



CROSS BORDER CHALLENGES: UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE ON THE INDIA-BANGLADESH BORDER

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Abstract:

This research examines the various factors contributing to human rights violations in the borders between Bangladesh and India. I analyze the literature on the Bangladesh-India borderlands to answer a few questions regarding the causes of violence. Where is violence the most common? What are some possible solutions? The 4096 km border is shared between Bangladesh and India, and several cross-border concerns affect their bilateral relations. The research outcomes provide light on the characteristics and underlying factors contributing to the cases of deaths among Bangladeshi individuals by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF). To explain the geographical location of violence, an upazila-wise violence map is generated using Geographic Information System (GIS) technology.

Keywords: border violence, border security, India-Bangladesh border, cattle smuggling

1. Introduction

Bangladesh and India share more than just a geographical border; they have also established themselves as significant allies. This strategic partnership has existed since the independence of Bangladesh (Kuthiala, 2021). Because of their historical backgrounds and geographical location, their cultural and social life are similar. Bengali is the predominant language in Bangladesh, West Bengal, and Tripura region. Furthermore, Assam, another Indian state that shares its border with Bangladesh, also hosts a substantial population of Bengali speakers. Notably, these Indian states share a border with Bangladesh (Khan, 2017). Before 1947, both countries were part of the same political entity, resulting in a significant connection between the peoples, particularly in familial relationships. The historical correlation and convenient geographical proximity facilitate the illegal crossing of borders. The large number of illicit border crossings and unlawful

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commercial practices in the immediate border area serve as the main drivers for border violence (Kudrat-E-Khuda & Sarkar, 2015).

Violence is the threat or use of physical force or influence against oneself, someone else, a group of people, or an entire community with the intention of causing harm that results in or is very likely to result in deprivation, injury, psychological harm, death, or other adverse effects (Krug *et al.*, 2002). Border Gourd Bangladesh claims that the illegal livestock trade constitutes the primary obstacle to achieving peace in the border region. In addition to illegal substances, migration poses a further difficulty. India has consistently committed to significantly reducing border killings; however, these assurances are merely words (Abrar, 2023).

There are allegations made by residents asserting that the Border Security Force (BSF) engages in unprovoked incursions into the Bangladeshi territory and perpetrates acts of aggression against civilians. Between 2001 and 2017, 1133 individuals lost their lives in the border area. Additionally, 1054 individuals sustained injuries, 1351 people were subjected to abduction, and 111 people were missing (Odhikar, 2022). It is quite challenging to determine the precise number of deaths due to the lack of accurate information regarding those who are missing. Additionally, the issue of the disappearance of dead bodies is another concern. The Border Security Force (BSF) employs lethal weaponry for causing fatal harm. Indian border security forces have claimed either that suspects were eluding capture or had to use lethal weapons in self-defence (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

The majority of Bangladeshis believe that Indians do not respect human life. Border violence generates hatred in Bangladesh after a few days, which is a major concern. Bangladeshi people always think that the role of India is entirely flawed and incapable of contributing to improving the current situation. The future diplomatic relationship between both countries highly depends on the controversial issue's conclusion (Bhattacharjee, *India: Resolving the Bangladesh Immigration Issue*, 2014). The study's primary goal is to determine the causes of border violence and identify the most violent portion of the Bangladesh-India border.

2. Literature Review

Md. Jaynal Abedin (2021) stated that India has the longest land boundary with Bangladesh, extending across a distance of 4,096 km. This boundary encompasses five states in India, namely West Bengal, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Assam. It crosses varied landscapes, including deep forests, hills, rivers, densely populated urban areas, and agricultural land. Hasan and Bala (2019) wrote that in 1947, when India was partitioned, Cyril Radcliffe arbitrarily drew out the extremely porous Indo-Bangladesh borders. Since establishing these borders, ethnic similarities and interconnected socioeconomic connections have existed on both sides. Eventually, tensions between India and Pakistan worsened as some old disputes stayed and new ones emerged.

