

# REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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## Lecture 15: Border Dynamics and South Asian Migration

Thank you. Good morning, and welcome back to the lecture series on refugee migration and diaspora. Today, we are going to discuss border dynamics and South Asian migration. When discussing South Asian migration, we see that it has been a significant and diverse phenomenon that has shaped the cultural, political, and economic landscapes of both the region itself and the countries to which South Asian migrants have moved.

**Border Dynamics and South Asian Migration**

South Asian migration has been a significant and diverse phenomenon that has shaped the cultural, political, and economic landscapes of both the region itself and the countries to which migrants have moved. The migration patterns have been deeply intertwined with colonial history, partition, geopolitics, ethnic conflicts, economic aspirations, and regional dynamics.

“It is at the border that a different, renovated gaze is necessary not only to grasp the unfolding of such processes with their ever-changing interrelations, contradictions, and conflicts but also to assess the different epistemological approaches that attempt to capture them in a theoretical frame.”(Marco Maoigiani, 2022)

India's borders with **Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka** and **Tibet** are not merely geographical demarcations; they have played a central role in shaping not just the country's geopolitical landscape, but are also sites of historical, cultural, and political complexity that shape migration patterns.



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The migration patterns have been deeply intertwined with factors including colonial history—especially the partition of the Indian subcontinent—as well as geopolitics, ethnic conflicts, economic aspirations, and smaller regional dynamics. All these factors together shape the experiences of the South Asian diaspora and the migration process of South Asian populations. to other parts of the globe. So, as Marco Maoigiani states, I quote, it is at the border that a different renovated gaze is necessary not only to grasp the unfolding of such processes with their ever-changing interrelations, contradictions and conflicts,

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but also to assess the different epistemological approaches that attempt to capture them in a theoretical framework.' India's borders with Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Tibet are not merely geographical demarcations. They have played a central role in shaping the country's geopolitical landscape as well as the sites of historical, cultural and political complexities which define the entire migration patterns. If we examine each of these South Asian borders one by one, we can first discuss the India-Bangladesh border. This border is perhaps one of the most complex and contentious in South Asia, marked by both historical and contemporary migration flows.

The partition of India in 1947, which led to the creation of Pakistan and afterward the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, set the stage for significant cross-border migrations. Post-independence, the India-Bangladesh border has seen several waves of migration, and these migrations have happened largely due to political instability, religious persecution, as well as economic conditions in Bangladesh. We also see that whenever there are certain, you know, communal riots happening in India, Whenever there is some dissent or some kind of insurgency pertaining to the Muslim minority, especially in post-colonial India, the repercussions can also be felt in the neighboring nation-states, namely Pakistan and Bangladesh.

So whenever there is a Hindu-Muslim conflict or communal tension happening in India, the repercussions can be felt both in Pakistan and in Bangladesh, and vice versa. Whenever we see that the Hindu minorities are facing some kind of jihadist activity or some kind of difficulty in Pakistan and Bangladesh, The repercussions can be felt in India as well. So the partition is not an end in itself. The formation of these borders post-partition is not an end in itself.



It keeps coming back to haunt the entire memory of South Asia. It comes back like a phantasmal presence, we may say. It is like a phantasmal process. presence that never seems to go away, and its aftereffects are always prevalent in South Asian politics, in the South Asian geopolitical space. So, then definitely when we talk about border dynamics and South Asian migration, we cannot not talk about partition-related migration.

The immediate aftermath of partition saw mass migrations of Hindus from East Bengal, which later became East Pakistan and then it became Bangladesh as it is known today. So the Hindus moved from the then East Bengal or Bangladesh to India and then the Muslims, a large section of Muslims moved from India to East and West Pakistan. According to Geneva Graduate Institute, I quote, The steady influx of Bangladeshi migrants in India's northeastern state of Assam led to major ethnic backlash in the late 1970s. In reaction, the Indian government decided to fence its border with Bangladesh, which ever since has become the site of national identity politics and contestation over irregular migrants."

So the influx of Bangladeshis and the way, you know, across different decades, very curiously, the Indian nation state has defined these migrants through different coinage. So they have been called as legitimate, you know, migrants, the ones that have smoothly transitioned into citizenry. They have been assimilated into the Indian mainland citizens definition and they are a part of the mainstream Indian populace. Whereas subsequently in the later decades, especially

## Border Dynamics and South Asian Migration

### India-Bangladesh Border

The India-Bangladesh border is perhaps one of the most complex and contentious in South Asia, marked by both historical and contemporary migration flows. The Partition of India in 1947, which led to the creation of Pakistan and later Bangladesh, set the stage for significant cross-border migration. Post-independence, the India-Bangladesh border has seen several waves of migration, largely due to political instability, religious persecution, and economic conditions in Bangladesh.

