ASIA MAIOR

US-China Competition, COVID-19 and Democratic Backsliding in Asia

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Migration, Borders, and Security Discourses in the time of COVID-19:
The case of migration from Bangladesh to India

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Migration has taken place throughout human history and continues to do so in the 21ˢᵗ century. In many recent instances, states that are destination of migration flows framed migration as a security issue, i.e. a threat to their citizens' livelihood, safety, and cultural identity. Discourses that securitize migration, thus criminalising immigrants, are not unique to the US and the EU, nor to South-North migration: they pertain to South-South migration as well. This article draws attention to a case of migration and border securitisation from the global South: the one concerning India-bound informal migration originating from Bangladesh. This, incidentally, is also the country of origin of large numbers of migrants that have made their way to Europe during the last decade. This article asks what are the consequences of a securitized approach in the framing and managing of borders and migration, and whether such consequences are worth or at all affordable to the countries involved in the securitisation. The article assesses the potential impact that securitized discourses have on Indo-Bangladeshi relations, as well as on the domestic politics of India and Bangladesh. It reviews the processes of the securitisation of the India-Bangladesh border and the criminalisation of the Bangladeshi migrants in India's contemporary domestic politics with reference to recent (2019-2021) events and current affairs.

1. *Introduction*

Bangladesh makes international headlines in relation to selected critical issues: its remarkable economic performance and recent graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status; the Rohingya repatriation crisis continuing against the backdrop of genocide in neighbouring Myanmar; climate change; and migration.

A young and densely populated nation, Bangladesh is a country of migration, including internal migration, immigration, and emigration.[1]

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1. On the Bengal Muslim diaspora, see: Claire Alexander, Joya Chatterji & Annu Jalais, *The Bengal Diaspora: Rethinking Muslim Migration*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

Emigration is both formal and informal, and directed towards various destinations in Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and beyond. When it comes to formal emigration, the Gulf states historically receive the largest numbers of Bangladeshi workers whose contract jobs support their families back home as well as the national economy, for which remittances remain of vital importance. Informal migratory flows, on the other hand, are directed towards multiple destinations, including Southeast Asian countries and Europe. For example, as frequently reported in the news from Europe in recent years, undocumented Bangladeshi migrants increasingly reach the European Union via various routes, including the notorious Italy- and Malta-bound ones that have migrants crossing the Central Mediterranean from North Africa, subject to the exploitation of human traffickers and at times to the cost of their lives.[2]

Historically, neighbouring India has been a traditional destination for Bangladesh-originated informal emigration. With a much larger landmass, a larger economy, and embracing Bangladesh on all sides (except to the South, where Bangladesh meets the Bay of Bengal and Myanmar), to date India remains a relevant destination for Bangladeshi migrants.

As much as migration is a common occurrence in human history, contemporary politics have seen the securitisation of migration and borders across the globe. Securitising discourses are not limited to South-North migration but are very much common to South-South migration as well. The India-Bangladesh border and Bangladesh-originated India-bound migration provide cases in point. In India, migration of different types – state-to-state migration internal to the Union; economic immigration originating from outside of India; immigration of asylum seekers – has been politicized for decades at the state, sub-regional, and national levels. At the moment, irregular migration from Bangladesh is a hot political issue in the states of the East and Northeast, and at the national level as well. Its politicisation is not new but decades old. However, the relevance of «migration» and «borders» and the securitized discourse surrounding them received new impetus following the introduction of divisive laws like India's National Register of Citizens (NRC) and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) since 2019 and inflammatory migration-centred electoral campaigning in the same years. These are but aspects of India's current Hindu nationalist turn that has

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2. The pandemic has further increased the already critical vulnerability of undocumented migrants in their journey. However, in Europe arrivals have continued throughout the 2019-2021 period. Bangladesh features as the country of origin of large numbers of them, especially along the Central Mediterranean route whose first port of arrival is Italy. For example, on 8 May 2021, in the largest arrival of the year so far, some 1,400 migrants reached the Italian shores, most of them having reportedly started their journey in nearby Tunisia, in the Ivory Coast, or Bangladesh. See: 'Migrants from Bangladesh among Top Groups Arriving on Italian Island', *InfoMigrants*, 10 May 2021; 'Bangladesh Top Source Country for Migrants Making Unsafe Sea Voyages to Europe', *Anadolu Agency*, 18 August 2021.

transformed India's political landscape in an openly anti-secular and Is-
lamophobic sense.[3]

Based on the case of irregular migration across the India-Bangladesh
border – India-bound migration in particular – this paper asks: what are
the humanitarian and political costs of framing and managing migration
through a securitized lens? The paper argues that the pursuit of a securitized
approach in the framing and management of migration carries important
repercussions on the domestic politics of both countries as well as for their
bilateral relations. The Indian government's demonisation of «the Bangla-
deshi immigrant», now supported by the CAA-NRC, is set to worsen frac-
tures along religious and ethnic lines at a time when identity politics have
turned dangerously dominant and divisive. Moreover, India's securitized
discourses and policies are met with criticism in Bangladesh and work to the
detriment of India's reputation as a friendly and reliable neighbour. The re-
sult has been the deterioration of a relationship that – although not without
problems – has been praised by the two governments as exemplary for more
than a decade. Last but not least, India's securitized discourses and policies
have the potential to adversely impact politics in Bangladesh as well, cast-
ing a shadow on the government's perceived pro-India stance. This comes
at a time when the government party, Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, faces
strong criticism from both liberals and conservatives due to its growing au-
thoritarianism. However, its main challengers are the increasingly assertive
Islamists, who have been vocal (and violent) in expressing their dislike for
an India now seen as openly Islamophobic.

The paper proceeds as follows. It first reviews the historical processes
that produced the securitisation of the India-Bangladesh border as well as the
criminalisation of the Bangladeshi migrant in the politics of contemporary
India. In doing so, it considers relevant recent events – including bilateral
ministerial meetings, state visits, elections, laws, instances of border violence
– which have taken place in the years 2019-2021. These developments over-
lapped in time with the COVID-19 pandemic, and in some cases interacted
with it. Lastly, the paper assesses the potential impact that such securitized
discourse around immigration can have on Indo-Bangladeshi relations, as
well as on the domestic politics of Bangladesh. In the first place, however,
because of the paper's frequent reference to securitisation, a concise overview
of the concept and the debate on its causes and consequences is in order.

3. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democ-
racy: building a kingdom of cruelty and fear', *Asia Maior*, XXX/2019, pp. 345-395;
Diego Maiorano, 'India 2019: The general election and the new Modi wave', *Asia
Maior*, XXX/2019, pp. 327-344; Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India
2020: The deepening crisis of democracy', *Asia Maior*, XXXI/2020, pp. 331-375;
Diego Maiorano, 'Democratic backsliding amid the COVID-19 pandemic in India',
paper presented at the conference *US-China competition, COVID-19, and democratic
backsliding in Asia*, EUI, Florence, 27 September 2021.

