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### The India-Bangladesh Border Fence: Narratives and Political Possibilities

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# The India–Bangladesh Border Fence: Narratives and Political Possibilities

Duncan McDuie-Ra\*

## Abstract

*The fencing of the India–Bangladesh border mirrors Scott’s understanding of “final enclosure” wherein “distance-demolishing technologies” and “modern conceptions of sovereignty” converge to demarcate firm boundaries of territory from previously ambiguous space (Scott, J. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Southeast Asia*, 11. New Haven: Yale University Press). This paper examines the different narratives surrounding the fence at the national level in India and in the borderland itself, focussing on the state of Meghalaya. These narratives reveal the ways the border fence is discussed and understood and the political positions taken on the fence in these different spaces. In examining these I present two key findings. The first is that the border fence is narrated and politicized differently at the national level and in the borderland. The second is that within the borderlands there is not a singular “borderland narrative” of the fence but several, reflecting dominant political positions already entrenched and new ways of articulating insecurity being brought by fence construction; though the former is more prominent than the latter.*

## Introduction

This paper examines the politics surrounding the India–Bangladesh border fence. I focus on the different narratives of the fence at the national level in India and in the borderland itself, concentrating on the state of Meghalaya. These narratives reveal the ways the border fence is discussed and understood and the possible political positions that can be taken on the fence in these different spaces. Yet these political positions are not simply articulations of different interests; they also reflect the power of localized logics of territoriality that enable and constrain the ways the fence is politicized. From the comparison between the national level and the local I present two main findings. The first is that the border fence is narrated and politicized differently at the national level and in the borderland itself. The second is that within the borderland there is not a singular “borderland narrative” of the fence but several, reflecting dominant political positions already entrenched *and* new ways of articulating insecurity being brought by fence construction; though the former is more prominent than the latter.

This paper is divided into three sections. In the first section I give a brief background on the fence and argue that its acceleration in the last two decades reflects changing views of territoriality in India reflecting Scott’s “final enclosure.” In the second section I analyze the narratives of the fence at the national level demonstrating the ways the fence is bound to the notion of protecting national territory from non-citizens. In the third section I analyze the divergent narratives around the fence in the border state of Meghalaya and argue that in the borderland the fence is perceived in three main ways but opposition to the fence has come to dominate local politics, though recent events have defused opposition somewhat. The conclusion discusses what the different perceptions and politicizations of the fence mean for understanding state enclosure in borderlands more broadly. Drawing on the method adopted by James Sidaway (2007), I analyze both written materials on the border fence (documents by the Government of India, academic literature, and articles taken from national and local newspapers) and discussions I have had with residents living in proximity to the fence over the last 10 years, especially in the Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya in 2004, 2005, 2008 and 2010. Comparing attitudes towards the fence in these “microplaces” (Sidaway 2007, 162) to national level narratives suggests divergent political positions on the

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fence between and within these different spaces. The analysis also draws on my earlier work analyzing the fence from a security perspective (McDuie-Ra 2012). Events surrounding the fence in 2011 and 2012 have transformed the context necessitating new ways of thinking about the fence, its politics, and its future

### Asserting Authority in India's East

Studies of state enclosure have become more prolific in recent years as different states construct physical barriers to enact sovereignty and assuage domestic discontent over immigration (Doty 2007; Latham 2010; Salter 2008; Zapata-Barrero and De Witte 2007). In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, James Scott argues that enclosure of territory is a projection of state power “to the very edge of its territory, where it meets . . . another sovereign power projecting its command of its own adjacent frontier” (Scott 2009, 11). Enclosure seeks to eliminate ambiguous territories and peoples while at the same time controlling movement across demarcated state territory. The fencing of the border between India and Bangladesh reflects a larger trend of enclosure taking place in other parts of the world where fencing, integrated border check posts, and surveillance of border areas is becoming the norm (Bigo 2007). As Willem van Schendel (2005) has shown, the borderland where the present-day nation-states of India and Bangladesh now meet has been the site of constantly shifting territorial claims, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since Bangladesh gained independence the international border with India has been a ubiquitous issue, fluctuating with the ebb and flow of bilateral relations, domestic political forces, and global factors (Hazarika 2000; Jones 2009a; Pant 2007; van Schendel 2005). While generally considered a less hostile border once Bangladesh gained independence than the border shared with Pakistan (Ganguly 2001) and China (Mehra 2007), the border between India and Bangladesh has become a space where sovereignty is enforced and displays of nationalism take place, though on a smaller scale than the border with Pakistan (Jones 2009b; Rao and Sharma 1991; van Schendel 2005). Tolerance of a “leaky” border has been replaced by assertions of authority epitomized by the fence.

