

# “Most fatal malady”<sup>1</sup>: Media, Migration and Identity in Assam

By

Ksenia Glebova\*

## When I can't Comprehend

Why they're burning books  
Or slashing paintings,  
When they can't bear to look  
At god's own nakedness  
When they ban the film  
And gut the scats to stop the play  
And I ask why  
They just smile and say,  
"She must be from another country."  
But from where we are it doesn't look like a country,  
It's more like the cracks  
That grows between borders  
Behind their backs  
That's where I live.  
And I'll be happy to say  
"I never learned your customs,  
I don't remember your language  
Or know your ways.  
I must be from another country"<sup>2</sup>

*Imtiaz Dharker*

The issue of Bangladeshi migration to Assam constructed in the local media as a threat to the Assamese identity is as much debated as it is complex. Stories and images of Bangladeshi migrants in Assam are ubiquitous in the local Assamese press. We are told that migration from Bangladesh is Assam's "*most fatal malady*"<sup>3</sup>, a "*plague*" and a "*ticking bomb*"

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\* Works for UNICEF Gender and Rights unit in Geneva.  
Refugee Watch, 38, December 2011

while the migrants themselves are referred to as "*infiltrators*" and "*encroachers*" who pose a threat both to the security of the state and the identity of the Assamese people. If we accept that identity formation in Assam is an ongoing process that continues to take place in a specific context, then we must address the media as an agent in the process and migration from Bangladesh as a tool. In the local press, the ongoing migration from Bangladesh to Assam is constructed as a security issue by means of a series of discursive strategies, most notably through arguments building a security bridge between migration and Assamese identity. In other words, the security argument is used in the discourse to frame the relationship between Bangladeshi migration and Assamese identity. The construction of both Assamese and Bangladeshi identities takes place within the migration discourse. Collective identity is always constructed on the basis of the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy and thus it always contains Otherness<sup>4</sup>. In the case of Bangladeshi migration to Assam, the Bangladeshi migrants are constructed in the press as the quintessential other. The discourse of differences between 'us' and 'them' is realised through discursive strategies of representing the positive self and the negative other and thereby constructing a homogenous Assamese identity. The press sets the limits of Assamese identity, defining who is an Assamese and who is not.

### **Framing Migration as a Security Issue**

In migration discourses identity of the host population is often used as an argument justifying securitisation. The Bangladeshi migration as a threat to the Assamese identity is a very strong argument used in the newspapers to legitimise exclusion and deportation of Bangladeshi migrants. Although the national security argument still holds its primary position; the 1998 Governor's report recommendation provides a telling summary of the identity threat construction: "Awareness should be promoted about illegal migration into Assam being not only a threat to the identity of the Assamese people but what is more, being a grave threat to our national security". The same use of the topos of threat in relation to identity can be found in the newspapers examined below. The link between identity and migration is made explicitly and the "influx of illegal Bangladeshis into Assam" is constructed as a threat to "the ethno-cultural identity of the people of the region"<sup>5</sup>.

In order to justify protection of the Assamese identity, the press resorts to discourses of differentiation whereby the Assamese and the Bangladeshi identities are juxtaposed to one another. However, the difficulty of distinguishing, for example, Bengali-speaking Indian nationals from foreigners for purposes of expulsion and deportation leads to the proliferation of the ambiguous category of "*suspected illegal migrant*". This category is then easily applied to the Assamese Muslims who settled in

Assam before 1971. Indeed, when identities are securitised their complex nature and flexibility are denied and suppressed. Securitisation, according to Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver - who once coined the concept, means “the staging of existential issues in politics to lift them above politics. In security discourse, an issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus, by labeling it as security, an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means”<sup>6</sup>. The key idea behind the idea of securitization is that security is a ‘speech act’. There are no security issues per se, but all issues can be constructed as security issues through ‘speech acts’ by ‘securitising actors’. “The utterance itself is the act”<sup>7</sup>.

In the process of constructing the Bangladeshis as a security threat to Assamese identity, the Assamese identity is reduced to a static exclusive version of itself that does not account for its historical complexity and formation against the Bengali-speakers from West Bengal that further problematises the ongoing migration from Bangladesh. The Assamese Muslims and their identity crisis is a case in point. The newspapers seem to be divided on their behalf. Some like *The Sentinel*, openly question their Assamese identity – others like *The Assam Tribune* highlight the need to protect the Assamese Muslims as “*genuine minorities*”. The latter again creates a distinction between Bangladeshi Muslims and Assamese Muslims as “*fake*” and “*genuine*”. The various dichotomies constructed in the press between the migrants and the Assamese are not surprising as migration and immigrants help the modern states define themselves against “the other”<sup>8</sup>. This argument seems to be well placed in the context of the Northeastern English-medium press.

