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# Representations of Bangladeshis and internal ‘Others’ in the Indian press: the cases of Felani Khatun, Zohra Bibi and the ‘woman in red sari’

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## ABSTRACT

The India-Bangladesh border is the fifth longest border in the world. It is 4,096.7 km long and runs through five densely populated states in India. It is also the longest border India has with any of its neighbours. The nature of the border has created its own specific issues for bordering practices, as people cross borders informally and for variety of reasons (such as trade, farming, kinship, tourism to list a few). The response to unauthorised mobilities is always in terms of the need for more guards and physical presence, along with inhumane border control tactics and the use of force. Importantly, India’s borders and approach to the idea of security is mired in the colonial past, but also the communal and gendered ways in which the boundaries of the nation-state are represented in postcolonial India. These intersections of communal and gendered patterns are also evident in the media reporting of Muslim people and Bangladeshi migrants in India; nevertheless, it has not received sufficient academic attention. There is a dearth of literature which focuses on the representations of Bangladeshi migrants and Muslims in Indian media. This article explores how the media brings the Bangladeshi woman and the Muslim Indian woman together in a discourse which represents them as ‘other’, along the lines of gender, religion, nationality and migration status. The article utilises the existing body of work around borders, migration, media, and gender, which is developed further through the analysis of three well-publicised cases of the ‘woman in red sari’, Zohra Bibi and Felani Khatun. Their media representations bring to the fore three important themes for consideration: ‘madness’, criminality and cruelty.

## Keywords

Indian media, Bangladeshi migrants, Muslims, gender, borders

## Introduction

The India-Bangladesh border is the fifth longest border in the world. During the partition in 1947, the border was drawn up mostly on maps rather than work on the ground, and it runs through people’s houses with one part of the house in India and the other in Bangladesh (Chatterji 1999). The nature of the border has created its own specific issues for bordering practices, and the movement of people from one side of the border to the other continues for multiple reasons such as trade, farming, kinship, tourism, to list a few. These movements are often undocumented and carried out either clandestinely or by negotiations between border

crossers and the border security forces. India's response to unauthorised mobilities is always in terms of more guards and physical presence, along with inhumane border control tactics. India has adopted a multi-pronged approach for protecting the borders such as building a fence, round the clock surveillance and deployment of sophisticated technologies (Datta 2018). All these measures are geared towards strengthening the border in ways which obliterate the shared histories between India and Bangladesh. Human rights violations, abuse and arbitrary use of violence merely based on suspicion of smuggling of people, cattle or goods are rampant along the border (Human Rights Watch 2021). These issues are further aggravated by the impunity received by the Border Security Force (BSF) personnel from both the state and its internal justice system. Different political parties in India have dealt with the question of 'illegal' migration from Bangladesh differently but with the common underlying logic of 'othering' (Mehta 2018). The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) led government, since it came to power in 2014, has actively created campaigns to 'oust' the 'illegal' Bangladeshi migrant out of India. This also involves internal bordering exercise and mass ID checks (Bhatia 2021).

The border is a zone of endemic violence, where masculinity is privileged and contest over inclusion and exclusion played out every day (Banerjee and Basu Ray Chaudhury 2011). India's borders and approach to the idea of security is mired in the colonial past, but also the gendered ways in which the boundaries of the nation-state are represented in postcolonial India. The image of *bharat mata* (Mother India) as a woman, mother and (Hindu) goddess marked the gendered and religious representations of the cartography of the Indian nation-state in modern India (Ramaswamy 2001). Women were seen as the markers of the political and social boundaries, but as nondescript entities that needed to be protected by their patriotic sons. The idea of citizenship in India developed according to a gendered notion of the community, and women have been historically included either temporarily or peripherally or excluded from the core idea of citizenship (Roy 2013). Mehta asks, "If the socio-political location of women as citizen – subjects is itself problematic, how, then, does one begin to understand the position and subjectivity of women who are not citizens or rather "unwelcome" foreigners without valid legal documents?" (2018a, 53-54).

