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The book under review is comprised of six chapters, with an introduction and a short afterword that give the reader a tour-de-France experience of the borderlands of Northeast India and Bangladesh by means of vivid descriptions of physical, spatial, and social features, including the interaction processes with humans of varied ages, sexes, positions, and interests. Malini Sur, with deep ethnographic courage, did research in places where nothing but trees stretch on for kilometers, which are rife with military shoes and suspicious eyes, and filled with masculine, ultra-nationalist, illegal armed forces, as well as normal citizens. Northeast India plays a significant role in shaping the India-Bangladesh border in multi-various ways, more specifically spatially and culturally. This border cuts across Northeast India, a region that is geographically isolated from the rest of Indian territory and heavily militarized (p. 2). The political economy of this region has yielded enormous tension laced with religion, market forces, and politics from the early twentieth century onward, and these have escalated in regular phases.

**Overview of the book**

The timeline of the book begins in the mid-nineteenth century and ends with the announcement of India’s Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) 2019, roughly covering 150 years of the history of the region. *Jungle Passports* examines the changes brought about by the decisions taken by the successive political regimes from the 1940s to the 2020s (mostly citizenship laws such as the implementation of the National Register of Citizens [NRC], and the CAA), and their impact on the lives of people, animals, and agriculture in the northeast region of India bordering Bangladesh. In the author’s words, this border “continues to be a site of land and identity conflicts and gross human rights violations” (p. 2). She attributes some of the hardships witnessed by the border citizens, mostly the ecological and political uncertainties, to the colonial and postcolonial cartographies, which undermined the problems. For instance, she highlights the drawing and redrawing of maps: traditional border locations became more complex after Partition, and post-colonial conflicts have unfolded because of the imposition of boundary lines (p. 13).

The book revolves around three main narrative threads. One follows the lives and struggles of Bengali Muslim householders who live close to the border in Bangladesh’s chars; the second follows the lives of Muslims of Bengali origin in the state of Assam. The most evident problems for the Muslims of Bengali origin living or depending on the border are that they are constantly under suspicion and threat from the Indian army for their religious minority background; in addition, they are suspected of being
unauthorized Bangladeshi settlers (p. 14). In the third thread, Sur engages with the Garos, who are classified as scheduled tribes and live in Meghalaya in Northeast India.

The three core chapters on rice, cow smuggling, and human identities explain the continuous struggle over everyday social life on the border. This book presents the everyday anthropology of the state, particularly focusing on the borders and shifting identities from legal to non-legal and illegal. This over-arching presence of the state breaks the morale of individuals, who have to negotiate their life world within the state’s purview as well as that of the market, be it for subsistence or for profit. In other words, this book explores the “diverse mobilities of people, goods, and animals amid political, historical, and ecological forces” at play in the Northeast India-Bangladesh borderland (p. 2). Also, it situates the border or fence in the era of global nationalistic rhetoric, and foregrounds the issues related to infrastructure, national citizenship, the migrant question, trade routes, as well as, of course, the effects of nature in the form of ever-changing river routes. In its entirety, the book deals with four elements: ecology, infrastructure, exchanges, and mobility. The author makes these four elements interact with each other throughout the book by foregrounding border studies. Border studies as a sub-discipline often focuses on trade and political equations, whereas this book incorporates more complex sociological, cultural issues, thus further expanding the scope of border studies.

**Political economy of rice**

One chapter is dedicated to describing how rivers have left lasting imprints on rice as a provincial, national, and border resource. In this chapter, Sur explores the varied ways in which rice functions as a border apparatus to demarcate places and people. As food, rice is an essential commodity, but in this border region, it has become controversial as claims to land have come to uneasily link the shifting chars, grazing territories, forests, and fields. The way the author separates these two things—land and what it produces—recalls Tania Murray Li’s work on Highlanders (2014) and David Arnold’s (1979) work in the Madras Presidency. With regards to producers, in this northeastern region, Sur has identified two different types of farmers—sedentary peasants and mobile indigenous cultivators. She situates these farmers in the context of border territorial intrusion and the forging of national subjects together around wet rice cultivation, smuggling, and consumption (p. 45). She also shows how rice as food and as a commodity was situated at the nexus point of the intimate and the political, as well as how the mobility and displacement of rice cultivators undergirded the tension that surrounded this borderland as it came to be located at the crossroads of agrarian and national territories (p. 47). Quite sharply, she observes that rice became a part of the security lexicon in Assam for because it reinforced fears about an invasion of Muslim peasants from Bengal into Assam so they could harvest rice (p. 51).

