobic discourse revolved around nativism – hence the opposition between the «local» Assamese and the «foreign» Bengali – the entry of Hindu nationalists in the state's political arena successfully shifted the axis of the discourse from ethnicity (anti-Bengali) to religion (anti-Muslim).⁴⁸ In other words, the BJP has to a large extent been able to communalize Assamese xenophobic identity politics, framing it according to the Hindu nationalist discourse it pursues on an all-India national scale. In practice, since a Hindu-Muslim binary was juxtaposed to the previous Assamese-Bengali one, Bengali Muslims in particular became its target. They became «infiltrators», threatening Assam and the nation with their greed and alien culture. On the other hand, Hindu Bengalis,⁴⁹ earlier equally demonized for their *Bengaliness*, now became first and foremost Hindus and hence welcomed as a «refugees».

The BJP successfully reframed the immigration issue in Assam and in West Bengal through a Hindu nationalist lens since the 1980s, betting on the securitization of migration in a bid to carve a space for itself in states – border states – where it historically had a weak presence. Thus, the politicization of irregular immigration from Bangladesh, while remaining a critical regional issue in the East and the Northeast, became also a national issue and one of Indian nationalism. Bangladeshi Muslims – characterized by backwardness, violence, sexual prowess and abnormal fertility rates – are for Ramachandran among the «others» in relation to which Hindu nationalism has articulated itself.⁵⁰

Also in recent years, the BJP has made its anti-immigration agenda a key point in electoral propaganda in border states. For example, in West Bengal in 2019 during an election rally in Alipuduar (which together with Cooch Behar is home to a sizeable Bangladesh-born population), Home Minister Amit Shah said: «If the BJP comes to power, we will bring in the NRC here to throw out all infiltrators and illegal immigrants. We will also ensure that the Hindu refugees are not touched. They are very much a part of our country».⁵¹ On another occasion, he declared: «Infiltrators are like

46 During colonialism the state encouraged large numbers of Muslim Bengalis from East Bengal to migrate to Assam as cultivators. English-speaking Hindu Bengalis migrated as well to find employment in the bureaucracy. As a consequence, these migrations represented a threatening competition for the Assamese in the land and job markets. After the 1947 partition, (most of) Sylhet, which had a Bengali and Muslim majority and had been part of Assam, was awarded to East Pakistan (i.e. today's Bangladesh), whereas Assam remained in India. As the transfer of Sylhet «purged» Assam of a large part of its Muslim component, the main target of Assamese nationalism has become the Bengali *Hindu*. For more details, see Rizwana Shamshad, *Bangladeshi Migrants in India*, in particular Chapter Two: 'The Foreigners of Assam.' See also Sur's latest work documenting identities, survival, and violence around India's fence: Malini Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021.

47 See the footnote above. See also Nabanipa Bhattacharjee, 'Unburdening Partition: The 'arrival' of Sylhet', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2009.

48 Rizwana Shamshad, *Bangladeshi Migrants in India*. See also footnote 46.

49 On the differences between the BJP's and other Assamese parties' approach to irregular migrants, see also Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy', pp. 372-373.

50 Sujata Ramachandran, 'Of Boundaries and Border Crossings: Undocumented Bangladeshi «Infiltrators» and the Hegemony of Hindu Nationalism in India', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1999.

51 'Amit Shah Promises NRC in West Bengal, with Exemption for Hindu Refugees', *The Hindu Business Line*, 29 March 2019.

termites in the soil of Bengal... A Bharatiya Janata Party government will pick up infiltrators one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal».⁵² However, Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool party (TNM), the West Bengali regional party whose vote banks the BJP has been attempting to break into in West Bengal, condemned the NRC-CAA (which will be analysed below) with which Shah's party proposed to counter immigration.⁵³ Eventually, in the recent 2021 election, the TNM defeated the BJP, and Banerjee won her third term as the state's chief minister.⁵⁴ On the other hand, the 2021 state elections in Assam saw the second consecutive victory of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, in power since 2016.

7. NRC and CAA: the criminalization of the Bangladeshi Muslim in the making

The politics of xenophobia in Assam are also important for another reason: the state is the leading-edge when it comes to the controversial NRC (National Register of Citizens). Since 2019, the NRC and the CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act or Citizenship Amendment Bill) have emerged as the most divisive issues in contemporary Indian domestic politics. The two measures are considered discriminatory against Muslims and an attack on the country's secular character. In addition to this, they have in Bangladesh-originated migration an indirect target and as a consequence have the potential to impact India-Bangladesh relations.

