

COMMENT

Stateless in Enclaves

THERE ARE NUMEROUS INSTANCES of 50 feet path between two paddy fields, separating India from Bangladesh, without any floodlit fences, watch towers or patrolling border guards. Around 162 enclaves within Bangladesh or India, lie surrounded by the other country. Thousands of inhabitants of the enclaves are abandoned in a stateless limbo, as successive regimes in both countries have failed to swap territory. The inhabitants of the forgotten enclaves are easy victims of criminal gangs and exploitation by security forces of India and Bangladesh. The enclave dwellers are known locally as 'chitmahal' people. Frequently villagers are arrested, jailed for lengthy terms, and then deported as illegal immigrants in India, only to be jailed for the same crime in Bangladesh. Their poor existence is precarious, even though they are allowed to lead a semblance of normal life. In any case, border guards cannot prevent them from travelling outside their villages. Some travel illegally to Bangladesh for registering their land. Dhaka authorities levy no tax, but take no responsibility, not even recognize them as citizens or even refugees. The same is true of Indian enclaves on the other side, 92% of enclave dwellers are Muslims. The first time joint census by India and Bangladesh, in 2011, has calculated about 51,000 people living in no man's land. Even though at the recent India-Bangladesh talks, there has been a protocol agreement on exchange of enclaves, the absence of a deadline and powerful vested interests will ensure that enclave dwellers are not permitted to choose their own nationality.

This is one of the partition-related scars left by history. The British devastated Bengal when they ruled and they continue to make their obnoxious presence felt in unresolved disputes as it is the case for enclave people. For generations they have been living as stateless and yet governments in Dhaka and New Delhi do not show any firm resolve to address the 'chitmahal' problem in its entirety. The British created too many devices to pursue their policy of divide and rule and that tradition continues unabated even in post-British political climate. □□□