



LIMINAL CITIZENSHIP: STATELESSNESS AND IDENTITY IN INDO-BANGLADESH ENCLAVE NARRATIVES

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Abstract

The Indo-Bangladesh enclaves created a unique situation of legal uncertainty and statelessness for the people who lived there. The enclave residents lived in deplorable conditions wherein they were deprived of basic facilities like access to institutions, citizenship rights, healthcare, education, and a stable source of income and livelihood. This paper examines the lived experiences of these residents by depicting characters like Monjila in Selina Hossain's *Bhumi O Kusum (The Land and the Flower)* and Lata in Amar Mitra's *Punurutthan*, respectively. These narratives argue that the scenario post-2015 Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) between India and Bangladesh has not changed much. The enclave dwellers still lead lives in a liminal socio-political and legal existence. Through a close reading of these scanty Bengali creative works, this paper explores how statelessness shapes quotidian life, affecting issues of healthcare, security, dignity, and gendered vulnerability. Simultaneously, these texts challenge the state authority to look into their situation from a grassroots level by foregrounding resilience, memory, and settlement. Ultimately, these texts question the existing understanding of citizenship, nationality, and belonging by highlighting the consequences of enforced geopolitical borders in South Asia, especially India and Bangladesh.

Keywords: Statelessness, enclave literature, Indo-Bangladesh border, citizenship and belonging, borderland

Introduction

The Indo-Bangladesh enclaves—chhitmahals (in Bengali)—stand as striking cartographic anomalies and enduring symbols of the unfinished legacies of the 1947 Partition of British India and the subsequent creation of Bangladesh in 1971. For decades, these fragmented territories, located within each other's national borders but legally belonging to the other state, rendered tens of thousands of inhabitants stateless, politically invisible, and socially precarious. The historic 2015 Land-Boundary Agreement (LBA) between India and Bangladesh tried to settle this anomaly. Both the Indian and Bangladeshi governments, after decades of negotiations, finally reached a long-awaited resolution. The agreement facilitated the exchange of a total of 162 enclaves (111 Bangladeshi and 51 Indian). Until the ratification of the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) in 2015, enclave dwellers navigated an extremely precarious bureaucratic existence: born in India or Bangladesh, yet belonging to neither. Statelessness here was not simply a legal anomaly; it was a daily existential reality, where crossing a border—even within one's home—was both literal and metaphorical.

However, the lived realities reveal a more complex transition. Interviews conducted by local journalists and academic researchers before the agreement indicate that many enclave residents remained uncertain about whether their living conditions would significantly improve. While these marginalised experiences have received limited attention in mainstream English-language media and literary discourse, several Bengali writers such as Selina Hossain and Amar Mitra have attempted to centralise these peripheral existences into literary focus.

This paper examines how Bangla creative literature reimagines the political and emotional dimensions of statelessness, especially in the context of identity, citizenship, and belonging. Rather than focusing solely on policy or geopolitics, this paper foregrounds literary narratives—particularly Selina Hossain’s *Bhumi O Kusum*, translated into English by Bina Biswas as *The Land and the Flower* (2020) and Amar Mitra’s *Punurutthan* (2017)—as sites of knowledge that document and dramatise the lived experiences of borderland inhabitants. These works do not merely represent historical trauma or bureaucratic neglect; they enliven the interiorities of those suspended in political limbo, and interrogate what it means to belong, to wait, and to remember across contested lines.

Drawing on border theory, especially Willem van Schendel’s *The Bengal Borderland* (2004), the paper conceptualises borders not as static lines but as dynamic lived spaces, where state sovereignty is fragmented, and everyday life is infused with uncertainty. The enclave, in this sense, is not merely a geopolitical aberration but a liminal zone—a frontier of multiple temporalities and fractured citizenship. These narratives challenge traditional notions of nationhood and propose a more performative, affective, and fluid model of identity, one shaped as much by memory and longing as by legal status or national allegiance.

In contrast to earlier anthropological or policy-oriented studies that often predate or marginalise post-LBA cultural representations, this paper situates Bangla enclave literature as a crucial intervention in migration studies and border theory. Through an analysis of emotional experiences such as fear, hope, despair, and resilience, we argue that enclave narratives articulate a counter-cartography of citizenship—one that resists fixed borders and embraces the unresolved nature of national belonging. Ultimately, this study highlights the role of literary humanities in reconfiguring our understanding of migration, marginality, and the possibilities of justice in a world marked by increasingly contested sovereignties.

