



MOBILIZING GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE: REFUGEE RESEARCH IN AN AGE OF DISPLACEMENT

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Insecure Nation, Insecure Migrant: Postcolonial Echoes from India's Northeast

Paula Banerjee and Ranabir Samaddar

The Problematic of Security/Insecurity

The issue of protection of the victims of forced migration and migrants in general is both a humanitarian and human rights issue (see chapter 2). Yet as soon as protection becomes in the main an institutionalized affair, the humanitarian aspect becomes dominant. The rights of the migrants are overshadowed by the humanist concern for the distress of the victims of forced migration and migrants in general. The louder the humanized descriptions become, the more overwhelming become the practical considerations of the large humanitarian institutions that are looking after the protection of the displaced. Humanized descriptions sit comfortably with practicality, considerations of security, and imperatives of policy-makers to balance concern for the migrants with policy imperatives of the state, dominant communities, multi-national corporations (MNCs), and the security lobby. Rights of migrants are minimized in this way. There is no easy way out of this paradox. However, the least that can be done in the field of research is to try to remove the cobwebs that shroud the insecure world of the migrants. Indeed, migration is the flag of insecurity—the

insecure nation and the insecure migrants. How can we dissect the discourse of security/insecurity? This question is important because no other question defines the migrant issue as much as the problematic of security.

The excessively humanized descriptions perhaps serve the function of downplaying the overwhelming factor of conflict and wars that take place because “communities must be defended”—one can say the “permanent condition” in which communities find themselves. On this rereading of the problematic, the questions that crop up are: What are the conditions in which migration becomes a matter of insecurity/security? What is that point, the threshold, where these two issues intersect? What are the patterns of collective politics and collective violence that require study if we are to understand the intersecting worlds of population flow and security? In other words, if we are to understand why human migration becomes a matter of contentious politics and therefore has to be governed by law, administrative practices, customs, and failing all other things, by brutal violence, we have to study the historical conditions of the emergence of migration as a matter of nationalized security, marked all over by collective violence and collective politics (see also chapter 2). As we shall see, these conditions not only make modern politics, in some respects they make modern politics seem exactly like old politics, which was marked by racism and brute physicality.

Yet, if it is true that what we face here is a situation of aporia, that is to say, an unending cycle of production of nativity–linkages–immigration–nationalism–ethnicity–violence–law–immigration–linkages–nativity–nationalism, it is also true that it is contention that pries open the situation again and again. Precisely the collective politics that in its moment of frenzy makes immigration the most contentious issue in the life of a nation, also exhibits factors or aspects that make immigration the occasion for democratization, justice, tolerance, and a dialogue for accommodation, and what can be called “de-securitization” of issues of life and justice, and therefore a different kind of autonomy.

The field of refugee research is complex, requiring the input of multiple disciplines and perspectives to understand the geopolitical contexts within which forced migration takes place. In the current context, we see profound inequalities—particularly between regions described as the global north and global south—and these inequalities contribute to the difficulties of researchers in the global south (as documented, for example,

in the South African context in chapter 1). While others document the important contribution of working across disciplines using multiple sources of data to advance our understanding of how and when people make the decision to leave (see chapter 6), or argue the value of the field of demography that focuses on the characteristics of people fleeing and can identify the pathways by which forced migrants are integrated into host societies (see chapter 8), this chapter demonstrates the value of critical historical analysis to understanding the roles of states in creating insecurities that influence the movement of people over generations. One of our aims is to investigate how the world of the incipient nation cannot but be a closed one, marked by a hyper sense of insecurity with the arrival of and mixing with “aliens.” This chapter expands this point by focusing on the complexity of forced migration across the borders and within the region of India’s Northeast.

The Colonial Background of Identity Politics and Transition to Postcolonial Era

Alien-hood everywhere of course begins with conquest. The modern history of immigration, insecurity, nationalism, ethnicity, and attacks on “foreigners” began almost everywhere, as in the Northeast of India, with conquest. With conquest and annexation of territory and along with it the people inhabiting that territory by the colonial power, the first seeds of racism were sown. Migration as a security problematic began in this way. Conquest, the administrative reorganization that each conquest required, and the new political-legal-administrative identity of a population, all made population flow an issue of security. Thus, issues of resources became matters of immigration, that is to say, a matter of security, which every conquest underlined. Native/immigrant politics became a question of resource politics, race politics, and nationalist politics at the same time. We begin this essay therefore with turning our attention to the early history of migration into Northeast India.