The Indian media become an extension of this gendered and communalised idea of the nation-state in the way it represents Bangladeshi migrants and Muslims. The discourse of the 'invisible invasion' of India by Bangladeshi 'infiltrators' has been spread by media in overt ways (Ramachandran 1999). The media and political discourses represent Bangladeshi women as helpless victims of trafficking and they silence their agency through a combination of anti-trafficking and anti-migration discourses (see Ghosh's 2014 research, which presents migrant women's narratives to challenge the victimisation paradigm in such discourses). Differently, men are represented as smugglers or terrorists, and this has a particular impact on public opinion and people's desire for more controls (see Jones 2009). These representations not

only influence the opinion of border crossers and Bangladeshis who are migrants in India, but also how Muslim citizens are viewed within India. Often the identities of Muslims from Bengal are conflated with that of ‘illegal’ Bangladeshi migrants, creating hierarchies within citizens (Mehta 2021; Bhatia 2021).

The nexus between the media and state (Tajammul-ul-Islam 2019) work in ways that facilitate antagonistic views or indifference towards people who cross the India-Bangladesh border in an unauthorised manner, or those who are unable to prove their Indian citizenship due to the socio-economic positions they occupy. Although the intersection of communal and gendered patterns is evident in the media reporting of Bangladeshi migrants in India, it has not received sufficient academic attention (Gupta and Sharma 1996). There is a dearth of literature which focuses on the representations of Bangladeshi migrants and Muslims in Indian media. This article explores how the media brings the Bangladeshi woman and the Muslim Indian woman together in a discourse which represents them as the ‘other’, along the lines of gender, religion, nationality and migration status. The media representation of Rohingyas in India (Chakraborty 2018) is also an extension of the same process of ‘othering’, although that is not our focus here.

The article utilises the existing body of work around borders, migration, media, and gender, and it further develops it through the analysis of three well-publicised cases of Felani Khatun, Zohra Bibi and ‘woman in red sari’. Their representations in the media bring to the fore three important themes for consideration: ‘madness’, criminality and cruelty.

### Literature review

Mass media shape public awareness and understanding, and also set agenda and frame debates around migration. They actively engage in image construction, which in turn impacts the decisions and actions taken by the social and political actors (Salahshour 2016; Bhatia 2018). The negative media portrayals have an effect on people’s emotions and attitudes and how they perceive migrants and migration related issues on individual and collective level (Parrott et al. 2019). The literature on media widely explores the use of metaphors, which are politically and racially charged, and associate migrants and people seeking asylum as inherently criminogenic, perpetrators of violence and aggression – rather than those fleeing from violent and at risk situations (Pruitt 2019). Their representation as a ‘problem’ threatening the nation’s safety (Farris and Mohamed 2018) or as objects that threaten the personal and social lives of the citizens (Charteris-Black 2006) discourages any kind of empathy from emerging. Farris and Mohamed (2018) highlight that “racialized threat narrative leads to the media’s “other-ising communities of colour” (817).

Studies show that media make use of judicial and security imaginaries and terms to represent migrants, thus mobilising audiences to said representations through connotation and

shortcuts. For instance, in United States, the media uses a range of framings techniques – ‘illegal’ (which criminalises the very existence), amnesty (that shows the benevolence or mercy of the supreme power), border protection (linked to the war on terror and war on drugs which by default casts doubt on the motives of border crossers), undocumented worker (a less accusatory frame when compared to ‘illegal’, and yet racialised and degrading), and temporary worker (that serves capitalist interests and treats humans beings as disposable and discardable) – all of these framings are designed to racially dehumanise and devalue the ‘other’ (Lakoff and Ferguson 2006). The media also deploys metaphors that link migrants to ‘pollutants’ (Cisneros 2008) or ‘animals’ (Santa Ana 1999), whereas in the South African media, migrants are represented as those who ‘steal’ what rightfully belongs to the citizens, put pressure on already scarce resources, and strip people of their livelihoods (Banda and Mawadza 2015). Of course, such sensationalist angles evoke legitimacy and immediacy, and it hyper-visibility migrants and at the same time renders them invisible and silent (as voices of migrants and their voice is seldom represented). Similarly, evidence from UK, Europe and Australasia has shown that liquid metaphors such as those of floods, influx, exodus, tide, wave, flow are frequently used to frame immigration as something that is beyond control, a natural disaster, or a catastrophe, and it induces a sense of fear – that damage or destruction in immeasurable quantities is imminent if immediate action is not taken (Salashour 2016; Khosravi Nik 2008).

