


Chapter 12

Reframing Accountability for Human Trafficking Along the India– Bangladesh Border: A Securitization and Fragmented Governance Approach

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the persistence of human trafficking along the India–Bangladesh border through the combined theoretical lenses of securitization and fragmented governance. While existing literature and policy frameworks often approach trafficking as an issue of migration management, social welfare, or criminal justice, this study argues that such interpretations inadequately address the structural and political dynamics that shape state responses. The research posits that the framing of trafficking as a national security threat—rather than a social or human rights concern—has produced a system where accountability is diffuse, bureaucratic, and performative rather than substantive.

INTRODUCTION

One of the longest and most densely inhabited international borders in the world is the 4,096-kilometer border between Bangladesh and India. Unlike borders pri-

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marily created by colonial conquest or geopolitical rivalry, this boundary traverses historically linked social, economic, and cultural landscapes. As van Schendel (2005) explains in *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, communities on both sides of the border have historically shared linguistic, familial, and labor networks that precede the contemporary nation-state. In the past, cross-border travel was considered routine, especially in rural and riverine areas such as the Sundarbans, North 24 Parganas, and Cooch Behar.

The creation of the border through the Partition of British India in 1947 fundamentally disrupted these patterns. Mass displacement, shattered local economies, and strict territorial sovereignty imposed on formerly flexible social spaces were all consequences of partition. In *The Spoils of Partition*, Chatterji (1999) shows how the hasty, poorly managed boundary-making process created long-term risks, especially for vulnerable rural populations. These vulnerabilities did not go away with time; instead, they were made worse by later political events, such as the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, which, according to Government of India statistics and UNHCR historical assessments, forced an estimated 10 million people into India.

Against this historical backdrop, trafficking emerged not as an aberration but as a structural outcome of disrupted livelihoods, gendered labor markets, and weak social protection. According to recent studies like Rina Chowdhury's *Trafficking, Migration and Border Governance in Eastern India* (Chowdhury, 2020), trafficking networks take advantage of poverty, the need for informal labor, and restricted access to documents. Particularly in situations where domestic employment, unofficial manufacturing, and the entertainment sector operate outside of effective regulation, women and children are disproportionately impacted.

Though the socioeconomic factors that contribute to human trafficking are widely known, the ways in which state interventions influence susceptibility and survivor outcomes have received less attention. Trafficking along the border between Bangladesh and India has been viewed more and more through the prism of national security throughout the last thirty years. Cross-border mobility has increasingly been associated with organized crime, illegal migration, and infiltration in political rhetoric in both Bangladesh and India. This reframing reflects a broader global trend in which migration-related phenomena are securitized, thereby legitimizing exceptional governance measures.

Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, in *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Buzan et al., 1998), define securitization as a process whereby political actors construct an issue as an existential threat requiring emergency action beyond routine political procedures. Once securitized, an issue is removed from the realm of deliberative policy-making and placed under the authority of security institutions. Applied to trafficking, securitization shifts the policy center of gravity away from

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