

Malini Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India–Bangladesh Border*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780812252798 (cloth); ISBN: 9780812224788 (paper)

Geographers, and particularly political geographers, have long been interested in questions around borders, boundaries, sovereignty, territory, and citizenship. The work on borders has evolved considerably within our discipline, with diverse methods and concepts used to analyse them. Scholars are attentive to the performativity and social production of borders, to their porosity, the practices of sovereignty outside the state, and the varied nature of borders and bordering across the world (Megoran 2012; Paasi et al. 2022). It is not only a violent site of state formation, but also a space where lives are lived, upended, and reshaped through shifts in social, political, cultural, and economic practices.

Malini Sur’s book, *Jungle Passports*, is a bold text that explores and expands on these themes through an exquisite biography and ethnography of the India–Bangladesh boundary along the Northeastern Indian states of Assam and Meghalaya. The partition of 1947 that cleaved British India into the states of India and Pakistan, and the later creation of the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971, has had lasting implications for the geopolitics of the region. Borders are ambiguous, ever-shifting due to the ecologically fragile landscape. They disappear and reappear, and are shaped and marked through physical and social infrastructures. Yet, this space is also highly securitised, and this combination of ambiguity and securitisation causes political anxiety to the nation-states that strive to strengthen it, anxiety that bleeds into the everyday lives both of people inhabiting the immediate borderlands, and also of those living far away from them.

Sur is an anthropologist, and in this monograph she draws our attention to how the border comes into being through four key elements – ecologies, infrastructures, exchanges, and mobilities – which, she notes, “shape the force of life and loss at the Northeast India–Bangladesh border” (p.6). The book weaves together a rich ethnography and critical archival work, conducted first between 2007 and 2008, and later through intermittent trips from 2013

until 2015, living in remote villages on both sides of the border. This is no easy task as the border is heavily militarised, and the author herself reflects of the impacts on this at various points through the book.

Sur notes that the book is:

about an in-between period when India started replacing old boundary structures with a new multilayered fence along its borders with Bangladesh. It specifically explores the diverse mobilities of people, goods, and animals amid political, historical, and ecological forces at play in the Northeast India–Bangladesh borderland. (p.2)

Sur states that in this “era of global nationalist rhetoric, this book seeks to foreground how the ubiquity of border infrastructures that seek to resolve issues of national citizenship and migrant ‘illegality’ establishes their indeterminacy of purpose” (p.3). In other words, despite the continuous investments in border infrastructures, and attempts to control the mobilities of people and places, these are continuously breached, creating grey zones along borderlands. Indeed, through six chapters, each of which engages with a different aspect of border making and border living such as infrastructures, commodities, gendered mobility, and courts, Sur shows us how the border materialises, not just as a physical barrier, but as a spectre that haunts the lives of people living in this region, continually reshaping their socialities, their mobilities, and their futures. She shows how it functions both as a site of opportunity, but also as one of fear, where military, agriculture, trade, and nature co-exist uneasily with each other.

We begin our journey with her in the first chapter on the Rowmari–Tura Road. Sur’s opening move is a search for the origins of this road that links Rowmari in Bangladesh to Tura, a town in Meghalaya, India. In tracing its emergence, she shows the history of colonisation and racialisation on the northeastern frontier, how its people – particularly the Garos, an indigenous community – were brought under colonial rule and conscripted to build these roads to advance resource extraction for the British. The road now cuts across an

international boundary, becoming a site of different kinds of mobility and surveillance, and continues to shape identities and mobilities, including the racialisation of the Garos. It serves then as an appropriate metaphor for many of the themes that she explores in this book.

In the second chapter, on rice cultivation and nation building, we learn how rice functions as a border apparatus, as an essential commodity but also as an object through which controversial claims to land are staked in a landscape that is ever-shifting. Border communities engaged in rice cultivation were racialised, communalised, and viewed with suspicion by their respective states, leading to their harassment and eviction. “Abandoned” land and harvests were then re-assigned to incoming refugees perceived as sharing communal identities and hence being more loyal to the state. Rice thus is implicated in the acquisition of land, in the racialisation of people, their citizenship, and in the securitisation of the border. For scholars interested in the study of land and agrarian relations, the chapter is illuminating in understanding how the grain becomes embroiled in the cultivation and imposition of identities, securitisation discourses, and the mobility of people. A particularly important issue that the chapter raises is around the question of property and the ways in which it becomes communalised and securitised. Although Sur doesn’t explicitly engage with theories of property, she deftly shows how the possession of property is intimately intertwined with national politics and (in)security.

From a rich and compelling chapter on rice, the narrative shifts to talking about cow smuggling and *fang-fung* in the third chapter. Sur explores the complex capitalist relations that are forged by and transcend borders and fences, and how these in turn affect social and political relations, and exercises of power. *Fang-fung*, a term used commonly in the *chars*,¹ refers to the “both duplicity and dependency” (p.69) that cattle smugglers (mostly men) engage in. These are men who broker the passage of cattle across the India–Bangladesh border, and this practice requires political, social, and economic negotiations that are intermeshed with masculinities. The smuggling of cattle requires careful negotiation with

¹ *Chars* are silty islands that appear and disappear with the shifting courses of the rivers in the Bengal Delta region.

power, and creates a system of patronage and dependency. Thus while these political leaders are often untrustworthy, they are also important figures for villagers' survival. The study of cattle smuggling here is fascinating. India prohibits the export of beef or cattle due to the sacred nature of the animal. This prohibition is what has enabled the trade to flourish in its current form, bringing with it risk, power imbalances, and particular assertions of masculinity. Sur traces the movement of Zebu cattle from Northwestern India to the border with Bangladesh. In doing so, she reveals the porosity of the borders, the complicity of various actors – from body guards to local politicians, smugglers/traders, and villagers themselves – in this trade, and the ways in which the illegality of the cattle trade, especially on the Indian side, translates into inequalities across the border. The cattle trade thus demonstrates many things, including the ways in which border societies play an active role in the precarious trading relationships between countries and how these relationships come to continually shape and reshape social relations across territories.

