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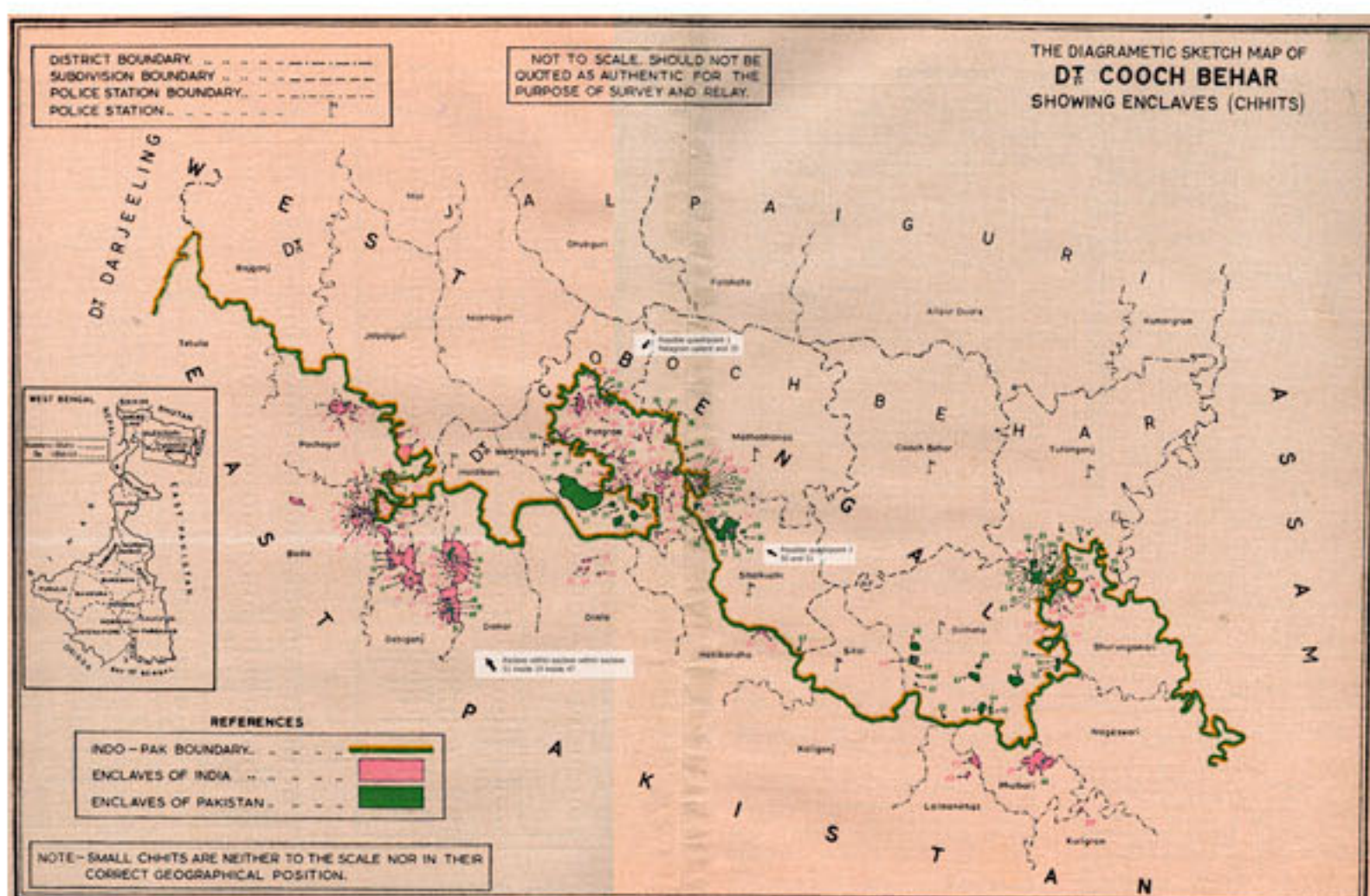


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Enclaves between India and Bangladesh
The land that maps forgot

Feb 15th 2011, 16:06 by T.J. | COOCH BEHAR | Like 271 | Tweet 8



(Click here for an enlarged view of the map, courtesy Jan S. Krogh)

THOSE of us who keep an eye out for anomalies in the world's maps have long held a fond regard for what might be called Greater Bengal. A crazed array of boundaries cuts Bangladesh out of the cloth of easternmost India, before slicing up the surrounding Himalayan area and India's north-east into most of a dozen jagged mini-states. But the *crème de la crème*, for a student of bizarre geography, is to be found floating along the northern edge of Bangladesh's border with India.

EVER since Bangladesh achieved its independence in 1971, struggles over territory and terrorism, rather than the exchange of goods and goodwill, have dominated its relations with its mega-neighbour. Forty years on, both countries appear to be nearing an agreement to solve the insoluble—by swapping territory.

The planned exchange of parcels of each other's territory is concentrated around some 200 enclaves. These are like islands of Indian and Bangladeshi territory surrounded completely by the other country's land, clustered on either side of Bangladesh's border with the district of Cooch Behar, in the Indian state of West Bengal. Surreally, these include about two dozen counter-enclaves (enclaves within enclaves), as well as the world's only counter-counter enclave—a patch of Bangladesh that is surrounded by Indian territory...itself surrounded by Bangladeshi territory.