Fencing the entire 4097 km border between India and Bangladesh has been sporadic (Bertocci 1986; Datta 2000; Narain and Dutta 1987). The initial phase of the project (1989–1999) led to 854 km being fenced, mostly in the Indian state of West Bengal. The second phase (2000–present) will bring the total fencing up to 4236 km (Ministry of Home Affairs 2010a). This second phase contains new fence construction in the Northeast states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura, thus the material realities of the fence are being experienced in new parts of the border. There is also a third phase being planned that will replace and reinforce old sections of the fence to make it more impenetrable (Ministry of Home Affairs 2010a, 24).

The completed stretches of the fence are not built at the line of demarcation between the two countries but 150 yards within Indian Territory, as designated by the Indo-Bangladesh Border Agreement of 1974 and subsequent Joint-Indo-Bangladesh Guidelines of 1975. One of the main challenges in fencing the border has been dispute over demarcation and the 150-yard buffer zone (Jamwal 2004, 24). With a population density of between 700 and 1000 persons per km<sup>2</sup> in many of the border areas, the buffer zone cuts through villages, fields, paths, and roads.

The fence is part of the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs’ “border management strategy” (Das 2008, 2009; Ministry of Home Affairs 2010a). Aside from the fence itself the strategy calls for rapid infrastructure development in the borderlands, reflecting Scott’s “distance-demolishing technologies” (Scott 2009, 11). The Ministry of Home Affairs reports that 3361 km of roads have been constructed along the border; with just under 1000 km more planned (Ministry of Home Affairs 2010a, 24). Road construction has been followed by the creation of more border outposts and watchtowers. There are currently 802 of these outposts on the border with a further 383 approved in 2009 (Ministry of Home Affairs 2010a, 7). Almost 2840 km of floodlighting has been sanctioned along the length of the border; keeping parts of the border lit up all day and night—electricity supply permitting (Ministry of Home Affairs 2010a, 4).

Policing the border is another component of the border management strategy. The Border Security Force (BSF) polices the Indian side and the Bangladeshi Rifles (BDR) on the Bangladeshi side. The BSF was created in 1965 under central command replacing local state police forces (Krishan 2001, 666). The tensions between locals and members of the BSF are a salient issue, particularly in the Northeast states already subject to draconian security laws through the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 (AFSPA) (McDuié-Ra 2009; Kikon 2009). Tensions between the BSF and BDR have resulted in troops from one side firing on troops from the other, escalating bilateral tensions (Das 2008; Krishan 2001, 670; van Schendel 2005, 303–314).

It is clear that the border management strategy has the intent of asserting central state authority on the borderland and increasing territorial control. Yet what is the rationale for this? What explains the shift from tolerated permeability to the assertion of authority and enclosure of the borderland? What explains the timing? The following section discusses the ways the fence is narrated at the national level in India.

## National Narratives

There are three component narratives of the fence at the national level in India: (i) infiltration, (ii) national security, and (iii) monitoring trade. Each will be discussed briefly in turn.

### Infiltration

Curbing migration to India from Bangladesh is the main purpose of the fence. The “narrative of homecoming” has been replaced by the “narrative of infiltration” (van Schendel 2005, 192–198) after the initial periods of movement across the border, first after Partition in 1947 that divided East Pakistan and India, and then after the Liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. There are an estimated 20 million Bangladeshi migrants in India (Chandran and Rajamohan 2007, 122). However accurate figures are difficult to produce enabling wild speculation on the number of migrants to serve various political agendas. Migrations are usually explained as a combination of push and pull factors that reinforce India as the desired destination and Bangladesh as the departure point bursting with potential migrants (see Singh 2002, 99–100).