**Partition-related Migration:** The immediate aftermath of Partition saw mass migrations of Hindus from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to India and Muslims from India to East Pakistan.

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After the 1970s or, you know, towards the end of the 20th century, the migrants from Bangladesh that have kept coming trickling through the border of India have been understood as illegal immigrants. Right. They have been seen as infiltrators. They have been seen even as spies. And there have been all these policies that have been designed, that have been adopted to maintain strict measures for treating these illegal migrants, especially sending them back to their home country or treating them in legal terms.



So, especially in West Bengal, we see that the communist government in West Bengal has taken very strict measures while dealing with the Bengali immigrants who tried to settle in the Sundarban areas, and this entire incident is happening. Better known today as the Marichjhapi Massacre. The Marichjhapi Massacre, where it is alleged that there was state-sponsored decimation and sabotage of properties of the migrants on suspicion that they were spies and were destabilizing the smooth running of the state government. So, these kinds of policies and these chapters in history actually point to the amplifying tension in the Indo-Bangladesh border. According to David Newman, I quote Newman here, 'Border studies have come a long way during the past decade.'



'From the study of the hard territorial lines separating states within the international system, the contemporary study of borders focuses on the process of bordering, through which territories and peoples are respectively included or excluded within a hierarchical network of groups, affiliations, and identities,' unquote. Post-1971, we see that the Bangladesh Liberation War led to the border becoming a focal point for migration as refugees fled the political violence as well as the economic hardships they faced in Bangladesh. As a result, we see that they sought refuge in India's northeastern states, especially in Assam. So, we see that these migrations also determined the provincial politics. Over a period of several decades, we see that Assam has assumed a stricter and less lenient attitude towards the Bangladeshi Muslims as a way of resisting the Bangladeshi migration or influx.

The Assam government has assumed a more reactionary position officially. So, we see that each province also has its own dynamics depending on the kind of immigration history it bears. So, Assam, as I said, has this local and migrant clash that has been going on for several decades now, which has made the Assam government's position more and more reactionary, more and more, let's say, anti-migrant and anti-Bangladeshi, right? So, the issue of illegal migration has remained a contentious issue between the two nations. In recent years, India has implemented stricter border controls, which has, in fact, fueled debates over citizenship and identity, particularly concerning the status of Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants.

So, who is a legitimate citizen in India? Who can work in India, and who can stay back and trade with India? Some of the concerned topics. These are some of the burning topics that are discussed when we talk about India-Bangladesh relations. So, there are many Bangladeshis temporarily coming to work in India, trading with India, and vice versa.

**South Asian Migration**

**Post-1971 Migration:** After the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, the border became a focal point for migration, as refugees fled political violence and economic hardships in Bangladesh, often seeking refuge in India's northeastern states, particularly Assam.



**Contemporary Migration:** The issue of illegal migration has remained a contentious issue between the two nations. In recent years, India has implemented stricter border controls, which have sparked debates over citizenship and identity, particularly concerning the status of Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants.



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There are also many Indians, especially Bengali Indians, who work in Bangladesh. So, the debates over citizenship, the debates over how long someone from the adjoining country can come, stay, work, and their terms of visit—the conditions, terms, and conditions they should keep in mind—are some of the questions discussed when we talk about the Indo-Bangladesh border. Next, talking about the India-Myanmar border, the India-Myanmar border is less discussed in mainstream migration discourse. However, it plays a crucial role in regional migration patterns, particularly in North-Eastern India. Scholar and critic Jaideep Chanda, in the work 'Irawadi Imperatives,' deeply studies the border dynamics and comments on the arbitrariness of the Indian-Myanmar border drawn by the British.

So, we know that prior to this border being drawn by the British, Burma, the former name of Myanmar, was part of the undivided Indian subcontinent. So, this continuity of culture—the continuity in terms of ethnicity, language, and culture—has remained on both sides of the border. However, the demarcation has been made officially. So, several ethnic groups, for example, the Kuki, the Nagas, and the Chin, live along both sides of the border.

We have the Kukis, Nagas, and the Chin living both in India and in Myanmar, in the borderlands. And they have long-standing social, cultural, and familial ties, which actually tend to blur and problematize the border that has been set from above. by the two nations. Migration across this border, although not always large-scale, has occurred through informal channels, often driven by economic opportunities, ethnic solidarity, conflict, as well as familial ties. So, Myanmar's internal ethnic conflicts, especially involving the Rohingya and other minority groups, have led to occasional spillover of these violated populations, these jeopardized populations from Myanmar into India,

particularly infiltrating into states like Manipur and Mizoram, which are in the northeastern part of India.