***Bhumi O Kusum* - Land, Longing, and Liminal Citizenship**

Selina Hossain’s *Bhumi O Kusum* (2020) presents a profound literary intervention in the discourse of statelessness, centring on the psychological and political trauma endured by residents of Indo-Bangladesh enclaves. Through the intertwined lives of its protagonists and their relationship with land (*bhumi*) and memory, the novel dramatises the precarious condition of people who lived for generations without documentation, recognition, or citizenship. Hossain’s text does not merely recount the history of the chhitmahals; it embodies the lived affective landscapes of fear, waiting, resilience, and hope.

It is one of the earliest Bengali novels to depict the rootless and precarious lived experiences of the Indo-Bangladesh enclave dwellers. Set around the 1947 partition, it is a poignant narrative of the Indo-Bangladesh enclave of Dahagram during the turbulent times, exploring the emotional and socio-political turmoil of statelessness and identity. The novel centres on Monjila, a young woman grappling with personal and collective displacement after her divorce and return to her father’s home. The opening chapters depict her encounter with Golam Ali, a village elder, who predicts she will have a daughter named Tanjila, igniting hope amidst her barrenness and social marginalisation. This prophecy, juxtaposed with the looming creation of Pakistan and India, underscores the tension between personal aspirations and national upheaval. Monjila’s interactions at the market, with police officer Arobindo, and with the elderly Namita, reveal her resilience and desire for belonging, marred by gender-based violence and social exclusion. Monjila desperately wants to be a part of the Indian constitution. She, along with the inhabitants of Dohogram enclave, never wanted to be Pakistani. Although some elders of the village try to persuade them to vote for Pakistan on the grounds of their Muslim religious identity, showing how they should be a part of the racially and ethnically superior race, the majority of the villagers do not fall for this propaganda. Instead, they opt for the land where they and their ancestors have lived their lives for generations.

Statelessness, Violence, and Bare Life in the Enclave

From this point onward, Monjila’s life became unbearable as she had to tackle her stateless condition to give birth to her child. She wanted her daughter Tanjila to have a better life, which does not deprive her of any citizenship rights. However, when it comes to fighting for her rights, she faces unknown and devastating challenges. She, along with the villagers of the enclave, realised that they were, in fact, trapped in their village, which fell on the borderland territory. It simply meant that in reality, they were neither Indian nor Bangladeshi. It gave a scope to the BSF to exploit and torture them at their will because the former would not be answerable to any higher authority for the violation of human rights.

When Monjila had to cross the enclave borders to reach a nearby Indian hospital and give birth to her daughter, she was not allowed by the border security forces, and, therefore, she had no other option but to go for a normal childbirth at home. However, it is not only Monjila but also other members of the enclave who were severely affected by the torments of the BSF. Losing lives at the merciless hands of the forces became a daily and normal affair for them. Shockingly, although they were outraged, they believed it to be their fate as they were indoctrinated that all of the enclave dwellers were bound to have a ‘bare life’.

For instance, Nuruddin, who had managed to go outside for seeking job, was found dead beside the border of the village. While walking around the border side at dawn, Golam Ali found a body smeared with blood. After getting no news from Nuruddin for quite a few days, the villagers apprehended that he might have been killed by the forces. Unfortunately, it turned out to be true. Clueless and grief-stricken, one of the mourning women took the blood-smeared clothes and ran towards the BSF camp. She threw it at them. However, even after killing her husband, there was no trace of regret or redemption in their eyes. They even threatened to rape and kill her. Golam Ali and others hopelessly dragged her into the village.

The following excerpt depicts the tragic death of Nuruddin.

Seeing Nuruddin lying both were shocked. Kajem Miya shouted, “Inform Golam Ali.” Nurul rushed ... “Our life is just a drama. When Monjila became mother, that was also a drama. When Maloti was dying that was also a drama. We are living a drama.” (Hossain, 2020, p. 187-88)

However, a hope for a better life still lingered in the hearts and minds. They were ready to take on challenges and embrace life’s difficulties, realising that they were part of a grand drama called life. Hossain writes:

Monjila coming forward said, “Lift uncle on the cot. What is the use standing here and watching the faces of those soldiers? Whatever be the drama, enclavers do not understand drama – they only know how to live. Drama is also a kind of living. We will live doing drama. (Hossain, 2020, p. 188)

The enclave dwellers had encountered a Derridean aporia - a dead-end. They had nowhere to go, no people to rescue them from this precarity, and no identity to hold on to. Their only place was their enclaves. And, unfortunately, this very place became their graveyard. As mentioned above, being a territory detached from the main governing land, enclaves were susceptible to frequent BSF brutalities. Moreover, they were devoid of any facilities that they were supposed to get by the directives of the constitution. Thus, Golam Ali’s thoughts on the strangeness of their land are indicative of their helplessness. On being enquired of by Kajem Miya about the forthcoming course of action, Golam Ali ponders:

Golam Ali kept looking incensed. Eyes wouldn’t get wet in the wind from river. The fire was still burning. Only the pain of helplessness lingered in the air of the enclave. Someone said from the crowd, “Enough, now stop. You do not have anyone to save your border. Where are your border- guards?” Golam Ali’s heart started beating high, he looked around. His little land was surrounded by another country. The land of Pakistan could not be seen as far as one can see. They were the citizen of some invisible country. You were the hostages of the border-guards of another country, Golam Ali – the river water fluttered in laughter – ha-ha-ha. (Hossain, 2020, p. 188)

Maloti died in the enclave when she was denied permission to go to Patgram to see a doctor. The enclave dwellers’ pleas were repelled without any mercy. One of the BSF officials asked them to wait till they inform the commander about this issue because Patgram fell on Pakistani territory. However, they clearly knew that it would take a long time to inform the commander, as he would have to be reached by bicycle. The delay could have caused Maloti’s death, which it ultimately did. It is more surprising when we learn that deaths for lack of entry to Patgram hospital were a quotidian phenomenon. “We must go to Patgram to see a doctor,” the villagers plead, but the border guards retort that Patgram lies in Pakistan and they cannot cross the border without permission (Hossain, 2020, p. 125).

“Stateless in South Asia: The Making of the India-Bangladesh Enclaves”, an article by William Van Schendel, portrays a situation where it was difficult for the border guards to identify and distinguish between real citizens and the infiltrators, given the similarities of language, attire, culture, food habits, etc. Van reiterates:

First of all, migrants usually travelled without identity papers (although there was also a sizeable group of Bangladeshis who entered India on visaed passports and never returned). Second, there was little to distinguish newcomers from residents. They spoke the same language, might dress in Indian-made clothes smuggled into Bangladesh, and blended in very easily. Even if they spoke an eastern Bengali regional dialect, there were many established Indian citizens in the borderland who originated from the same regions. (Schendel, 2004, p. 218)

It resulted in a chaotic situation, and the innocent enclave residents had to face the brutalities and harassment daily.

Post-LBA Realities and Continuing Marginalisation

As mentioned earlier, the post-2015 land boundary agreement situation has not improved much. New settlement camps are facing problems in terms of food, sanitation, healthcare services and work. Sampurna Bhaumik, drawing on Singh, in her article “Everyday Lives in Peripheral Spaces: A Case of Bengal Borderlands”, writes:

The camp residents seemed in agreement that the exchange treaty had not resulted in a higher quality of life in the camp and the living conditions are in some ways worse than what they faced earlier. They stated that the ration they receive from the government on a monthly basis is nearly not enough for even two weeks. The residents have little to no cash, and almost no jobs. The government has not offered them any livelihood options or any vocational training that would enable them to find jobs on their own. The younger residents sneak out of the camp to find jobs that do not require official documentations or educational qualifications, but of course

those jobs do not pay much. The residents also protested the governments' decision to move the camp from its current location. (Bhaumik, 2021, p. 21)

In his book *The Bengal Borderland* (2005), Van states that after the 1947 Partition, a peculiar phenomenon was created where East Bengali Hindus migrated to India, and the state allowed it in the name of 'homecoming'. However, at some point, due to political upheaval and complications, these migrations were later labelled as 'infiltrations'. Drawing on it, we can argue that enclave dwellers who, although legal citizens of a state, were getting branded as illegal citizens. They had to undergo security check-ups to enter their own land.

Punurutthan – Rebirth, Rupture, and the Persistence of Stateless Memory

This text is crucial in understanding the peculiar condition of settling inside an enclave to save oneself from the state authority. Published in 2017, Amar Mitra's *Punarnutthan* (Rebirth or Resurrection) tells a story of a fugitive police inspector, Golokbihari Kundu. He was falsely charged with murdering an alleged criminal, Bharat Koila, under his custody in his police station situated in the remote area of West Bengal named Naupahari. Another police inspector had beaten Bharat Koila to death, and Golokbihari was nowhere involved in the killing. However, as the murder had taken place under his custody, he was liable to answer to the court and the higher authorities. He realised that the supposed suspect was innocent and he had been killed to whitewash the illegal coal mining of the higher authorities, where senior police officials were also implicated. In fact, Bharat attempted to reveal these illicit mining activities to the public. It is because illegal mining took the lives of the workers by causing sudden landslides and collapses in the mine.