Explanations of push and pull factors are paired with an hysterical narrative of infiltration of Bangladeshis into urban areas of north India (Datta 2004; Ramachandran 2002). Bangladeshi infiltration is seen not simply as a drain on the economy of the border areas but on the heartlands of north India. As Hindu nationalism has grown in influence throughout the Indian polity in the last three decades the issue of infiltration from Bangladesh has become a boon for organizations like the Sangh Parivar and the Bharatiya Janata Party (Gillan 2002; Ramachandran 2002). The media has latched onto stories of Bangladeshi infiltrations, blaming migrants for everything from violent crime to wage rates (Ramachandran 1999, 245–246). Analysts lament India’s lax approach to curbing the alleged demographic transformation of border areas. As Anand Kumar writes:

The demographic profile in the Siliguri corridor, within a 5 km belt of the international border with Bangladesh, has undergone rapid changes. This has happened primarily due to illegal immigration from Bangladesh as well as lax policing ... Estimates indicate an astonishing 150 per cent increase in Muslim population in Siliguri and adjoining areas in the past seven years, against 30–40 per cent in other Muslim-dominated belts in the state. The town’s cosmopolitan character makes it easier for outsiders to get assimilated into the local populace. (Kumar 2010, 113)

Interestingly, Kumar admits that it is difficult to determine who is an infiltrator and who is a legitimate resident of Siliguri, though this admission does little to assuage his call for further measures to stop the

infiltration. Each incidence of infiltration reported, each political crisis in Bangladesh, each data set that compares India's economic boom to Bangladesh's relative poverty has the effect of turning the Indo-Bangladesh border into a frontline in the battle against unrestrained migration from Bangladesh.

### **National Security**

There is a distinct national security narrative in the logic of the fence wherein Bangladesh is seen as a location where terrorism and anti-India sentiments ferment. Islamic extremism, although confined to a small section of the population, has gathered momentum in Bangladesh since the 1990s (van Schendel 2009, 208–209). The ramifications are mostly felt domestically (Karlekar 2005), nonetheless India remains determined to prevent Islamic groups from Bangladesh crossing into India and the fence is integral to this (Pant 2007). The former Prime Minister of Bangladesh (and current opposition leader), Begum Khaleda Zia agrees. She recently commented on the necessity of managing terrorism in the India-Bangladesh relationship:

Some of the terrorist threats are home-grown while others transcend international boundaries. Physical and structural mechanisms needed to combat this menace mean diversion of huge financial and material resources ... [and] Such cooperation must also extend to combating piracy, drug trafficking and human trafficking. (Zia 2012, 721–722)

As Jones (2009c) argues, this consensus on terrorism suggests two very different countries divided by the border fence; one modern and economically powerful, the other poor, backward and violent. Migrants merge with terrorists in this narrative, and all persons from Bangladesh become suspect within India. The fence enables a line to be drawn between civilized peoples of the globe and those bent on destroying civility (Jones 2009c, 292–293), and India becomes the guardian of this boundary with occasional consent from the authorities in Bangladesh.

The fence is also designed to stop insurgent groups from Northeast India seeking refuge in Bangladesh. Insurgent groups from the Northeast have long used Bangladeshi territory to shelter from the Indian armed forces and paramilitary dating back to the time of East Pakistan (Means 1971). In recent years there has been a strong focus on links between Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and insurgent groups in Bangladesh, including both radical Islamic groups and Northeast insurgents sheltering there (Cline 2006; Saikia 2002; Winchell 2003). Yet there is a further advantage to the fence as far as insurgency in the Northeast is concerned; stemming migration; addressing one of the primary grievances of insurgents and communities in the Northeast (Hazarika 2000; Weiner 1978).

### **Monitoring trade**

The border fence directs cross-border activity into state-controlled customs posts allowing the government to monitor commerce in the borderlands and gain revenue in the process. Smuggling is a major feature of trade between India and Bangladesh. There are many excellent studies of the extent of smuggling across the border, detailing a complex trade in betel nut, cattle, cement, coal, cotton, firearms, garments, narcotics, jute, people, pharmaceuticals, sugar, timber, and wildlife (see Bannerjee et al. 1999; Das 1990; Hossain 1981; Maniruzzaman 1975, 1977; Paul and Hasnath 2000; Pohit and Taneja 2003; Sikder and Sarkar 2005). Much of this trade occurs with the cooperation or complicity of the border security forces on both sides, raising the stakes of the trade in the process, though smugglers also become targets of the security forces, and vice-versa (van Schendel, 1993). The fence is designed to make smuggling more difficult and central and state governments in India can claim that the fence will curb illegal trade and increase rents from legal trade. The fence directs cross-border movement into officially sanctioned corridors, favoring law abiding economic transactions, benefiting formalized business and government interests, rather than shadowy local and informal transactions. Here the fence is a passage for people and goods, but only those approved by the authorities.

