

The Falsity of Boundaries, Cultural Continuities and Blurred Identities: Mapping the Connectivity of the Bengal Basin beyond its Geography and Imagined Location

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Abstract

The falsity of identifying certain geo-political demarcations as actual convergences of specific ethnic, social and cultural identities or as genetic pools has been demonstrated multiple times (Wouters and Heneisse 2023, Ramirez, 2014, Channa 2013). People have never been confined to the regions where they may be located at a specific time period and cultures have travelled through their human mediums across seas, mountains and deserts, intermingling and exchanging goods, ideas and influences. Each cultural region can only be located and captured in a moment of time, never across a temporal zone and these momentary captures are the photographic culmination of long histories and interactions that manifest as ‘regional’ only in that flash but otherwise they are a stream that has been flowing and continue to flow. The Bengal basin has been located within a stream of flow culture and human bodies across a vast region, linking it by trade, travel and ideological campaigns to the North, South, East and West. In my paper, I will specifically focus on the North-Eastward zone linking Bengal to Burma, via Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram. This is a continuous zone especially through its mobile and diverse populations of indigenous people on the highlands bordering the various zones and just as the numerous waterways and major rivers of this region have made trade and population movement a continuous feature of the region, land routes through these mountain tracks have also linked the various zones, through trade, religious preachers and transfer of technology. From as early as the 13th century, horses from Mongolia were being traded in Bengal via Mynamar, when it was under Mongolian rule. Buddhist preachers known as *gosains* have traversed the hazardous Himalayan tracks to preach Buddhism in Tibet and peasants from Bengal, Hindus, Muslims and Santals; experts in plough cultivation have moved into upper Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura to do plough cultivation and clear the forests for settled agriculture as the local people there were only conversant with slash and burn cultivation. Mynamar, during the colonial period had a sizeable Bengali diaspora as Burma was part of British territory and seen almost as an extension of India. Bengali literature and family histories are replete with these connections. These flows of material goods, people, beliefs and technology deconstruct the artificial political entities of the various states whose identities too have

been constantly shifting with the changes in power regimes and transfer of populations. The Bengal basin is therefore best viewed as part of a larger landscape or more aptly a part of a larger flowing river of ways of life, languages, beliefs and patterns of culture whose outermost limits are always fuzzy.

Key words: *Boundaries, falsity, geopolitical identity*

Introduction

The falsity of identifying certain geo-political demarcations as actual convergences of specific ethnic, social and cultural identities or as genetic pools has been demonstrated multiple times (Wouters and Heneisse 2023, Ramirez, 2014, Channa 2013). People have never been confined to any location even if they may be located there at a specific time period. Cultures have travelled through their human mediums across seas, mountains and deserts, intermingling and exchanging goods, ideas and influences. The misconceptions created by European claims to have been the first to travel across the globe were set aside by Wolf (1982) in his monumental work, 'Europe and the People without History'. At present, there is enough archaeological and pre-historical evidences to show that humans have always travelled; if they had not, then we would have all been confined to the continent of Africa. Each cultural region can only be located and captured in a moment of time, never across a temporal zone and these momentary captures are the photographic culmination of long histories and interactions that manifest as 'regional' only in that flash but otherwise they are parts of a stream that has been flowing and continues to flow. What can be identified as a region is primarily in terms of its geography and ecology and not its cultural, political or ethnic identity. In that sense the use of the concept of Bengal Delta is appropriate as it refers to a geographical location and an ecology of which the cultural dimension has been changing over time and whose habitat exhibits the footprints of various shades of human populations and cultures that have both traversed it in transit or have settled down to intermingle and produce the present communities, which again are numerous in their differences and collective histories.