UNODC Annual Report (2017) wrote that to address the border disputes and ease tensions between the two countries, the then-prime ministers of India and Bangladesh,

Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, signed a treaty to settle the land boundary dispute in 1974, three years after Bangladesh was independent. Brad Adams authored a report for *The Guardian* (2014) entitled "India's Shoot-to-Kill Policy on the Bangladesh Border," this report underscores instances of lethal force employed by the Border Security Force (BSF), targeting individuals attempting to cross the border. Adams contends that despite the gravity of these incidents, international media coverage remains limited, thereby hindering broader awareness and scrutiny. Furthermore, the article asserts that while India asserts its prerogative in border management, it falls short in effectively safeguarding human lives within its borders. Criticism is directed towards the BSF for its purported use of disproportionate violence, raising concerns about unnecessary force. However, the article refrains from exploring potential solutions to mitigate these issues.

The *Daily Star* (2020) published a report mentioning that the Bangladeshi Home Minister informed parliament that over the past decade, 294 Bangladeshi citizens were killed in encounters with the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) along the border. The Minister provided a breakdown of these casualties, stating that in 2009, 66 Bangladeshi nationals lost their lives, followed by 55 in 2010, 24 in both 2011 and 2012, 18 in 2013, 24 in 2014, 38 in 2015, 25 in 2016, 17 in 2017, and a reduced count of 3 in 2018. This report also indicates that the border regions of the two nations have high population density. A considerable number of individuals residing on both sides have experienced displacement of farmland and loss of livelihood due to riverbank erosion, thereby relying on cross-border engagements, including the illicit activities of cattle rustling and smuggling. Tragically, numerous instances arise wherein individuals are subjected to fatal violence and torture solely based on suspicion of their involvement in smuggling activities.

Additionally, there are reports of children being exploited by smugglers in efforts to mitigate the risk of detection, consequently becoming victims of indiscriminate use of lethal force. In 2020, Al Jazeera released a report stating that Indian border forces had been responsible for the deaths of 25 Bangladeshi individuals within a span of six months, citing Odhikar, a human rights monitoring organization, as their source. Along the extensive 4,096-kilometer (2,545-mile) border, incidents of shootings have occurred as Indian border forces implement their contentious "shoot-on-sight" policy aimed at curbing cattle smuggling and unauthorized crossings from Bangladesh into India. Similar to other journals and reports, there is a lack of specificity regarding the locations where violence predominantly occurs along the border and strategies to mitigate its occurrence.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted based on primary and secondary data sources. Field observation is the primary data source used in this study. In order to examine the settings and the management of borders, the researchers visited four specific border sites, namely Benapole Port, Tamabil Port, Chouddagram, and Lalmonirhat region. The researcher collected data from the local community to understand the most common variables

contributing to instances of violence. Secondary data sources like organizations, literature surveys, and websites have been used for this study. The border violence data was compiled from the Indo-Bangladesh border between 2011 to 2017. Sequential data were gathered from 'Odhikar,' a Human Rights Organization based in Bangladesh (www.odhikar.org), 'Ain O Shalish Kendra' (www.askbd.org), a reputable legal assistance and human rights organization in Bangladesh. Access to the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) administrative data was not attainable. A possible reason is that the India-Bangladesh border is a region of heightened sensitivity. To produce a border violence geo-database, the study used Google Earth Pro and Mouza maps. After producing the database, the study used QGIS 3.16.15 software for georeferencing and digitization.

4. Factors Behind Border Violence

Bangladesh and India share the third-longest and most deadly border in the world. Any form of violence, particularly on an international boundary between two nations, is referred to as border violence. Both sides have claimed several reasons for this unethical death. However, our analysis focuses on the primary cause of border violence.

4.1 Cattle Smuggling

The primary cause of border violence between Bangladesh and India is cattle smuggling. The cow holds significant religious devotion in India, where most people adhere to Hinduism. On the other hand, in Muslim-majority Bangladesh, beef is considered one of the primary protein sources. Muslim individuals engage in the ritualistic act of sacrificing livestock as an expression of devotion to the Almighty during the sacred festival known as Eid-Ul-Azha (Hassan & Bala, 2019). Cattle originating from Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and western Uttar Pradesh are illicitly transported over 1500 km from the border. The annual value of livestock trafficking between Bangladesh and India is nearly one billion dollars. In India, the price of a mature buffalo is Rs50000, whereas, in the neighboring country of Bangladesh, it sells at around 150,000. The profit margin makes it lucrative to smuggle and recruit economically disadvantaged and unemployed young individuals who serve as intermediaries for transporting livestock across the border (Javed & Mahato, 2023).