At this juncture, it is important to underscore why we locate our discussions in India’s northeast. To understand how differences were made that ultimately racialized and then nationalized histories of partition and graded democracies, one needs to look at colonial administration and the

creation of differences as was done in the northeast of India in the eighteenth century. The colonial administration had introduced in that period the notion of “racial difference” between the plains and the hills.

It is perhaps best to begin our narrative with Assam, a state in North-east India bordered by the countries of Bhutan and Bangladesh and by seven Indian states including West Bengal to the west that is connected to the rest of India via a 22-kilometre strip of land, known as the Siliguri Corridor. In the known history of Northeast India, including in the colonial period and for some time after, Assam constituted the major part of the region. Even today the politics of Assam affect most of Northeast India and perhaps the first agitations against migrations also began in Assam. In the traditional discourse, the influx of people into Northeast India is viewed as a prime security concern, yet from a non-traditional perspective the interesting point is that even Assam’s own beginnings are traceable to the migration of different groups of people from East and Southeast Asia. The beginnings are in the colonial time; however, for the purpose of this chapter, we shall touch the colonial phase briefly and then focus on the post-independence period.

There are several accounts by British officials that speak of their experiences in the northeast frontiers. One such account is by George Dunbar, who was stationed in the present territory of Arunachal Pradesh. His reminiscences dealt with frontier people such as the Abors, the Mishimis, the Hill Miris, the Nishis, and some of the Naga tribes. Quite unconsciously, Dunbar recorded at least three types of movements of people in this region. They included movements for official purposes including movements by the army, and for non-official purposes such as movements for trade and movements as pilgrimages. When Dunbar went to the Dihang valley for the Abor expeditions in 1911–12, he found the area “rather densely populated with strangers” (Dunbar, 1984, 193). He also found out that there were robust trade relations between these people, the Tibetans, and people from the south. In one particularly lucid passage he describes how in some villages, “everything that could not be made locally was Tibetan stuff, brought down by traders.” He speaks of regions where “trade comes almost equally from north and south. Along the foot-hills, of course, the Abors get all they need to buy from shopkeepers in the Plains” (Dunbar 1984, 212). He speaks of square blue porcelain beads that were used as

mediums of exchange. These beads were not made in the region but by “Bori traders [who] brought them down from Tibet” (Dunbar 1984, 219).

Dunbar again speaks of different groups of migrants who had in the recent past migrated to these areas. One of them was the Kebangs, who migrated from Riu and established a powerful village. Another group interestingly enough were the Nepalis, whom he calls the Gorkhas. He speaks of a “hundred thousand Gorkha settlers, who mostly became graziers” (Dunbar 1984, 287). Dunbar is not the only person to speak of Gorkha settlements; others speak of their presence in this region from a much earlier time. The *Gazetteer of Naga and Manipur Hills*, while discussing the state of immigration into these areas, speak of the Nepalese as the main foreign settlers in these regions. It describes the rest of the foreign population as “a few coolies and cartmen from Bengal and the United Provinces, a few artisans from Punjab, and a few traders from Marwar.” The *Gazetteer* also mentions that “emigration from the district could not be measured with any degree of accuracy, owing to the changes in boundary that had recently taken place” (Allen 2002, 35). Even though the *Gazetteer* mentions that migrations are few and far between, in another instance it speaks of a total of eighteen shops in Kohima, where thirteen were owned and maintained by Marwari merchants (Allen 2002, 59). In Imphal town, of thirty-six shops Marwaris owned twenty-nine (Allen 2002, 107). It is as if the presence of Marwaris seemed so commonplace that their influx for trade did not seem exceptional enough to deserve a special mention. From the British administrative commentaries, it was also apparent that the frontier as a space was marked as very different from the civilized world. This sense of difference underpinned their attitude towards the frontier people, who were considered less than human and could be treated with contempt. No wonder then that these memoirs are replete with stories of how the frontier people deserved the violent response that was meted out to them. Allen’s *Gazetteer* discusses how the British felt that “the Nagas should be taught a lesson,” when they refused to submit to British rule. It also reveals that some Naga villages opposed the British advance in the early part of 1880s, so the British officials felt “it was necessary to open fire, and some 50 or 60 of the enemy were killed.” It was also remarked that the “punitive expeditions were a regular feature of the administration of the districts, as it was only by this means that independent Nagas could be taught that the lives and property of those who had submitted to us must

be respected” (Allen 2002, 23–5). The lives and property of these frontier people were never respected.