In the fourth chapter, “Kinship, Identities, and ‘Jungle Passports’”, we see how indigeneity, gender, and religious identity come together to enable border crossings of Garo Christian women between Bangladesh and India. The Garo community and their land are cleaved violently by the border, but kinship ties remain crucial to the community and these are maintained through transborder mobility. Sur takes us on a historical and ethnographic journey of how this comes about, through the mobility of Garo Christian women bringing “export-reject” clothes from Bangladesh to India (p.93). This is an incredibly fascinating chapter packed with different and important elements, and through them Sur highlights the ways in which the border is co-produced by police, border security, and border communities themselves. The state uses the communities for espionage and relies on them to keep peace. In turn, it also allows the passage of women without permits across the international boundary. As Sur eloquently notes, “playful exchanges” between Garo Christian women traders and the male Indian border security guards “made a heavily militarized borderland convivial without displacing the border’s menacing edge” (p.115). She highlights not only the feminisation of mobility across militarised borders, but also the ways in which convivial

practices around the border, between troops and local and indigenous communities – such as the sharing of tea, small talk, and even the development of personal and romantic relationships – that help to carve out a complex life. This intertwining of security, poverty, race, and class is rich and an eye-opening ethnography into the policing of borders themselves.

In the fifth chapter, “Fear, Reverence, and the Fence”, Sur delves into the infrastructures of fear, illuminating how physical border fences materialise and “delimit violent events to a singular political form and temporal frame” (p.121). The strengthening of border infrastructures has now led to the fragmentation of relationships between villagers and soldiers. It has also caused distress to animals, especially elephants that co-habit with villagers in this space. Elephants, frustrated with the increasing encroachment on their habitat, run through the terrain, destroying fields and causing considerable damage to the livelihoods of villagers. Villagers refer to them as *mamas* (maternal uncles) out of respect – the same term they use to describe the soldiers who wreak havoc on livelihoods through border infrastructures and the immobilisation of people. Border crossings become life-threatening, and together with border closures lead to growing poverty and gendered violence. The chapter illustrates the physical and metaphorical mixing of animals and security apparatuses that mould the landscape and the lives of people living here.

Chapter six is titled “Bangladeshi ‘Suspects’ and Indian ‘Citizens’ in Assam” and is an ethnography of the bureaucracy of citizenship claims and production in the “Foreigners Tribunals” in Assam. Those who are targeted here and called up to show evidence of their Indian citizenship are mostly Muslims and some Bengali Hindu refugees from Bangladesh. There is a reliance on “proper”, documentary evidence, though clearly, falsified confessions to being “illegal immigrants” also make their way into courts. The increasing efforts to securitise the border and deport people from India, evident through recent updating of the National Register of Citizens and legislation such as the Citizenship Amendment Act,²

² The Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 confers citizenship to non-Muslim refugees if they migrated before the end of 2014 from specific countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The National Register of Citizens is a record of every citizen of India, mandated by the 2003 Amendment of the 1955 Citizenship Act. It

renders people stateless, divides communities, and sometimes mobilises immigration control to resolve land disputes. Sur shows how class differences define the ways in which people are able to defend themselves – wealthier, educated, and politically connected women, for example, perform better than those who are poorer and lack formal education. Assam’s ethnolinguistic politics also “other” Bengali Hindu refugees. Finally, there are those who don’t turn up, who are listed as “untraceable”, and many of whom are summarily deprived of their citizenship. This untraceability of migrants feeds the populist discourses of illegal migration into Assam. The chapter is a great example of the performativity of the law and courtrooms – mirroring similar work in geography (e.g. Jeffrey and Jakala 2014) – demonstrating how the border comes into being not only through physical infrastructures, but also through the tentacles of courts, documents, and bureaucracies.

Finally, in a short afterword, Sur reminds us that although this border becomes increasingly lethal, it is fundamentally a space of mobility. She returns us to the dual imperatives of containment through border infrastructures and mobility through poverty, desperation, and kinship, that continually mould the uncertain and shifting landscapes of borders. She reminds us that as COVID-19 closes the world off further, mobility can be generative of life itself.

Although the book is a rich and evocative ethnography and biography of the border, in fact it exceeds it. Indeed, each chapter brings a fresh perspective to how the border comes into being, how that shifts and how those living in these spaces negotiate these changes. It shows us how the border creeps into domestic spaces and how colonial and capitalist relations continue to influence territorial formations, mobilities, and social and security practices along the edges of postcolonial states. Although this review engaged each chapter in turn to draw out some of its complex offerings, this doesn’t do the book justice. Indeed, each chapter could be a book in itself as they have much to offer. Equally compelling are the ways in which Sur animates the complex and intertwined lives of security personnel and the border was implemented in Assam between 2013 and 2014 with a final list created in 2019. It identified approximately 1.9 million people as being illegal immigrants in the country and thus subject to either deportation to Bangladesh or detention.

communities, of fear, opportunity, kinship, that transcend the infrastructures of security to shape this landscape. She places herself within this landscape as well, and we come to see how as a researcher, the months of fieldwork have taken a toll on her anxieties and fears as she attempts to do fieldwork in this highly charged environment. This is a must-read for geographers, anthropologists, and other social scientists who are interested in studying borders, mobilities, postcolonial state formation, questions of gender, property, and the performance of the law at the edges of the state.

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