## Political Possibilities at the National Level

As can be seen, at the national level the fence is infused with deep nationalist sentiment, and taking contrary positions can leave politicians, journalists, and activists open to the charge of being anti-national not to mention pro-terror or pro-infiltration; not easy positions to maintain. To oppose the fence is to oppose the assertion of territorial authority and sovereign right. The fence is discussed and understood through a powerful logic of necessity. Therefore the possibilities for divergent political positions on the fence are limited.

Criticism of the fence at the national level is generally confined to criticism of its ineffectiveness not its existence. For example, Saikia compares the slow pace of fencing the Bangladesh border to the much faster completion of the fence on India's border with Pakistan arguing that "the extremely lethargic pace of work in Assam ... (has allowed) illegal migrants to continue entering Assam and its sister states in the northeast [sic]" (Saikia 2006, 201). As will be seen in the following section, this also demonstrates the common tactic of blaming the state governments for not showing enough commitment to the national cause.

The fence itself is not seen as a problem. The problem is the fence is not resolute enough to achieve its purpose of enclosing India, especially when there is collusion by the forces charged with policing it. Thus there is criticism of the ease with which people succeed in circumventing the fence (Shashikumar 2009). Bypassing the authorities does not undermine the logic of fencing Bangladesh in the first place; rather it illuminates the intricacies of collusion between local communities and the agents charged with monitoring the border. Sahana Ghosh demonstrates that local communities in the borderland are subject to mistreatment by the BSF but also collude with the BSF in cross-border activities. She writes, "Underneath the dominant rhetoric of complaint about the BSF lay the spectre of complicity with the BSF. Local people's collusion with the BSF in smuggling goods and people across the border is a common occurrence, commonly known" (Ghosh 2011, 56). This has the effect of dividing the community into those prepared to collaborate with the BSF to enable their illegal activities and those who are not, and in some cases cannot, suggesting that the impact of the fence on lives and livelihoods, at least in the Bengali speaking zones of the border, depends upon individual calculations of risk and morality as well as differentiated capacity to manage negotiations with those monitoring cross border trade.

## Borderland Narratives

The fence is viewed with far more scepticism in the borderland itself. Meghalaya is one of the eight states of Northeast India, a border region barely connected to the rest of India by land and sharing 90% of its boundaries with neighboring countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, China (Tibet), and Nepal. Meghalaya is a series of steep hills and valleys in its eastern half, and lower hills in its western half. The land is a plateau between the plains of Bangladesh to the south and west and the Brahmaputra and Kamrup valleys of Assam to the north and east, both densely populated when compared to the sparse population of the hills. In the following section my main focus is on the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya, making up the eastern half of the state, as this is where opposition to the fence has been most pronounced and where I have engaged in fieldwork in communities living close to the fence.

The Northeast is a diverse region. Within this diverse population are constitutionally-recognized Scheduled Tribes, falling under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Sixth Schedule provides autonomy to traditional institutions to allocate land, resolve disputes of a limited nature, and provides reservations in employment, educational institutions, and state parliaments. Since the re-organization of Assam into new federal states in several episodes between 1963 and 1987, many of the larger Scheduled Tribes reside in these new states, including Meghalaya. Further many tribal communities live on either side of international and internal borders (see Bal and Claquin-Chambugong, this issue). With the exception of a few patches under the command of the military or central government territory they are controlled by traditional institutions and Sixth Schedule District Councils. This makes the

imposition of the fence by the Indian Government a source of tension and the subject of competing claims of territorial control as will be seen below.

There are three main narratives of the fence in Meghalaya: (i) opposition, (ii) support, and (iii) neglect. I will discuss these in turn.

