



ESSAY
SPECIAL ISSUE

A Cordon Sanitaire at the India–Bangladesh Border

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This commentary considers the effects of COVID-19 on the borderland communities of Meghalaya, a hill state in Northeast India. Efforts to fence this border have failed to deter informal exchanges with Bangladeshi neighbours, but the national COVID-19 lockdown looks set to shift locals into relations of dependency on and within the nation's borders, rather than across them.

Introduction

Perched high in the treetops of the Indian village of Mawlynnong are platforms built from local bamboo, from which the verdant plains of Bangladesh are visible approximately three kilometres distant.¹ This village, like others nearby, is dotted with such treetop vantage points, popularly known as 'Bangladesh View Points', and frequented by droves of Indian tourists every year. The vista is simple: the canopy of

the forest surrounding the village ends with India at the divide between hill and plain, while beyond lies Bangladesh. Here, ethnic and national identities have been determined and ascribed by geography. Now, political and epidemiological events are accentuating this geographical division, with COVID-19 cordoning populations off from one another.



Underlying Conditions

The India–Bangladesh border is a colonial carving that bisects the land lying between the respective provincial capitals of Shillong in India, and Sylhet in Bangladesh. Originally an administrative boundary demarcating a division between the hills of Meghalaya and plains of Sylhet, it transformed into a national border following the separation of Sylhet from Assam in 1947, as the former became part of East Pakistan and the latter India. Yet the geographical basis for this boundary did not prevent movement across it, which ensured that the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo peoples inhabiting the southern flanks of Meghalaya's hills remained far more closely connected to the people of the plains than to their brethren at higher altitudes,

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let alone distant Delhi. The presence of informal yet regular markets at various points along the border shows these connections persist into the present.

These informal markets demonstrate the restricted view the state has of its own edges. It officially banned this local "international" trade forty years previously, so in the eyes of those watching the border from Delhi, such regular cross-border exchanges do not exist. Official transit across this border necessitates copious paperwork earnestly recorded in authoritative documents that will ultimately ascend to form the nation's statistics collated in Delhi itself. Numerous agents, the Border Security Force (BSF), customs, and police, represent the state at formal border crossings and along the boundary (Boyle and Rahman 2018). On the ground, however, the situation is suppler; away from official crossings, locals engage in regular exchanges across the border with the full connivance of both the BSF and their Bangladeshi equivalents, who are rewarded for acceding to and securing the market.

This local bartering is supplemented by other trades which attract greater official attention from both BSF and state. Drugs, guns and counterfeit currency join bovine border-crossers in being shuffled across this boundary, which for many years also sheltered some of the many insurgent groups operating in India's Northeast. Nevertheless, the impetus for the ongoing construction of a fence along the full length of Meghalaya's border with Bangladesh, across 445 kilometres of frequently inhospitable terrain, stems from broader national narratives regarding the pervasiveness and dangers of illegal Bangladeshi migration effectively tapping into the fears of Meghalaya's resident tribal populations over migration into the state (Mcduie-Ra 2014).² The overlapping edges of the Meghalayan body politic and Indian territory are thus experienced as intensely "sensitive space" (Cons 2016), and currently 320 kilometres of this border has apparently been fenced in one form or another.³

The War sub-tribe of the Khasis reside in the foothills of the India-Bangladesh borderland where the authors conduct their fieldwork, and dominate Mawlynnong, a small village of about 120 households. Pestilence, or *khlam* in the local Khasi language, is not a novel experience here. Locals recollect an episode of *khlam* decades back, which necessitated removing all domesticated animals out of the village to a communal pen in the forest, located down towards the India-Bangladesh border. When a tarmac road finally connected this village to the main state highway in the mid-2000s, tourism flourished as Mawlynnong was branded the 'cleanest village in Asia'. The recent flow of visitors inspired by accounts of the neatness and cleanliness of the village were unwittingly responding to a community shaped by disease. The potential of epidemiology to shape space for broader social and economic forces is one that has re-emerged in recent months.

Symptomatic Treatment

India announced the implementation of a nationwide COVID-19 lockdown on March 24, 2020. The immediate, visible, and scrutinized effect of halting economic activity was to trigger an enormous internal migration, as some 100 million Indians sought to return from their places of work to their home villages (Baas 2020). In this borderland, however, the lockdown worked as intended. Villages along the border imposed their own fractal versions of national policy, severing communications with neighbouring villages and halting movement within their areas. This was implemented at the village level rather than through federal institutions, who have neither the authority nor infrastructure to enforce such a drastic curtailment of mobility in the area. Instead, the state government of Meghalaya relays the imposition of the lockdown to the Autonomous Governing Councils which co-ordinate local tribal administration within the state. These Councils communicate with the *Sordars*, traditional leaders representing a series of villages, who are then responsible for seeing its implementation in the villages under their jurisdiction, through village units locally known as *dorbarshnong*.