In another section of the frontier, there were massive flows of migrant people with diverse consequences. Different hill tribes in Tripura came from upper Burma. There is one school of opinion that the people belonging to the hill tribes of Tipperah were a branch of the Shan tribe of Burma (Ganguly 1983, 2). People from Bengal started moving to Tripura from the sixteenth century. The rulers of Gaur gave the kings of Tripura the title Manikya.¹ “Ratna Manikya patronized the settlement of a good number of Brahmins, Vaidyas and Kayasthas from Bengal in Tripura. This was perhaps the first case of immigration of population into Tripura from the west as against all the earlier flows of immigration being from the east and the northeast,” (Ganguly 1983, 3). In the initial period, royal patronage encouraged migration from Bengal. The British Government appointed their political agent in Agartala in 1871. Following this, the rulers of Tripura were encouraged to appoint administrators from Bengal. In the 1911 census, it was estimated that 97,858 people spoke Bengali, forming over one third of the population of 229,613.² Migration from Bengal did not mean that other migrations from the east and northeast stopped. In fact, migrations of groups such as the Reangs, Kukis, Lushais, Mags, Chakmas, and Tripuris continued, arriving in search of jhum lands. In some cases, community conflicts might have driven them to Tripura (Ganguly 1983, 4). Another reason for massive migrations into Tripura in the nineteenth century was that until 1880 there was no regular land revenue system in Tripura. In many cases, the Maharajas granted land in perpetuity at a fixed rent and where no grants were made, the usual custom was to farm out collections. In most cases, grantees could get exemptions from paying land revenue by giving free service to the state. After 1880, a number of rules came into force for regulating the land tenure system. Yet fragmentation of holdings, the landlessness of a large part of the rural population, and the illegal transfer of lands from tribals to non-tribals continued (Gan-Chaudhuri 1980, 106–7).

The transition from the imperial form of rule to the national form only accentuated the political problematic of immigration, because while the imperial form of rule in many ways left the borders—in this case the borders in the northeast—undefined and un-demarcated, the national form of state was to be much more territorial. The idea of a nation, which was

a weapon in the anti-colonial struggle, also implied to the leaders of the nation the inheritance of a bureaucratic-territorial state, and its re-organization on the basis of a territorial-national principle of identification of population groups, which could not be otherwise congruent with each other. The imperial form of rule, at least the colonial rule in India, negotiated the issue of diversity of the society with a graded form of administration in which divide and rule was an extremely important principle. Difference was the organizing norm of the ruling political form. The national state made a switch over from the norm of difference to that of homogeneity (one nation, one state), which meant settlement of the hitherto “unknown” frontier areas into fully administered areas of the national state. The constitutional deliberations in the country of the preceding ten years (about twenty years if we take the Simon Commission as the starting point) of independence (1928–47) bear out that history of transformation of the principles of organizing politics and administration from a “frontier area” to a fully administered part of the country. Yet it is important to note in this connection what changed and what remained through the transition. While principles of administration changed, and national republican rule replaced the colonial territorial entity and new linguistic-ethnic boundaries were drawn, the ideologies of conquest, racism, and security proved to be permanent gifts of the colonial time.

In 1935, legislation by Assam had designated many of the hill districts as excluded areas or partially excluded areas. A special cadre for the frontier area was created in Burma, and India followed suit. However, by the time the Indian constitution came to be framed, political exclusion of the hill areas (including Manipur and Tripura, which had evolved along different historical lines) was out of the question. The main recommendation of the Constituent Assembly’s sub-committee on Northeast Frontier Tribal and Excluded Areas was that the future of these areas did not lie in absorption—instead it lay in political and social amalgamation. Thus, distinction (read difference) would remain, but political identity with the Union would also become an accompanying reality. With nationalist pressure, the concept and history of excluded areas were given summary burial. But more than this, the framing of the constitution and subsequent reorganization of the region reflected three major developments: (a) The boundary demarcation between India and Burma was complete with dividing people like the Nagas and the Mizos who by that time had started

to think of themselves as belonging to distinct nation-hoods; (b) National rule in India had firmly established its toehold in these areas, ending by and large the graded system of rule; (c) The restructuring of the political-administrative space by creating settled and (hopefully) stable units of political-administrative units in the form of states.