The media representations are also gendered. Migrant men, especially from Muslim majority countries are often depicted in the media as hyper-sexual, deviant and dangerous. The media reproduces and circulates specific forms of ‘oriental manliness’, which is projected as a primitive counterpart to the idealised forms of European masculinity (Jazmati and Studer 2017). Wigger (2019) uses the concept of intersectional stereotyping to uncover the racialised, gendered and religious patterns in media representations of male Muslim migrants. On the other hand, the articles analysing representations of immigrant women in media are scarce; however, ones that exist suggest that women are stereotyped and framed as those who supply sexual services, are un-motherly, and lazy and economically dependent (Mawadza and Banda 2016).

Pictures and visuals are also an essential part of reporting. Images can have a more powerful impact on the readers of an article as it is perceived as objective evidence (Cisneros 2008). According to Wright (2002), many of the media images of refugees follow the same repeated pattern of ‘Madonna and Child’. The images are not accompanied by refugee voices, and the group is simply portrayed as passive victims who are ‘over there’ and starving, suffering and/or dying – and while such images can evoke sympathy, they also create a racial difference and desensitizing affect over a long term. Whereas, images of people seeking asylum portray them as ‘coming here’ or ‘on their way’. For example, photos of migrants on

dinghies and boats represent them as an uncontrollable risk and a larger army waiting to invade the West (Lenette and Miskovic 2019, 114). The group can be further dehumanised through faceless or distant images, which is likely to trigger fear regarding their identity or as de-identified strangers. In the context of Calais 'jungle', Bhatia argues that racialised and criminalised visual representations of migrants and refugees as 'rioters', 'smugglers' and 'illegals' inhabitants lead to their 'social death' (see Bhatia 2018).

The image of the lifeless body of a 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian boy of Kurdish ethnic background, washed up on the Turkish beach in 2015, generated discussions on the visual representation of migrant deaths in mass media. Lenette and Miskovic (2019) argue that lack of depiction of deaths in the public consciousness can contribute to inertia, and turn the fact into a fiction in collective imagination. Therefore, consistent visual representations expose readers to death and identifiable information and put a face to the human tragedy and suffering, and could potentially lead to an action. However, images may also reproduce violence in ways we will discuss in the next section.

The existing research on media representation of immigrants focuses on the Western hemisphere (Joris et al. 2018) and literature on media representation of migrants and internal 'others' in the South Asian context remains sparse. This article attempts to address these lacunae. The following sections unpack gendered patterns of Islamophobia, Hindu nationalism, border/ing, citizenship in India. Fifty articles, from a combination of broadsheet newspapers and online news platforms that publish in English, are included within the analysis. The articles were manually coded and analysed. The authors purposively searched for media articles that focussed on the three cases under discussion. While these cases were well-publicised, we have also selected the cases as they "are about something larger than the case itself" (Seawright and Gerring 2008). We utilise these case studies to make a broader, discursive arguments about the media, gender, and border/ing.

### **Image and case description**

In relation to the images of violence and suffering, Sontag (2003) argues that photographs have a perverted appeal, and people look at them in the same way that drivers slow down to look at the scene of a car crash. Therefore, in this section we have made a cautious choice not to reproduce the images so that we do not perpetuate the violence of those images. But in this quest, we also do not want to make the women/girls or their situations invisible. Hence, we have recreated the images/cases through our description.