The fact that livestock smuggling is seen differently in the two countries is a significant obstacle to solving the problem. In India, cattle smuggling is considered a criminal action, although it is not in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has established a legislative framework allowing individuals to acquire livestock by remitting a fee to the customs department. India's Border Security Forces (BSF) reported that livestock smugglers attacked approximately 16 BSF personnel in 2020. In order to ensure security, the Border Security Force (BSF) uses lethal weaponry, which, unfortunately, has resulted in deaths (Bhattacharjee, Locking horns at the border, 2023).

However, the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Indian Customs Authority are involved in cattle smuggling. Evidence suggests that the number of seized livestock at the border was inaccurately represented, showing less than their actual count.

Additionally, they decrease the value of seized cattle in auctions. Dealers purportedly provided a sum of Rs 2000 per head of cattle to Border Security Force (BSF) officials and Rs500 to customs officials. In addition, it is noteworthy that customs officers would levy a 10% fee on the auction price paid by successful bidders (Hindustan Times, 2020).

4.2 Illegal Migration and Human Trafficking

In South Asia, illegal immigration is a contentious topic. Indian officials assert that it significantly contributes to increased border violence. In 2004, Mr Sriprakash Jaiswal, the Minister of State Home Affairs, gave an address in parliament regarding illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators in India. According to his statement, the estimated number of such infiltrators exceeded 12 million, with West Bengal being the state with the highest count of approximately 5.7 million (Jamwal, 2004). On the other hand, according to the Indian Census Report 2001, the recorded number of individuals residing in India who originated from Bangladesh was around 3,084,826 (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2001). In 2019, The National Register of Citizens (NRC) was published in Assam, wherein the state governance asserted that over 1.97 million persons residing in Assam were considered illegal, with a significant proportion originating from Bangladesh (Ngaihte, 2019). *“In Bangladesh, even the per capita income is comparatively higher than in India. There is no possibility of moving to India.”* Foreign Minister Abdul Momen expressed comments after the release of the Assam NRC report (The Daily Star, 2019).

It is well known that human trafficking is still happening at an alarming pace. Cross-border trafficking has developed into a political and social issue that requires quick attention.

Annually, an estimated 50,000 girls from Bangladesh are victims of trafficking, either within India or as they are being transported through the country, and in the decade, over 5 lakh Bangladeshi women and children between the ages of 12 and 30 have been brought in this way (Chauhan, 2018).

4.3 Illegal Drug Business

An intelligence analysis states that the primary sources of drug supply to Bangladesh are the 40 or so illegal drug factories in the India-Bangladesh border regions. Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) have expressed worries and urged the Indian government to shut down such enterprises (Dhaka Tribune, 2023). In recent years, there has been a decline in cattle smuggling into Bangladesh; however, the trafficking of narcotic drugs and psychiatric substances, such as yaba tablets and phensedyl, cannabis (ganja), opium, and heroin, has seen an alarming increase. The 900-long border with South West Bengal is particularly vulnerable to drug smuggling. From 2020 to 2023, the Border Security Force (BSF) seized at least 1.2 million bottles of phensedyl, a widely used cough syrup intended for illegal transportation to Bangladesh. In addition, the authorities confiscated 198 kilograms of gold (Thakur & Parashar, 2022).

Table 1: Upazila Wise Violence Data (2011-2017)