Although Golok tried very hard to convince the DSP (Deputy Superintendent of Police) about his innocence, he failed to do so because he was, in reality, trapped in the nexus between police and politics. He understood he could not be saved by anyone, as it would suit the purpose of the people involved in this crime. And, if he is imprisoned, then the real culprits would take a sigh of relief. The Police had already started searching for him, and they had gone to both his urban and village residences. His wife and daughter informed him over the phone that the police were doing their best to put him behind bars.

Left without any option, he took a North Bengal-bound express train from Sealdah. He was in contact with Aninda Talukdar, an innocent sub-inspector of the same police station. In fact, it was Talukdar who advised him to flee from South Bengal to North Bengal and also arranged for his accommodation in some of his acquaintance's house in Jalpaiguri, a district in North Bengal.

Terrified, traumatised and exhausted, he lands in North Bengal. After a few days' stay in the town, he is led to an area where the Indian police, civilians and government officials cannot enter. Both Golok and the readers were astonished to learn that the area, although well within Indian borders, was under the jurisdiction of Bangladesh. Surprised at this knowledge, Golok started shooting a flurry of questions about this area.

After getting out of the vehicle and walking for an hour, he reached his destination. He will stay in Jogen Barman's farmhouse and look after the latter's land and workers. A teenage girl, Lata, who stays at the farm, will take care of Golok. Jogen Barman will come on every Sunday to inspect Golok's management and the balance sheet. Golok takes a keen interest in this area and its inhabitants. After settling down there, he bonds well with the servant girl Lata. He finds out that Jogen, who is too old, sleeps with this girl.

Although seemingly a happy girl, she longs for some connection to her land. She originally belonged to India, but after the Partitions, she somehow ended up in this enclave. Therefore, she involuntarily became a resident of 'chhitmahal'. This identity became a nightmare for her. Her existence had no written or, for that matter, verbal proof. As a result, anyone could thrash or violate her without facing any legal issues. Because she possessed neither an Indian nor a Bangladeshi voter identity card, her existence remained liminal, suspended between two nations. Jogen Barman and others took advantage of it and exploited her. Amar Mitra writes about her deplorable condition: "তার বাপ মায়ের কথা। নেই কেউ। বাপ হয়তো বাংলাদেশে ঢুকে গেছে বি এস এফ-এর লাঠিতে। আর মা ভেগেছে। বাবু যোগেনের কথা শুনতে হয়। নতুবা বি এস এফের হাতে তুলে দিলে তারা হয় বাংলাদেশে ঠেলে দেবে, না হয় জেলে রেখে দেবে বাংলাদেশি অনুপ্রবেশকারী বলে।" (Mitra, 2017, p. 118; my translation)

"About her parents- she has none. Her father might have been kicked into Bangladesh by the BSF, and her mother has run away. She must obey Jogen Babu; otherwise, if he hands her over to the BSF, they will either push her into Bangladesh or imprison her as a Bangladeshi infiltrator."

Gendered Statelessness and the Politics of Vulnerability

She got habituated to her mental, physical and sexual exploitation. It is hurtful to see that she, after serving Jogen Barman for a certain period of time, stopped believing that she was being exploited and accepted her fate. Jogen Barman treated her as a slut. Mitra writes: "লতা মাগীটা সেবা করসে তো, উয়ারে নিয়ে শুয়ো, আরাম দেবে মাগী, ..." (Mitra, 2017, p. 119; my translation): "Lata will serve you- sleep with her; she will give you comfort."

However, in the deep corners of her heart, she wished to have an Indian voter identity card and return to her native land. Golok Barman gets to know about her wish when she tries to get close to him and takes him into confidence. She informed him that she was being threatened by Jogen Barman and that the company would hand her over to the Indian Border Security Force (BSF). Therefore, she had to keep silent and serve him. The reason she started serving Golok with her heart and will is tied to her mission of either getting an Indian voter ID or leaving this place and entering Indian territory through him. She says:

মুই কত বলেছি একখানা ইন্ডিয়ান ভোটার কার্ড করে দিতি, রেশন কার্ড, বুড়া দিবেনি।

কী হবে, এখানে কি ভোট হয়, এ তো ইন্ডিয়া নয়।

লতা বলল, ভোটার কার্ড থাকলি ভয় থাকেনি, বিয়েসেফ তুলবেনি, তুমার আছে তো?

এখানে কি তারা আসে?

না, অনুমতি নাই, ইটা ভিনদেশ।

তবে ভয় কী? আমি বললাম।

লতা বলল, ছিটের বাইরি যাবার উপায় নি, অসুখবিসুখ হলিও হাসপাতাল নিবেনি।

(Mitra, 2017, p. 121; my translation):

“I have asked the old man many times to arrange an Indian voter card or a ration card for me, but he refuses.

