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Borderlines and Rivers: Geopolitics of Bengal's Frontiers

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Introduction

Borders in Bengal are drawn across a living landscape. This is a region where rivers migrate, islands appear and vanish, and embankments rise and fall with the seasons. After 1947, the lines that divided peoples and sovereignties were laid upon floodplains that resist permanence. The resulting frictions—between cartographic certainty and geomorphic change—have shaped everyday life for farmers whose fields are eaten by currents, for officials tasked with administering jurisdictions that shift with the monsoon, and for communities whose kinship networks spill across checkpoints and fences. This book asks what happens when statecraft meets a moving river.

The argument begins with a simple observation: borders are not only legal or political artifacts; they are also hydrological and sedimentary processes. In Bengal's delta, the Ganges–Padma, Brahmaputra/Jamuna, Teesta, and Meghna systems braid and unbraid over decades, redistributing land and livelihoods. When a thalweg shifts or a char emerges, claims of ownership and sovereignty must be renegotiated. Policy frameworks often lag behind these natural rhythms, turning ecological change into human insecurity. By centering riverine morphology, we can better explain why boundary disputes persist and how they might be governed more justly.

This book also traces the institutional pathways through which India and Bangladesh have sought to manage their shared frontiers. Boundary agreements and river-water treaties were designed to stabilize relations, yet they operate within a landscape that destabilizes itself. The Land Boundary Agreement's resolution of enclaves reduced anomalies but did not end the daily complications of policing and service delivery in flood-prone districts. Water-sharing compacts allocate flows, but farmers still experience scarcity or inundation based on local embankment breaches, siltation, and infrastructure decisions upstream. Understanding these multiscale mismatches—between treaties, technologies, and terrain—is vital for both analysts and practitioners.

Equally important are the lived geographies of borderland communities. For cultivators on eroding banks, the line on a survey map matters less than the river's next cut. For fishers negotiating seasonal bans and security patrols, compliance can hinge on whether a navigation channel migrated overnight. For traders in border haats, a fence can be a barrier at noon and a bridge at market time. Gendered labor, remittances, and migration patterns thread through these stories, revealing how households adapt to uncertainty with remarkable, if precarious, ingenuity.

Methodologically, the chapters combine archival research, legal analysis, hydrological science, and geospatial data with interviews and village-level observation. Satellite

imagery helps trace channel migration and land loss; court cases expose the jurisprudence of moving banks; treaty texts show the ambitions and constraints of diplomacy; and community narratives ground the analysis in everyday stakes. This interdisciplinary approach is intended for geopolitical analysts and geographers seeking rigorous frameworks, and for borderland communities and policymakers seeking actionable insights.

The book proceeds from history to hydrology, from institutions to infrastructures, and from households to horizons. Early chapters reconstruct how partition produced a frontier across a delta, while subsequent chapters examine specific river systems and engineering interventions—from barrages to embankments—that have reworked both flows and frontiers. Later chapters analyze enclaves, corridors, and border markets; the political economy of silt, sand, and farmland; disaster governance; and the legal claims that arise as land appears or disappears. The final chapters turn to cooperation, exploring what durable, climate-aware, and community-centered governance might look like in a future of more frequent extremes.

Ultimately, *Borderlines and Rivers* argues that stable relations in Bengal's frontiers will depend less on perfecting fixed lines and more on governing with the grain of a restless delta. Policies that acknowledge erosion and accretion, invest in flexible institutions, and empower local stakeholders can transform recurring crises into managed transitions. In a landscape where the only constant is change, the task is not to make borders immovable, but to make them governable, humane, and resilient.

Chapter One: Mapping a Delta: The Making of Bengal's Borderlands

The land of Bengal has always been a place defined by its waters. Long before lines were drawn on paper to demarcate nations, the intricate network of rivers, estuaries, and floodplains shaped identities, economies, and political power. To understand the contemporary geopolitics of Bengal's frontiers, one must first appreciate the dynamic canvas upon which these borders were eventually superimposed. This is a story of silt, currents, and the relentless geological forces that have ceaselessly sculpted a landscape, creating both bounty and precarity.

At its heart, Bengal is a delta, the largest such formation in the world. This vast, low-lying plain, encompassing modern-day Bangladesh and India's West Bengal, is the handiwork of three colossal river systems: the Ganges-Padma, the Brahmaputra-Jamuna, and the Meghna. Originating in the mighty Himalayas, these rivers collectively transport over a billion tonnes of sediment annually, steadily building and rebuilding the delta as they empty into the Bay of Bengal. This ongoing process of deposition and erosion has been shaping the region for millions of years, accelerating significantly during the Holocene epoch.