### Opposition

In contrast to the national level there is an influential opposition to the fence in the borderland, primarily based in the Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya. At first glance this opposition seems curious. Fencing the border to curb migration into India from Bangladesh appeals to the underlying insecurity at the heart of life in Meghalaya. Meghalaya has 2.3 million persons, 91% of which are Scheduled Tribes. This population is primarily made up of two ethnic groups, the Garo (35%) and the Khasi/Jaintia (56%). Given Meghalaya's relatively small population and its proximity to Bangladesh it would appear safe to assume that the fence would be strongly supported in Meghalaya. However, unlike the national narrative, concern about migration in Meghalaya is not centered on Bangladeshi immigrants; rather concern is over Garo and Khasi territory being overtaken by non-tribals, whether from Bangladesh, Nepal, or other parts of India. The "threat to India" perception discussed above is far less pertinent than the localized perception of "threat to tribals" responding to a different territorial conception. Migrants from Bangladesh are outsiders in the same way that all non-tribal migrants are outsiders. Thus the fence does not offer a comprehensive solution to insecurity over migration, unlike the claims made at the national level and opens the possibility for more diverse political positions.

Yet this begs the question: why is the fence so strongly opposed in the Khasi Hills? In short, the opposition to the fence is an extension of long-running tensions over the use of territory. There are competing visions of territoriality: one national and one sub-national. The fence needs land to be built, especially considering the buffer zone, and the fence will control what can and cannot move across the international border. Opposition is based on the use of tribal territory for a national project and the concentration of control of movement with national authorities. The fence is understood as yet another attempt by the Indian Government to control tribal territory.

Land seizures have added to opposition sentiment. Land seizures to complete the fence and build border roads have been accelerated under Phase II of construction. In a recent example 30,567 km<sup>2</sup> of land in Dawki was transferred to the Indian Government and then to the BSF in 2010 (Ministry of Home Affairs 2010b, 2). Furthermore, by building the fence 150 yards from the border, significant areas of fertile land in the border areas have been dissected by the fence, seized to build the fence and roads, and/or cut-off from villages. It is not just farmland that has been affected, but access to markets, forests and water sources (*Shillong Times* 2010a). Compensation is only paid for the six-foot wide patch of land that the fence sits on, not land lost to the buffer zone or the severing of access to other natural resources.

Opposition to the fence led to two main events: the suspension of fence construction in Meghalaya from 2007 to 2010 and the decision to build the fence at "zero-point" rather than 150 yards. Opposition has been driven by influential organizations including the Khasi Student's Union (KSU), the Federation of Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Peoples (FKJGP), the Hynniewtrep National Youth Front (HNYF), the Synjuk Seng Samla Shnong (SSSS), and the Federal Council of Riwar Mihngi and War Jaintia (FCRMWJ); which have come together to form the Coordination Committee on the International Border Fencing (CCIBF).

Most of the organizations making up the CCIBF are powerful players in local politics in Meghalaya, though they tend to be in adversarial relations with the Government of Meghalaya much of the time, especially when the Government of Meghalaya is seen to do the bidding of the Indian Government without consideration of local impacts. In opposing the fence they are also suggesting that actors within Meghalaya, not the Indian Government or the security forces, should make assertions of authority over

territory and movement across the border. Members of these organizations are routinely detained under the Meghalaya Preventive Detention Act (Rehman 2009), embedding an adversarial relationship with the Government of Meghalaya that is enacted in opposition to the fence. During field interviews with leaders of the KSU (*Personal Interview*, February 22, 2005) and FKJGP in 2005 (*Personal Interview*, March 5, 2005), all stated the importance of opposing the influx of migrants, but they stressed that there were a number of ways this could be done, including using identity cards and by stepping up detection of migrants already in the state. During the suspension of construction (2008–2010) and in the years following renewed demarcation efforts (2010–2014), the CCIBF were vigilant, deploying members of the local units of member organizations to monitor the activities of the BSF and the Government of India's National Building and Construction Corporation along the border (*Shillong Times* 2011, 2012b).