2. A theoretical framework on the benefits and costs of the securitisation of migration

«Securitisation of migration» indicates the application of the concept of «securitisation», which was firstly developed by the Copenhagen School, to the study of migration. Accordingly, security threats are not objective but socially constructed. The process of securitisation is undertaken by a political actor which constructs the threat as existential and exceptional, i.e. as endangering survival and requiring an intervention via extraordinary means. Hence, securitisation justifies the adoption of extraordinary measures by the actor that constructs the threat and commits to manage it.[4] While securitisation was originally conceived as a process driven by speech – i.e. defining a security threat by a speech act – other authors have highlighted that securitisation can also be driven by practices.[5]

Scholars of migration have shown that securitising migration can negatively affect various stakeholders, including the securitising state, which is supposedly its primary beneficiary. Securitisation presents the state with obvious advantages, i.e. increasing its legitimacy and justifying the undertaking of exceptional measures. However, it can also create new challenges for the state, i.e. having to manage conflicting demands; to deliver what promised; and losing credibility in light of human rights concerns.[6] According to Boswell, this explains why, in some cases, states have either rhetorically committed to securitisation but avoided translating their pledge into stringent policies, or outsourced migration control to other countries, like in the case of the EU.[7] Most recent scholarship on the EU case drew attention to the negative consequences that the securitisation of migration had on its relations with third countries. For instance, based on the case of the EU and Jordan, Seeberg and Zardo argue that securitisation led to the increasing informalisation of EU-third countries agreements.[8] Similarly, Webb demonstrates that it enabled non-EU countries to alter power relations and extract significant political concessions from the EU.[9] Overall, this scholarship suggests that the securitising actor, in this case the state, does

4. Barry Buzan, Ole O. Wæver & Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

5. Sarah Léonard & Christian Kaunert, 'The securitisation of migration in the European Union: Frontex and its evolving security practices', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Online First, 2020.

6. Christina Boswell, 'The Securitisation of Migration: A Risky Strategy for European States', *Danish Institute of International Studies*, 2007.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Peter Seeberg & Federica Zardo, 'From Mobility Partnerships to Migration Compacts: Security Implications of EU-Jordan Relations and the Informalization of Migration Governance', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Online First, 2020.

9. Jonathan Webb, 'The 'Refugee Crisis' and Its Transformative Impact on EU-Western Balkans Relations', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Online First, 2020.

not necessarily gain from choosing a securitising approach in migration management; instead, it might incur disadvantages in terms of its domestic affairs and its international relations.

Obviously, the state is not the only actor whose interests are at stake when migration is securitized. Consequences at the humanitarian level, often neglected in the state's decision-making, are critical to securitized migration, weighting most heavily on irregular migrants. Scholars have documented the increased humanitarian risk attached to irregular migration and driven by border fatalities, detention, and other practices that have produced the securitisation of migration in various regions of the world.[10]

The fact that having borders «sealed» fails to reduce migratory flows but is likely to increase the leverage of human traffickers – as demonstrated by the case of the US-Mexican[11] and the EU[12] borders – suggests that securitisation is not just inefficient but also inhumane as a strategy. Furthermore, another effect of securitisation that caused serious humanitarian concerns has been the outsourcing of migration management to third countries pursued by the EU. Since the Union failed to formulate a migration policy due to disagreement among member states, it resorted to what Panebianco defined as «borders' control by proxy» – that is «delegating migration management to third actors with an open mandate»[13] – with no concern for the guarantee of human rights. The human cost of such a policy has been known for years, as demonstrated by the ghastly news emerging from Libyan detention centres and the testimonies of those who survived them. In all, this body of literature demonstrates that framing migration as a *security*

10. Jørgen Carling, 'Migration control and migrant fatalities at the Spanish-African borders', *International Migration Review*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2007; Raymond Michalowski, 'Border militarisation and migrant suffering: A case of transnational social injury', *Social Justice*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2007; Stefanie Grant, 'Recording and identifying European frontier deaths', *European Journal of Migration and Law*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2011; Leanne Weber & Sharon Pickering, *Globalization and borders: Death at the global frontier*, London: Palgrave, 2011; Melissa Bull *et al.*, 'Sickness in the system of long-term immigration detention', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2013; Alison Gerard & Sharon Pickering, 'Crimmigration: criminal justice, refugee protection and the securitisation of migration', in Bruce Arrigo & Heather Bersot (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of International Crime and Justice Studies*, London: Routledge, 2013.

11. Rob T. Guerette & Rob V. Clarke, 'Border enforcement: Organized crime and deaths of smuggled migrants on the United States–Mexico border', *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2005; Maria Jimenez, 'Humanitarian crisis: Migrant deaths at the US–Mexico border', *American Civil Liberties Council of San Diego and Imperial Counties, Mexico's National Commission of Human Rights*, 2009.

12. Valeria Bello, *International Migration and International Security. Why Prejudice is a Global Security Threat*, New York: Routledge, 2017.

13. Stefania Panebianco, 'The EU and Migration in the Mediterranean: EU Borders' Control by Proxy', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Online First, 2020, p. 14.

crisis has the likely effect of aggravating it as a *humanitarian* crisis, in which irregular migrants are the main victims.

Scholars tend to agree that the securitisation trend has gained momentum after 9/11 and other terrorist attacks of Islamist matrix that took place in the US and Europe. At the same time, securitisation is not exclusive to South-North migration, as proved by the case of India and Bangladesh. Indeed, securitisation seems to remain the main prism through which migration is currently framed; the EU, which in the mid-2010s was theatre to one of the worst migration «crises» of contemporary times, perhaps now offers a potential exception. Panebianco has argued that there has been an appreciable change in the EU's migration discourse stemming from the European Council, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic. The change consists in the programmatic promotion of a «human and humane approach» that emphasizes the EU's duty to ensure its citizens' interests but also extends solidarity to migrants. This new discourse substitutes the notion of «border control» with «border management» and stands in stark contrast with the securitized discourse filled with exceptionalism, urgency, and migrant criminalisation which had turned mainstream during the mentioned «migration crisis» of less than a decade ago.[14] The adoption of EU's *New Pact on Migration and Asylum* in September 2020 feeds such hopes, although it remains to be seen how proactive members states will be in its implementation. The EU's new human security-based paradigm, at least at the discursive level, appears in stark contrast with other enduring securitising approaches, such as the one emanating from the Indian state, which keeps revolving around notions of state and national security, and whose «costs» and «benefits» this paper attempts to assess in light of recent (2019-2021) developments.

3. *India as a destination of irregular migration*

Why should Bangladeshis search for better livelihoods elsewhere, particularly in neighbouring India, leaving a country that has successfully graduated from LDC status and is considered Asia's rising star?[15] This is what many

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14. Stefania Panebianco, 'Towards a Human and Humane Approach? The EU Discourse on Migration amidst the Covid-19 Crisis', *International Spectator*, Vol. 56, No. 2 , 2021.

15. Graduation from LDC (Least Developed Country) status marks an important milestone for Bangladesh's development trajectory, its image, and its political leadership. Having met all the prescribed requirements, in November 2021, Bangladesh was recommended by the United Nations' ECOSOC and endorsed by the General Assembly to officially graduate in 2026. See: United Nations General Assembly, 'Graduation of Bangladesh, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Nepal from the least developed country category', A/RES/76/8, 29 November 2021 (https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3950012?ln=en).