About a hundred years ago, Bishop F.B. Fisher of the Wesleyan Episcopal Church had written that Calcutta occupied a strategic position on the route taken by populations moving from the southern part of Asia, that is 'from the north-west to the south-east, from Persia, Mesopotamia, Afghanistan, the Punjab and Upper and Central India towards Bengal and Burma. Some of these lines of movement terminate with the coal and iron fields around Asansol; others end with the city of Calcutta itself, while others pass through Calcutta down into the wonderfully rich and fertile fields of Burma and the Malay Peninsula' (c.f. The Statesman 11th December, 2023:07). In this quote, the Bishop is trying to highlight the wisdom of Job Charnok in establishing a city in a pestilence swamp; a city that provided a key destination for many people, seeking trade and livelihood, especially those moving in from the

more arid regions in the north-west to the fertile regions around the Bengal Delta. The success of Charnok's settlement is seen in that by the year 1921, the population of Calcutta stood at 1,327, 547 (more than a million people). The Bengal basin, with its fertile agricultural potential, its rich resources as well as its strategic location between the seas and the mountains, has lured populations from many adjoining areas. It has also provided passage for a stream of culture and human bodies flowing in from a vast region, linking it by trade, travel and ideological campaigns to the North, South, East and West.

The major four major factors that one can identify, which motivated the flow of goods and people, both into and out of this region, were: trade, formation of new settlements, political upheavals and religion. However, as the following narrative will show, all these factors were intrinsically tied up with each other. Political usurpation was motivated by trade interests and people often settled in areas that were conducive to trade. As people moved from one region to another, they carried their gods and beliefs with them, often giving rise to syncretic traditions in the process. Movements have also been caused by war and famines but the prime motive for many centuries has been trade and the search for livelihoods.

The Ancient Period

Trade, livelihoods and the search for new horizons has been a motivating factor for land travel and sea voyages as seen from the ancient travel routes like the Silk Route, from the memoirs of travelers such as Marco Polo and Iban Batuta and the remains of those who went on foot across continents, even before the advent of the wheel, water travel and domestication of horses. Obscure graves, little shrines and faded resting points trace the foot prints of travelers, lonely or in groups who traversed long distances by whatever means that were at their disposal. What spirit of adventure drove those ancient humans, or what natural disaster, we may not know for certain, but what is surely known is the spread of human genetic material, physical substances like seeds and flora and fauna as well as cultural artifacts that is clear evidence of mobility. Neither political nor ecological barriers have ever stopped people from reaching out, to venture and seek out new territories. Bengal's strategic position between the sea-coast and the Himalayas has kept it open for movement through both land and water, and numerous movements have populated it from the very ancient times.

The Bengal delta is an ecological mix of different kinds of terrains, including mountains and highlands along with waterways, marshes and tropical rainforests. These different ecological zones specialize in certain key resources native to them, giving rise to exchange of these goods, like for example the Himalayan Salt trade through which the arid Tibetan plateau exchanged salt for essential food items like rice, oil and sugar of which there was a local scarcity (Channa 2013). Salt, wool, rice

and sugar are some examples of goods that passed through ancient trade routes that had existed for millennia and were part of the feudal and even tribal economies. Trade has always brought people in contact to intermingle, not as automatons but as cultured humans who exchange many intangible goods along with the objects they trade or barter with each other. Wouters and Heneise (2023:17) describe that in pre-colonial times, significant trade existed between highland North-East India and Burma, as substantial goods in the form of mineral wealth like gold, copper, limestone and jade and valuables like elephant tusks, silk, opium, and timber passed between Southern China and Bengal through the Burma corridor. From as early as the 13th century, horses from Mongolia were being traded in Bengal via Mynamar, when the latter was under Mongolian rule. Because of the market in Bengal for these horses, the Mongols ignored the Burmese market, preferring rather to trade at a longer distance. There is not much on record about those times, only the data available from history about the spread of the Mongolian Empire, their efficiency in trading in horses and the local interest in Bengal for those horses. What is certain is that goods and people have flowed across these regions, and various political strategies largely linked to the flow of these goods, have from time to time both created as well as dismantled political boundaries. However, both documental and ethnographic material shows that the cultural and social links have continued to exist irrespective of the geo-political fractures.