As the opposition has applied pressure from below, the Government of India and its various stakeholder agencies have applied pressure from above (*Shillong Times* 2008b), leaving the Government of Meghalaya stuck between the two (see McDuie-Ra 2008). As this pressure has built, the CCIBF have entrenched their position, claiming that no Meghalaya territory will be given for the fence. In late 2008 the Government of India called for fresh tenders for fence construction, despite the Government of Meghalaya insisting that construction was stalled, causing further tensions. This also undermined the Government of Meghalaya who had called for the fence to be put on hold. The BSF itself has continued to pressure the Government of Meghalaya to recommence fencing, claiming that it is not possible for them to police the border with the fence uncompleted (*Indian Express* 2009). Notably, the Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Ramachandran Mullappally visited the border in March 2012 to gain a first-hand impression of the problems being experienced and to push construction forward. Such a high profile visit sent a clear message that the Indian Government would no longer accept delays. Interestingly Mullappally did not meet with the main opponents of the fence, the CCIBF, and instead remained in the BSF camp at Dawki during his stay (*Northeast Today* 2012).

The CCIBF have since pushed for the fence to be built at the “zero-point” of the border not 150 yards into tribal territory. The Government of Bangladesh agreed to this in early 2011 hoping to speed up the fence construction, demonstrating the support for the fence in Dhaka as well as in Delhi (*Deccan Herald* 2011). Goodwill was also created by a land swap in mid-2011 wherein Meghalaya received 240 acres of land and returned 41 acres to Bangladesh (*The Hindu* 2011). In late 2011 the Indian and Government finally agreed to construct the fence at zero-point (*The Telegraph* 2011), though it is unclear whether existing sections of the fence would be moved from 150 yards to the zero point, effectively reclaiming tribal lands from the BSF. Again this is a remarkable concession on the part of both Bangladesh and India brought about by the local opposition movement in the borderland (*Meghalaya Times* 2013). The agreement to build at zero-point has likely paved the way for the construction of the fence given that the main grievance of the CCIBF is now addressed.

### Support

The oppositional narrative has come to dominate politics around the fence in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. However, there is support for the fence mostly voiced by political actors with a stake in good relations with the Indian Government and such actors have had to adopt nuanced positions. For example, one of the leading political figures in Meghalaya is Agatha Sangma, the Union Minister of Rural Development in the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (the lower house of parliament) until her resignation in 2012. Sangma has gained national attention as the youngest minister of state in the Indian parliament and for achieving this as a tribal woman from the Northeast. In 2012 on the nationally televised programme *Your Call* aired on the NDTV network, Sangma was asked about violence between migrants and settlers in the Northeast. She responded by discussing the need to better protect the border:

... the borders in the North-East are extremely porous and I really feel that it has been overlooked by the Government of India. We concentrate a lot on the



India-Pakistan border, but the ... attention that the North-Eastern borders need to be given are not being given. To be honest, my constituency borders with Bangladesh and we feel that a lot of ... so called environmental refugees is something that we see in every monsoon season. Whenever the rains pour, a lot of the Bangladeshi labourers, tend to come and work in my constituency and eventually it's a situation where you cannot close your eyes to a situation like that. And, therefore, I think that when you can see that something is arising and it needs to be looked at, one must not turn their heads and say that there is no problem. (NDTV 2012)

Yet she also displays awareness for the consequences of the fence. In an interview in *Tebelka* magazine in 2009, Sangma was asked about migration into Meghalaya. She replied that many migrants arriving from Bangladesh have started settling in Meghalaya and are obtaining identity cards before adding, "... the borders are close by and people have become close-knit. They have established markets. So ... we have to be sensitive to the difficulties that people will face" (Simha 2009).

Contrast this to the perspective of representatives of national bodies in Meghalaya. The Governor of Meghalaya since 2008, Ranjit Shekhar Mooshahary, is a former director general of the National Security Guards, one of the paramilitary forces involved in counter-insurgency activities overseen by the Ministry of Home Affairs, and a former director general of the BSF. Mooshahary has repeatedly argued in favor of the fence and argued that the Government of India should acquire land that falls beyond the fence to allow the border to be policed more forcefully (*Shillong Times* 2008a; *Assam Tribune* 2013). The aforementioned visit of the Union Minister of State for Home Affairs in 2012 echoes a similar sentiment—to sort out the delays caused by local politics with some flexing of central government muscle.

Here it can be seen that those elected to office by constituents in Meghalaya display wariness to the impacts of the fence even when supporting it, while those appointed by the Indian Government articulate frustration with politicians in the borderland who either fail to see or ignore the pressing need for completion of the fence. Yet the possibilities of deviation from the national narrative are also evident, suggesting that dissent against the fence is more possible and more acceptable in the borderland when compared to the national level. What results is conditional support for the fence, a recognition that it is necessary but that it will also have harmful impacts which need to be offset; something rarely if ever articulated at the national level, suggesting that there is more room for political manoeuvrability for those in formal politics in the borderland.