The NRC is a register of all Indian citizens mandated by the 2003 amendment of the 1955 Citizenship Act. At the moment, the only state in the Indian federation with an NRC is Assam – other Indian states have committed to implement one, whereas states where political parties other than the BJP are in power have rejected it. In Assam, the NRC came into being as early as 1951 in order to curb illegal immigration from then East Pakistan, i.e. current Bangladesh. However, the final updated NRC for Assam was published only recently, in August 2019.⁵⁵

In order to be included in the NRC, people must possess certain documents that are deemed valid to prove their citizenship status. Hence, in theory, the NRC potentially identifies those who live in the country illegally and discourages illegal immigration. However, one of its main flaws is that in practice proving citizenship with documents is not possible even for genuine citizens as the status of many of them is *de facto* undocumented. This is because in India, like elsewhere in the global South, documenting births and deaths through bureaucratic acts is not necessarily standard practice, especially among illiterate people who are economically, politically, or geographically marginalized.

On the other hand, the CAA passed by the Indian Parliament in December 2019 amends the 1955 Citizenship Law. It offers Indian citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians⁵⁶ who flee persecution from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, and arrived in India by December 2014. The bill is remarkable because it makes religious identity a criterion for Indian citizenship for the very first time. Indian secularism is not free of flaws, but it had so far remained the official credo of the state. It is undeniable that Indian nationalism has historically had Hindu undertones, that the numerical majority of Hindus in the country has often been exploited by political parties (not just the BJP) and that it has worked to the detriment of minorities. However, officially India has always projected itself as a secular polity. It is telling that at the moment of post-colonial rebirth India styled itself as a «Republic» (not a Hindu one) in contrast to «the *Islamic* Republic of Pakistan». This explains why the CAA fast-tracking of non-Muslim refugees for citizenship has been widely received as «communal», Islamophobic and as an attack on India's secular character enshrined in its constitution.

52 'Amit Shah Vows to Throw Illegal Immigrants into Bay of Bengal', *Reuters*, 12 April 2019.

53 'CAA Is a Means to Deceive People, Says Mamata', *The Hindu*, 9 December 2020.

54 Ronojoy Sen, 'Mamata Resists the BJP's Might, Wins Big in Bengal', *Institute of South Asian Studies*, 19 May 2021.

55 For a detailed analysis of the NRC and CAA, see Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy'.

56 These are religious minorities in India, where Hindus comprise the majority of the population (approx. 80%). Islam is the largest minority religion in the country (approx. 14%). However, it is absent from the CAA list.

As far as the politicization of Bengali immigration in India is concerned, the CAA and NRC are of critical importance because they turn the above-mentioned binary discourse of «refugees» versus «infiltrators» into actual law. In practice, the CAA and NRC synergy provides a pathway towards legalization for undocumented people as long as they are not Muslim. Consider the following (not so) hypothetical scenario: once enforced, the NRC deprives genuine citizens who are unable to prove their status of citizenship and it also exposes undocumented migrants. However, Hindus and other non-Muslims (whether citizens or not) have the option to apply for citizenship as refugees under the CAA, unlike Muslims. In other words, from the perspective of undocumented citizens of Bengali ethnicity and irregular Bangladeshi migrants, the NRC-CAA excludes Muslims from regularization, while allowing non-Muslims to be considered in the refugee category. Thus, it continues to criminalize Muslim Bengalis in general as «Bangladeshis» and «infiltrators» to be got rid of.

8. Potential reverberations in Bangladesh

India's CAA-NRC has the potential to impact politics across the border as well. Because in the East and Northeast the measures have been advertised as aimed against illegal Bangladeshi migrants, it is feared they might exasperate identity politics in neighbouring Bangladesh and escalate illegal border-crossing *from* India.

As far as border-crossing from India is concerned, recent declarations by India's BSF have suggested that a re-migration movement back into Bangladesh had been recorded soon after the passing of the CAA in early 2020, as more Bangladeshis were apprehended while crossing from India into Bangladesh than vice versa.⁵⁷ However, it remains unclear whether these data are sufficient to determine that the reported outflow is sustained and if it is motivated by CAA-induced fears among migrants rather than by other critical concurrent circumstances, namely COVID-19 and consequently increased unemployment, especially among daily wagers.⁵⁸

Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government has refrained from openly commenting on the NRC-CAA. Its official stance is that the CAA is India's internal matter, although unnecessary.⁵⁹ Indeed, by offering asylum to non-Muslims fleeing from Muslim-majority neighbours, including Bangladesh, the CAA implies that non-Islamic minorities are not safe in such countries, a claim that Dhaka has denied. Although the Bangladeshi government has maintained a low profile on the matter, the CAA has been strongly criticized in the Bangladeshi media and by public opinion, further fuelling anti-India sentiment in the country. For instance, in March 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was scheduled to travel to Dhaka on the occasion of *Mujib Borsho*, i.e. the celebration of Bangladeshi father of the nation Sheikh Mujib Rahman's 100th birth anniversary. The announcement of Modi's trip caused protests in Dhaka.⁶⁰ Its subsequent cancellation was then officially justified with pandemic-related risks.⁶¹ Around the same time, visits by Bangladeshi ministers to India were similarly cancelled, allegedly because of displeasure caused by the passing of the CAA in the Indian Parliament and the debate on the status of Bangladesh's religious minorities that ensued.⁶²

In March 2021, Modi eventually made his way to Dhaka on the occasion of Bangladesh's 50th national anniversary. His visit took place amidst large scale protests led by Islamist groups and madrassah students who clashed with the police and Awami League supporters. The protests resulted in at least 12 dead after the police opened fire on the protesters, giving yet another demonstration of the government's hard line against dissent.⁶³ They also demonstrated the growing popularity and assertiveness of Islamists in the country. The protests were reportedly led by Hefazat-e-Islam (Hel),

57 'Substantial Increase in Outflow of Bangladeshi Migrants Post CAA Enactment: BSF', *The Times of India*, 24 January 2020.

58 'More Migrants Returning to Bangladesh, Shows BSF Data', *The Hindu*, 15 December 2020.

59 'Citizenship Amendment Act Is India's Internal Matter, Sheikh Hasina Says', *Gulf News*, 18 January 2020.

60 'People Protest Modi's Upcoming Bangladesh Visit', *Dhaka Tribune*, 2 March 2020.

61 'PM Modi's Dhaka Trip Cancelled after Bangladesh Reports 3 Coronavirus Cases', *The Times of India*, 9 March 2020.

62 'Bangladesh Foreign Minister Cancels Visit, India Brushes Away Speculation on CAB Link', *The Wire*, 12 December 2019; 'Bangladesh Cancels Foreign, Home Ministers' India Visits', *The Hindu*, 12 December 2019; 'Bangladesh Junior Foreign Minister Cancels India Visit', *The Wire*, 11 January 2020.

63 'Violent Protests Spread in Bangladesh after Modi Visit', *Al Jazeera*, 28 March 2021.

a radical Islamist group that advances sectarian demands for the reform of Bangladeshi law against atheists, apostates, and Muslim minority sects. He had already made use of vandalism, arson, and violence when staging protests and attending rallies, clashing multiple times with the police. All in all, besides casting a shadow on India-Bangladesh relations, the CAA and the enduring securitization of the question of «Bangladeshi illegal immigration» in Indian politics weighs heavily on Sheikh Hasina's perceived pro-India stance and causes her government and party to face harsher criticism at home, especially from Islamist forces, who are now their primary challengers.

9. Conclusion

Migration is a common occurrence in human history. Even as the world is being shaken by the enduring COVID-19 pandemic, pushed by multiple needs migrants continue to undertake perilous journeys risking their lives. Although it is not an exceptional phenomenon, migration is often seen as an exception and a threat and so it is securitized. Moreover, the securitizing trend concerns South-South migration as much as South-North migration and remains strong, although most scholars argue that apart from propaganda in electoral competition, securitization does not necessarily pay off in practice.

This article has drawn attention to a case from the global South, namely the securitization of Bangladesh-originating migration in India. Both old and new events concur to explain the phenomenon. On the one hand, it is rooted in the turbulent history of the subcontinent, in particular the 1947 partition, which forcefully bound fluid territories with rigid borders and multiple identities into linear categories. At the same time, it is also fuelled by several current geo-economic and political processes, such as the continual threat to fragile livelihoods caused by capitalist economies and climate change, and the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India. The latter has caused migration to be further politicized in electoral competition and has produced new efforts to police it, of which the updated NRC and CAA are the latest incarnation.

Overall, the consequences of this securitization of migration are far-reaching, including sustained human rights violations on the border and in the borderlands, damage to New Delhi-Dhaka bilateral relations and, perhaps most importantly from a political point of view, aggravation of identity politics in both the country of destination and the country of origin of the migratory flows. In conclusion, the case dealt with in this paper suggests that securitization carries high humanitarian costs and political consequences that are neither desirable nor affordable for the countries involved.

Finally, beyond the political salience of the India-Bangladesh border and India-bound Bangladeshi migration, this case is typical of securitization at large too. It invites a critical reflection on questions that are political, policy-relevant, and urgent beyond current South Asian affairs. Who are the winners and the losers when migration is understood and managed through securitizing discourses? Is securitization worth its humanitarian and political costs?

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