Folklore has it that this quiltwork of enclaves is the result of a series of chess games between the Maharaja of Cooch Behar and the Faujdar of Rangpur. The noblemen wagered on their games, using villages as currency. Even in the more sober account, represented by Brendan R. Whyte, an academic, the enclaves are the "result of peace treaties in 1711 and 1713 between the kingdom of Cooch Behar and the Mughal empire, ending a long series of wars in which the Mughals wrested several districts from Cooch Behar."

That was before the days of East India Company rule, before the British Raj and long before the independence of South Asia's modern republics. These places have been left as they were found by both India and Bangladesh: in a nearly stateless state of abandonment. They are today pockets of abject poverty with little or nothing in the way of public services.

In a 2004 paper titled "An historical and documentary study of the Cooch Behar enclaves of India and Bangladesh", Mr Whyte, in reference to the intractability of the boundary issues at partition, asks whether India is still "waiting for the Eskimo".

"When in 1947 Mr Feroz Khan Noon suggested that Sir Cyril Radcliffe should not visit Lahore for he was sure to be misunderstood either by the Muslims or the Sikhs, The Statesman wrote: 'On this line of argument, he [Sir Cyril] would do better to remain in London, or better still, take up residence in Alaska. Perhaps however there would be no objection to his surveying the boundaries of the Punjab from the air if piloted by an Eskimo'."

Apparently the newspaper thought that anyone's sorting this border dispute anytime soon was highly improbable. Sir Cyril's success seemed as implausible—in those waning days of the British empire—as the notion of an Inuit flying an aeroplane. Most of a century later and a flying "Eskimo" seems like no big deal, while progress on the zany borders of Cooch Behar has made no progress at all.

There is now talk that a land swap might be sealed when India's prime minister Manmohan Singh visits Bangladesh later this year. If it goes ahead, India stands to lose just over 4,000 hectares of its territory, or about 40 square kilometres. It has 111 enclaves of land within Bangladesh—nearly 70 square kilometres. Bangladesh has 51 enclaves of its own, comprising 28 square kilometres surrounded by India. The transfer proposed would simplify the messy boundary immeasurably—and entail something like a 10,000-acre net loss for India.

For India's governing Congress party, making a gift of land to Bangladesh—in all an area equivalent to the size of 2,000 test-cricket stadiums—will not come easy. During a time of ideological waffle, it is an issue which India's opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) can use to flaunt its nationalistic (oftentimes pro-Hindu, ie anti-Muslim) credentials and to attack Congress at a weak spot—its perceived softness towards illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, most of them Muslims. By many estimates, more than 15m illegal migrants have entered India from Bangladesh since 1971. The BJP has been trotting out the round figure of 20m for years.

Meanwhile, construction of a border fence, 2.5m high, on India's 4,100km border with Bangladesh, the world's fifth-longest (due to all its zigging and zagging), continues unabated. It is a bloody border, too. Indian soldiers enforce a shoot-to-kill order against Bangladeshi migrants caught making their mundane way from one side of the line to the other.

But what's in it for India? Its broader desire to clarify its fuzzy borders with all its neighbours provides one attraction. The dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir has eluded resolution. China's claim of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh remains an open sore. Drawing one steady borderline in the east looks comparatively easy.

India must also hope that its generous co-operation in the territorial dispute might help Bangladesh's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, secure popular Bangladeshi support for a rapprochement with India. Her Awami League (AL) government has proven itself a willing partner: working to deny Bangladeshi territory to the insurgent groups who challenge Indian sovereignty in its north-eastern states; and cracking down Bangladesh's homegrown Islamic-extremist fringe. But as many of Sheikh Hasina's fellow citizens see things, India has yet to reciprocate following their government's consent last year to allow India to use Bangladesh's ports and roads. The main opposition party, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), whose leader likes to say that no foreign vehicles should be allowed to use Bangladesh's territory, scents blood.

Indian diplomats know this. A diplomatic cable from the American embassy, leaked to the world by WikiLeaks, summarises discussions held in 2009 between India's then High Commissioner to Bangladesh and the American ambassador. India, the Americans thought, would like to establish a bilateral agreement with Bangladesh on counterterrorism, but was impeded by its understanding "that Bangladesh might insist on a regional task force to provide Hasina political cover from allegations she was too close to India".

Such international intriguing tends to ignore the people who actually in the enclaves—150,000 by some estimates—who are left waiting. Their chief grievance is a complete lack of public services: with no education, infrastructure for water, electricity etc, they may as well not be citizens of any country. NGOs are barred from working in the enclaves. The question of their citizenship is a major obstacle in resolving the problem: referendums are out of the question, as India does not want to create a precedent which could inspire Kashmiris or north-easterners fighting for independent statehood.

The people who actually live in enclaves (and counter-enclaves) in a certain sense "don't see" the borders. They speak the same language, eat the same food and live life without regard to the politicians in Dhaka, Kolkata and Delhi. Many of them cross the border regularly (the bribe is US\$6 a trip from the Bangladeshi side).

A few years ago, away from Cooch Behar, on the eastern border with India, I met a man who lived smack on the border between Tripura state and Bangladesh. His living room was in Bangladesh, his toilet in India. He had been a local politician in India, and was now working as a farmer in Bangladesh. As is typical in such places, he sent his daughters to school in Bangladesh, and his sons to India, where schools, he thought, were much better. To his mind, the fence dividing the two countries was of little value. But, he conceded, "at least my cows don't run away anymore."

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