Identity - as we propose to argue - is discursively constructed and produced through media. Any particular construction of identity can either legitimise or question policy<sup>9</sup>. Any analytical approach to identity must be able to accommodate the empirical complexity and allow not only for the construction of a national Self and a radically different Other but also for degrees of difference and Otherness<sup>10</sup>. The extreme difficulty of coming to simple conclusions on the basis of unitary identities must be acknowledged in the interpretation of the findings.

Rapid changes in Assam's demographic composition played an important role in the construction and evolution process of Assamese identity. The identity issue featured high on the agenda of the 1975-1981 anti-foreigners movement in Assam and identity protection rhetoric was used by the groups at the forefront of the agitation. The Assam Accord that ended the violence in 1985 featured a definition<sup>11</sup> of who is an Assamese agreed upon by the signatories. The definition was then used as the basis for the controversial (Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act passed in 1983. The repeal of the Act in 2005 sparked off increased coverage and debate in the regional media.

In present-day Bangladesh, the key push factors for migration from Bangladesh to Assam are mainly economic and social insecurity. In 2010 Bangladesh was ranked 129<sup>th</sup> out of 169 states in terms of its human development index<sup>12</sup>, a comparative global measure of life expectancy, literacy, education and standards of living. Economic instability and depression, poverty, lack of employment opportunities, struggle for livelihood and economic discrimination of Hindu religious minority coupled with political factor of social insecurity caused by fear of riots, terrorism and absence of democratic rights<sup>13</sup>.

The so-called "Bengali chauvinism"—referring to Bengali alleged lack of enthusiasm for establishing railways and academic infrastructure<sup>14</sup> as well as their enthusiastic support for imposing Bengali as the official language of Assam<sup>15</sup> - is also said to have played a role in the Assamese identity formation process. As a result, the Assamese language emerges as a key factor in stirring nationalist resentment among the Assamese and a crucial parameter of Assamese identity. For example, Nag<sup>16</sup> suggests that Bengali officials were instrumental in convincing the British that Assamese language was a dialect of the Bengali language in 1836, when Bengali was established as the official language of the province.

Although most papers were in agreement in terms of their construction of Bangladeshi migration as a threat to Assamese identity, the degree of securitisation varied greatly between the newspapers examined here with *The Sentinel* and *The Statesman* at different ends of the spectrum. *The Sentinel* stands out not only as the most prolific but also the most radical voice – in terms of the number of articles, language used to characterise migration and migrants from Bangladesh as well in terms of the solutions it called for. *The Sentinel* also drew attention to its own role in the "crusade against illegal immigration" and repeatedly issues overt calls for action such as "it is high time all nationalistic Indians and patriotic organizations raised their voices against the illegal Bangladeshis" in July 2010<sup>17</sup>. Some other papers reviewed here, with the notable exception of *The Statesman*, exhibited similar language of security ingrained in the coverage of Bangladeshi migration and its framing as an 'existential threat' to the Assamese identity. Overall, the media coverage of the issue has been prolific and at times could be termed no less than "hysterical"<sup>18</sup> especially during electoral campaigning as migration has long been a top election issue in Assam.

Das<sup>19</sup> argues that the Northeast media mainstreams and stereotypes its subjects on the basis of his case study of media coverage of internal displacement in Assam. He claims that the media sets coverage rules and norms in such a way that makes representation of the subjects in the public domain "not only difficult but impossible". The media transform its subjects into "border problems", "infiltrators" or "refugees", "Muslim terrorists", "al Qaeda agents" and so on<sup>20</sup>. The same can be said of the Northeast media

discourse on Bangladeshi migration, where the migrants are presented in similar terms.

Ultimately, representation is about what, who and how is being shown and, correspondingly, not being shown; and what is expressed directly and indirectly. Representation is not simply about showing something or someone to someone else but it reflects the choices made along the way: what, to whom and, once again in line with critical discourse analysis, how. Representation does not only show what we think but it also influences how we think – again the emphasis is on 'how'<sup>21</sup>. How we think of the Assamese identity and the Bangladeshi 'otherness' is formed in the process of media production of securitisation. Thus, what is being represented and what is not produces a particular image of Bangladeshi migrants in the minds of the newspaper readers. The Bangladeshis as the other are constructed in relation to the producer of meaning – the middle-class English-speaking Assamese newspaper journalists.