The political economy of the rice section would have been complete if the author had addressed the following questions: When did rice cultivation begin in this region? What are the social and regional backgrounds of the cultivators? What role does the state, in different periods, play in promoting rice cultivation? In the southern part of India, for instance, rice cultivation became important only after canal irrigation started: when the British acquired rights over vast tracts of lands, they focused on reclamation of...
land and inundation, thus shifting their attention from trade to agriculture. It is the combination of these factors which made rice a commercial crop in that part of India.

The Political Sociology of Borders

Goods, animals, and human beings are analogous to plaited hair strands; in other words, they form the backbone for the book under review, in the midst of borders, fences, routes, and roads. The author calls the border the “life force” (p. 5) and raises epistemological questions like: What are the possibilities of life amidst heavily fortified fences, violence, scarcity, fear, and uncertainty? How have socio-ecological histories and territorial conflicts shaped the political topographies of mobility, nationalism, and citizenship? What shapes and reshapes the life world of individuals who acquire various identities such as deportees, refugees, farmers, smugglers, migrants, bureaucrats, lawyers, and clergies? How are the social institutions of identities (caste, religion, gender) fundamentally changing at the border? Borders are always porous, as the following passage clearly shows:

“[F]rom pillar 2280, we cycled downhill across a narrow stream and passed by forests with huge trees that shaded the border road. Chandra, [a key informant] cycling in front of me, suddenly announced, “This is Bangladesh.” “Where?” I asked. “On your left,” she screamed, cycling ahead. A few minutes later, Chandra remarked, “We are back in India.” As we cycled through Aina village, old border fences covered by foliage emerged on my left. Minutes later, Chandra, still ahead of me, shouted again, “Bangladesh.” Across the fields, we occasionally saw men waving away the birds that nibbed on the rice paddy. As the mud road meandered, we continued to cycle along fields and through forests. I looked for the old border fence but failed to locate it. I was unable to distinguish between Indian and Bangladeshi territory. I struggled to keep up with Chandra. My spatial disorientation contrasted with her knowledge of the forest landscape. Not only did she know the precise location of every boundary pillar as well as a border guard, but she also crossed over to Bangladesh with ease.” (P. 124)

The border residents have to prove their loyalty to the state, and they are always looked at suspiciously by the ever vigilant state. There may be some concessions, say for a few people mentioned in the book, like politician and border broker Aladdin, a fang-fung (who manages border brokerage mostly involved in the transportation of Zebu cows and bulls), but otherwise, the condition of poor ethnic and religious minorities, or the rural poor, is vulnerable. Citing Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004), Sur shows that, while these residents are illiterate, the state pushes them much further to the margins through the illegibility of its own practices, documents, and words (p. 148).

Roads do play an important role in demarcating a place, more so in the borders, but they are conspicuously absent in the social sciences, particularly in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. This question cannot be addressed in detail here. Even though it is not the book’s major focus to write on roads, the first chapter of Jungle Passports does deal with roads—the Rowmari-Tura Road. Malini Sur consciously complicates some of the simple questions, such as, “Who constructed the road?”, “Where did the road begin and end?” and “Who were the inhabitants of Rowmari and Tura?” While answering these questions, she delves much deeper into the colonial, nineteenth-century British India road building process, and examines how it’s policies made tribes, and the marking of the borders in that region. In other words, she holds
that “roads were border fences and walls” (p. 25). She brings out the complex geographical, instrumental, and political designs of routes along northeastern frontiers both during British and post-Independent India. In 1971, Rowmari became part of Bangladesh, while Tura is part of Meghalaya, Northeast India. The largest ethnic groups in the Garo Hills region of Meghalaya are the Garos. They are classified as scheduled tribes. More particularly, Garo Bangladeshi Christian women traders play a significant role in the book: to sell the export rejected clothes they cross the border. For them, the act of crossing the border is not illegal; in fact they claim it is their moral right to situate themselves in the indigenous landscape. It is in this context that the author invokes “gendered transborder livelihoods” (p. 98).

This needs further explanation. Sur explains how the lives and journeys of Garo Christian Bangladeshi women traders are fundamental to the understanding of South Asia’s post-colonial margins, particularly when the “partition effects” continue to shape people’s identities and predicaments even today. She also explains how they maneuver their economic interests amid state repression and nation-building. Having said that, she identifies the limitations in the rich feminist historiography in Bangladesh, which does not incorporate Garo Christian women and their distinctive ethnic minorities and kinship structures, as well as their contribution as mobile traders.