District	Upazila	Deaths occurred in 2011-2017	District	Upazila	Deaths occurred in 2011-2017
Satkhira	Satkhira sadar	11	Kurigram	Kaliganj	3
	Kalaroa	4		Phulbari	6
	Debhata	4		Raomari	8
Chuandanga	Damurhuda	7	Rajshahi	Bhurangimari	4
	Jibannagar	4		Charhat	1
Jessore	Sharsa	24	Naogaon	Paba	6
Meherpur	Mojibnagar	1		Godagari	3
		Gangni	1	Porsha	2
Jhenaidah	Maheshpur	16	Chapainababganj	Sapahar	9
Kustia	Dualatpur	5		Dhamoirhat	2
Dinajpur	Birampur	7	Jaipurhat	Nababganj sadar	3
	Biral	2		Shibganj	20
	Fulbaria	4		Bholahat	1
	Dinajpur sadar	4		Gomostapur	7
	Hakimpur	1		Jaipurhat Sadar	3
Thakurgaon	Baliadangi	12	Panchbibi	3	
	Haripur	11	Jamalpur	Dewanganj	1
	Pirganj	1	Netrokona	Durgapur	1
	Ranisankail	1	Sherpur	Jhenaigati	1
Panchagarh	Tetulia	4	Sylhet	Jointapur	1
	Panchagrh Sadar	4		Companiganj	1
Lalmonirhat	Patgram	17	Sunamganj	Gowainghat	1
	Hatibandha	6		Tahirpur	1
	Aditmari	2	Cumilla	Chouddagram	1
	Lalmonirhat Sadar	1			

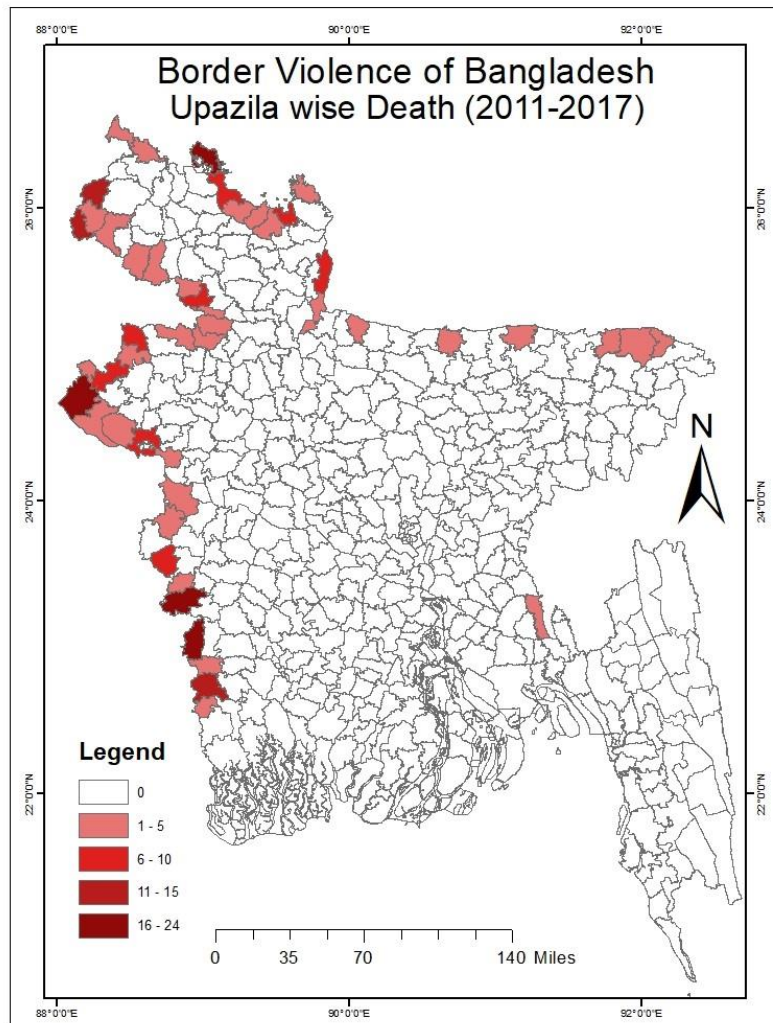
Source: Daily newspaper archives (2011-2017) about border violence, Ain O Salish Kendra.

5. Unveiling the Realities: Findings from the India-Bangladesh Border Violence Study

5.1 Border Conflict Mapping: Identifying Hotspots of Violence

Our study uncovered a complex landscape of border violence characterized by a variety of incidents. We identified geographical hotspots of violence on the border through detailed mapping and analysis. The majority of reporting and news sources often neglect to mention the specific regions where incidents of border violence are most frequent. Instances of border violence are unlikely to occur in sparsely populated areas. The upazila-wise border violence map reveals that most violence occurs along the border between Bangladesh and West Bangla. The most frequently violated border is found near a land port, where tourists or goods cross the border. Sharsa upazila serves as a notable exemplification of this phenomenon. The largest land port on the Indo-Bangladesh border, known as Benapole port, is located in the region of Sarsha. This region is easily accessible from both countries. Benapole is adjacent to Satkhira Sadar and Maheshpur Upazila, another violated area. The same assessment applies to the other most violated areas.