Indians ask, not without disdain for a smaller and younger neighbour that has recently outperformed India as the fastest growing economy in South Asia on some other development indicators as well.[16] Indian right-wing and anti-immigration politicians have voiced such concern strongly, thus branding illegal immigration from Bangladesh as a threat. Besides, while emphasising the size of immigration from Bangladesh, they cast a shadow on the country's economic trajectory, as emigration is seen as a sign of the inability of Bangladesh's much praised development to have a real positive impact on its people's lives.

On the other hand, the Bangladeshi government has repeatedly stated that the idea that its citizens emigrate to India illegally and in large numbers is a flawed one, and used the country's economic growth rates as evidence. Foreign Minister Abdul Momen has been particularly vocal in rebutting allegations: «The perception that a lot of Bangladeshis are moving to India is not true because Bangladesh is doing pretty well… It is the land of opportunity; it is a vibrant economy. When the economy is good, people will not move out of the country. So that perception is wrong».[17] Thus, while countering Indian accusations, the Bangladeshi government also defends the country's development success story, as central to the history of the Bangladeshi nation as to the legitimacy of the ruling party, the Awami League.

Reality is more nuanced and complex than either of the two official narratives. Undoubtedly, the country's development trajectory has been stunning, and it has managed to lift millions out of poverty. However, the wealth deriving from economic growth has not reached all in equal measure; instead, it has come to a high cost for many of those who have made it possible. Although Bangladesh's economy has experienced remarkably steady growth and maintained relatively high GDP growth rates (even during the pandemic), inequality remains an issue, as sections of the population become wealthier while many of those already in poverty become poorer.[18] In addition to this, climate change threatens already fragile livelihoods in rural Bangladesh and has emerged as an additional push factor for internal migration and emigration.[19] Furthermore, the country is among

16. 'India Struggles but Bangladesh's GDP Rides High on Manufacturing, Export Boom', *Business Today*, 30 October 2019.

17. '«Bangladeshis Aren't Termites» — FM Abdul Momen Says Idea of Illegal Immigration to India Wrong', *The Print*, 27 March 2021.

18. Silvia Tieri, 'Bangladesh 2019-2020: Issues of Democracy, Disasters, Development', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 294, 302.

19. Migration has been also framed as an adaptation strategy to climate change. See Katha Kartiki, 'Climate Change and Migration: A Case Study from Rural Bangladesh', *Gender and Development*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2011. On the (re)emergence of climate change as a cause of migration see Etienne Piguet, 'From «Primitive Migration» to «Climate Refugees»: The Curious Fate of the Natural Environment in Migration Studies', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 103, No. 1, 2013.

the most densely populated (1,240 people per square km of land according to 2018 data), with a population among the youngest in the world (median age under 28 years).[20]

As a consequence, many struggle to find opportunities for sustainable income. For some daily wagers and ex-small farmers, seeking such opportunities in Dhaka and Chittagong (the country's major urban centres and key destinations of internal migrants from rural areas) is not a viable solution anymore: these cities are already swelling, and newly arrived workers find it hard to get employment. It is because of this reason that India continues to represent a relatively attractive destination for many. This is, for example, the case documented in Percot's ethnography of the landless peasants of Moralganj, in the Khulna Division in southwest Bangladesh, who, in order to escape debt trap and underemployment at home, prefer working as waste-pickers and domestic helpers in Delhi and Bangalore, even though this comes at the cost of vulnerability, marginalisation, and constant fear of deportation.[21]

4. *Crossing and violence at the «porous» India-Bangladesh border*

Most Bangladeshi migrants get into India from Bangladesh by illegally crossing the border that separates the two countries and runs more than 4,000 kilometres-long over land and water. The Indo-Bangladeshi border came into being in 1947 as a consequence of the partition of British India, which marked the beginning of the process of decolonisation and gave birth to independent India and Pakistan while partitioning Bengal.[22] In 1971, former East Bengal was reborn as the Bengali- and Muslim-majority People's Republic of Bangladesh. West Bengal instead – mostly Bengali-speaking

20. For the sake of comparison, the following data can be considered: India's population density is 455 people per square km of land (2018). Bangladesh's total population was 164.69 million (in 2020), and its total extension 147.6 thousand km (2018); by contrast, India's total population was 1,380 million (in 2020), and its total extension 3,287.3 thousand square km (2018). Source: 'Country Profile: Bangladesh', *World Bank Data*, 2021; 'Country Profile: India', *World Bank Data*, 2021.

21. Marie Percot, '«Picking up the Neighbours' Waste»: Migration of Bangladeshi Villagers to India Metropolises', *Migration and Development*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2020.

22. In eastern India, independence from the colonial yoke came along with the partition of Bengal, a vast and diverse region whose territorial boundaries had been reimagined and altered multiple times in the course of history, and that, in the political turmoil of 1947, ended up divided into West Bengal and East Bengal. East Bengal (then known as East Pakistan) became the eastern wing of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, from which it successfully seceded following the war of 1971, supported by Indian military intervention. See: Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010; Sayeed Ferdous, *Partition as border-making: East Bengal, East Pakistan and Bangladesh*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022.

like Bangladesh, but with a Hindu-majority population – had «remained» in India since the partition of 1947. Today it is one of the states of the Indian Union and has the longest portion of the Indo-Bangladeshi border, whose other chunks fall within the Northeast Indian states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura. Thus, the Indo-Bangla border, like many in Asia and the post-colonial world, is relatively recent.

Those who can afford to travel via legal means and in relative security do so; most others cannot, so they cross the border illegally and remain vulnerable to poverty, violence, and exploitation. To make their passage across the border, they often rely on human traffickers – *dalal* («middlemen») – who count on a cross-border network of contacts, including corruptible border authorities.[23] Once on the other side, some migrants move to specific destinations and into employments that are already known to them because they have been prearranged relying on existing kinship networks;[24] others try to establish a new life on their own; yet others leave after the promise of contract jobs, often arranged by the *dalal* themselves. These agreements are not always genuine, and, as a result, migrants might find themselves working as bonded labour or sold as sex slaves in the case of women.[25] Many women are also trafficked as brides and destined to Indian sub-regions with highly skewed gender ratios where men resort to «buying women» in order to get married. Some enter these marriages willingly, while others are unaware of the destiny awaiting them.[26] In general, migrants' destinations are not limited to West Bengal and the Indian Northeast but might be elsewhere in India, well away from the border.

The relatively recent demarcation of this territory (where the border now lies) as an «international border» contrasts with the movement of goods and people that has been taking place for centuries and with the aspirations of those who are in search of better livelihoods on the other side.[27] To secure the border is a goal that both the Indian and the Bang-

23. Sharat G. Lin & Madan C. Paul, 'Bangladeshi Migrants in Delhi: Social Insecurity, State Power, and Captive Vote Banks', *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 1995.

24. *Ibid*. See also Swagato Sarkar, 'The Illicit Economy of Power : Smuggling, Trafficking and the Securitization of the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland', *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2017; Marie Percot, '«Picking up the Neighbours' Waste»: Migration of Bangladeshi Villagers to India Metropolises'.