The dynamic nature of this delta is not merely a geological footnote; it is the very bedrock of Bengal's historical and political geography. Unlike fixed mountain ranges or stable coastlines, the boundaries provided by rivers are inherently ephemeral. A river that served as a clear demarcation one decade might, in the next, abandon its course, creating new land (accretion) or swallowing existing villages (erosion). Such abrupt shifts have profound implications, turning settled territories into contested zones and reliable transport routes into impassable stretches of silt and uncertainty.

Early civilizations in Bengal understood this fluidity intuitively. For millennia, human settlements adapted to the rhythms of the rivers, establishing communities along fertile banks and shifting as the waters demanded. Archaeological evidence suggests that rice-cultivating communities thrived in the Bengal delta as early as the second millennium BCE, demonstrating a long history of human interaction with this dynamic environment. The region's waterways were not just sources of sustenance but also crucial arteries for communication, trade, and even military campaigns.

Ancient texts and early maps, though rudimentary by modern standards, hint at a political geography deeply intertwined with hydrological features. The earliest references to Bengal in Vedic literature speak of 'Vanga,' an area covering the lower Ganges, primarily east of its delta. Various regional kingdoms and "janapadas" such as

Gauḍa, Puṅdra, Varendra, and Vanga rose and fell, their territorial extents often defined or constrained by river courses and floodplains. These early polities learned to navigate the inherent instability of their watery domain, with power often consolidating in regions less prone to sudden geomorphic upheaval or in areas strategically positioned along key waterways.

With the advent of European maritime powers in the 16th and 17th centuries, the imperative to map Bengal intensified. Early European cartographers, often guided by the accounts of traders and explorers, began to chart the delta's intricate waterways, recognizing their immense commercial potential. The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English East India Companies all sought to establish a foothold in Bengal, drawn by its lucrative trade in textiles and other commodities. Their maps, while initially imperfect, represent an early attempt to impose a fixed, legible order onto a constantly shifting landscape.

However, the precision demanded by colonial administration often clashed with the delta's inherent dynamism. James Rennell, the first Surveyor General of Bengal from 1767 to 1777, was instrumental in producing some of the most accurate maps of the region for his time. His "Bengal Atlas," first published in 1779, was a monumental undertaking, crucial for the commercial, military, and administrative activities of the British East India Company. Yet, even Rennell's meticulous work was a snapshot of a moment in time, a fixed representation of a fluid reality. The rivers he painstakingly charted continued their restless migration, often rendering his maps outdated within decades.

The British colonial administration, headquartered in Calcutta (Kolkata), became acutely aware of the challenges posed by Bengal's dynamic rivers. Maintaining infrastructure, particularly railways, in Eastern Bengal proved to be a constant struggle due to the changing courses of the Ganges and Brahmaputra and the relentless deposition of silt. Flooding, a perennial feature of the delta, further complicated governance and resource management, leading to significant disruptions in communication and agrarian production. The colonizers, accustomed to more stable European topographies, found themselves grappling with a landscape that actively resisted their attempts at rigid control.

Bengal's political geography also underwent significant transformations during the colonial period, long before the ultimate partition of 1947. The Bengal Presidency, which evolved into the largest administrative unit of British India, initially encompassed vast territories including Bihar, Orissa, and Assam. However, its sheer size and administrative unwieldiness led to repeated reorganizations. In 1905, Lord Curzon, then Viceroy of India, notoriously partitioned Bengal into two provinces: a Muslim-majority East Bengal and Assam, and a Hindu-majority West Bengal, which included parts of Bihar and Orissa.

This "First Partition of Bengal" was ostensibly for administrative efficiency but was widely perceived as a "divide and rule" tactic, igniting fervent nationalist protests. The uproar ultimately led to the annulment of the partition in 1911, and Bengal was reunited, though Bihar and Orissa were separated to form distinct provinces. This episode underscored the deeply emotional and cultural attachment Bengalis had to their unified linguistic and geographical identity, even as religious divisions began to simmer.

The administrative history of Bengal, therefore, is not merely a record of shifting political boundaries but also a testament to the persistent influence of its geomorphology. The efforts to delineate, survey, and administer this vast delta consistently ran up against the natural forces that shaped it. Even as the British sought to impose order through cadastral surveys and administrative divisions, the rivers continued their silent, powerful work, subtly undermining the perceived permanence of these lines on paper. The colonial experience, in attempting to fix and control the delta, inadvertently highlighted the futility of such endeavors in a landscape defined by movement. This legacy of mapping a restless delta would profoundly impact the eventual carving up of Bengal in 1947, laying the groundwork for the complex borderland dynamics that continue to this day.

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