Indeed, the Bangladeshi migration discourse works in terms of collective identities. Das<sup>22</sup> argues that the media makes the individuals "subsumed under and appropriated by certain categories" – the frames that are constructed in the process of media coverage. Das describes the mechanics of the process whereby the categories overtake the individuals, who no longer appear before the reader "as living human bodies". He goes on to suggest that when the object of discourse is dehumanised, the human stories do not elicit empathy from the readers. This approach evokes Wodak's referential discursive strategy that relies on the devices of depersonalising metaphors and metonymies. Furthermore, Das<sup>23</sup> claims that in the Northeast the reporters hardly ever speak directly to the object of his or her reports and there is often no personal contact between the reporter and the alleged Bangladeshi migrants. Instead, the reports are born out of press releases, press conferences, luncheon meetings and general knowledge assumptions. Reporting literally means *covering* the object of reporting – as the cover thickens day by day; the object of reporting is "pushed more and more into the oblivion"<sup>24</sup>. Thus Bangladeshi migrants in Assam are lost in the phenomenon of migration; the act of migration is stripped of the migrant. Das adds that since the discourse rests on predefined categories, only the information that fits into the pre-existent frames is included in the discourse. Thus the information that fits with the already existent categories qualifies as news, and the information that does not – is censored and thus does not end up on paper or on screen<sup>25</sup>. The media construct the frames in such a way that they appear before the reader as "unproblematic and incontestable", as if there is nothing more to them. According to Das, the act of reporting is thus equated to the "art of writing the truth"<sup>26</sup>. This also applies well to the construction of the Bangladeshi migrants in the Northeast media discourse.

The currently dominant construction of Bangladeshi migration to Assam as a security issue by the regional press is not only biased but narrow as it deliberately excludes alternative frameworks and limits the discourse to pre-defined frames. The phenomenon of Bangladeshi migration to Assam can be constructed from two broadly opposite perspectives - as a security threat and as a humanitarian problem, whereby migration is a survival strategy in search of better livelihoods. While security approach dominates the discourse, the human security approach focusing on migrants as individuals moving in search of better livelihoods is currently absent. Also, the discourse emphasises the pull factors of Assam but does not mention the push factors in Bangladesh such as numerous floods, depriving people of home and arable land, and resulting food crises. Migration from Bangladesh can also be seen as labour migration due to diminishing employment opportunities and in response to demand for cheap manual labour in Assam.

The importance of alternative frameworks lies in the fact that they call for alternative solutions. For example, framing the issue as labour migration calls for legalization of labourers by means of issuing work permits. It is important to note that proponents of very different solutions – ranging from the economic boycott of the migrants to legalising labour migration – agree that the issue needs to be urgently addressed. It is also clear that the issue of undocumented migration from Bangladesh needs a comprehensive and practical solution that will work on the ground as it has persisted for decades. The complexity and sensitivity of the Bangladeshi migration to Assam may call for a mix of policy solutions that can diffuse the situation and be practical enough to implement.

The solutions most commonly propagated in the press call for various means of exclusion: identification and deportation of the migrants, economic boycott of migrant labour and its replacement with self-sufficient labour economy as well as the fencing of the border that first began in the 1980s and is still incomplete at the time of writing. Nine deadlines have been set by the central government since 2009 to completely seal off the border with the latest being set for 2012<sup>27</sup>. This is a direct outcome of the securitisation process that transfers the issue from the domain of 'normal' politics into emergency politics. While identification of Bangladeshis is complicated since there is no comprehensive identification system even for Indian citizens, deportation has largely proved ineffective during the 22 years of the IMDT Act. Economic boycott of migrant labour and attempts at self-sufficiency can also be dismissed outright as highly unrealistic measures not to mention their detrimental impact on the lives of the migrants.