25. Swagato Sarkar, 'The Illicit Economy of Power : Smuggling, Trafficking and the Securitization of the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland'.

26. Thérèse Blanchet, 'Bangladeshi Girls Sold as Wives in North India', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2005; Ravinder Kaur, 'Marriage and Migration: Citizenship and Marital Experience in Cross-Border Marriages between Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Bangladesh', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, No. 43, 2012; Rimple Mehta, 'Barbed Affect: Bangladeshi Child Brides in India Negotiate Borders and Citizenship', *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2019.

27. For more details on the history of the Indo-Bangladeshi border, see: Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland. Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, London:

ladeshi governments have repeatedly committed to, and in the case of India especially there is a complex set of interests in getting it sealed (as further detailed below). Despite this, the border has in practice remained «porous», as it continues to see the movement of goods (particularly debated in the Indian media is the case of cattle smuggled from India into Bangladesh); of people who frequently move in and out, even daily; and, of course, of migrants, especially Bangladeshis, who move to the other side of the border planning to stay there for some time before returning, or for good. The securitisation of the border on the one hand and the continuing trans-border mobility on the other are irreconcilable in the way they conceive and make use of the space of the border. Their clash produces violence, which marks the border – an everyday space for many borderland dwellers and a space of hope for migrants – also as a space of fear, vulnerability, and death.

Border violence takes many forms. While patrolling the border, Indian authorities have clashed with smugglers or come under attacks which in some cases have turned deadly.[28] For example, in 2019, an Indian soldier was reportedly shot dead from across the border by the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), the agency which controls the border on the Bangladeshi side.[29] In August 2021, two personnel of the Border Security Force (BSF), that is the Indian counterpart of the BGB, were killed along the border in the Northeastern state of Tripura, allegedly in an ambush by militants of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), which is banned in India as a terrorist organisation.[30] At the same time, the «gaps» in the border sealing are not limited to land tracts still unfenced or hard-to-fence riverine portions. Some officials, both from the Indian and the Bangladeshi side, contribute to keeping the border porous as they are involved in the illegal traffic of goods and people, from which they reportedly benefit through bribes, cuts on «shipments» smuggled to the other side thanks to their connivance, or even sexual favours.[31] That the border authorities play such a role has been documented in ethnographic accounts of border crossing and border life;[32] in studies on informal cross-border trade; and in the occasional in-

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28. 'Locking Horns at the Border', *The Indian Express*, 20 July 2020.

29. 'BSF Soldier Killed In Firing By Bangladesh Guards At Bengal Border', *NDTV*, 17 October 2020.

30. '2 Soldiers Killed In Ambush Along India- Bangladesh Border In Tripura', *NDTV*, 3 August 2021.

31. Swagato Sarkar, 'The Illicit Economy of Power: Smuggling, Trafficking and the Securitization of the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland'.

32. *Ibid*. See also: Marie Percot, '«Picking up the Neighbours' Waste»: Migration of Bangladeshi Villagers to India Metropolises'; Pallavi Banerjee & Xiangming Chen, 'Living in In-between Spaces: A Structure-Agency Analysis of the India–China and India–Bangladesh Borderlands', *Cities*, Vol. 34, 2013; and Rimple Mehta, 'Barbed Affect: Bangladeshi Child Brides in India Negotiate Borders and Citizenship'.

vestigations carried out against officers, local police, and politicians. The latest case emerged in India recently, in early 2021, against the backdrop of approaching elections in West Bengal.[33]

Conversely, border authorities reportedly harass people who inhabit border areas on either of the two sides. Also, they shoot to kill.[34] The victims of these border killings are not only people allegedly involved in illegal activities – like smugglers, traffickers, paper-less migrants – but also dwellers whose fields or grazing areas are located in the proximity of the border.[35] The cross-border movements are not unidirectional but go both ways: both Indians and Bangladeshis move across[36] and are the victim of border violence, including border killings. However, it is worth stressing that most of the victims are Bangladeshis.

5. *The securitisation of the Indo-Bangla border*

From an Indian perspective, the Indo-Bangladeshi border is critical for bilateral relations with Dhaka; for domestic politics concerning India's Northeast; as well as for Indian trade and connectivity with the broader eastern neighbourhood, that besides Bangladesh includes Myanmar and Southeast Asia.

The border does not just separate Indian and Bangladeshi territory: it also marks the delicate territorial connection between mainland India and its Northeast sub-region. West Bengal aside, the remaining part of the border on the Indian side falls within the territory of the aforementioned states of the Northeast: Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura. Geographically the Northeast area – which in addition to these states also includes Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, and Sikkim – is linked to mainland India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor, also known as the «Chicken's neck», with China to its North and Bangladesh to its South. From a domestic point of view, the Northeast is considered one of India's borderlands because it features a high concentration of populations that are otherwise ethnic and religious *minorities* and because its integration into the Indian core has been late and turbulent. The area has been a theatre of armed separatist movements for decades. The central government's counterinsurgency led to hu-

33. 'Explained: CBI's Probe into Cross-Border Cow Smuggling Trade and Its Widening Net in Bengal', *The Indian Express*, 7 January 2021.

34. Saleh Shahriar, Lu Qian, & Sokvibol Kea, 'Anatomy of Human Rights Violations at the Indo-Bangladesh Borderlands', *Territory, Politics, Governance*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2020.

35. 'Trigger Happy. Excessive Use of Force by Indian Troops at the Bangladesh Border', *Human Rights Watch*, 9 December 2010.

36. Baniateilang Majaw, 'Indo-Bangladesh Borderland Issues in Meghalaya', *South Asia Research*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2021.

man rights violations which marred India's image and its legitimacy in the area. The protracted insurgency-counterinsurgency period also left a deep scar in people's memory and influenced the development of democratic institutions.[37]

Additionally, this sub-region of India is a reason for anxiety for New Delhi because it is one of China's gateways to the Indian subcontinent. As a consequence, China's proximity and proactivity are weighty factors in determining India's position vis-à-vis its Northeast. The recent clashes of June 2020 between the Chinese and Indian armies on the western Himalayan Line of Actual Control re-emphasized the volatility of the Northeast as a theatre of ongoing India-China rivalry.[38] Besides, China remains a crucial variable also in India's relations with Bangladesh. Beijing is a key development partner and investor for Dhaka, and recently it attempted to get involved in two matters that are close to Delhi's interests: the Rohingya crisis and, most importantly, the sharing of Teesta river water which is a long-standing Delhi-Dhaka bilateral issue.[39]

Furthermore, Delhi's *Look East Policy* – which, under Modi, became the *Act East Policy* – has among its strategic objectives enhancing the connectivity of India with Bangladesh and Southeast Asia through the development of India's land-locked Northeast.[40] Hence, although less volatile than the Indo-Pak border on the West or the nearby Indo-Chinese border lying to the North, also the Indo-Bangla border is of extreme geopolitical relevance for India.