#### *Woman in red sari*

In the middle of April 2020, when Eastern India was experiencing a sweltering heatwave, a woman about 40 years old was found in the no-man's land (see Datta 2018 for a discussion of

no-man's land as a contested geo-political space). Newspapers in India referred to her as 'mentally disabled' and 'specially abled'. The first set of images showed the woman draped in a distressed red *sari* either lying down on the riverbed Feni with her back to the camera or sitting facing the camera. The expression on her face reflected a doubt, or rather confusion. In the second image, the woman was stranded on the no man's land for 11 days. It showed her standing up, with a stick clenched with both her hands and looking startled. She was represented by the media as a 'mentally ill' 'Bangladeshi' (this despite her nationality not having been officially proven). Her name and any other identity moved into oblivion – which is why we refer to her as a 'woman in red *sari*'.

Over the 11-day period, the news outlets published various stories: some stating that people from Bangladesh were providing her with food and water, as she was more on the Bangladeshi side of the border. Other outlets mentioned that Bangladeshi Border Guards tried to push her towards the Indian territory, so as to shift the responsibility. And some newspapers (quoting a BSF officer) went as far as to mention that Bangladesh pushes 'mentally challenged' persons from their country to India. The outcomes of the case and what happened to the 'woman in red *sari*' remain unknown.

### *Zohra Bibi*

In July 2017, Zohra, a domestic worker in Noida (Northern India), was allegedly held captive overnight and beaten by one of her employers. Zohra worked in an upscale residential complex – a gated community consisting of 2800 luxury apartments. After going missing all night, Zohra's husband, along with other slum residents, went searching for her in the complex. Without much success initially, they eventually found her. She was allegedly physically assaulted by the employers, who accused Zohra of stealing money. The agitated slum residents protested against the treatment of Zohra. Following the protest, the employer filed an official police complaint against them for ransacking and vandalising the property.

There were three images published in the Indian media. The first image (which was widely circulated) showed a woman protestor in a torn pink and green dress (*salwar kameez*), looking visibly distressed and in pain, carried by two women police officers (one holding her hands and shoulders, and the other firmly holding her feet), and surrounded by four male and one female complex security guards. There are angry protesters in the background who are looking at the woman being taken away. The image is one of chaos and shows the law enforcement in action, trying to contain a disorder. The second image is that of Zohra laying on the floor with her eyes shut and mouth partially opened. She looks frail and exhausted and in pain. In the image, Zohra is surrounded by other women slum residents, who appear to be taking care of her. This image appeared only in two broadsheet newspapers, but was also circulated on few online platforms and news outlets. The third image emerged two days after



the incident. Following the protest, the police officers raided the slum as it was speculated that ‘illegal Bangladeshis’ were living there and were the ones to blame for the disturbance, criminality and destruction of the employer’s property. The men were held in police custody. In the third image, a group of women from the slum are standing outside the police station, holding their registration and ID cards – so as to demonstrate their citizenship status and ties to the country (i.e., India).

Zohra Bibi’s treatment and the consequent protest stirred a great discussion around ‘illegal’ migration and criminality (and less so on class and labour exploitation) in the Indian cities. A month after the incident, the police dropped the case against the employer.

### *Felani Khatun*

Felani was a 15-year-old girl, who along with her father, attempted to cross the Indo-Bangladesh fence on the morning of 7 January 2011. She was born in the Indian state of Assam to parents who were undocumented. Her father, Nurul Islam, moved to India at a young age to escape severe poverty in Bangladesh. For most of his life, Nurul worked as a manual labourer, and his wife (Felani’s mother) was a street vendor. Felani herself lived and worked as a domestic worker (child labour) in the Indian capital city of New Delhi. The father and daughter were heading to Bangladesh, where Felani’s marriage was arranged to occur the day after the border crossing. On the morning of crossing, Felani tried to climb the 2.5-meter fence, but somehow her dress got entangled in the barbed wire and she was stuck midway. Her cries for help caught the attention of the BSF officer (*jawan*) of 181 Battalion called Amiya Ghosh, who opened fire without warning. The bullet pierced through Felani’s chest. The eyewitness accounts in media stated that she was alive for around an hour, and no attempts were made to call for medical help.

