IN UNDERSCORING that nine out of ten refugees were located within a small group of developing states, the UN report echoed what Aristeid Zolberg argued thirty years ago. He advanced that tensions produced by the disintegration of imperial states and the emergence of new post-colonial states in the mid-20th century were refugee-producing processes and accounted for the large number of refugees in developing regions. Jaya Chatterji, in her recent monograph of the Bengali diaspora, agrees with Zolberg. She convincingly shows that the partition of the Indian subcontinent (in August 1947) and the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent Bengal nation state (in 1971) led to significant internal displacement and international migration in South Asia. These population movements were greater in scale than from South Asia’s devastated borders to Britain and other advanced economies.4

Given the global emergence of high security barriers and deep suspicion of Muslim migrants, it is important to realise that everyday mobility, political violence and territoriality need to be investigated in one analytic frame. Despite prolific scholarship on the partition of the Indian subcontinent that attended to violence, trauma and agency,5 the narration of border-crossings as interweaving locations of loss and abolition on the one hand, and material and social possibilities on the other, remains challenging. How do we write about people who cross borders without documentation, who experience state violence but also ‘work the border’? How do we engage with violence through bodies that move across borders as much as those that are trapped in abjection and inertia? How do we condemn border violence in one voice in regions where maps and migration precarious divide states and militarise small regions, adding to multiple border predicaments? I suggest that the term ‘divided bodies’ may be useful to engage with the socio-political and intellectual possibilities that are derived from unscripted/unofficial border-crossings in militarized borders. Without necessarily denoting causality, the outcomes of their border-crossing label them as ‘knowledge’ and ‘labour’ migrants. With the United Nations computing ‘international’ and ‘bilateral’ migrant stock on the basis of where people were born and have come to reside, we are left speculating about their affluence, deprivation and injuries. Furthermore, since intellectual division of labour in computing data on migrants is based on the living versus the dead, migrants who face torture and die while crossing borders form another set of statistics gathered by human rights organizations.

Although borders that divide states such as Bangladesh and India are legacies of shared pasts, migration figures and questions of legality lead to explosive political debates. Bangladesh has questioned the United Nation’s enumeration on the grounds that it merely reproduced biased official Indian projections. Tellingly, apart from Indians imprisoned in Bangladesh, there is no discussion on unauthorized border-crossings from India to Bangladesh, despite the large numbers that travel for trade, to shop or to maintain kinship ties. The relative porosity of the border ensures that those escaping political persecution and natural disasters, or migrating for work (travelling without legal documentation) collapse in predicament and statistics. In this unstable landscape, India is constructing a new border fence with Bangladesh. The fence effortlessly shapes shifts from a matrix of wires and metal pillars through which Indians and Bangladeshis enquire about divided families and gossip, into a site of closure and suffering. An infrastructure of violence, it shapes migrant bodies, and reinstates Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson’s compelling formulation that in national cartographies impinging upon bodies, ‘border maps’ are also ‘body maps’.6 Mutated and dead bodies are found along the fence, bodies that are being increasingly photographed and digitally circulated.

Above: India’s new border fence with Bangladesh under construction in Meghalaya, Northeast India (2007) Photograph. Malini Sur

Digital bodies
Bangladesh activists circulated digital images of Felani’s tortured body with captions describing her journey from northeast India to Bangladesh, cross-border firings, injuries, postmortem and burial. These images disrupted sequence and temporality, and Felani surfaced in various frames. A bleeding upside down female body on a bent banana with hands and legs tied to bamboo poles, a horizontal body with a bullet to the chest; a dangling body and a ladder next to it; a partly stitched swollen body covered with a plastic sheet; a border guard looking away from the hanging body.

Felani’s tortured form supported a Human Rights Watch report. Aptly entitled ‘Trigger Happy’, the report underscores excessive militarization along the India-Bangladesh border and documents India’s indiscriminate use of force. It estimates that Indian border guards have shot dead at least 1000 undocumented travellers in the past decade.7 Felani’s post-mortem, which revealed a bullet to her chest is condemnable, given the large number of two-way crossings at the India-Bangladesh border.8 The statistics were alarming because the study was limited to a little more than half of the 4,096 kilometre boundary, excluded the heavily militarized border regions of northeast India and failed to investigate human rights abuses committed by Bangladesh border guards. Willem van Schendel called the India-Bangladesh border a ‘killer border’ long before Felani’s gruesome end due to excessive political violence, and Indian and Bangladesh border guards’ use of excessive force on both sides. Advancing that borders between ‘friendly states’ generate extreme violence, the author calculated 2,428 cases of injury, abduction and killings, including that of border guards, within a short span of five years.9 In projecting border violence and militarization as recent, escalating and limited to the Indian side, we forget that what is today the India-Bangladesh border, sits uncomfortably on a troubled zone. For centuries, this region has been armed in various ways, even as suspected traitors and dissidents were disarmed. Here, rebels and militias have sought refuge, smaller territories have been coercively appended, and border guards and peasants have raided granaries and cattle. Village elders as well as the archives remind us that militias, the police, dissidents and border residents have battled each other along these political margins, even as they collaborated on border vigilance.10