37. Alex Waterman, 'Normalcy Restored? The Lingering Drivers of Insurgency in Northeast India', in M. Raymond Izarali & Dalbir Ahlawat (eds.), *Terrorism, Security and Development in South Asia*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2021, pp. 99–120; Dixita Deka, 'Living without Closure: Memories of Counter-Insurgency and Secret Killings in Assam', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2021. Dilip Gogoi, *Making of India's Northeast: Geopolitics of Borderland and Transnational Interactions*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2020; Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and its Northeast*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020; Vibha Arora, 'The Paradox of Democracy in the Northeast and the Eastern Himalayas', in Vibha Arora and N. Jayaram (eds.), *Routeing Democracy in the Himalayas*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2013, pp. 101-32;

38. Arzan Tarapore, 'The Crisis after the Crisis: How Ladakh will Shape India's Competition with China', *Lowy Institute*, 2021.

39. The Teesta is one of the many trans-border rivers shared between India and Bangladesh. It springs from the Himalayas in India's Sikkim, runs through India's West Bengal, and then enters Bangladesh. Dhaka and New Delhi sat at the negotiation table multiple times, but no agreement has been reached on the matter. In addition to the two national governments, also the Indian state of West Bengal is a key stakeholder in the dispute and opposes further water sharing. Recently, China offered Bangladesh an engineering scheme aimed at altering the riverbed for increased manageability. For further details see: Silvia Tieri, 'Bangladesh 2019-2020: Issues of Democracy, Disasters, Development'.

40. M. Amarjeet Singh (ed.), *Northeast India and India's Act East Policy: Identifying the Priorities*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2019.

The Indian state of Assam started fencing the Indo-Bangla border in the 1960s in phases. India's central government undertook fencing in the 1980s. Assamese politicians initially failed to engage the central government in the fencing endeavour but anti-Bengali violence in the following years prompted New Delhi to conclude the Indo-Bangladesh Border Road and Fence project in 1986.[41] The project recorded slow progress, until it was revived by the BJP when the party was at the lead of the National Democratic Alliance government (1999-2004).[42] The prevention of illegal immigration has represented a vital goal of the fencing endeavour since its inception. With the fence, India aims to keep its territory secure from a number of threats that are considered to be pouring in through the border; thereby securitising the border itself. McDuie-Ra identified three component narratives of the fence: controlling infiltration, national security, and monitoring trade. In all, the border fencing projects India as politically and economically developed vis-à-vis its backward neighbour. By contrast, Bangladesh is posed as a security threat: it is a source of India-bound migrants, ready to drain Indian economic resources; it is home to anti-India sentiment and Islamic terrorism; it is a shelter for anti-India Northeast militancy;[43] it is a base for illegal economic transactions.[44] Accordingly, the border, while working as a shield from the threat of supposed flood-like Bangladeshi immigration, also represents an essential component of India's own counter-insurgency in the Northeast on the one hand and of its participation in the global «War on Terror» on the other.[45] In any case, «the major issue driving border fencing in India is migration from Bangladesh».[46]

The COVID-19 pandemic produced a subtle alteration of this narrative and its intrinsic power relations, although tacitly and temporarily. In late April 2021, Bangladesh shut down the border with India while the latter was undergoing its «second wave» and facing an unprecedented oxygen shortage. The border closure – which concerned people's crossing but exempted goods carriers – was initially declared for two weeks but subsequently extended in May and again in June.[47] The logic underlying the measure

41. Rizwana Shamshad, 'Politics and origin of the India-Bangladesh border fence', *17th biennial conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia*, *Melbourne*, 2008.

42. Rizwana Shamshad, 'Bengaliness, Hindu nationalism and Bangladeshi migrants in West Bengal, India', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol. 18, No. 14, 2017.

43. Historically, Northeastern militant groups have sought sanctuary across the border.

44. Duncan McDuie-Ra, 'The India-Bangladesh Border Fence: Narratives and Political Possibilities', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2014.

45. *Ibid*.

46. Duncan McDuie-Ra, 'Tribals, Migrants and Insurgents: Security and Insecurity along the India-Bangladesh Border', *Global Change, Peace and Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2012.

47. 'Bangladesh extends border closure with India till June 30 due to Covid-19', *Business Standard*, 14 June 2021.

was obvious: containing the risk of virus spreading into Bangladesh through the border. Hence, the state of emergency caused by COVID-19 normalized a measure that would normally be diplomatically unviable, especially for a smaller neighbour like Bangladesh in its relation with India. Significantly, from the point of view of the securitisation of the border, it temporarily framed India – and not Bangladesh – as the source of unwelcome imports and as a security threat.

6. *A long-standing humanitarian and political issue: border killings*

So far, the border has been fenced – but only partially – in a bid to keep a check on infiltrations. In early 2021, India and Bangladesh have renewed their pledge to secure its yet uncovered portions.[48] As mentioned, the border is guarded by the Indian BSF on one side and the Bangladeshi BGB on the other.[49] The two agencies hold semestral Director General-level meetings, where the commitment to bring border killings to zero have been reiterated multiple times but to no avail. In fact, killings of Bangladeshis at the hands of the BSF have continued throughout the last decade, decreasing in 2016 but then surging again and recording a decade high in 2020, with 51 Bangladeshi citizens shot dead in that year alone.[50] As for 2021, yet more cases have unfortunately been recorded. Based on the report of Bangladeshi human rights NGO Odhikar, by June 2021, four Bangladeshis were killed, six injured, and one tortured by the Indian BSF.[51] This brings the total number of (known) Bangladeshi victims since the year 2000 to 1240.[52]

As a result, while endangering the lives of those who live near the border or attempt to cross it, continuing border killings have also turned

48. 'India, Bangladesh Agree to Speed up Border Fencing', *The Hindu*, 27 February 2021; 'About 76 Pc of India-Bangladesh Border Covered by Fence: MHA', *ANI*, 3 August 2021.

49. For more details on the BSF and the BGB, see: Babu Joseph, *An Insight Into the Intricacies of BSF Law: An Anatomy of BSF Law by a GD Officer For GD Officers*, Chennai: Notion Press, 2019; Harsh V. Pant (ed.), *Handbook of Indian Defence Policy: Themes, Structures and Doctrines*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016; Lt. Col. M. D. Sharma, *Paramilitary Forces of India*, Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2009; Malini Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021, p. 175.

50. 'Statistics of Human Rights Violation by Indian Border Security Force (BSF)', *Odhikar*, March 2021.

51. 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (January-March) 2021', *Odhikar*, March 2021; 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (April-June) 2021, *Odhikar*, June 2021.

52. The number of recorded border killings is in all likelihood an underestimate.

into a thorny issue that keeps marring Indo-Bangladeshi bilateral relations. While Indian authorities reiterate that they fire only when under attack and that the victims are criminals, in Bangladesh the killings are considered extrajudicial murders since criminals should be consigned to civilian authorities and not shot dead. Moreover, as mentioned, the people shot dead on the border are overwhelmingly identified as Bangladeshi citizens. Also, the delayed justice in cases concerning Bangladeshi victims of border killings – like the notorious murder of unarmed teenage girl Felani Khatun in 2011 – adds to Bangladeshi people's indignation on the matter.[53] In addition to this, the killings perdure in spite of the two governments' commitment to bringing them to zero, Dhaka's requests to Delhi to exercise restraint, and Delhi's pledge to use non-lethal weapons.[54] Because of these reasons, border killings cause outcry among Bangladeshis and are perceived as a purposefully bullying behaviour inflicted on Bangladesh by India as a domineering neighbour.