The Colonial Period: Trade and Migrations

During the colonial period, the British transformed the face of every region they conquered and caused immense political upheavals because of their trade interests, such as that for pashmina wool and borax across the central Himalayas (Channa 2013) and for eastward trade to Tibet, Burma and beyond through the North-Eastern side of the Himalayan frontier. British capitalist aspirations across the Himalayan frontiers led them to annex territories, such as that of Sikkim, which they wrested from the Gurkhas and restored to the Chogyal in 1816 (Kotturan 1983:59), on the condition that the Chogyal will remain under British administration there by keeping open the trade corridor to Tibet, Western China and Inner Asia, through their territory. However, because of unrest from the Sikkimese side, British finally made it into an Indian state (Kotturan 1983: 63-67) and also annexed Kalimpong from Bhutan, to strengthen their control over the Tibetan corridor. The first tea plantations in this region were established in 1856 and further enhancement of trade from North Bengal was accomplished with the building of roads and railways. A road connected Darjeeling to the Grand Trunk Road in 1866 and a road was built from Darjeeling north to the Tibetan border at Jelap pass in 1877. A railroad connecting Calcutta to Darjeeling was completed in the year 1858. In this way North Bengal via Calcutta, was fully connected southwards to the Indian mainland and also northwards to Tibet through

the Northeast of India. The trade routes were therefore strengthened considerably during the colonial period but only to facilitate the movement of those materials that could feed into British capitalist interests. Not only goods but human bodies also traverse the corridors that were meant for trade, and for various reasons.

One category of people who are usually more mobile than the others are the ones on the margins both physically and politically, whose motivation to look for means of survival, pushes them a little further than what those who live within their comfort zones would attempt. The others are the ones who are less tied to power centers or who are more independent than subordinated, relying more on their own decisions than being dictated from above. These are also usually those who occupy regions that are on the peripheries of nations and states, far away from the seats of power and are both ungovernable and actually ungoverned. Scholars such as Michaud (2010) and Schengel (2020) have referred to these regions as Zomia, the ones which feel the least impact of power centers around them and which consequently get the least benefits also. Jean Muchaud (2010: 188) had drawn a map of Zomia in South Asia, imagining it as broadly stretching between the uplands of Pakistan and Afghanistan to the west and the central highlands of Vietnam in the East. We can imagine parts of the Bengal delta lying somewhere on this line, contributing to the vitality of the whole. One such specific location in the Bengal region, is the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) from where people have been moving out and in as a regular flow. During the medieval period, the CHT was a prosperous area of communities who did cotton cultivation and were the main suppliers of this essential commodity to the Mughal Empire. During British rule, many of them were transported to Burma as labour and later, when Burma and the Indian subcontinent were free of British rule and each of them became separate nations, the migrants from CHT, known now as Rohingyas were left with an ambiguous identity in their country of migration as they now became a Muslim minority in a predominantly Buddhist country. The story of their persecution is by now well known as also their reluctant acceptance back to their original country where they have now become migrants. Their region of origin has also undergone several political upheavals before settling down as Bangladesh, but the Rohingyas are left homeless although at the time they actually travelled, they were going from one part of an unified empire to another part. This story of becoming migrants without any actual movement has been dealt with extensively by scholars of borders and Van-Schendel is one who has paid close attention to the Indo-Bangladesh border, a border as we all know is an ambiguity.

While most people on these borderlands are more mobile than those living on the plains settlements, the tribal or indigenous people liable to be most mobile. The reasons can be seen in that they either have tenuous ties to the land being shifting cultivators, foragers or pastoralists; or they often face oppression from the dominant communities. The settled cultivators and those closer to the centers

of power are less likely to be mobile. The Santals from Bengal and Bihar plateaus migrated to Assam in the North-East, Burma and the highlands of CHT, where they introduced wet rice cultivation to largely shifting cultivating people. The last named now refer to themselves as Pahariya Bengalis. In addition to the Santals, the Oraons and Mundas also travelled to Assam to do rice cultivation. In CHT, the local indigenous people, the Banthalees, Dangurs and Assamese welcomed them as rice cultivation was looked up to by them as a superior form of cultivation. The Santals had moved to other regions of Bengal also. Sarkar (2011:67) relates how the Santhals poured into the Malda district of West Bengal, from 1800 onwards and about 20,000 Santals had settled there till 1900. They were welcomed by the local landlords in what was known as the Barind tract, for their superior skills in rice farming. However it was here, due to the uneasy relationship between the landlords, and Hindu upper castes that the Jitu Santal rebellion occurred. Detailed account of which can be found in Sarkar (2011).