### Neglect

The third narrative is difficult to classify as either oppositional or supportive. Rather it is a narrative that locates the fence in the everyday realities of communities living close to the border rather than the broader political context of Meghalaya. This narrative is not voiced often and when voiced it remains confined to the border villages and their *dorbars*, or traditional councils. The fence raises strong feelings of neglect among border residents. Their communities have been ignored and neglected by the Government of Meghalaya and the Indian Government for decades. However the fence brings opportunities to capitalize on sudden government attention and redress the neglect experienced in this part of the state.

On a number of visits to towns and villages throughout the border areas from 2003 to 2009 in both the Garo Hills and Khasi Hills districts it is clear that the border fence is part of an increasingly tenuous everyday reality. As permeability is made more difficult and the assertion of national territorial authority brings rapid changes to the physical spaces on which the fence sits, the fence enforces territorial enclosure to all but the most risk averse. Communities living close to the border raise three main issues: militarization, rupture of cross border networks, and poverty.

The fence increases militarization by increasing access of the BSF to border villages. The increase in watchtowers, check posts, floodlights, and roads (some of which can only be used by the BSF and thus

have little value for local communities) makes mobility across the border and near the border difficult and increases the surveillance capacity of the BSF. Militarization in the Northeast is charged with very different dynamics than in other parts of the border such as West Bengal. Communities throughout the Northeast region have had brutal experiences with the armed forces and paramilitary over the decades and the expansion of BSF operations in the slopes is unlikely to be well received. The fence means locals living in border villages are far more susceptible to arrest and interrogation for alleged indiscretions as permeability is replaced by a physical territorial delimitation in a region where there is very little legal recourse and the prospects of justice are remote. This has a major impact on people's lives as many locals moving too close to the fence fear being shot or detained. This includes moving across the fence but also moving in close proximity to access fields, forests, and watercourses and those using the border roads.

This reflects the second issue, the rupture of cross-border networks. This is not a new concern. Since the creation of East Pakistan and then Bangladesh much has been written about the isolation of the Northeast, however the completion of the fence makes this enclosure final. Even after the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, communities in the border villages of Meghalaya continued to trade across the border. However, with the completion of the fence the costs of trade are too high for small-time traders and for those using small-scale trade to supplement livelihoods. With poor roads and infrequent public transport this means that most villagers have to cover long distances to uphill markets on foot, while markets across the border are closer and along easier terrain but are now cut off or only open at certain crossing points.

Not all trade is hampered by the fence. Smuggling creates revenue for highly organized agents in collusion with border security forces. Given the topography and the greater connectivity of Tripura and Assam to Bangladesh through Agartala and Silchar, the amount of smuggling through Meghalaya is smaller than other parts of the border. Coal and cattle are exceptions and vast quantities of both are smuggled frequently. Estimates place smuggled coal at three times the official trade (Bhaumik 2009, 199) and in 2008 over 10,000 head of cattle were seized by the BSF in Meghalaya; a figure that excludes the number of cattle that made it across the border (*Outlook India* 2008). The fence will pose a small obstacle to highly organized smuggling networks, but will make small scale unofficial trade across the border more difficult; the kind of trade that supplements livelihoods in the border villages.

This links to the third issue, poverty. Meghalaya is divided into seven districts and further divided into 39 Community and Rural Development Blocks, each with its own block development officer; an extension of the state government tasked with implementing development policies. Of the 39 blocks in Meghalaya, 14 share the international border with Bangladesh, including blocks in the Khasi and Garo Hills districts. The *2008 Meghalaya Human Development Report* provides poverty statistics broken down by block (Government of Meghalaya 2009). The average percentage of households below the Indian National Poverty Line in Meghalaya is 48.90% compared to the national average of 26.10% (Planning Commission 2001, 166), making it a poor state when compared to the national average. Of the 14 blocks sharing the international border, 10 are *above* the state average for the percentage of households below the poverty line. In other words, they have higher levels of poverty than the state average, already much higher than the national average. Interestingly, of the four blocks on the border that are *below* the state average for household poverty, one is only just under at 47.75%, and two of the others are in blocks that have major border crossings (Government of Meghalaya 2009, 112), suggesting that mobility across the border eases poverty levels somewhat for villages close to crossings points.

