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Review: Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border -- by Malini Sur

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**Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility,
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REVIEWED BY

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Lennart V. Schmidt is a second-year Master's student from the joint Global History program at Free University and Humboldt Universität Berlin. He is interested in development and infrastructural studies with a focus on hydro dams, public discourses, transformation processes, and environmental history in South Asia and the world.

Jungle Passports is a compelling work on the communities that live in the ever-changing landscape of the Indian-Bangladeshi borderland. The unique geography of this borderland, with its appearing and disappearing islands, rivers that change their course, and the dense jungle forest, contradicts the idea of a sealed border. This contradiction inspired the author Malini Sur to use the landscape and its inhabitants as an archive, to understand the dynamics and societal transformation that the militarization of the border has caused. Her work is wrapped around the idea of a “Jungle Passport” – a neologism invented by Sur – to grapple with the mobility of different communities in an (officially) highly controlled border.

Malini Sur is a socio-cultural anthropologist by training, with a PhD in Anthropology from the University of Amsterdam. She has held positions at the University of Toronto and the National University of Singapore. Currently, she is an Associate Professor at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. Her research is focused on borders, mobility, climate, cities, and citizenship. Besides scholarly articles, Sur produces documentary films. Her first film, *Life Cycle*, focuses on city dwellers’ mobility in Kolkata. A second documentary on the Parramatta River, Australia, is on the way.

Jungle Passports is clearly an anthropological work. However, its methodology has much to offer for non-anthropologists as well. The idea of land as an archive, combined with traditional archival sources, can be interesting for historians. This is particularly pertinent because of a process over recent decades, during which approaches like global history, environmental history, and oral history have softened the demarcation lines of traditional archives. Sur challenges the traditional archive by using the landscape and its inhabitants, through “ethnographic and historical fieldwork,”¹ as an archive. This approach would allow historians to investigate spaces that have been previously avoided due to the scarcity of traditional archival sources.

In the first chapter, “The Rowmari-Tura Road,” this interdisciplinary approach is most visible. Sur uses a historical lens and traditional archival material to contextualize her ethnographic study of the area by focusing on the importance of infrastructure – roads in particular – like the Rowmari-Tura road, to understand the region’s dynamics and history. Looking at rice cultivation, its effects on the local culture, and the question of property via land securitization through the state, the second chapter also focuses primarily on the land. The third chapter deals with cattle smugglers living from inter-border trade, leading to a *fang-fung* culture among the smugglers. *Fang-fung* describes the risky male-dominated inter-border trade culture structured by “duplicity and dependency”.² The chapter also explores the political and social networks surrounding and enabling cattle smuggling. The central theme of the fourth chapter is the “Jungle Passport”, a term invented by Sur to describe the methods used by female members of the Garo (a local ethnic group) to cross the Indian-Bangladeshi border back and forth without official documents. The Garo women pass the border through negotiations with border security, and are part of the communities who inhabit the borderland while producing and reproducing the border according to their interests, Sur argues. Fear, loss, and their embedment in infrastructure through the

construction of India's new border fence in the region are discussed in the fifth chapter. The fence has drastic consequences for the communities living from inter-border trade, the families separated by the border, and the elephants who lose their natural habitat.

The book's last chapter moves from the jungle and the borderland to the courtrooms of Assam, where the Indian state processes the claims of the predominantly Muslim refugees from Bangladesh. Sur argues that their chances of obtaining Indian citizenship have decreased significantly since the Hindu nationalist government – accused of systematic discrimination against Muslim communities – came to power in 2014. This chapter is particularly interesting given its ambition, and approach to analyzing the political center of India from its margins. Throughout the book, there is a general search for reciprocal influences between communities, infrastructure, and the environment. However, the variety of topics covered in the six chapters makes it difficult for the author to formulate a concrete argument or tie the chapters together in the conclusion.

The large amount of primary sources and ethnographic material – collected over several years and a significant strength of the book – allows the reader to dive into the world of different communities living in the borderland area and understand the influences human-made infrastructure and environmental changes have had on these communities. This density of information, and wide range of topics and themes compressed into 172 pages, also leads to a shortage of theory-building and methodological discussions. Although briefly touching on theory on the second page, the book avoids a solid section on theory-building, and the reader has to find bits and pieces dispersed over the whole book. A section on theory and methodology to theorize the rich evidence – which Sur has so neatly collected over the years – has the potential to become a theoretical framework for further research. For instance, the ideas on human-made borders, negotiations between the state and its citizens, human-environment relations, and the state as a producer of “illegals” and citizens could be used – if thoroughly theorized – as a theoretical framework for other research projects. The scarcity of theoretical reflection also leads to some flaws in her argumentation. For instance, when she tries to connect infrastructural studies, based on the idea of networks, and India's newly built border fence, which contradicts the creation of a network.¹³ Some elaboration here would have helped to clarify the argument she is trying to make.

Throughout her work, Sur applies and combines a multitude of approaches. When she tries to understand economic dynamics in the borderland through the Hindu Businessman Gosh, a politician, local businessman, and a broker for cattle smuggling,⁴ Sur uses ethnographic interviews combined with microhistory. Another central methodology of her book is “history from below”, with her focus on the history of Christian Garo women, a group that is not yet part of the extensive feminist Bangladeshi historiography.⁵ Interestingly, *Jungle Passports* is difficult to categorize in one field due to the multitude of topics and methods covered in the book. It contributes to borderland studies in South Asia, a growing field since David S. Gellner's edited volume *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia*, published in 2013.⁶ In addition, Sur's work is part of a new approach to this field

which focuses on mobility in the borderland.⁷ However, parts of the book, like the first and the sixth chapter, align more with infrastructural studies in South Asia; for instance, works like *The Promise of Infrastructure or Hydraulic City*.⁸

There is no overarching conclusion at the end of the book. However, this absence allows the reader to draw their own conclusion and focus on the nuances of each chapter instead of compressing them into one conclusion. Sur's work suggests looking to the margins, the borders – widely perceived as no man's land – and the dynamics and mobility in spaces sealed and controlled in the government's narrative. She also invites us to think critically about a national historiography produced from the margins, with the ambition to understand larger processes in India's political landscape. Her research on the Indian-Bangladeshi borderland may reveal more about India's political situation and history than focusing on the much-studied regions of the Hindi Heartland, Bengal, or Jammu and Kashmir. In this regard, *Jungle Passports* contributes not only to the understudied historiography of the Indian Northeast but also to national historiography by trying to understand the state from its margins.

NOTES

¹ Malini Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 2.

² Sur, *Jungle Passports*, 69.

³ Sur, *Jungle Passports*, 9, 122.

⁴ Sur, *Jungle Passports*, 74.

⁵ Sur, *Jungle Passports*, 110.

⁶ David N. Gellner, ed., *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁷ Farhana Ibrahim and Tanuja Kothiyal, eds., *South Asian Borderlands: Mobility, History, Affect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁸ Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel, eds., *The Promise of Infrastructure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Nikhil Anand, *Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).