While officially the border is presented as one of the many issues on which Dhaka and Delhi cooperate and promote ongoing dialogue, the problem's endurance and the positions maintained by the two governments on the occasion of ad-hoc talks show a lack of common ground. For example, in 2020, the second biannual BSF-BGB meeting of the year took place in Guwahati, the capital of Assam, where the question of illegal Bangladeshi migration has been highly politicised for decades. As a result of the talks, the two parties agreed to conduct joint night patrols and construct single row fences in priority patches of the border. However, they kept differing on the extent of the infiltration; in fact, the BGB Director-General denied BSF's reports of large numbers of Bangladeshis crossing into India.[55] A few months later, in March 2021, Indian Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar paid a visit to Dhaka ahead of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's trip to Bangladesh, scheduled later in the same month. Interacting with his Bangladeshi counterpart Momen on various aspects of bilateral ties, on border killings Jaishankar remarked that crime remains the outstanding problem.[56] His statement seemed to suggest that crime causes killings to perdure; in other words, that as long as crime continues, the killings will not stop. The remarks seemed to im-

53. 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (January-March) 2021', p. 40; 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (April-June) 2021', p. 37; '10 years of Felani killing: family's wait for justice continues', *The Daily Star*, 7 January 2021.

54. 'BSF Must Use Non-Lethal Weapons on Border, Bangladesh Tells India', *The Hindu*, 21 July 2021; 'Bangladesh Once Again Requests India to Use Non-Lethal Weapon at the Border', *The Daily Star*, 27 February 2021.

55. 'Reports of large-scale Bangladeshi ingress into India denied', *The Hindu*, 25 December 2020.

56. 'Killings along India-Bangladesh Border Because of Crime: Jaishankar', *The Hindu*, 4 March 2021.

plicitly justify the killings and caused resentment among many in Bangladesh, more so because they were not followed by any rebuttal by the Dhaka government.[57]

At the basis of the problem is the fact that the two governments espouse very different versions of the reality of cross-border movements. While the Indian government and various politicians have pointed out for decades that a constant flow of illegal Bangladeshi migrants crosses the border to enter India, Bangladesh continues denying such allegations.[58] The general lack of comprehensive data on the phenomenon and, in particular, the lack of data acknowledged by both governments complicate efforts to analyse the issue and contribute to keeping it enmeshed in political narratives. A few years ago, upon publication of the long-awaited 2011 Census of India, some had argued, Census data in hand, that the issue of irregular Bangladeshi immigrants is over-politicised in India; that, in reality, they are far less numerous than what politicians declared and most people would imagine. Census data show that the number of Bangladesh-born people residing in India «fell substantially across almost all states of India and especially the major hosting states along the border—West Bengal, Assam and Tripura».[59] The demonisation of clandestine Bangladeshi immigrants, however, continues. For years Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)[60] politicians have quoted figures as high as 20 million, although they failed to back them with reliable sources.[61]

7. *The politicisation of immigration in India's East*

Indeed, the Bengali immigrant, and specifically the Bengali Muslim – hence «the Bangladeshi» – has been criminalized for decades. Immigration of people of Bengali ethnicity from the territory that is today Bangladesh has been framed as a threat to the cultural and economic wellbeing of local

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57. 'Three-Month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh: Human Rights Violations (January-March) 2021', pp. 39-40; 'India's Message on Border Killings Is Loud and Clear: Like It or Lump It!', *The Daily Star*, 11 March 2021.

58. '«Bangladeshis Aren't Termites» — FM Abdul Momen Says Idea of Illegal Immigration to India Wrong.'

59. Chinmay Tumbe, 'India Is Not Being Overrun by Immigrants', *LiveMint*, 28 July 2019. See also: R. B. Bhagat, *Population and the Political Imagination: Census, Register and Citizenship in India*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022, pp. 77-78.

60. The BJP is a Hindu nationalist party. It is currently in power at the federal level as well as in various Indian states.

61. 'India and Bangladesh: Migration Claims Fact-Checked', *BBC News*, 21 February 2020.

populations in several Indian states at different points in time.[62] However, nowhere it has been more vehemently politicised than in the Northeastern state of Assam. There, the question of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants remains *the* key political issue to date.

Determining unequivocally who is who and where one belongs can prove a difficult task in the case of areas where migratory movements have taken place across centuries, along different routes, and under the aegis of different state powers. This is further complicated by the legacies of British colonialism, which, among other interventions, in the case of Assam-Bengal, gave impulse to migration and altered the borders of these sub-regions. In Assam and greater Bengal, large scale movements of Bengali people have taken place at least since East India came under colonial rule, thus making today's demarcation of identity categories such as «Bengali», «Bangladeshi», and «Assamese» not always straightforward. These identities, instead, have proved to change according to the politics of the time – a reminder of the unstable nature of minorities in South Asia.[63] Additionally, the borders of Assam (hence of Bengal) were altered more than once; their latest most important alteration was arguably the passage of Muslim-majority Sylhet from Assam to East Pakistan with the partition of 1947.[64]

Since the late 1980s, as it emerged as a rising force in Indian politics, the BJP drew attention to the issue of immigration originating from Bangladesh and constructed it as a security threat.[65] So doing, the party successfully reframed the Northeast's and West Bengal's «immigration issue» through a Hindu nationalist lens. The Bangladeshi Muslim – characterized in Hindu nationalist parlance by backwardness, violence, sexual prowess and abnormal fertility rates – is, for Ramachandran, one of the «others» in relation to which Hindu nationalism has articulated itself.[66] Thus, the politicisation of

62. Vanita Banjan, 'Illegal Bangladeshi Migrants in Mumbai', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 70, No. 4, 2009; Sujata Ramachandran, '«Operation Pushback»: Sangh Parivar, State, Slums and Surreptitious Bangladeshis in New Delhi', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2002; Rizwana Shamshad, *Bangladeshi Migrants in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017, Chapter Four: 'The «infiltrators» of Delhi'.

63. For a detailed account, see Rizwana Shamshad, *Bangladeshi Migrants in India*, in particular Chapter Two: 'The Foreigners of Assam'. See also Sur's latest work documenting identities, survival, and violence around India's fence: Malini Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border*.

64. See footnote above. See also: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee, 'Unburdening Partition: The «arrival» of Sylhet', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2009.

65. Sujata Ramachandran, 'Of Boundaries and Border Crossings: Undocumented Bangladeshi «Infiltrators» and the Hegemony of Hindu Nationalism in India', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1999; Rizwana Shamshad, 'Politics and origin of the India-Bangladesh border fence'.