A COVID-triggered transformation of rural villages into literally 'gated' communities has been one visible in other countries (Liu and Bennet 2020). In the Meghalayan Hills, though, there has been no need for recourse to physical barriers to manage movement. Nor is "intimate surveillance" in the borderlands a technologically sophisticated operation: compliance is secured through direct social pressure rather than indirect social stigma or the "selfie governance" that results from the introduction of facial recognition systems to quarantine apps (Datta 2020). Despite the recent focus on India's "Smart" borders, the same direct imposition of controls applies here to any movement across the nation's boundaries. The BSF manning the border with Bangladesh received strict orders that the international boundary be immediately sealed, and the market handlers, who ensure the smooth operation of such mercantile spaces through negotiation with the BSF, had no choice but to comply with the government's demands for lockdown. Despite the Indian state's fixation on infrastructural and technological solutions to its "sensitive" boundaries, their management continues to involve the engagement of state representatives with local life (Sur 2019).

The borderland is a space where locals have drawn on resources from both sides of the border, out of sight of the state while under the gaze of its agents. This is reflected in attitudes to the border fencing project, which has been distinctly mixed in the areas we study due to traditional informal market relations with their counterparts in Sylhet as well as land ownership across the border. Closures of village and national borders have severe impacts on local livelihoods dependent

upon tourism or selling produce at border markets. The situation is not entirely novel; past irritations and flare-ups have been cauterized by restricting movement, markets are often put on hold due to border incidents between the BSF and their Bangladeshi counterparts, while changes in border guards every three or four years necessitate fresh negotiations to reopen these market spaces of exchange. The state here is "enacted as much through the reproduction of uncertainty" (Reeves 2014) as enforcement. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has already seen these market spaces of exchange closed for several months.

For villagers, this has influenced their daily lives, particularly diet and seasonal food-preserving practices such as smoking fish, or fermenting betel nuts.⁴ Normally sustained by the movement of vegetables and fish across the border, by June local distress had compelled the state of Meghalaya to announce the distribution of relief to these communities through the market town of Pynursla, 30 kilometres back from the border. Formerly a key node in a regional *transborder* economy (Boyle and Rahman 2019), turning this local market into a site for the distribution of state largesse accelerates the dependence of border villages on the government. In these straightened times, the channels of communication open to villages now travel in only one direction; away from the border. The closure of the border markets and of any other exchanges across the border during this Covid-19 pandemic will enable the state to push through the border-fencing project.

The policy of establishing official border 'haats' to replace traditional informal markets means that this may not sever cross-border exchange entirely (Boyle and Rahman 2018). In these formal institutions, however, local borderland communities are no longer active decision-makers in the functioning of these markets, which are instead manned by the state agencies such as the BSF and Indian Customs. It is not the presence of such figures in the borderlands which is new, but the institutions and structures within which they are embedded. The India-Bangladesh borderland in this part of Meghalaya is being transformed into a space devoted to repelling threats from across the border, rather than interacting across it.

Cordon Sanitaire

The cross-border connections that have sustained life in these regions for decades have been in abeyance since lockdown was announced at the end of March, halted through the combined efforts of the state and its agents and the determination of locals not to allow the spread of COVID-19 within their villages. This exercise on self-restraint has extended to the informal markets that have traditionally preserved the economic autonomy of these borderland areas against both provincial and national centres. Anxiety regarding the

prospect of COVID-19 circulating freely on the other side of the border increases support for the fencing project, which in the circumstances becomes much easier to sell to the population.

The result of local concerns over the transmission of disease is their adoption of the state's blinkers: the border becomes a securitized line preventing the movement of people or goods across it (Ferdoush 2018). In a post-COVID-19 world, for spaces traditionally sustained through exchange across the border, the dependency of these villages on the state will severely limit the potential borderland communities have for negotiating with it. A cordon is created by viewing the world through the lens of the pandemic; this congruence of state and local visions may be effective at responding to the obvious threat, but at the cost of narrowing political possibilities in its aftermath.

Acknowledgements

Our fieldwork on which this article is based has been funded by Kyushu University's Short-term International Research Exchange Program and a JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP16K17071.

Notes

- 1 The authors of this piece have made regular visits to this particular village for five years, as part of a decades-long engagement with this borderland region by one of them. Methodologically, the piece uses interviews and news reports to build upon the extensive ethnographic observation conducted prior to lockdown.
- 2 In March earlier this year, the death of a Khasi man in a clash with non-tribal villagers down near the Bangladesh border led to the stabbing of non-Tribal residents in the provincial capital of Shillong. See <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/citizenship-amendment-act-caa-meghalaya-violence-simply-put-6301430/>
- 3 See: <https://shillongtoday.com/certain-pockets-of-indo-bangla-border-in-meghalaya-fence-from-zero-line-sangma/>
- 4 While the Khasi community prefers to smoke its fish, Bengali communities dry theirs in the sun. On the other hand, Bangladeshi villagers on the other side of the border buy raw betel nuts from Meghalaya and dry them to make 'supari', while the Khasis ferment raw betel nuts over a couple of months at least, to accentuate their intoxicating properties. All of this smoking and drying and fermenting happens during the summer months, and has been disrupted by lockdown. Neither fish nor betel nuts are coming across the border this year.

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