While CHT can be seen as a turbulent region for various reasons, Burma, lying east across the Bengal region has also been a hot seat of movements, especially as already mentioned, it was part of thriving trade routes between the East and the South West. After colonizing Bengal, the British, in their political attempts at control more territories and staging a counter attack on an aggressive Burma, entered into a conflict with it and the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826), significantly impaired many of these trade routes, depleting mountain passages and depopulating the towns that were thriving on this trade. After losing the war, Burma became British territory and what we call North-East India was also controlled by the British Empire, leading to considerable loss of trade across the mountain ranges and the ancient links became weaker. Later with colonial rule providing safe passage, Burma became a destination for many people for different reasons. People belonging to higher class/castes, other than the indentured labour like the Rohingyas, also went from Bengal to Burma, like anthropologists Pandian's grandfather (Pandian 2014) who managed to set up a prosperous business in timber. While many went for trade, they went also as government servants and as a variety of professionals such as doctors and engineers. These expatriate Bengalis of those times are part of our family histories, as many of us, including myself have an uncle or someone who was in Burma and from where they were forced to return when the Japanese occupied Rangoon during the Second World War. Prosperous people had to leave everything behind and come away with nothing. Pandian has given an account of his grandfather's journey to Rangoon and then the awful trail back to India, by land and by bullock cart. In my family I was told about an elderly couple who boarded the last flight from Rangoon carrying nothing but the photograph of a dead son.

Memories, Landscapes and Lingering Traditions

The close ties that were enabled during the days of the British Empire were almost abruptly severed by the World War and then by the freedom from colonial rule that left the two countries as sovereign

states. Yet, Burma, remains enshrined in the Bengali imaginary in the form of literature, songs and residual cultural elements, not to forget the unforgettable character of Abhaya created by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, in his Srikanto series. Abhaya depicts what seems the impossible for those times, a married woman who leaves her husband to elope with her lover. The story of Abhaya also brings home another aspect of travel, the crossing of cultural boundaries where the normative sphere becomes more lax, as one moves away from the core centers of conservatism. The expatriates in Burma developed certain cultural traits, notably greater freedom for women, than was possible in Bengal, in fact in all of India, in the early part of the last century. Irawati Karve, the female doyen of anthropology, was born and raised in Burma, named after the Irrawaddy river and received an education rare for a female child to receive in India of those times. Similarly the fictional Abhaya displays immense courage in challenging societal norms. A distantly related aunt in my family also managed to become a doctor because of her residence in Burma and was known for her liberal life style.

But Burma was not the only region for interaction, countries as far away as European ones, also came close to the soil of Bengal. The French, Portuguese and the British were three major European powers who landed in the Bay of Bengal through the sea route. These traders and travelers ultimately decided to take over the country, but even as they did so, there was a two way and not a one way exchange of people and culture. We, in Bengal are all too familiar with the narratives of this intermingling of different streams, in the persona of Antony Kabiya, the egg benedicts and plum cakes that our palate has adopted, the coining of the term *paunrutie* (a distortion of pound *ruti* or bread sold by the pound), for bread, in the blouses and chemise and petticoats of women's attire and in a myriad of other aspects. But the colonizers were also not left unaffected, as they adopted the ayahs and the coolies, the sherbet, kebabs and curry. It is ironical that British cuisine is now known for curry more than it is known for the Christmas puddings.