66. Sujata Ramachandran, 'Of Boundaries and Border Crossings: Undocumented Bangladeshi 'Infiltrators' and the Hegemony of Hindu Nationalism in India.

irregular immigration from Bangladesh, while remaining a critical regional issue in the East and the Northeast, became also a national issue and an issue of «Indian» nationalism, and vice-versa. Promoting the securitisation of migration in border states such as Bengal and Assam served the party in its bid to carve a space for itself in states where it historically had a weak presence.[67]

In recent years too, the BJP has made its anti-immigration agenda the key point of electoral propaganda in border states. For example, in West Bengal, in 2019, during an election rally in Alipuduar (which together with Cooch Behar is home to a sizeable Bangladesh-born population), Home Minister Amit Shah said: «If the BJP comes to power, we will bring in the NRC here to throw out all infiltrators and illegal immigrants. We will also ensure that the Hindu refugees are not touched. They are very much a part of our country».[68] On another occasion, he declared: «Infiltrators are like termites in the soil of Bengal... A Bharatiya Janata Party government will pick up infiltrators one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal».[69] However, Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool party (TNM), the West Bengali regional party whose vote banks the BJP has been attempting to break into in West Bengal, condemned the NRC-CAA (that will be analysed below) through which Shah's party proposed to counter immigration.[70] Eventually, in the recent 2021 West Bengal Assembly election, the TNM defeated the BJP, and Banerjee won her third term as the state chief minister.[71] On the other hand, the 2021 state elections in Assam saw the second consecutive victory of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, in power since 2016.

Initially, in Assam, anti-Bengali xenophobia was targeted at Hindu Bengalis as well. However, it turned with particular vehemence against Bengali Muslims as the BJP gained power in the state. In her recent book on «Bangladeshi migrants in India», Shamshad convincingly argues that while earlier Assamese xenophobic discourse revolved around nativism – hence the opposition between the «local» Assamese and «foreigner» Bengali – the

67. Niraja Gopal Jayal, 'Reconfiguring Citizenship in Contemporary India', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2019, pp. 37-38; Rizwana Shamshad, 'Bengaliness, Hindu nationalism and Bangladeshi migrants in West Bengal, India'; Micheal Gillan, 'Refugees or infiltrators? The Bharatiya Janata Party and «illegal» migration from Bangladesh', *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2002.

68. 'Amit Shah Promises NRC in West Bengal, with Exemption for Hindu Refugees', *The Hindu Business Line*, 29 March 2019.

69. 'Amit Shah Vows to Throw Illegal Immigrants into Bay of Bengal', *Reuters*, 12 April 2019.

70. 'CAA Is a Means to Deceive People, Says Mamata', *The Hindu*, 9 December 2020.

71. Ronojoy Sen, 'Mamata Resists the BJP's Might, Wins Big in Bengal', *Institute of South Asian Studies*, 19 May 2021; Soumya Bhowmick, Ambar Kumar Ghosh, 'Battle for Bengal 2021: Political Themes and Electoral Dynamics', *Observer Research Foundation*, 2021.

entrance of Hindu nationalists into the political arena of the state successfully shifted the axis of the discourse from ethnicity (anti-Bengali) to religion (anti-Muslim).[72] In other words, the BJP has been able to communalise Assamese xenophobic identity politics to a large extent, framing them according to the Hindu nationalist discourse pursued on an all-India national scale. In practice, since a Hindu-Muslim binary got juxtaposed to the previous Assamese-Bengali one, Bengali Muslims in particular became the new targets; they became «infiltrators», threatening Assam and the nation with their «greed» and «alien» culture. On the other hand, the Hindu Bengali, earlier equally demonized in force of its *Bengaliness*, now became first and foremost a Hindu, hence welcomed as a «refugee».[73]

8. *NRC and CAA: the criminalisation of the Bangladeshi Muslim in the making*

The politics of xenophobia in Assam are important also for another reason: the state is the leading-edge when it comes to the controversial NRC. Since 2019, the NRC and the CAA have emerged as some of the most divisive issues of contemporary Indian domestic politics. The two measures are considered discriminatory against Muslims and an attack on the country's secular character. In addition to this, they have in Bangladesh-originated migration an indirect target and, as a consequence, have the potential to impact India-Bangladesh relations as well.

The NRC is a register of all Indian citizens mandated by the 2003 amendment of the 1955 Citizenship Act. At the moment, the only state of the Indian federation with an NRC is Assam – other Indian states have in turn committed to implementing one, whereas states where political parties other than the BJP are in power have rejected it. In Assam, the NRC came into being as early as 1951 in order to curb illegal immigration from then East Pakistan, namely current Bangladesh. However, the final updated NRC for Assam was published recently, in August 2019.[74]

In order to be included in the NRC, people must possess certain documents that are deemed valid to prove their citizenship status in the first place. Hence, in theory, the NRC potentially identifies those who live in the country illegally and discourages illegal immigration. However, one of its main flaws is that, in practice, proving citizenship through documents can be unviable even to genuine citizens, as the status of many is *de facto*

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72. Rizwana Shamshad, *Bangladeshi Migrants in India*.
73. On the differences between the BJP's and other Assamese parties' approach to irregular migrants, see also: Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy', pp. 372-373.
74. For a detailed analysis, see: Niraja Gopal Jayal, 'Reconfiguring Citizenship in Contemporary India'; see also: Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy'.

undocumented. This is because in India, like elsewhere in the global South, documenting births and deaths through bureaucratic acts is not necessarily a standard practice, especially among illiterate people who live in economic, political, or geographical marginalisation.

On the other hand, the CAA passed by the Indian Parliament in December 2019 amends the 1955 Citizenship Law. It offers Indian citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians who flee persecution from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, and have arrived in India by December 2014.[75] The bill is remarkable because it makes religious identity a criterion for Indian citizenship for the very first time. Indian secularism is not free from flaws, but it had remained the official credo of the state since independence.[76] It is undeniable that Indian nationalism has historically featured Hindu undertones, that Hindus' numerical majority in the country has been often exploited by political parties (not just the BJP) to the detriment of minorities. However, officially India has always projected itself as a secular polity. It is telling that, at the moment of post-colonial rebirth, India styled itself as a «Republic» (not a Hindu one), in contrast to «the *Islamic* Republic of Pakistan».[77] This explains why the CAA fast-tracking of non-Muslim refugees for citizenship has been widely received as «communal», Islamophobic, and as an attack on India's secular character enshrined in its Constitution.

As far as the politicisation of Bengali immigration in India is concerned, the CAA and NRC are of critical importance because they turn the mentioned binary discourse of the non-Muslim «refugee» versus the Muslim «infiltrator» into actual law. In practice, the synergy of CAA and NRC provides a pathway towards legalisation for undocumented people as long as they are not Muslim. Consider the following (not so) hypothetical scenario: once enforced, the NRC deprives of citizenship genuine citizens who are unable to prove their status; it also exposes undocumented migrants. However, Hindus and other non-Muslims (whether citizens or not) will have the option of applying for citizenship as refugees under the CAA, unlike Muslims. In other words, from the perspective of undocumented citizens of Bengali ethnicity and Bangladeshi migrants, the NRC-CAA allows non-

75. These are religious minorities in India, where Hindus comprise the majority of the population (80% approx.). Islam is the largest minority religion in the country (14% approx.); however, it is absent from CAA's list. For a detailed analysis, see: Niraja Gopal Jayal, 'Reconfiguring Citizenship in Contemporary India'.