**Border Dynamics and South Asian Migration**

**Conflict-Driven Migration:** Myanmar's internal ethnic conflicts, especially involving the Rohingya and other minority groups, have led to occasional spillover into India, particularly in states like Manipur and Mizoram

**Refugee Crisis:** Although not as large as other refugee crises in South Asia, there are instances of refugees seeking asylum in India due to Myanmar's political turmoil, including the military coup in 2021 and the resulting violence.

The India-Myanmar border, particularly in states like Mizoram and Nagaland, has become a hotspot for refugees, including Myanmar soldiers fleeing ongoing conflict and civilian refugees from ethnic armed groups such as the **Chin National Army** and **Arakan Army**.



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So, although not as large as other refugee crises in South Asia, there are instances of refugees seeking asylum in India due to Myanmar's political turmoil. So, from time to time, for example, we have seen that the Rohingyas have taken refuge both in India and in Bangladesh owing to the ethnic cleansing that they have faced in Myanmar. The government-sponsored, the state-sponsored ethnic cleansing that the Rohingyas have faced down the decades. So, talking about the political turmoil in Myanmar, we can remember a very recent military coup that happened in 2021 and the resulting violence.

All these, you know, unrest, these political unrests caused spillover of populations into the neighboring nation-states. The India-Myanmar border, particularly in states like Mizoram and Nagaland, has become a hotspot for refugees and refugee infiltration. This also includes Myanmar soldiers that flee ongoing conflict and civilian refugees from ethnic armed groups such as the Chin National Army as well as the Arakan Army. Not only are ordinary people entering nation-states like India and Bangladesh, but we also have armed groups such as the Chin National Army and the Arakan Army that are seeking refuge in neighboring countries. The influx has strained local resources of the host state, challenged India's border security policies, as well as complicated its diplomatic stance, especially with Myanmar's military junta.

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These migrations are driven by factors including conflict, economic hardship, and environmental disasters and are further complicated by policies like border fencing. The free movement regime, also known as FMR in short, and the competing national security interests. As borders tend to tighten, families and communities are increasingly divided. They cannot move smoothly from one country to another to meet family members. Migration is shaped not only by necessity but also by the complex interplay of security, economic interests, and regional diplomacy.

So, migration entails all these factors: the question of security, the question of diplomatic position of each of these nation-states, and the economic interests of the population that is moving. And the question of regional diplomacy. Overall, the question of South Asian migration, the topic of South Asian migration, cannot be dissociated from the larger discussions on international relations and international politics. It deeply affects the border dynamics in South Asia. The India-Sri Lanka border, marked by both historical migration and modern-day refugee issues, is shaped by the unique geopolitical and ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka.

### Border Dynamics and South Asian Migration

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These migrations, driven by factors like conflict, economic hardship, and environmental disasters, are further complicated by policies like border fencing, the **Free Movement Regime (FMR)**, and competing national security interests.

As borders tighten, families and communities are increasingly divided, with migration being shaped not only by necessity but also by the complex interplay of security, economic interests, and regional diplomacy.



The most significant migration across this border occurred during and after the Sri Lankan Civil War, which took place between 1983 and 2009. Tamil refugees fleeing the violence of the Tamil Tigers insurgency and the Sri Lankan government's military operations sought asylum in southern India, especially in the state of Tamil Nadu. And in our syllabus, we have discussed A number of works, including Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, where we see this condition of refugeeness, this state of nowhere that the refugees face both in Tamil Nadu. Once they enter India, they face otherness, they face crises in the refugee camps. And they face this further if they have to leave South Asia altogether and move to

**South Asian Migration**

**India-Sri Lanka Border**  
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**Sri Lankan Tamil Migration:** The most significant migration across this border was during and after the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009). Tamil refugees, fleeing the violence of the Tamil Tigers' insurgency and the Sri Lankan government's military operations, sought asylum in southern India, particularly in Tamil Nadu.

**Post-War Migration:** After the end of the civil war, some Tamils returned to Sri Lanka, but many remain in India, either as refugees or with uncertain legal status. The issue of Tamil resettlement in Sri Lanka and the rights of the Tamil diaspora in India continues to be an ongoing concern, linked to questions of ethnic identity, autonomy, and justice.



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to one of the Western countries, such as the US or Canada. So, if they are part of the American diaspora, they face this vacuum, this nostalgia, and a state of being nowhere further, and they miss their homeland. This is something that comes back again and again in Michael Ondaatje's writings. So, after the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka, some Tamils returned to Sri Lanka, but many remained in India. So, the refugee Tamils did not go back to Sri Lanka, where they would be marked as a minority population, right?