What is the use? There are no elections here- this is not India.

Lata said, if you have a voter card, there is no fear; the BSF cannot harass you then. Do you have one?

Do they come here?

No, they do not have permission- this is foreign territory.

Then why worry? I asked.

Lata replied that there is no way to leave the enclave; even hospitals will not admit us if we fall ill.”

Another odd thing that strikes Golok is the environment of ‘chhitmahal’, which is surrounded by rivers and borders. Being a Bangladeshi land, Indian police personnel are restricted from entering it. Therefore, it became a haven for criminals and smugglers. All sorts of criminal activities used to take place in almost all of the ‘chhitmahals’. After committing crimes, criminals would directly come and take shelter in these ‘chhitmahals’. While attempting to reassure Golok that he will remain safe as long as he stays inside the enclave, Jogen comments on the peculiar nature of these territories:

আমি কথা বলি না। যোগেন চুপ করে থাকে একটু সময়, বলে, ইদিক হলে অসুবিধা হতনি, ছিটে ফেলে দিলেই হতো, কে তুলত লাশ, ই তো না ইন্ডিয়া না বাংলাদেশ, আপনারও ভয় নাই, লাশের মতোই, কে আপনারে আরিস্ট করবে। হে হে হে... যোগেন হাসতে থাকে।”

(Mitra, 2017, p. 112; my translation):

“I said nothing. Jogen remained silent for a while and then said that it would not have been a problem if the murder had taken place in these areas; the body could simply have been dumped in one of the enclaves and no one would have bothered to retrieve it. This place is neither India nor Bangladesh, so you have nothing to fear. You are like a dead body here-who would come to arrest you?”

Although innocent, Golok started identifying himself with the real runaway criminals. In his short stay in this enclave, he realised many harsh realities that the inhabitants of this place had to go through. They were thrashed daily by the border security forces. They were made to live a liminal life, devoid of any Government facilities. It is all the stranger because they were official and rightful citizens of a nation, in this instance, Bangladesh, and yet to get any help from them. It simply meant that they were Bangladeshi citizens only on paper. Although a sheer generalisation, almost all of the enclaves, whether Indian or Bangladeshi, met the same fate of destitution, abandonment and neglect. There are many accounts wherein the Indian enclaves situated in Bangladesh were not looked after by the Indian govt. It is true that some efforts, though minimal in nature, were undertaken by the respective Governments. The peculiar geography and geopolitical positioning of the enclaves made it more difficult for the Governments to help the enclave dwellers get a full-fledged life that they deserve.

Needless to say, Lata's life is completely different and difficult. Judith Butler argues in her 2004 monograph that with the increased violence directly perpetrated on the victims, the survivors need to take up the responsibility and decide their course of action.

Conclusion

The Indo-Bangladesh enclaves, long characterised by juridical liminality and spatial ambiguity, offer a unique vantage point from which to interrogate the entwined notions of statelessness, identity, and citizenship. Through a close analysis of Selina Hossain's *Bhumi O Kusum* and Amar Mitra's *Punurutthan*, this paper has illustrated how literature emerges not only as a mode of representation but also as a site of epistemological resistance. Far from functioning merely as fictional representations, these narratives give voice to those historically marginalised by cartographic violence and state erasure. They articulate the emotional, social, and political consequences of stateless conditions.

Both texts illustrate the quotidian struggles of enclave dwellers whose lives unfold in conditions of legal ambiguity and institutional neglect. The experiences of Monjila in Hossain's narrative reveal how statelessness permeates the most intimate aspects of life, from childbirth and healthcare to dignity and personal security. Similarly, the character of Lata in Mitra's narrative exposes the deeply gendered dimensions of enclave existence. These representations show how the absence of legal recognition renders people vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and social abandonment. They also reveal the failure of state institutions to guarantee protection, belonging, or justice.

Therefore, by highlighting memory, emotion, and everyday survival, these literary texts challenge conventional state-centred narratives of citizenship. These writers suggest that belonging cannot be reduced to legal documentation alone, as it is perpetually negotiated through lived experiences, collective memory, and attachment to land. Thus, these novels construct a counter-cartography of citizenship that challenges rigid geopolitical mappings by foregrounding the historically excluded voices. The political imagination of the nation-state is thereby contested and at the same time expanded. In the final analysis, these literary representations underscore the importance of the humanities in rethinking and reconfiguring the politics of border and belonging. Writers such as Selina Hossain and Amar Mitra encourage readers to reconsider the human consequences of territorial divisions and state exclusions.

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