

Local Media Discourses on the Bengal Bangladesh Border

An Abstract

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This paper will have a look into the Indo-Bangladesh border from the perspectives of English language national newspapers, Bengali vernacular newspapers and local newspapers from the border districts and try to compare the three to portray how the border is represented and constructed by different discourse communities. What are the questions that both fascinate people and yet make this border a much vexed region? The border is not just a material space, but also a discursive challenge and an emotive issue. My purpose is to find out what makes border this almost mythical and sacred space where the state justifies and legitimises its presence by upholding national security and yet the border becomes increasingly an insecure space. It remains an enigma to most people.

Let us look at the discourses culled from a few of the leading national newspapers. Their news about the Indo-Bangladesh border takes two prominent but different lines. The newspapers either harp on the quantum of people coming into or infiltrating Indian borders or on the nefarious role played by the BSF, BGB and border criminals. The border people are discussed only incidentally. Even well intentioned reports are premised on these questions of illegality. One such example is a story that appeared in *India Today* on 14 January 2011. In this story the author describes the situation thus:

“Several immigrants...have, over time, become naturalised citizens of India. They have ration cards, educational certificates, voter identity cards and even passports. Touts on both sides of the border have been helping immigrants for decades now. ‘Earlier, immigrants had to pay Rs. 1000 to Rs. 2000 per person for each document. We now charge anywhere between Rs. 5000 to Rs. 10000 per document per person,’ says one tout.”ⁱ

If one looks at newspapers that come out from the border areas the coverage is of a different kind. These papers can hardly be called dailies. Typically they begin abruptly, run for a certain time and stop abruptly. The editors may or may not support a political party or line but usually news is about the every day lives of the people in the area. Even when they carry news of national/international importance there is usually a local twist. In one such story it is said that: “Even though the barbed wires have managed to divide the two countries they have not been able to divide the hearts of the people of the two countries. The love that people have for each other cannot be stopped by the fence. The two people not only share a language but also their hearts so why this fence? This question is raised by Afsar Sheikh, from Rasikpur village in Nadia, when he comes to visit his grand daughter Marufa. Marufa broke down in tears when she first saw her grandfather. She wanted so much to touch him but the fence did not let that happen.”ⁱⁱ

From a close reading of the newspapers I want to reflect on the following:

- (a) what are the questions that interest different population groups or discourse community?

- (b) Who are the major actors in the border and
- (c) What makes borders such a vexed problem?

ⁱShutapa Paul, "Illegal Immigrants: East Bengal in West Bengal," *India Today*, 14 January, 2011, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/east+bengal+in+west+bengal/1/126587.html> accessed on 14 October 2014

ⁱⁱZulfikar Ali Kanan, "The Barbed Divided Countries But Not The Hearts of the People," *Meherpur.com*, 24 October 2012, p. 1.