The Political Economy of Resources and Violence

Now consider the following two sets of facts—one, reflecting the political economy of resources in the region and the other reflecting a security-oriented thinking dominating the space. The immigrant, as we shall see, emerges as a product of these two sets and their relationship.

The issue of resources began with the colonial trade of tea and timber. In addition to the British-owned tea estates, gradually other estates came to be owned by various Indian groups and the Assamese groups; the Assamese bourgeoisie today consists of tea owners, contractors, transporters, traders, and people engaged in the hotel and real estate industries, liquid gas distribution, or timber trade. Thus, while the revenue generating capacity of states in the northeast has been extremely weak, with the entire region lagging behind the rest of the country in industrial growth, power supply, fertilizer consumption, credit flow, communication facilities, and transport network, the political class survives with central aid with which it makes its nation. We have thus an absolutely combustible combination: rentier state, a parasitical political class, massive mass discontent, weak or nil growth, and the absence of any appropriate policy of local development and resource generation and utilization—with immigrants seen as the cause of all miseries of life.

The region has a population of about 40 million, with 90 per cent living in rural areas, agriculture being the primary occupation of 78 per cent; however, about 25 per cent of the total consumed food grain in this region is imported from outside. Agro-sector reform is almost nil while some of the big public-sector enterprises marked as promising global players such as the Indian Oil Corporation, Oil India Limited, and Oil and Natural Gas Corporation operate in this region. Yet, notwithstanding the presence of some of the richest public-sector companies in this region, its incapacity to generate revenue is stark. The indicators relating to small-scale industrial units and manufacturing units present an equally dismal picture.³

The level of urbanization in the region is quite low—only 14 per cent of the population of the region lives in towns, while population density increased from fifty-seven per square kilometre in 1961 to 123 in 1991. The pressure on land has grown, and the decadal population growth rate in all the states of the region has been higher than the national average, which is 23.50 (1991 census), while non-agricultural productive activity has almost remained at the same level.⁴

At the same time, the mode of shifting cultivation faced a crisis. Shifting cultivation was for a typical subsistence economy, and though this did not preclude trading of other products, it meant collective management of forestland, including allotment of the portion for each family, maintenance of village commons, and no accumulation of surplus for “expanded reproduction.” While shifting agriculture has declined, or been made impossible in a market set up, settled cultivation too has not improved. Large numbers of communities practised settled cultivation over the ages in hill areas too including the practice of wet rice cultivation in the form of terrace farming. In short, the principal issue of sustainability of resource use is now in question in the entire region—from the plains of Assam to the hills of Mizoram. Clearly the issue of sustainability of resources, contrary to the popular notion of depending on controlling immigration, is wider and more complicated. It presents a blocked scenario, which is marked by very little formal trade and economic linkages in the east (Burma), south (the Bay), west (Bangladesh), and north (Bhutan and Tibet). Developed basically in recent history as what can be called an economy of “a market along the foothills,” which bears the characteristics of an extraction economy around coal and limestone, and a plantation economy around tea and timber, the entire scenario represents today what Dietmar Rothermund (1993) termed “an enclave economy.”

It is perhaps wrong to say that politics in the northeast is divided in two segments—the modern parliamentary politics with franchise, votes, institutions, financial agencies, education, developmental policies, etc. on one hand, and ethnicity, politics of identity, gun-running, gun battles, narcotics, xenophobia, and hatred against outsiders on the other. A more circumspect view would tell us of a combined and closed world (enclave economy) of contentious politics marked by a war of resources and attacks against the most immediate “enemy,” the most immediate “invader,” the most proximate “occupier,” and the most immediate “usurper” of

land. Security is intensely physical in this milieu, as is its politics, and the by-products of such politics such as neoracism.

This has been apparent in the way in which the 1,879-kilometre-long border with Bangladesh is considered in this security discourse. The border is not a site invoking commonality to share, not an opportunity to link up with others; the border is seen as a threatening factor, changing the demographic complexion of these states. Tripura's Indigenous population is a minority today—about 28 per cent of about 3 million population of the state. The anti-foreigner agitation in Assam from 1979 to 1985 was perhaps one of the largest mass mobilizations in post-independence India. It involved deaths (of about 7000), riots, massacres, forced displacement (of about 2 million), mass boycotts, paralysis of administration, and an upsurge of Assamese nationalism that required the “foreigner” to be identified as the enemy of the surging Assamese nationalism.⁵