Using Wodak's discourse - historical approach - that is historically oriented and context-sensitive – specific contents of the discourse, discursive strategies and linguistic means used in the construction of the

discriminatory discourse on Bangladeshi migrants can be established. The continuous exclusion and discrimination of Bangladeshi migrants in Assam that reached its zenith during the Assam agitation is legitimised by means of securitising migration from Bangladesh. The discriminatory discourse on Bangladeshi migration to Assam in the press rests on the construction that Bangladeshi migrants present a security threat to the survival of the Assamese. The precise content of the threat lies in the scale of migration, migrants' demands on scarce land and jobs of the Assamese, migrants' religious affiliation and illegal status as well as other factors. The arguments present dramatic scenarios that threaten the very survival of the Assamese through terrorism, border diseases, being reduced to a numerical and religious minority in their own state and others. The link between migration and security is legitimised by means of discursive strategies including the referential strategy of positive self-representation and negative representation of the Bangladeshi migrants; and attributing negative traits to the Bangladeshi migrants as opposed to the positive Assamese. The discriminatory utterances are reported in explicit terms and further intensified by means of various linguistic devices such as metapragmatic verbs and metaphors. An editorial in *The Sentinel*<sup>28</sup> warns of Bangladeshis as going to “spread their *tentacles* as far as possible after illegally entering Assam and other border-States”.

### **The Impact**

Securitisation of migration discourse in the media has a great potential to affect the lives of the Bangladeshi migrants who are being securitised in both direct and indirect ways, at different levels, within the borders of Assam, at its borders and beyond its borders. The implications range from daily discrimination by the police and border security forces and dehumanisation of Bangladeshi migration in the media discourse to violence caused by the public “taking law into their own hands”<sup>29</sup>, as Chief State Minister Tarun Gogoi warned against after the outbreak of anti-migrant violence in August 2008 led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) and tribal student groups. Importantly, in the process of securitisation both Bangladeshi and Assamese identities are being scrutinised – in the discourse being a Bangladeshi implies illegality and Assamese identity is constructed as homogenous and exclusive.

Economic boycott of migrant labour as one of the solutions proposed in the press to tackle the issue of Bangladeshi migration is a concrete example of the implication of securitisation for the livelihood of the migrants. The boycott was initially proposed by the BJP and continues to be openly propagated by *The Sentinel* at the time of this writing. Another solid example is provided by the notorious IMDT Act itself. The IMDT can be seen as an extraordinary measure evoked as a result of securitisation. The

Act was enacted by the Parliament in 1983 at the height of the anti-foreigner movement in Assam, and it defined the migrants in the way asserted by the securitising agents who signed the Assam Accord. Furthermore, the fencing of the Assam-Bangladesh border that has been in progress since 2000 is a particularly concrete example of the impact of securitisation on the lives of people on both sides of the border. At the time of writing the anticipated completion date was set for 2012<sup>30</sup>. In addition, protests and rallies against Bangladeshi migrants organised by the AASU and other student organisations are not an unfamiliar sight on the streets of Guwahati and throughout Assam - large-scale rallies were held in Guwahati as recently as in November 2010 in the capital Guwahati<sup>31</sup>. At its worst, the securitisation process in Assam ended in raids, arrests, detentions and deportations of allegedly illegal Bangladeshis. At the state level, the lack of consensus on the issue between India and Bangladesh is a further source of worry for the migrants caught between two fires. Unwelcome in India, they are not necessarily welcome back in Bangladesh either. This is well illustrated by the 2006 Satgachi episode when several hundred people spent days in the so-called 'no man's land' between India and Bangladesh while both states were refusing to accept them<sup>32</sup>. The vicious circle whereas India is pushing the unwanted migrants out and Bangladesh is refusing to accept them is a potential scenario. At the party politics level, the process of securitising Bangladeshi migrants in Assam has been used as an expedient by the Hindu nationalist parties such as the BJP at the nationwide level and the AGP at the state level to maintain their patriotic image and expand political support among the majority community of Hindu Assamese, although at times AGP changed its strategy showing a pro-Bangladeshi Muslim attitude. The remarkable consensus of the English-language print media when it comes to the framing of Bangladeshi migration as a security threat suggests that, once migration is framed as a security threat, it is no longer possible for the left and secular actors to dismiss it as a communalist issue. This consensus also makes desecuritisation look unrealistic.

### **Desecuritizing Media**

The question is how can the press initiate the process of desecuritisation in future amidst all this? In principle, anyone can act as a desecuritising actor in the same way as anyone can securitise. But some actors are more powerful than others. The question of motivation and political support is crucial. Ultimately, India does not currently have anti-discrimination guidelines for the press. The antidiscrimination debate, though certainly viewed as very important by many scholars and media professionals, has not really reached public consciousness. No real negative sanctions exist for uttering discriminating remarks that often go without



penalty as a consequence. Thus a legislative framework of addressing discriminatory discourses can be another instrument of desecuritisation.