The images of death eventually surfaced on the internet, and they were published in the Indian (and also Bangladeshi) news outlets. Here we discuss two widely circulated images. In the first image, Felani’s lifeless body is hanging upside down on the Indian side of the fence, with her eyes closed, and hair (ponytail) and right-hand swinging. In the image, she is dressed in red, white and blue *salwar kameez* and has pieces of jewellery hanging from her neck. In the image two Indian officers in camouflage pattern uniform are standing in the corner, while Felani’s body is left hanging. The second image was of Felani’s dead body, with face and small part of the chest visible. The body is inside a white plastic body bag, eyes closed, traces of blood over the face and a huge surgical incision (staples) on the chest which is clearly visible in the image. Both images were so gruesome that many social commentators initially found it unbelievable and questioned its authenticity.



## Analysis and discussion

This section covers the analysis of the above images, and the news stories connected to them, via the distinct themes of ‘madness’, criminality and cruelty.

### *‘Madness’*

An article in *The Hindu*, “In no man’s land between India and Bangladesh, languishes a woman without identity,” evoked the imagery of Toba Tek Singh at the beginning of the news article on the woman in a red *sari* (Singh 2020). The Toba Tek Singh imagery is a powerful one to remind us of the violence at the time of partition of British India and the creation of political borders in the Indian sub-continent. *Toba Tek Singh* is a story penned by Manto (1955) that highlights the apathy of the newly born states of India and Pakistan towards people in mental ‘asylums’ who were exchanged between the two countries, just as civilian prisoners had been exchanged. Bishan Singh, the main character of the story was in a mental asylum in Pakistan and when he was being transferred to an asylum in India, he asked the officials which country was Toba Tek Singh in, a place where he claimed his home was. In the absence of a definitive answer from officials on either side, he decides to be in the no-man’s land between India and Pakistan. As the story progresses, the readers realise that “the asylum inmates are in fact much more sane than the politicians controlling their destiny” (Jokinen and Assadullah 2019). Several scholars have drawn on a connection between ‘madness’ and partition, as that seems to be the only plausible response to the ‘madness’ of the bureaucratic processes of Hindu-Muslim violence and the partition itself (Alter 1994; Jain and Sarin 2012). The reference to Toba Tek Singh in *The Hindu* article evidences that the ‘madness’ of the partition continues in the unquestioned acceptance of the narrative of mental illness of a woman who was stranded at the India-Bangladesh border.

There are two narratives that dominated the news articles on the woman in the red *sari*. First, that she is mentally ill, and second, the conundrum of her citizenship: Indian or Bangladeshi? While the Border Security Force (BSF) in India and the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) were unable to identify her citizenship status for 11 days, they were able to identify her status as a ‘mentally disabled’ woman soon after she was found near the river. It is said that “An ‘extensive inquiry’ by the BSF PRO revealed that she was a Bangladeshi national” (Deb 2020). The details of the extensive inquiry and the official procedures that were followed for it are not known to the public.

The different perspectives highlighted in the media discourse brought forth the following about the case under discussion: “border-related issue”, “she speaks Hindi fluently”, “inhumane that the woman has been stranded”, “she is not a citizen of India”, “no documents to prove her nationality”, “there was no clear response from her when asked about her husband”, “did not carry any papers that established she was Indian.”<sup>1</sup> For the media, these

are the ‘facts’ of the matter and they reported the incidents as if ‘witnessed’. Neither of the states, Bangladesh nor India, had reasonable ‘evidence’ in the form of ‘legal’ documents to accept the woman in the red *sari* as their citizen. The ‘lack of clarity’ in her narrative incapacitates the media and the state to build any ‘logical’ or ‘comprehensible’ narrative about her. Neither can they ascertain her citizenship nor her marital status, the two crucial markers for a woman’s identity in a patriarchal conceptualisation of the state. Hence, the only thing that can be ascertained through her ‘vague’, ‘incomprehensible’ and ‘illogical’ responses is that she is mentally ill or ‘unstable’. The ‘madness’ of the bureaucratic processes and the politicians trying to continuously create new measures of citizenship gets side-lined in this process. Jain and Sarin (2012) rightly point out:

The mentally ill continue to be the classic apocryphal ‘other’, and both politicians and society continue to use the terms ‘mad’ and ‘insane’ to disparage and insult, and almost never express the honest concern and graciousness, which may have helped provide balm to the horrors of the Partition then, and to the care of the mentally ill now. (4)

The concept of madness remains “a non-normative construct in the region, one that is dialogically fashioned between the deviant actor and the disapproving other” (Wilce 1998 in Sur and Sen 2020, 449). Metaphorically *pagol* (*mad*) is an “agent who challenges established social norms; an allegory that has been poetically popularised through the songs penned by Bengali poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore” (Sur and Sen 2020, 449). While Sur and Sen (2020) “relocate madness as a way of being and surviving the city” (499), we extend that understanding to the ways in which ‘border work’ (Reeves 2014) in the South Asian context evoke multiple ideas of ‘madness’. Reeves (2014) refers to ‘border work’ as the “the messy, contested, and often intensely social business of making territory ‘integral’” (6). The idea of border work goes beyond focusing on state practices and looks at the ways in which people engage with the process of making and unmaking the border. In this process, ‘madness’ may be seen in two ways: first, the quotidian ‘madness’ of the people crossing borders as a way of opposing the state and as a mode of survival; second, the ‘madness’ of the media and the state in constantly trying to detect the national identity of a person through ever changing standards of documentation required to prove said national identity. The agency of the woman in the red *sari* and many others who cross the India-Bangladesh borders on an everyday basis need to be seen not only in triumphalist terms as one that counters the ‘madness’ of the state but also in terms of the pain endured in the process (Asad 2008). The woman in the red *sari* and other cases of allegedly mentally ill men and women found in border villages indicate that the media fails to represent any other form of their identity apart from them being mentally ill and ‘not-Indian’ and that there is not any discussion on the state mechanisms which render populations stateless. The images of the woman in the red *sari* continue to haunt our

imagination and make us wonder, who should be the focus of the discourse of ‘madness’: the society at large, the state or the media?

### *Criminality*

A popular news outlet called *India Today* published an article titled “RSS Body Says Immigrants to Blame for Noida Society Violence, Wants CBI Probe” (Rai 2017). The article presents ‘factual information’ and requests by the far-right Hindu nationalist organisation (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh/RSS) for the Central Bureau of Investigation to open an inquiry into Zohra Bibi’s incident. The article further mentions: “a huge number of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants are working in the city under false papers and the mob attack has prompted the UP [Uttar Pradesh] administration to start ‘weeding out the disease’ that is infesting the whole of India.” Following the protest by domestic workers and slum residents, several media outlets circulated stories and headlines using the following terms: ‘mob violence’, ‘mob attack’, ‘violent mob’, ‘mayhem’, ‘violence’, ‘riot’, ‘attack’, ‘illegal migrants’ and ‘ban Bangladeshis’. The articles focused on the disturbance in a gated community, destruction of employers’ property, and also of alleged violence against Zohra (often in the same piece and accompanied by image one and image two discussed earlier). Instead of addressing the protest as class struggle and means of fighting against exploitation and gender-based violence, the focus was primarily directed at the inherent criminality of the poor and Muslim migrants. The slum residents and domestic workers were represented as conniving and disingenuous, and their protest as disruptive and as a criminal act in an otherwise peaceful community. The news also made its way into the British tabloid press. For instance, the Daily Mail published an article — “Maid MOB goes on rampage after paid help was found unconscious” (Jain 2017) — repeating the same pattern. In a way, the articles presented the disturbance and violation of borders of the gated community as violation of the borders of the Hindu nation by ‘Bangladeshi’ ‘infiltrators’ and indirectly or directly called for tightening of policing and security to weed out the enemy within.