As the Assam anti-foreigner movement showed, the issue of migration and citizenship is the link between the so-called parliamentary sphere of politics and the dark sphere of identity politics. Identity has little to do with looks, claims, tongues, destitution, resources, and justice, or to put it more appropriately, in the politics of identity these matters of looks, claims, tongues, and resources appear only as a matter of rights—that is to say justice transmogrified in the mirror of rights, so that justice means now the expropriation of *others* and the vindication of the “politics of homeland.” Because it was a matter of *citizenship*, it showed the hierarchical landscape of nationalism: foreigners could be there to keep the wheels of the tea industry running (in 1921 about one-sixth of Assam's population was engaged in tea gardens) for which the London Stock Exchange had gone mad as early as the late nineteenth century. Similarly, they could be there to reclaim marshy lands and help with food production, but citizenship was for the Indigenous, the ethnic, and the nationals.

High population growth in Assam was thus to become an issue. In fifty years (1901–51), the growth was 138 per cent. Crop production had also increased in this period, along with the area under cultivation and tea production; but all this compared to labour growth was a minor phenomenon to the besieged mind—be it farm labour, peasant labour, plantation labour, or labour in petty jobs. Typically, the protest of the native did not arise around the demand for jobs, but around issues of election, electoral rolls, franchise, and citizenship rights—it was a war against aliens. The

citizens were prepared to rather remain economically impoverished, sick, and infirm, and survive on the doles handed out by the “centre,” which logically should have been an equally alien presence to the natives along with the tea garden owners and timber merchants. But it was time for the citizens to drive out the aliens, in view of the unnatural population growth in the state—by one count nearly 100 per cent growth between 1961 and 1991. The bloody anti-immigrant movement continued for five years; not only foreign immigrants were attacked, even members of the minority communities—particularly Muslims—were targets at times. Riots, torching of houses, looting, paralyzing administration, civil disobedience—the war continued in all forms. War against foreigners became civil war amongst various communities. The State had to combine strong methods and persuasive techniques to administer inter-ethnic relations, and demography became one more area of governmentality, so much so that defining an Assamese—the first task of claiming a nation—became an enterprise beyond cultural articulations: it was bloody, administrative, contentious, exclusive, expelling, and an elect enterprise. From the neat writings of Assam Sahitya Sabha to the killing fields of Nellie (1983)⁶ was but a short road. On the surface it was a question of expelling or killing Muslims—at times Bengali Muslims, at times Assamese Muslims. But at the level of the physicality of nationhood it involved the plain tribes, hill tribes, other linguistic groups such as the Nepalese, and people from other states such as Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, or West Bengal, and Bihar. Many organizations grew up or gathered strength and momentum in this bloody war, the most prominent being the United Minorities Front, which immediately after its formation in 1985 bagged seventeen out of the state’s 126 assembly seats in the elections held in December that year. The ceding of Sylhet (in the form of a referendum) years back in the Great Partition, as could be seen now, had done little to make Assam a pure nation,⁷ even after it cut off its (East) Bengal links.

In this war cry, legislative acts proved to be of little use in expelling immigrants—the Foreigners Act or the Illegal Migrants Determination Tribunals Act. The figures told the story—in fifteen years after the Assam Accord of 1985, the total number of inquiries initiated against suspected illegal aliens was 302,554, and the number of illegal immigrants expelled was 1,461. Because it was a war, all communities had developed strategic tools of linkages and enmities—plains/hills, valleys/hills, Hindus/

Muslims, Bengalis/Assamese, Bengali Muslims/Bengali Muslims, Assamese Muslims/Bengali Muslims, Bodos/Assamese, Bodos/Muslims, Bodos/Santhals, Assamese/Nagas, Assamese/Kukis, Karbis/Kukis, Karbis/Assamese. It was not a case of sudden ethnic conflict; it reflected rather a condition of generalized war, because the war consisted of several battles and theatres of attrition. Insecurity from migration had created lines of all kinds and had taken clearly military dimensions. But more on that later; first let us see how this condition engulfed areas outside Assam too.

