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## Border Regions

### Sample translation

Publication date: September 10<sup>th</sup> 2021

Pages: 208

Original language and publisher: Dutch | Van Oorschot

Genre: Narrative non-fiction

#### CHAPTER 1. EXCLAVES

There are many different stories speculating about the origin of the approximately two hundred Cooch Behar exclaves at the border of Bangladesh and India. Did it involve a poker game between two local rulers, who were betting on plots of land? Did someone with a leaky pen draw the borderline?

It's not hard to sympathize with the dreamers who came up with these explanations. There can't possibly be a logical reason for creating hundreds of exclaves in the middle of this humid, swamp-like region, which is largely inhabited by farmers and isn't home to any important cities or large constructions.<sup>1</sup> Exclaves, counter-exclaves and the only third-order exclave in the world—an Indian meadow situated in Bangladesh, situated in India, situated in Bangladesh—used to make up over eighty percent of all exclaves on Earth, with over fifty thousand people living “across the border” of their own countries. When you see the Cooch Behar region on a map for the first time, you might have to blink twice. What

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<sup>1</sup> Exclaves are pieces of land that belong to a certain country but are not attached to the rest of that country. Enclaves are slightly different: these are regions that are fully surrounded by one other country. Enclaves are always exclaves—unless they form a separate, independent country; like San Marino, which is completely surrounded by Italy—but exclaves aren't always enclaves. An exclave can also border on water, or on two other countries; in these cases it is not an enclave. The Cooch Behar exclaves are all enclaves as well.

exactly are we looking at? What is this *about*? It looks like the two countries collided, sprinkling shards of land all over the map.

The explanation for this situation is actually not too complicated. During a war at the start of the eighteenth century, between the two Indian kingdoms of Mughal and Cooch Behar, both armies occupied small plots of land. These eventually ended up in the peace treaty of 1713 and subsequently withstood the entire colonial period, as Cooch Behar still enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy under British rule. In fact, it took the British authorities a while to figure out what was going on there. In 1814, when they had been occupying the region for quite some time, one magistrate reported to his superior officer that he had come across some parts of land toward which criminals from Mughal—which was under stricter control of the British—seemed to be fleeing. In doing so, they were able to avoid colonial prosecution.

None of the British proposals to simplify the situation lead to any changes. And this had far-reaching consequences when the British decided to divide the Indian colony into two independent countries.

People often think that the bifurcation of India was a matter of British colonials simply drawing a line between, approximately, the Islamic and the Hindu communities. It seems that they were in a hurry—once they had decided to grant independence, they wanted to leave as soon as possible.

As a matter of fact, Cyril Radcliffe—a lawyer, commissioned by the British authorities, who was completely unfamiliar with the region—took a few days to draw a coarse line that would separate India from the new neighboring country, that consisted of two parts<sup>2</sup>. But the British didn't take the same course of action everywhere: in Cooch Behar, they let the monarch Raj decide on his own. Did he want to become part of India, which was largely Hindu, or of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), which was largely Islamic? He chose to become part of India, whereas the British added the leftover bits of Mughal to East

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<sup>2</sup> This caused the British to perform another colonial misdeed at the very last moment. On the border between Pakistan and India, especially, the two religious communities did not live fully separately from one another. Moreover, there was a third group present: the Sikh. It was impossible to draw a “perfect” border, and the reveal of the new demarcations caused a mass migration. As a result, the ethnic tensions between the two groups suddenly rose, leading to a number of violent outbursts in which more than a hundred thousand residents were killed. The border drawn by Radcliffe is currently still the border. I will discuss more of this type of colonial drawing board demarcations and their consequences in chapter 2.

Pakistan. Both states thus “brought along” their exclaves, creating the most complex set of international borders in the world.

For years, I wondered what this must have meant for the residents. Was there any border patrol? That seemed impossible, right? Were the residents stuck on their own meadows? And would they *feel* any different from one meadow to the next?

It took me a long time to find answers to these questions. A few years ago, however, I read an impressive article on the subject. In 2013, geographer Hosna Shewly published her research on the exclaves, consisting of ten pages full of facts and details about life in those borderlands, based on seven months of fieldwork.

The answers were unsettling. The few tens of thousands of people inhabiting the exclaves were, actually, stuck in a kind of vacuum. If a Bangladeshi living in an exclave had to travel through India in order to visit a family member, for instance, they ran the risk of getting caught and being thrown in jail, for it’s illegal to travel through India without the proper documents. And there was no way for the Bangladeshi to obtain those without going to the “mainland” of Bangladesh first—an almost banally Kafkaesque situation.

“To live, I have to enter India,” a Bangladeshi, cited by Shewly, says. “But Indians call me a foreigner and would throw me in jail if they caught me.”

To make matters worse, the mother countries had little to no influence on the exclaves. They barely had a legal system, health care, education or electricity. It doesn’t come as a surprise when Shewly mentions that the few murders committed in the exclaves almost always go unpunished. Those seeking health care in the surrounding country are often denied entrance to hospitals.

Shewly calls the situation in these regions “bare life”: a way of living that’s stripped to the bare necessities. It’s strongly reminiscent of what Thomas Hobbes once called the “state of nature”, where any type of body politic is completely absent. It is the “state before the state”, a stateless condition in which it’s every man for himself and a matter of survival of the fittest. Cooch Behar is one of those regions which is neglected by the central government, however rare it may be: it’s too complicated, too expensive, too remote. It’s not strange, then, that according to Shewly there are several active criminal gangs stealing cattle and transporting it from country to country, while the owners, powerless, watch it happen. “When we complain, they tell us that people without a country don’t have a voice,” one of the interviewees explains.

The material collected by Shewly—who deserves the necessary praise for her attempt to depict life in this area—gives us a rare glimpse of the daily lives of the Cooch Behar exclave residents. Although her report is comprehensive, it's still somewhat sad that we know so little about the individual lives led here in the past decades. But it's enough proof to justify the decision to, after years of squabble, “neutralize” all of the exclaves. In fact, the decision should have been made much earlier.

In 1974, India and Bangladesh signed the first letter of intent to end the confusing situation. In practice, it took more than forty years for the matter to be resolved, seeing as neither country prioritized it. It wasn't until the nineties that they started compiling an inventory of the size of each exclave, and in 2007 they performed a population count. India even had to change its constitution to account for the loss of more than 40 square kilometers of land.

In May 2015, the Indian parliament agreed to this. Once they were close to a solution, both governments suddenly—and for the first time—started listening to the local population. That summer, 75 teams, each consisting of one Bangladeshi and one Indian government official, went to the region to ask the residents which citizenship they wanted to acquire after the border changes. It took them ten days.

The results weren't all too surprising: by far most people chose to live in the country that they would become a part of, according to regional media statistics. 14,000 Bangladeshi exclave residents became Indian, and 36,000 Indian exclave residents became Bangladeshi. Only about a thousand residents of Indian exclaves apparently chose to become Indian citizens and subsequently move to India. On July 31, 2015, at midnight, it all became official: the new border went into effect. In a single second, the world lost the lion's share of its exclaves.