Intangible goods like technology, language and religious beliefs travel faster and have been doing so for centuries. But these goods were not the only things exchanged, beliefs, language and deities also travelled along with the material goods. There is sufficient evidence in terms of incorporation of words from each of these languages in this area, Portuguese and French have both contributed to modern Bengali as it is spoken but it is the British who finally took near complete control and their influence upon this region is more profound than anywhere else in India. The exchange was mutual although lop sided and the British genetic and cultural material remain as components of present day Bengal and may be observed floating in England as well. As Trautmann has pointed out, the base of the statue of Sir Willam Jones in the St. Paul's cathedral in London depicts the Hindu myth of Samudra Manthan, the Kurma Avatar and Visnu and Lakshmi, and Jones is shown with a large replica of the book of Manu (Manusmriti) resting on his hand. This statue crafted by John Bacon was installed by

the East India Company (Trautmann 2004: 76-79) is another symbol of the cultural syncretism made possible by institutes such as the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

Missionaries and carriers of various gospels were another kind of travelers that have existed for a long time. As pointed out by Clifford Geertz, religion is a very strong motivational force by its very nature of being outside of the rational. Just the preaching of their beliefs, not necessarily for proselytizing, was strong enough motivation to push fakirs, mendicants and other holy men across the seas and mountains. In the Bengal Delta, people travelled not only along water routes by ferry and boats, they also undertook some hazardous travels across the mountains and highlands. The Gosains traders from Bengal took the gospel of Buddhism to Tibet via some perilous mountain routes (Camman 1951:59). Hindu holy men, fakirs travelled to the mountains across to Afghanistan and other places. Having travelled from India in the early 13th to 14th century, Buddhism returned to India in the early sixties along with the Dalai Lama. The Himalayan borders are today dotted with small monasteries and shrines built by the lamas who accompanied him. In a fairly remote village near Harsil, almost at the Indo-Tibet border in Uttarakhand, I found a tiny shrine bearing the inscription that its foundation was laid by H.H. the Dalai Lama himself in 1965. While travelling, these beliefs and rituals take on the colours of the local culture and the result is a kaleidoscope of various practices and thoughts that spread across a landscape.

The concept of landscape makes it evident that it does not imply any boundaries but rather a spread, not uniform but shaded and in the case of a geo-political territory the shading is in terms of what Tsing (2016: 5) refers to as ‘vernacular histories, which ties them to the contingencies of encounters and the peculiarities of places’. The idea of clear boundaries, of demarcated borderlands is alien to most people who were not educated in the Renaissance philosophy of Cartesian duality. For most indigenous people, as pointed out by Karlsson (2000: 31) who writes with reference to the Rabhas, ‘It was hard to say where one village started and ended, and it was equally difficult for ethnographers to map the borders of a “tribe”’ Such ethnographic predicaments have been met by most honest ethnographers who have not taken given categories for granted (Channa 2013, Ramirez 2014) and others. Not only tribes but even peasants would not have had such clear cut boundaries in mind as they cultivated their lands or traded or moved in search of livelihoods. It was only with the parceling out of land in the form of zamindaris that such boundaries became important for revenue collection, as did individual land ownership.

The region encompassing the Bengal delta is one with its own vernacular history but one that shades off into other wider global histories, for example, the conquest of Burma in the 12th and 13th centuries by the Mongolian empire, is one example of how a historical event in part of the world affects the other, as Bengal became entangled with far off Mongolia, in the importing of horses via

Burma. The Bengal Famine of 1942 is another example of a War in Europe affecting the poor peasants in another part of the world, beautifully depicted by Satyajit Ray in his film *Asani Sanket*. The colonization of Bengal linked it to European history, parts of which became incorporated into its soil through Christianity, the English language and literature and various other cultural elements like food and clothing. Because of the relatively open border with Myanmar during the colonial period and even later through the ethnic and linguistic similarities with certain indigenous groups, a number of ethno-linguistic groups are spread across India, Myanmar and Bangladesh, for example the Rohingyas and various Naga and Kuki groups. A map showing the Greater Naga Lim, as imagined by the Naga liberation movement, shows part of Burma, Manipur and Assam also as Naga territory (Lurstep 1992), a territory the Nagas would like to claim as their own.

Expulsions and Suffering

It is not possible to construct a narrative about any region, without describing the points of conflict, the disturbances and tensions that are to be found everywhere. Every landscape has its turbulence and schisms. The Bengal region has had more than its share of political upheavals in the form of multiple cleavages in recent history; once during the Partition of the country and secondly during the formation of Bangladesh. However, the position of the indigenous people of this region has always remained precarious. With greater integration of this region with the centers of power and control by the external colonizers the worst sufferers have been the indigenous tribes. As pointed out by Archana Prasad (2004: 109), the spread of industrial capitalism during the colonial period that led to the linking of the local forests to global market, deprived the forest dwelling tribes of their centuries old habitations and means of livelihoods as more and more forests were brought under control of the central state and reserved for profit making by them. The conversion of nature into a resource deprived these nature-dwelling communities a big blow not only in material terms but also in terms of the denigration of their belief systems and nature centric cosmology as 'primitive'.