Way back in 1876–77 in Tripura, the Indigenous people were more than two thirds of the total population of 91,759. By 1991, they counted for less than one third of the state's population of 2,757,205. It was again roughly the same story. With the Great Partition began waves of migration in the state, and finally in the eighties Buddhist Chakma refugees entered in sizeable numbers from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the wake of the conflict and army operations of the Bangladesh State against the rebellion. The Tripura Upajati Juba Samity (TUJS) was formed in 1967; in 1978 it led to the formation of the first militant movement against immigrants, the Tripura National Volunteers, which soon started attacking settlers and symbols of government authority, including at times security forces. The land question became crucial, and with *jhum* (shifting) cultivation being systematically disturbed and finally destroyed, clashes began to erupt. The June riots of 1980 were the first major signal of the troubled times. It caused enormous displacements. The Dinesh Singh Committee Report, set up by the Ministry of Home Affairs to investigate the massacre of 1980, gave a tentative estimate of 1,300 deaths. However, unofficial sources claimed the figures to be above 8,000. It also estimated that nearly 372,000 persons were affected by the riots, and of them about 150,000 people belonged to Indigenous communities. Nearly 200,000 people had to be sheltered in camps. The number of total relief camps was 141; nearly 35,000 houses were gutted; and the estimated loss of property was about Rs. 21 crores (slightly more than \$1 million USD at the time). Later, an estimated 2,614 families were displaced from severely affected areas such as Khowai, Sadar, and Bishalgarh sub-divisions due to clashes. By 2000, the civil-political-military movement of the Indigenous people against the settlers or migrants had become so strong that a ragtag combination of forces called the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura were elected to the twenty-eight-member Tripura Tribal Autonomous District Council. The

1980s were marked with violence, large-scale settler-native killings, army operations, rape of women by security forces and the militants, kidnaping, and increasing communalisation of the scene.⁸ The TUJS demanded from the government of India more powers to the Autonomous District Council, barbed wire fencing of the entire length of the 856-kilometre-long boundary with Bangladesh, push back of immigrants who had arrived after 1971, and the introduction of the inner-line permit system to enter the Tribal Council Area.

The situation of a generalized war in the region finds reflection not only in war rhetoric, but also in actual incidents of expulsion. Thus, in many places the Nepalis have been on the run, in others, Bengalis. Expulsion of Nepalis in many places in the Northeast led to an autonomy movement in the Darjeeling Hills. In North Bengal, adjoining the Bodo areas of Assam, a similar process of conflict later began with the killings and expulsion of several Northeast militant groups from Southern Bhutan. Everywhere, the “immigrant”—known as the settler—faces insecurity in the form of the native; likewise, everywhere the native, known as the “Indigenous,” faces insecurity appearing in form of the settler. And altogether, the state faces insecurity from the spectre of aliens swamping the land, aliens who in league with their soulmates here are conspiring with foreign countries to secede or at least make the region a hotbed of conspiracies. This led to bitter clashes and bloody internal rivalries, with day-to-day governing becoming a tough business, because an unlikely issue had leapt to the top of the priority list: governing population flow.

In this context, it is no surprise that security becomes a macro-question, population management becomes a matter of governing from the top, and the army becomes the most accredited institution of such management. Indeed, population flow is “geopolitics” to the army. Population flow in this discourse brings borders, not because the flow is always across borders, but because mobile populations are dangerous in terms of governing and administering: they can mobilize support, and support across borders is more difficult to govern. Thus, the Indo-Burma border, first settled in 1826 in the Yandabo Treaty, later confirmed in the Nehru-U Nu agreement of 1953, and hitherto left un-administered, became militarized. Thus, stretching from the Namkia Mountains bordering Arunachal Pradesh, then Patkai Bum bordering Nagaland, to Hamolin bordering Manipur to the Chin Hills bordering Mizoram, the administration of

borders became important. Kachins, Shans, Eastern Nagas, Chins, Arakanese, plus Burmese communist rebels—all could claim links across the border to this side; hence population flow could not be allowed to be negotiated at the community level, it was not simply an innocent matter. It can be seen, therefore, how the military discourse, discourse of social insecurity, physical insecurity, and the contentious politics of nationhood all combined in this political exercise of ensuring security against the aliens.

Trafficked Women as Aliens

When the alien is a woman, a much worse scenario awaits the migrant everywhere; we allude to the situation of the trafficked women and children. Though liberal South Asian constitutions and laws guarantee people's right to be protected from exploitation and thereby prohibits trafficking too, no amount of liberal and humanitarian legislation has been able to stop this form of servitude or semi-servitude of large groups of women. It is not merely a question of more or less governance but a continuance of the erosion of women's physical, economic, and social security by the patriarchal mode of national security that holds sway in the areas under discussion. Violence faced by the trafficked women is the worst form of violence faced perhaps both by women as a social category and by the category of forcefully displaced people. As a group, victims of trafficking reflect the growing insecurity of the vulnerable population groups in a milieu of traditional insecurity.