**Fieldwork/method**

This much-celebrated book received an honorable mention from the Bernard S. Cohn Book Prize committee for the year 2023. One needs to specifically mention the author’s field work and related experiences. Conducting field work at a site that is geographically isolated and politically sensitive, heavily militarized, in constant conflict with military forces, and subject to the constant movement of ethno-nationalist militant groups is not a small task. Amidst all these, Sur painstakingly collects the data from multiple sources by moving across different places, which cut across multiple states within the two different nations-India and Bangladesh.

The author’s field area includes Northeast India, particularly Assam and Meghalaya, and five bordering districts of Bangladesh: Kurigram, Sherpur, Jamalpur, Mymensingh, and Netrokona, respectively. The borders are always porous; among them, the Northeast India-Bangladesh border region is of an even more complex nature. Unlike many other boundaries, this region is “the landscape of chars, hills, foothills, and rivers (which) itself is shifting” (p. 2, original emphasis). The complexities pertaining to borders are intertwined with people and land, the numerous enclaves and landlocked archipelago; this border can also be called a social boundary (Ludden 2003). The author retains the sociality in her writing style which makes it more engaging; she brings the reader along with her throughout her fieldwork through sharp observations and analysis. With vivid descriptions of events and conversations, the reader is hooked onto the text. Sur’s cycle rides with Chandra, and auto-rickshaw rides with another informant, Mohsin, exemplify her social bonding in the field with her respondents.

Echoing the passage with Chandra which has already been quoted, Sur tells the following story when she writes about Zebu smuggling (fang fang economies): “[I] traveled with Aladdin’s aide Mohsin to the Garo Hills to search for the animals arriving from Northern and Western India. Our nocturnal journeys in an auto-rickshaw fell into
a predictable pattern. They began with Mohsin’s excited phone calls to confirm the routes, upon which he guided our auto-rickshaw in the direction of hidden shelters. We left the village where I resided, travelling in the direction of Tura—on the Rowmari-Tura road—where cattle handlers waited silently with torches and long sticks” (p. 73). Altogether, Sur presents the processes involved in shaping the whole capitalist ecosystem developed around cow smuggling.

### Conclusion

This book will be useful for scholars from various disciplines (sociology, anthropology, political science), more specifically for students, scholars, and activists interested in border studies, regional studies, or migration studies. For students and scholars whose area of research is the southern part of India with less first-hand experience with borders, partition narratives and their manifestations, perennial religious conflicts, etc., this book will surely open up new avenues of knowledge. An important outcome of this book is that the author describes how people find ways to remain mobile despite huge walls, numerous checkpoints, etc. As she puts it, “the powerful forces that regulate the fragile balance of life and death at the nation’s margins compel people to cross borders again and again” (p. 5). The book is about relationships between individuals, between individuals and animals, between citizens belonging to different countries, and between enforcement agencies. The book needs to be looked at in two different ways: from the point of view of content and form, and from that of ethnographic fieldwork. Scholars who are interested in conducting fieldwork and in documenting and writing about their field sites should definitely read this book.

Also, this book is useful for scholars working on transnational political economy through various social sciences disciplines, primarily for the reason that in the last decade or so, there has been a resurgence in nationalist authoritarian politics on a global scale. Politically and ideologically, several nations have become more rigid towards economic, political, and environmental-related issues, thus making the lives of their citizens miserable, or, sociologically speaking, stateless or displaced.

To sum up, borders, roads, and fences all cultivate fear: they are “infrastructures of fear” (p. 120), which are integral to social life, kinship, and smuggling in the region of the Northeast India-Bangladesh border (p. 171). Malini Sur highlights that “unequal relationships between nations and impoverished border crossers translate into detentions, deportations, torture, and death,” and she goes on to say that “limiting human mobility in the name of national security, illegality, and sovereignty hardens territorial boundaries and normalizes border enforcement” (p. 121). On the contrary, to quote her again, “the border fences and walls symbolize neither national sovereignty nor the failures of nation-building. They are metaphorical charges and transform into a potent political register” (p. 171).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Malini Sur is a socio-cultural anthropologist. She is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Western Sydney University.

2. The riverine areas (island) of the river Brahmaputra, locally known as “Char/ Chapor”. They are situated along the India-Bangladesh border.

3. With few exceptions, such as G. D. Khosla’s *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading up to and Following the Partition of India* (1949), Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998) and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin’s *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (1998).