The criminality framing by default blocks any attempts of empathy and solidarity. By linking slum dwellers and domestic workers with ‘illegal’ migration and crime, the media constructed an unrealistic and stereotypical portrayal of the poor as dangerous and pathologically criminogenic. The day after the protest, the police raided the slums and picked up male members of the family and community. Around 13 men were arrested and detained in connection with causing ‘disturbance’ and ‘rioting’ at the luxury apartment block. On the other hand, no action was taken against Zohra’s employers – a wealthy Hindu family. The speculations that ‘rioters’ were ‘illegal’ ‘Bangladeshis’ probably led to these arrests. Following the arrests, the media published image three – group of women outside the police station holding their IDs to prove the Indian citizenship. Those from the slums were Indian Bengalis,

but that did not matter as the shadow of ‘illegality’ was casted over them. The women, in their desperate attempt to reverse the ritual of unbelonging, are found clutching tightly to documents and photographed to prove their Indianness to the entire nation. We call this a “naked theatre of bordering citizenship”. The bogey of ‘illegal’ Bangladeshi migrants maintains the vulnerability of women and working poor ensuring their low wages and exploitation, and low chances of protest. Image three serves a powerful purpose: it shows the likely punitive outcome for those who protest against their treatment, and this in turn stops the poor from collectivising and bargaining for working conditions and better wages. The labels of criminality and ‘illegality’ render Zohra and her community members stateless in a way that even identity documents were not sufficient to prove their national identity to the insecure Indian citizen.

### *Cruelty*

The image of defenceless Felani, a girl from a poor family, attracted pity and compassion and also anger and grief. The image drew attention to the shooting, generated an uproar and consequently called for action. The officer (*jawan*) Amiya Ghosh was eventually charged.<sup>2</sup> In a way, the image created a proximity to the ‘other’, and it exposed the human rights violations and suffering which are often hidden from the public view. The media also covered the outcome of subsequent court proceedings, acquittals and re-opening of the case. Over the past ten years, the photo of her lifeless body hanging upside down on the fence has re-surfaced on multiple occasions (including in Bangladesh/South Asian news outlets and on social media), as her parents continue to fight for justice. The news stories that accompany the image not only highlight the violence perpetrated by the BSF officer, but also the problematic nature of General Security Forces Court that prosecutes their own officers in trials not open to the public and treats them with leniency.

Felani Khatun’s image has gained an iconic position in the media: being a female, Muslim, a child from a poor family, who was about to enter underage marriage, elevated her status as a victim in the Hindu imaginary (unlike Muslim males who are simply represented as smugglers, traffickers, and terrorists). Hariman and Lucaites (2007) explain that iconic photographs of representative individuals, along with subjects’ experience of violence and war, are typical news stories of every major outlet. According to them, “the single figure becomes the event, the era, and pattern of civic perceptions and public response. Instead of the long chains of discourse that constitute public debate, the image becomes the means for incorporating public opinion into a civic performance” (91). While the immortal image of a suffering child called for action against the killing, at the same time, it also silenced the multifaceted and complex reasons behind her death.