There are multiple ways in which people are trafficked. We take examples from the sub-region of East and Northeast India and Bangladesh. Often, those who want to cross borders out of desperation contact traffickers, who they think of as smugglers, and offer them a price; sometimes, traffickers kidnap people for harvesting organs. But, for those who want to be "smuggled," deals are sometimes done amicably, with prices clearly spelled out. However, since the journey is fraught with violence, things may go awry and the vulnerable face further abuse as violence overtakes all other considerations. There are also a number of routes through which women and children are trafficked in and out of these regions.

It is impossible to gather definitive data about the number of women trafficked. However, the growing number of brothels in the border areas of India and Bangladesh suggest that this is a thriving business. Women

often shift from one brothel to another. If they are apprehended in a brothel, there is a chance they will be repatriated, but if caught moving from one place to another, they are immediately incarcerated. When women from Bangladesh are trafficked to India, they might then be transported to Pakistan or West Asia. Sanlaap's (2002) research in two red-light areas of West Bengal highlighted women's migration from one location to another. Ninety per cent of the red-light areas the women identified as places where they had worked were situated in the states bordering Bangladesh in the Northeast or West Bengal. In Changrabandha, one of the red-light areas identified, 66 per cent of the women said they had come from Bangladesh. In Dinbazar, many of the trafficked sex workers said that their mothers came from Bangladesh. The report states: "The rate of trafficking in Changrabandha is remarkably higher than in Dinbazar. The red-light area of Changrabandha is adjacent to Bangladesh border and women are trafficked through this border like any other commodity" (Sanlaap 2002, 18).

Most of the women in the Sanlaap (2002) study were illiterate and many had entered prostitution as minors. Some were from families of either wage labourers or cultivators, and in other cases, their mothers were trafficked sex workers. The mothers engaged in sex work could offer no alternative for their daughters; their children are stigmatized and face discrimination when they try to enter other fields of work. Deprived of education and a social environment that offered any promise or hope, the trafficked sex workers of Dinbazar and Changrabandha had few options beyond prostitution as a way to earn a living. Trafficked from one centre to another, these women live with insecurity, at the mercy of both criminals and the police. Their location, near the border, means they are often forced to give shelter to criminals from either Bangladesh or India. The police pursue them, but also use them for sex without any payment. To attract customers from among the truckers crossing at zero point, they stand on the roads, where they are extremely vulnerable to violence (Sanlaap 2002, 25). Without any legal documents, they are criminalized if apprehended and jailed, sometimes for periods longer than mandated.

The border itself is a place of poverty and violence against women. Multiple indicators suggest that the trafficking of women and children is on the increase in the Northeast and also within and from Bengal. The Northeast has been torn apart by multiple levels of conflict, making

women and children more vulnerable. For example, attacks on women's land rights and social position, especially in the Khasi and Garo Hills, have compounded women's susceptibility to traffickers. In Meghalaya, the situation is further complicated by the ban on the felling of trees for timber. Such moves on the part of the government are commendable from an environmental point of view, but they rob the rural poor of a chance to earn their livelihood (see chapter 11 for discussion of the complex relationship between conservation and displacement). With few alternatives for earning a living, people are forced to migrate. Many women migrating to urban centres end up in brothels (*Meghalaya Guardian* 2004). Newspaper reports have registered the concern of NGOs: "Non-governmental agencies fighting against the malaise of trafficking of women and children have expressed grave concern that the evil is growing with increasing numbers of women and children from Meghalaya and other North-eastern states being lured and deceived into the flesh trade in the metropolitan cities in the country" (*Assam Tribune* 2004). The case of West Bengal is more complex. Globalization, monetization, and increasing communalization have all added to devaluing or differential valuing of women. West Bengal has acted as a destination point for trafficked women for some time now, but women from rural areas of Bengal are now increasingly being trafficked to other regions. Numerous cases reported in newspapers show the apathy of the police to consider either trafficking or rape as a serious crime especially when the woman is of a minority group. This apathy towards minorities who can be wilfully ignored especially in times of political tensions is also an effect of a rigid idea of national security. Indeed, trafficking in women, children, and labour are enmeshed, where policing methods invariably fail, because labour rights are ignored as well as women's own rights to decide their futures.