76. C. S. Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance: Indian Secularism and the Politics of Religious Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; Tejani, Shabnum, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History, 1890-1950*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008; Anuradha Dingwaney Needham & Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007; Rochana Bajpai, 'The conceptual vocabularies of secularism and minority rights in India', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2002.

77. Ian Talbot, *India & Pakistan*, London: Arnold, 2000.

Muslims into the refugee category while excluding Muslims. Thus, it keeps criminalising Muslim Bengalis as «Bangladeshis» and «infiltrators» to exclude and eliminate.

9. *Potential reverberations in Bangladesh*

India's CAA-NRC has the potential to impact politics across the border as well. It is feared the CAA-NRC might contribute to exasperating identity politics in neighbouring Bangladesh and escalate illegal border-crossing *from* India, because in the Indian East and Northeast the measures have been advertised as aimed against illegal Bangladeshi migrants.

As far as border-crossing from India is concerned, recent declarations by India's BSF suggested that a re-migration movement back into Bangladesh had been recorded soon after the passing of the CAA, in early 2020, as more Bangladeshis were apprehended while crossing from India into Bangladesh than vice versa.[78] However, it remains unclear whether such data is sufficient to determine that the reported outflow is sustained; and if it is really or only motivated by CAA-induced fears among migrants rather than by other critical concurrent circumstances, namely COVID-19 and consequently increased unemployment, especially among daily wagers.[79]

Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government has refrained from openly commenting on the NRC-CAA. Its official stance is that the CAA, although unnecessary, is India's internal matter.[80] Indeed, by offering asylum to non-Muslims fleeing from Muslim-majority neighbours, including Bangladesh, the CAA implies that non-Islamic minorities are not safe in such countries, a claim that Dhaka has in turn denied. Although the Bangladeshi government has maintained a low profile on the matter, the CAA has been strongly criticised by Bangladeshi media and public opinion, further fuelling anti-India sentiment in the country. For instance, in March 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was scheduled to travel to Dhaka on the occasion of *Mujib Borsho*, i.e. the celebration of Bangladeshi «father of the nation» Sheikh Mujib Rahman's 100th birth anniversary. The announcement of Modi's trip caused protests in Dhaka.[81] Its subsequent cancellation was then

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78. 'Substantial Increase in Outflow of Bangladeshi Migrants Post CAA Enactment: BSF', *The Times of India*, 24 January 2020.

79. 'More Migrants Returning to Bangladesh, Shows BSF Data', *The Hindu*, 15 December 2020.

80. 'Citizenship Amendment Act Is India's Internal Matter, Sheikh Hasina Says', *Gulf News*, 18 January 2020.

81. 'People Protest Modi's Upcoming Bangladesh Visit', *Dhaka Tribune*, 2 March 2020.

officially justified with pandemic-related risks.[82] Around the same time, the visits of Bangladeshi Ministers to India were similarly cancelled, allegedly because of displeasure caused by the passing of the CAA in the Indian Parliament and the debate on the status of Bangladesh's religious minorities it had ensued at that time.[83]

In March 2021, Modi eventually made his way to Dhaka on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence. His visit took place amidst large scale protests led by Islamist groups and madrassah students who clashed with Awami League supporters and the police. The protests resulted in at least twelve dead people after the police opened fire on the protesters, underscoring the government's hardline on dissent.[84] They also demonstrated the growing popularity and assertiveness of Islamists in the country. The protests were reportedly led by Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI),[85] a radical Islamist group that advances sectarian demands for the reform of Bangladeshi law and textbooks against atheists, apostates, and Muslim minority sects.[86] HeI had already been involved in violent protests, incurring in the government's heavy-handed repression and clashing multiple times with the police.[87] In all, besides casting a shadow on India-Bangladesh relations, the CAA and the enduring securitisation of the question of «Bangladeshi illegal immigration» in Indian politics weight heavy on Sheikh Hasina's perceived pro-India stance and cause her government and party to face harsher criticism at home, especially from the Islamist forces, who are now their primary challengers.

10. *Conclusion*

Even as the world is shaken by the enduring COVID-19 pandemic, migrants continue undertaking perilous journeys at great risk to their lives, pushed by multiple factors. Although it is a non-exceptional phenomenon, migration is often represented as a state of exception and a threat, thus securitized. Besides, the securitising trend concerns South-South migration as

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82. 'PM Modi's Dhaka Trip Cancelled after Bangladesh Reports 3 Coronavirus Cases', *The Times of India*, 9 March 2020.

83. 'Bangladesh Foreign Minister Cancels Visit, India Brushes Away Speculation on CAB Link', *The Wire*, 12 December 2019; 'Bangladesh Cancels Foreign, Home Ministers' India Visits', *The Hindu*, 12 December 2019; 'Bangladesh Junior Foreign Minister Cancels India Visit', *The Wire*, 11 January 2020.

84. 'Violent Protests Spread in Bangladesh after Modi Visit', *Al Jazeera*, 28 March 2021.

85. «Hefazat-e-Islam» might be translated in English as «Safeguard of Islam».

86. Mubashar Hasan, *Islam and Politics in Bangladesh: The Followers of Ummah*, Singapore: Springer, 2020; Mubashar Hasan, 'Understanding Bangladesh's most potent religious opposition', *The Interpreter*, 31 March 2021.

87. *Ibid.*

much as South-North migration and remains strong although most scholars argue that, apart from propaganda advantages in electoral competition, securitisation does not necessarily pay off in practice.

This article has drawn attention to a case from the global South, namely the securitisation of Bangladesh-originated migration in contemporary India. Both old and new events concur to explain the phenomenon. On the one hand, it is rooted in the turbulent history of the subcontinent, in particular the 1947 partition, which forcefully embedded fluid territories into rigid boundaries and multiple identities into linear categories.[88] At the same time, it is also fuelled by several current geo-economic and political processes, such as the continuous threatening of fragile livelihoods caused by capitalist economies and climate change, and the mainstreaming of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India. The latter has caused migration to be further politicized in electoral competition and has produced new efforts aimed at policing it, of which the updated NRC-CAA are the latest incarnation.

Overall, the consequences of this case of securitized migration are far-reaching, including sustained human rights violation on the border and in its borderlands; damage to New Delhi-Dhaka bilateral relations; and, perhaps most importantly from a political point of view, the exasperation of identity politics in both the country of destination and the country of origin of the migratory flows. In conclusion, the case dealt with in this paper suggests that securitisation carries high humanitarian costs and political consequences that are neither desirable nor affordable for the countries involved.

Finally, beyond the political salience of the India-Bangladesh border and India-bound Bangladeshi migration, this case speaks of the issue of securitisation at large too. It invites a critical reflection on questions that are political, policy-relevant, and urgent beyond current South Asian affairs: who are the winners and the losers when migration is understood and managed through securitising discourses? Is securitisation worth its humanitarian and political costs?

88. Joya Chatterji, 'From imperial subjects to national citizens: South Asians and the international migration regime since 1947', in Joya Chatterji & David Washbrook (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of the South Asian Diaspora*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2018, pp. 183-197.