The images of violence and death make the viewers/readers consumers of trauma and distance them from the broader reality: the geo-cultural context, the porousness of the border,

and the predicaments of the poor who lack travel documentation. Felani was not the first person nor first child who was killed by the BSF officer at the border and certainly not the last (see Human Rights Watch 2010 and 2021). While there was outrage and calls for justice for Felani, at the same time, there were also calls for using non-lethal means and implementing other forms of surveillance at the border. The idea of no borders, open borders or safe passages for crossing (especially considering the historical connections and kinship ties) was not part of the analysis in any of the articles, and was also missing from the wider public debates and discussions. The borders are presented as fixed, innate and necessary. Since the killing, borders have become even more militarised. Also, the killing of Felani and others have already been legitimised by the state, and a quote by BSF commander sums this up: “We have made it clear that we have an objection to the word ‘killing,’ as it suggests that we are intentionally killing people. We fire at criminals who violate the border norms ... The deaths have occurred in Indian territory and mostly during night, so how can they be innocent?” (Human Rights Watch 2010, 16).

Furthermore, some of the media reporting of Felani’s death included a mention of her father’s recklessness as he made the child cross one of the most militarised borders in the world. Many of the stories made a passing mention of smuggling and illicit activities at the border. More generally, the stories of organised and cross-border crimes and cattle/cow smuggling are regularly published ever since the BJP was elected to power in 2014 (see Bhatia 2021). Therefore, while media presented the image and covered the death and victimisation of Felani, it also covered stories and reported on the increase in criminal activities at the border and emphasised the need for greater security and control. By means of such coverage, Felani’s death is linked to parental neglect and criminality, which in turn makes her life less worthy when compared to those reading the news, and gives readers tools to distance themselves from the death. According to Jean Franko (2013), society is increasingly made immune to the everyday violence and terror and partake in a culture of cruelty, which is also gendered in nature. She further argues, “If *Cruel Modernity* lingers on this dark side, it is because I believe that unless there is a better understanding of the social vacuum that allows cruel acts, political solutions and ethical principles will remain in the realm of the abstract” (22). The repetitive and justified acts of violence against ‘alien invaders’ on grounds of *raison d’état* pose complex questions around repression and on-going and never-ending Hindu nation state building. The cruelty meted out on Felani (and other border crosses) by the state and media is reflective of the social and political vacuum and a lack of empathetic engagement with India-Bangladesh border issues. In her death, Felani is kept alive and the image of her body has turned into a site of the spectacular through which the ‘problem’ of ‘illegal’ migration and border evasion is depicted in numerous ways and forms. Every aspect of the image, such as border fence and officers standing dispassionately close to her body while she is slung midway on the

fence bleeding, portrayed the fate of ‘migrant aliens’ at the border attempting clandestine crossing. Through the image and news stories, the collateral damage of border protection and cruelty is repeatedly presented but the call for de-escalation or abolition of borders purposefully remains absent.

## Conclusion

The cases of Zohra Bibi, Felani and the woman in the red *sari* are all indicative of the status of women in the postcolonial hetero-patriarchal states of India and Bangladesh. The media discourses revolve around presenting them as mentally ill, as standing firmly with an identity card or a hanging dead body over the barbed wire, but no recourse to a legitimate claim to citizenship to any country is implied. If they resist by crossing the border, they lose their life; if they sit passively on no-man’s land, they are labelled as mentally ill; and if they assert themselves by claiming their rights or showcasing their identity cards, their plight falls on deaf ears and their families are taken into police custody for being ‘illegals’. The women continue to stay on the margins of one country or the other. There is no degree of certainty with which their citizenship can be ascertained by creating new norms and documents for shared histories dating back thousands of years. The media headlines for each of these cases have further exacerbated their vulnerabilities and perpetuated the wider disparaging sentiments towards ‘illegal’ Bangladeshi women in India as well as the internal ‘other’. How do we conceptualise justice for Zohra, Felani and the woman in the red *sari*, who are now shunned into absolute silence in the way they are represented by the media as well as the structural violence inflicted by the state?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Terms used in this paragraph has been compiled using the different news articles. See Singh 2020, Deb 2020, Mazumdar 2020, The Wire 2020, Chakraborty 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Amiya Ghosh was charged under the Indian Penal Code Section 304 i.e., culpable homicide not amounting to murder. In other words, having no knowledge that the act in all probability would cause death or ‘unintentional killing’.

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