The Ultimate Discourse of Security

The military discourse to control migration and thus prevent conflicts sprang not only from the generals' minds, it had roots in the internal discourse of society's security also, on which the military discourse fed. For instance, the Bodo student leader Upendra Brahma, an active member of Assam Agitation, pressed for implementation of Clause 10 of the Assam Accord, which said: "It will be ensured that relevant laws for prevention

of encroachment of government lands and lands in tribal belts and blocks are strictly enforced and unauthorised encroachers evicted as laid down under such laws.” Upendra Brahma demanded the eviction of the Indigenous population from Tamalpur and the “immigrants” from the char areas of Brahmaputra. This was certainly the signal for attacks on the Santhal population (not considered as “tribe” in Assam) in Bodo areas. Similarly, the insistence on making Assamese virtually the language of instruction in all parts of the state became a matter of contention with the All Assam Tribal Students Union. The Karbi Autonomous Council Demand Committee complained that the leaders of Assam were taking steps to wipe out other distinct languages and cultures from the state. Specialists started saying that security could be provided now only by deployment of the army. With it began the full-scale security discourse and “securitization” of the social mind. Hereafter tea garden owners could feel secure that the army was there; the people bought security now that they were paying taxes to government and the rebels both; and men of property had bought security with private guards and militias. The true significance of the army operations “Operation Bajrang” (1990) and “Operation Rhino” (1991) lay there. They signified the rejection of any dialogic approach, casting anyone advocating the release of prisoners or protection of human rights as “soft” and a compromiser—one who did not care about lives of jawans (soldiers in the Indian army).

It is not that the ethnic rebels and other liberationist groups and movements in the region and the army generals think along the same lines of security/insecurity. But to understand why the discourse of physical security can lodge itself at the heart of security concerns of a community, group, population, or state, and be so totalizing, we have to study closely the security practices of solidarities stretching from a group to a state and their interface. The intermix of so many concerns at a material level has produced the inflammable “politics of security”—where national security, community security, Indigenous population’s security, developmental security, resource security, land and food security, and military security have converged.

The politics of security is a field. This is the field of governmentality, where all issues become relations between the governors and the governed. In this field, one can notice the presence of legal and civic behaviour, also illegal and warlike behaviour along with the presence of the

policies triggered by claims of the state that security can be provided by an overall protection by arms and through development. At the same time, the groups realize that that they can survive only by exercising their own security options, one of which is to claim nationhood, homeland, and to pull up the drawbridges so that outsiders cannot come in. In short, while popular sovereignty still exercises the imagination of groups below the nation-state, this can become a potent political tool of democratization only within a group, which is fixed. But where the group is not fixed, and the people refuse to become a population group, the constitutional framework of autonomy fails. The field of governance and rule, which makes population flow a matter of administration and puts its stamp on the latter with law, administrative measures, violence, and suppression, is then by nature a combination of legality, para-legality, and illegality.

Notes

- 1 For more details, see Choudhury and Ranjan 1977.
- 2 See Burman and Chandra 1933, List of Tables: 5 and 6 (since the introduction has no pagination the page numbers are not given). This is one of the first detailed publications of census in Tripura.
- 3 See Sikdar and Bhorali 1998, 167–72.
- 4 All figures relating to human development are taken from Ganguly 1996, 29–53. It is noteworthy that Ganguly does not cite immigration as an obstructing factor in achieving the goal of sustainable human development in the region.
- 5 These figures are from Hussain 1993, 10.
- 6 Founded in 1917 the Assam Sahitya Sabha is the premier literary institution of Assam. It aims to promote Assamese culture and literature. It has about one thousand branches all over the state. Its support for a distinct identity of the state during the anti-immigration movement in Assam was pronounced. The Nellie massacre took place in Assam during a six-hour period in the morning of 18 February 1983. The massacre claimed the lives of over 2,000 people (unofficial figures run at nearly 10,000) from fourteen villages in the area. The victims were Bengali immigrant Muslims whose ancestors had relocated in pre-partition British India. Some media personnel were witnesses to the massacre. The violence in Nellie was seen by some as fallout of the decision to hold state elections in 1983 in the midst of the anti-immigrant agitation in Assam. It has been described as one of the worst pogroms in independent India.
- 7 Indeed, as historical research into the history of the Sylhet referendum of 1947 bears out, the referendum by itself was the reflection of the fault lines within the Assam society. See, for instance, Chakrabarty 2002.
- 8 Figures cited from Hussain 2003, 138.

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