The challenges posed by modern international migration cannot be adequately addressed by securitisation that acts to reduce the complexity of migration to a simplified security frame. The language of securitisation calls for urgent and radical solutions but it is not a solution in itself. The securitisation of Bangladeshi migration to Assam in the Northeast Indian press means very tangible detrimental consequences for the Bangladeshi migrants and does not translate into an increased level of security for the Assamese either. Instead of framing the Bangladeshi migrants in security terms, the challenges of migration can be addressed through 'normal' political and administrative processes aiming to facilitate regularised migration. The media play an important role in producing and reproducing discriminatory discourses through constructing linkages between migration and security, as this study demonstrates. But once examined from a historical perspective, Assamese identity is a lot more complex than its construction in the process of securitisation. In addition to its grave implications, securitisation greatly delimits the solutions to the issue of migration from Bangladesh to Assam. As cross-border migration is likely to remain a source of conflict in South Asia in the coming years due to the inherent asymmetries of the region, desecuritisation of migration and search for sustainable and feasible solutions can enhance the prospects of peaceful co-existence.

To reiterate Huysmans<sup>33</sup> "to tell a story is to handle the world". The Northeast Indian English-medium press tells the story of Bangladeshi migrants to Assam in a biased, discriminatory and stigmatising manner constructing the identity of Bangladeshi migrants in juxtaposition to the identity of the Assamese – thus contributing to the reinforcement of the mutually exclusive dichotomy of 'us' and 'them'. Understanding identity as a complex, continuous and evolving process is a necessary prerequisite for practical desecuritisation. The historical development of Assamese identity shows that it did not develop in a vacuum and migration from Bangladesh played an important role in the process. Hence the stories of the majority – the Assamese –, and the minority – the Bangladeshis – can be told in such a way that they do not exclude each other from the political community<sup>34</sup> thus enabling a 'miscellany of identities'<sup>35</sup>. Desecuritisation of Bangladeshi migrants would be more difficult if the Assamese identity continues to be seen in an exclusive way that denies its plural nature and discursive aspects as well as historical ties with the area that is now Bangladesh.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Define it as Political Migration" in *The Sentinel*, 7 July 2006.

<sup>2</sup> From the poem "Freak" (abridged version) by Imtiaz Dharker.

- <sup>3</sup> "Define it as Political Migration", *The Sentinel*, 7 July 2006.
- <sup>4</sup> Kristeva, 1992.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Sentinel*, "The Influx issue", 19 April 2005.
- <sup>6</sup> Buzan et al. 1998, 26.
- <sup>7</sup> Wæver 1995, 55.
- <sup>8</sup> Balibar, 1993.
- <sup>9</sup> Hansen, 2006.
- <sup>10</sup> Hansen, 2006.
- <sup>11</sup> Assam accord text (1985) accessed at the Centre for Development and Peace Studies site [http://cdpsindia.org/assam\\_accord.asp](http://cdpsindia.org/assam_accord.asp) on 30 October 2010.
- <sup>12</sup> Human Development Report, UNDP, 2010.
- <sup>13</sup> Datta, 2004.
- <sup>14</sup> Gohain, 1985.
- <sup>15</sup> Baruah, 1991.
- <sup>16</sup> Nag, 1990.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Sentinel*, "Don't I ignore the grave Bangladeshi issue", 11 July 2010.
- <sup>18</sup> Hazarika, 2008.
- <sup>19</sup> Das, 2004.
- <sup>20</sup> Das, 2004.
- <sup>21</sup> Jokinen 2000, 117.
- <sup>22</sup> Das, 2004.
- <sup>23</sup> Das, 2004.
- <sup>24</sup> Das 2004, 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Das 2004, 4.
- <sup>26</sup> Das 2004, 4.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Sentinel*, "Nine deadlines on fencing along B'desh border since 2006!" 5 May 2010.
- <sup>28</sup> *The Sentinel*, 11 July 2010.
- <sup>29</sup> BBC News, "Fears over Assam vigilante violence", 8 September 2008, last accessed 1 November 2010 at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/7603984.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7603984.stm).
- <sup>30</sup> *The Assam Tribune*, "NRC pilot project to start in June", 23 April 2010.
- <sup>31</sup> *The Assam Tribune*, "AASU rally brings traffic to a halt", 14 November 2010.
- <sup>32</sup> Bhaumik, 2005.
- <sup>33</sup> Huysmans, 2006.
- <sup>34</sup> Jutila 2006, 182.
- <sup>35</sup> Rushdie, 2000.

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