Furthermore, the zone straddling northeast India and the foothills and plains of Bangladesh is central for an understanding of the India-Bangladesh borderland as a zone of affinity and contestation. India and Bangladesh officially sanctioned the first experimental border market the same year Felani Khatun was shot.11 A legacy of old trade routes, in weekly markets known as border haats, bordering the state of Meghalaya (northeast India) and Kurigram (Bangladesh), trans-border traders legally conduct business up to a maximum of $50 and officially travel without passports.12

Spectacles of militarization

In September 2013, a United Nations population factsheet reported that Asia hosted the second-highest number of international migrants (after Europe) and the largest number of refugees.2 The factsheet contributed to explosive debates on the India-Bangladesh border, a product of political events in 1947 and 1971. It corroborated that there were 3.2 million Bangladeshis residing in India. Indian political parties quickly used this data to validate India’s fear of ‘infiltrating’ Bangladeshis. Bangladesh predictably rejected the statistics. The release of the UN report in 2013 coincided with civil society protests in Bangladesh over India’s ‘shoot to kill’ policy at the border. The same month, an Indian border constable, Amiya Ghosh, who had shot fifteen-year-old Felani Khatun, was acquitted. Felani’s body hung from India’s new border fence with Bangladesh. The fence – a project under construction – substantially re-configures the border landscape that cuts across heavily militarized northeast India, which shares complicated boundaries with Bangladesh.
Many refugees such as Nurul Islam, Felani’s father, have made a home in Assam, long after India and Bangladesh mutually consented to a legal cross-border migration (March 25, 1971). In the case of older settlers in this region and immigrants who have acquired Indian citizenship in Assam, frenzied detection discourses and ‘suspicious Bangladeshi’ add layers of ambiguity rather than fix the boundary between citizens and foreigners. Migration, land grabs and settler migrations occur on a gruesome scale such as in Nellie (1983) and Koakraj (2012) in Assam. These further complicate Assam’s external and internal borders, especially since northeast India has been under prolonged military scrutiny and marginalized in India.1

Divided citizens
State repression at the India-Bangladesh border have brought about new forms of virtual protest, similar to social media-led anti-regime protests in Africa and West Asia. As India’s cross-border shootings featured on conventional diplomatic platforms, cyber warfare raged over Felani’s death. Appearing in early 2011 in ‘Yahoo Answers’ under the label of ‘Government and Politics’ and the subcategory ‘Military,’ Amak (a pseudonym) protested Felani’s killing to illustrate India’s atrocities against Bangladesh. While the responses to his question (a red addendum) were varied, it was clear that Bangladesh entered India without legal authorization. Yahoo presented a summary of questions that included, ‘How does it feel to kill someone?’

However, cyber activism also includes critical deletions, which do not preclude state surveillance. For instance, ‘Ajay1694’ fleeingly surfaced on Wikipedia’s India Border Security Forces page in 2012, requesting deletion of the section on Felani’s image and killing. In his assertion that this deletion of Felani’s photograph. Images of Indian border guards and officers, and ammunition took precedence on the Wikipedia page. In September 2013, after the acquisition of the BSF constable who fired at Felani, a new Wikipedia page, entitled ‘Killing of Felani,’ surfaced and along with it new writing on virtual walls. In January 2014, the ‘Bangladesh Grey Hat Hackers’ and the ‘Bangladesh Cyber Army’ attacked fourteen hundred Indian websites (including intelligence websites) to protest Felani’s killing. Felani’s graphically photographed hanging body came to exemplify Bangladesh’s geo-body and its sexual relationship with India. This was made explicit in a poster posted on the walls of Dhaka in 2011. “Stop Border Killings” at the upper outer margin of the poster frames Felani’s hanging image. Two subtexts are scripted along the lower margins. The first emphatically states, “Felani does not hang Bangladesh hangs”; the second subtly ambiguously attributes the authorship of the poster to the “public of Bangladesh” (both translated from Bengal). Bangladesh activists ranging from cyber hackers and human rights organisations, to religious and political interest groups, ensured that Felani was recognised as a Bangladeshi citizen. Unlike digital images and texts that created and deleted evidence and left uneven trails, the poster of Felani’s killing will persist in the form of links that home, workstations and trade hubs border fences. Felani’s tortured form correlates short and hurried walks through rice fields and forests that separate India and Bangladesh with migrant burials in sanding deserts that form a part of the United States-Mexico border. Since the term international migration obscures critical distinctions and profiles migrants on the basis of the living, the dead, refugees and others, scholars and activists must read across distinct statistical skits to compile and read migration-related data. Added, rather than subtracted, this will inform us about the diversity of moving, settling down, dying and grieving that shape migratory regimes. Felani epitomises South Asia’s complex games of territoriality and links Bangladesh’s troubled geography with Assam’s post-colonial history. As India and Bangladesh orchestrate joint parades along a border that was never a conventional war theatre, we are reminded once again that this border rests on uneasy friendships. Till we expand our dissenting horizons, images of Felani’s tortured body will continue to sporadically haunt our collective conscience.

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