In the border villages, contention over who builds the fence and who controls movement across the border is less relevant than the impacts of the fence on everyday life. An organization has formed from some communities in the border villages to lobby the Government of Meghalaya. The Federation of International Border Village Headmen (*Ka Synjuk ki Rangbah Shmong Border Area*) was formed with members from 50 villages living in the border area (*Shillong Times* 2010b; *U Nongsaini* 2010). The group are from one of the most neglected stretches of the border, between Mawphyllun and Khonjoi-Maheskola, spanning the area between the West Khasi Hills District and the South Garo Hills District. Villages in this

area are some of the poorest in a very poor state. In 2010 the group met with the Chief Minister of Meghalaya, Mukhul Sangma, and called for better roads, healthcare facilities, educational institutions, water supply, electricity, and agricultural assistance. In 2013 the organization lobbied the Meghalaya Public Works Department to stop delaying the construction of a centrally-funded road project along the border (*Shillong Times* 2012a). Thus while the CCIBF have been disputing construction, the Federation of International Border Village Headmen have been calling for parts of the border management strategy to go ahead. Their position on the fence is neither outright opposition nor obliging support; rather they want to use the fence to make claims on the Government of Meghalaya. The fence is an opportunity to address decades of neglect by all tiers of government. The emergence of the Federation of International Border Village Headmen is indicative of the frustrations felt in the border villages and the inability of supporters or opponents of the fence to adequately represent these frustrations in the state capital.

## Conclusion

What does this particular comparison between the narratives of the border fence at the national level in India and in the borderland tell us? First, the border fence is narrated and politicized differently at the national level and in the borderland. At the national level the fence serves a logic that is produced and sustained by mutually reinforcing narratives: anti-migration, national security, and monitoring trade. These appeal to Indian nationalism, Hindu nationalism, and national feelings of vulnerability. Opposition to this logic is limited and the possibilities for varied political positions are few. This is not to argue that contestation and opposition is non-existent, but it is marginal. The only viable dissent comes from those who feel the fence is not effective *enough*.

Second, in the borderland there are multiple narratives of the fence that have opened the possibilities of varied political positions. In the borderland there is not a singular “borderland narrative” of the fence but several, reflecting dominant political positions already entrenched (ethno-nationalism) *and* new ways of articulating grievances and calling for state attention. There is a narrative that supports the fence in Meghalaya, though since the emergence of the opposition to the fence this support is usually qualified. The opposition narrative has been powerful enough to have the fence suspended and built at “zero-point:” an astounding feat considering the national pressure being applied to complete the fence. Given the prominence of ethno-nationalist politics in Meghalaya in the last three decades, particularly in the Khasi Hills, drawn directly from the anxieties of a small ethnic minority surrounded by neighbors from numerically large and culturally dominant groups, opposition to the fence is curious as the fence would (in theory) make migration into the Khasi Hills more difficult. Yet there are important factors that help to explain the persistence and effectiveness of the opposition. Opposition to the fence is not only about the fence itself but that the central government is seizing tribal land to build the fence and seeking to control tribal territory. A clear tension between national and sub-national territorial control is taking place here and as the fence is the means of control it is at the center of this tension. Further, opposition shows that the fence is not perceived to be the solution to stopping migration into Meghalaya. The territoriality of sovereign enclosure has a different meaning in a tribal state like Meghalaya, where territoriality is sub-national and “otherness” is extended to non-tribal Indian nationals as well as citizens of surrounding countries. The easing of some of these territorial concerns in 2011 through the land swap has significantly tempered opposition.

The narrative of neglect offers a different perception of the fence altogether by articulating the insecurities that the fence brings to everyday life. The fence is perceived as part of a long-term experience of neglect from the state and central governments, and the channels for articulating this position are limited. The emergence of the Federation of International Border Village Headmen is an indication of the depths of this neglect. For the villages close to the border the fence is a material manifestation of the precariousness of communities living in the sites of territorial demarcation. Sudden attention from the state and national government provides an opportunity to capture development goods that have rarely flowed to the communities in these neglected areas.

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