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They remained in India with the larger Tamil population living in Tamil Nadu, either as refugees or with uncertain legal status. The issue of Tamil resettlement in Sri Lanka and the rights of the Tamil diaspora in India continues to be an ongoing concern, linked to questions of ethnic identity, autonomy, and the larger question of justice. Talking about the India-Tibet border, the India-Tibet border has a unique migration dynamic shaped by historical and ongoing political struggles between China and Tibet. The most significant migration event in Tibet was in the year 1959 when the 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet following the Chinese invasion, seeking refuge in India. Since the time of the Dalai Lama's evacuation and emigration, India has become home to a substantial Tibetan refugee community, particularly in Dharamshala, where the Tibetan government in exile was established.

Although the main wave of Tibetan migration took place in the 1950s and 1960s, some Tibetans still flee across the border and enter India to escape Chinese repression. The Tibetan diaspora in India plays a critical role in advocating for Tibetan autonomy and cultural preservation. The issue of Tibet remains a source of tension between India and China, with India hosting the Tibetan exiles and China continuing its efforts to assert control over Tibetan land. The border between India and Tibet, which is now part of China, is also strategically important, and it contributes to ongoing border disputes, most notably in areas such as Aksai Chin and the state of Arunachal Pradesh in India.

**South Asian Migration**

- The Tibetan diaspora in India plays a critical role in advocating for Tibetan autonomy and cultural preservation.

**Geopolitical Significance:** The Tibet issue remains a source of tension between India and China, with India hosting Tibetan exiles and China continuing its efforts to assert control over Tibet. The border between India and Tibet (now part of China) is also strategically important, contributing to ongoing border disputes, most notably in areas like Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh.



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So China's expansionist tendency, its imperialist ambitions have affected both Tibet and India. And these attitudes actually resonate and have their own repercussions in the larger South Asian politics. The India-Pakistan border is one of the most significant and contentious borders in the world, both historically and geopolitically speaking. The border has been marked by major migrations, violent conflicts, territorial disputes, as

well as complex political and cultural dynamics since the partition of British India, which took place in 1947.

**South Asian Migration**

- The **India-Pakistan border** is one of the most significant and contentious borders in the world, both historically and geopolitically. The border has been marked by major migrations, violent conflicts, territorial disputes, and complex political and cultural dynamics since the Partition of British India in 1947.
- **Partition of India and the Massive Migration of 1947 Historical Context:**  
The Partition of British India in 1947 into two independent states—**India** and **Pakistan**—was one of the most traumatic events in South Asian history, leading to one of the largest mass migrations in human history.
- The creation of Pakistan as a separate Muslim-majority state and India as a secular, multi-religious state set the stage for mass communal violence and displacement.



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The partition of British India in 1947 into two independent states, namely India and Pakistan, was one of the most traumatic events in South Asian history, leading to one of the largest mass migrations in human history. So, the creation of Pakistan as a separate Muslim-majority state, in juxtaposition with India, which declared itself as a secular multi-religious nation-state, set the stage for mass communal violence and displacement, especially among the Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh groups. The boundary line was actually drawn by a British barrister named Sir Cyril Radcliffe. So Cyril Radcliffe drew the border lines that demarcated India from East Pakistan and West Pakistan. It left millions of people stranded on the so-called wrong side of the new national lines.

**South Asian Migration**

**The Partition:** The boundary drawn between India and Pakistan left millions of people stranded on the "wrong" side of the new national lines.

The Partition was accompanied by widespread communal violence, as Hindus and Sikhs living in what became Pakistan moved to India, while Muslims in India crossed over to Pakistan.

**Migration Figures:** It is estimated that 10-15 million people were displaced during the Partition, with over 1 million losing their lives in the ensuing violence.

The migration was not voluntary; people were forced to leave their homes in fear of their lives, and entire communities were uprooted. Families were torn apart, and long-standing relationships between people from different religious communities were shattered.



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So when we say the wrong side, we mean that someone is left on a piece of land where their ancestors stayed, but where they became part of the minority population. It would mean a Hindu in what became Pakistan. or a Muslim in what became, you know, let's say

the Hindu-majority India. So, a Hindu in Pakistan was expected to feel safer in India. And so, although the person had property, business, and homestead in Pakistan, he or she would be expected to eventually move and stay with co-religionists in India, right?