In his ethnographic study of the Rabhas of sub-Himalayan Bengal, Karlsson (2000) has described the systemic expulsion of the Rabhas from their forest from the colonial period to the present. The process began with the establishment of the Jaldapara Sanctuary in the 1930, for the protection of the one-horned rhinos, and later in the 1980s by the creation of the Bux Tiger Reserve for the Project Tiger. The Rabhas consider themselves to be the subjects of their Kocha Raja, who has been historically replaced by the Bhutanese, the British and presently by the Bengalis. British educated and market oriented populations such as the Bengalis, soon overran the indigenous people such as the Tripuris, the Rabhas, and others present in the forests and lands of the Bengal Delta.

A region is therefore not made up just of myths and stories and of its flora and fauna but it is also representative of a shifting power field, where the narratives of the dominant hold center stage and overshadow the stories of those pushed to the margins. The Bengal Delta, its history and its imaginaries are mostly seen and understood through the eyes and practices of the dominant groups. Smaller entities have got lost, their stories turned to ashes, such the Tripuri, Lodhas, Lepchas and Rabhas among others, the earliest residents of this region have been the first to have faded away, victims of what Nathan and Xaxa (2012) have referred to as 'adverse inclusion' a process by which disenfranchised people are reintegrated in marginal and degraded position. The indigenous people, after being ousted from their original habitats are reduced to being laborers in urban slums or as coal mine laborers. They are almost always allotted the most hazardous and menial jobs as a token of compensation for their loss. A landscape is therefore not necessarily composed of happy colours but is often shadowed by dark shades of exploitation and deprivation. To look towards a sustainable and just future it is important to pay attention to what Karlsson (2000: 141) has called as 'eco-politics' to understand that there is a story of domination and suffering behind all that is upheld as beautiful, necessary and in 'national interest'. These dominant/subordinate equations are not isolated or purely local, though they are manifested in their local and specific forms at particular moments of history, but are the local expressions of larger, global power fields, like that of the neo-liberal market economy or the global network of trade (both legal and illegal) and the global manifestations of white supremacy.

In Conclusion

This brief excursion into the history and population movements across this region is just to introduce the region, not as a physical space or even a geo-political entity but as a landscape, a scenario that is imbued with meaning introduced through human perception which in turn is informed by the memories, by shadows the culturally significant events that spread much outside of their specific location to remain embedded in the mosaic of real and imagined tapestries of belongingness and identity. Take for example the name Polashi (Plassey), maybe now just a small village in Bengal but which for the Bengalis and to some extent for all Indians, evoke the larger image of colonization, a defeat and a betrayal and the entire transformation of an era, where one defeat on the battle field meant the beginning of the end; the entry of the East India Company into Indian territory, not just as traders but as rulers. In the same way for different people with different memories, the landscape is a site for tracing one's past and also one's future. Space and time coalesce into each other, for without reference to temporality, space becomes emptied of its events, its processes and associated narratives.

The Bengal Delta therefore has no boundaries that are real, what we assume as a delimitation of any kind is only conceptual, a facility to enable discourses and analysis and nothing beyond that. Thus, in spite of the formation of post-colonial nation-state boundaries that seek to impose strict

control on any kind of movement across their borders, there persists even in the 21st century, ‘a continuous mobility in the Bengal or Burma/Mynamar-Thailand borderlands’ (Wouters and Heneise 2023:19). One has seen the cinematic expression of the border crossings between West and East Bengal (politically India and Bangladesh), in the films such as *Bisarjan* and *Sankhchil*. Therefore for a region to have an ethnographic existence, it needs only to show some degree of density in its local relational structures and collective imaginaries, the rest is left to the analyst to construct and present in a credible form.

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