Figure 1: Bangladesh's upazila-wise border violence



Source: QGIS 3.16.15

5.2 BGB: Silent Audience

In this case, BGB ignores the offense. Others claimed that BGB helped Bangladeshi citizens. However, these activities were often only taken in response to the shooting death of a Bangladeshi person and consisted of holding a flag meeting with the BSF. The primary responsibility of the Bangladeshi Border Guards is to ensure the protection of its citizens and prevent the occurrence of illicit activities. However, it has been unsuccessful in accomplishing any of these objectives. However, this institution has undergone a process of corruption and has now become a platform for supporting illicit trade, leading to a significant decline in the reputation of Bangladesh.

5.3 Inactive role of NGO

The websites of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh provide substantial statistical data and research papers on border killings. They serve as the leading spokespersons against these acts of torture and have a significant role in shaping the view of India and the Border Security Force (BSF). Nevertheless, their involvement in

ground activities could be much higher. The majority of individuals asserted that they had yet to receive assistance from government departments or any non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Some people have claimed that members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have just done interviews without offering any form of assistance. This claim demonstrates that although NGOs claim to be working on the issue, most of their efforts are not centered on the requirements of the victims. A significant portion of their efforts primarily focus on advocacy, which may not provide immediate results for those victims.

5.4 Impact on Bangladesh-India Relations

Bangladesh and India, as neighboring nations, have a substantial assortment of issues. Border violence creates another point of concern. As stated, people have family or friends on both sides of the border. Thus, it is nearly impossible to prevent illegal crossing. The primary cause for the negative sentiment towards India among people and politicians in Bangladesh is the incidents of border violence. The government of Bangladesh consistently urges the Indian authorities to avoid using lethal weaponry.

6. Proposals for Action: Mitigating Border Violence Risks

- People crossing the border illegally to see their relatives or friends do not go far from the border. In the Indo-Myanmar border, India has implemented a Freedom of Movement Regime (FMG), which permits local residents along both sides of the line to travel across the border within a radius of 16 km into the neighboring country without requiring a visa. It is recommended that both Bangladesh and India consider implementing this method along their shared border.
- The prohibition of the use of lethal weaponry at borderlines is crucial. The Border Security Force (BSF) defended their shoot-to-kill policy by citing the potential threat to their own lives, although the individuals killed were found unarmed. Both sides must collaborate to create a mutually acceptable agreement to ban lethal weaponry along the border effectively.
- Cattle have been transported over long distances away from the border. No Bangladeshis were involved in smuggling livestock or its transportation to India. Therefore, Indian authorities must stop cattle smuggling in their territories. It is not a solution that kills Bangladeshi paddlers who cross cattle to the border.
- All claims of violation by BSF should be investigated and prosecuted by an impartial and independent commission, which will be operated under the auspices of the United Nations. This investigation should invite Indians and Bangladeshis to provide evidence and file charges. The study should have a specific duration, be transparent, and be able to protect participants.
- The United Nations could send a clear message to BSF that the accused must fully cooperate in the investigation, and those responsible for severe human rights violations will be punished. Those who fail to comply should be subject to appropriate punishments such as demotion or termination.

7. Conclusion

The cross-border murder of innocent people in Bangladesh grossly violates human rights. The research argues that the practice of border killings has become a crucial indication of human rights violations through the Bangladesh-India border. Border violence poses a significant obstacle to the constructive advancement of bilateral ties. So, enhancing the overall fundamental rights at the borders is an urgent requirement. Therefore, the Indian authorities have not fulfilled their commitment to stop border killings. Bangladesh and India should work together to increase protests against human rights abuses along the border and implement specific steps to end cross-border violence.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Saikat Hossain received a BSc in Geography and Environment from Jahangirnagar University and completed his MSc from the same department. He has a strong interest in Human Geography.

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