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So, otherwise the person would be left as a minority on the wrong side of the border. The partition was accompanied by widespread communal violence as Hindus and Sikhs living in what went on to become Pakistan had to move to India; most of the Hindus and Sikhs actually moved to India. A large-scale Muslim immigration took place from India to Pakistan. Muslims mostly moved across the border into what became Pakistan. It is estimated that around 10 to 15 million people were displaced during the partition, with over 1 million losing their lives in the ensuing violence.

The migration was not a voluntary one. People were forced to leave their homes in fear of their lives, and entire communities were uprooted. Families were consequently torn apart, and long-standing relationships between people from different religious communities were shattered. So, even after the initial displacement in 1947, migration across the Indo-Pakistan border has continued, although in smaller numbers. Some of these movements have been voluntary, whereas others have been driven by the need to escape political or religious persecution.

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The region of Punjab, which was divided between India and Pakistan, has seen continued migration, and these migrations often took place along familial lines. People migrated with the motivation of reuniting with their families. Many families that were separated by partition have continued to maintain cross-border ties and alliances, even though formal travel and migration have been restricted. It's very unfortunate and painful to even imagine. That one had to, you know, travel to meet their family with a passport and visa.

So one part of their family home or one part of their family lived in a place that had to be called a foreign land. And one had to visit the family with a passport and visa. And that's the kind of distance, that's the kind of gap that a border creates—an official border and demarcation of two nation-states actually created. Further, we see that the Kashmir conflict is something much spoken about in the South Asian context. The Kashmir region has been a hotspot for migration, particularly after the 1947 Kashmir War between India and Pakistan.

### South Asian Migration

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**Cross-Border Communities:** The region of Punjab, which was divided between India and Pakistan, has seen continued migration, often along familial lines. Many families that were separated by Partition have continued to maintain cross-border ties, even though formal travel and migration have been restricted.

**Kashmir Conflict:** The Kashmir region has been another hotspot for migration, particularly after the 1947 **Kashmir War** between India and Pakistan.

In the northwest, the India-Pakistan border continues to be a flashpoint for migration, particularly in the context of religious and ethnic persecution, with Hindus, Sikhs, and other minorities from Pakistan seeking refuge in India.



In the northwest, the India-Pakistan border continues to be a flashpoint for migration, particularly in the context of religious and ethnic persecution, with Hindu Sikhs and other minorities from Pakistan constantly seeking refuge in India. For example, the Kashmiri Pandit community, which is a Hindu minority, was forced to flee the Kashmir Valley in the 1990s due to violence and insurgency. And this community sought refuge in different parts of India. So they dispersed from their homeland in the Kashmir Valley to the rest of India. They had to seek refuge in other parts of India.

Displaced Kashmiris is a topic that adds to the ongoing tensions and migration in the South Asian context. Over the years, political instability, military standoffs, and cross-border violence have led to continued displacement. Kashmiri Muslims have often moved across the Line of Control, especially from Pakistan-administered Kashmir to the Indian side and vice versa. And this movement from one Kashmir to another, from POK to India and vice versa, has been motivated by better opportunities, a search for better opportunities, or a search for refuge from ongoing violence in the local land, in the homeland. The 2019 revocation of Article 370 by the Government of India, which granted Jammu and Kashmir special autonomy, has further complicated and amplified migration issues in the region.

**Border Dynamics and South Asian Migration**

The **Kashmiri Pandit** community, a Hindu minority, was forced to flee the Kashmir Valley in the 1990s due to violence and insurgency, seeking refuge in other parts of India.

**Ongoing Tensions and Migration:**  
**Displaced Kashmiris:** Over the years, political instability, military standoffs, and cross-border violence have led to continued displacement. **Kashmiri Muslims** have often moved across the LoC (Line of Control), especially from Pakistan-administered Kashmir to the Indian side and vice versa, either seeking better opportunities or in search of refuge from violence.

**Recent Developments:** The 2019 revocation of **Article 370** by India, which granted Jammu and Kashmir special autonomy, has further complicated migration issues in the region. The decision has led to protests, increased militarization, and a continuing refugee crisis.



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The decision has allegedly led to further protests, increased militarization, and a continued refugee crisis visible in the region. So, as a way of concluding, India's borders with Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Tibet have each produced unique migration patterns and dynamics, often reflective of broader geopolitical, ethnic, and socio-economic realities. So, according to Marco Maigiani, I quote, In grasping the multiplicity of processes, interactions, and conflicts occurring across borders, as well as the various ways borders themselves can generate, shape, and transform social processes,

each of these approaches has indeed provided a unique perspective on borders, thus incredibly enriching the discipline. Migration across these borders has been driven by a complex mix of historical legacies, conflicts, economic opportunities, as well as political crises, making each of these borders sites of significant human movement as well as cultural exchanges.

With this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let's meet with a new topic and another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.