Paper Rights: Emergence of Documentary Identities in the Partitioned Borderlands of South Asia, 1952-67

Abstract

Recent scholarship on Independence, Partition and decolonization in South Asia have focused on analyzing historically the different projects that were critical in the constitution and construction of a post partition national order in the region. The creation of international borders have received special attention as scholars have placed emphasis on the origin, delineation and control of borders between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh as critical instances of how these countries formalized their nationhood. Further, borderlands have become units of analysis for understanding the limits of nationalizing projects. Ordinary men and women became the central to state building initiatives at the border as they crossed and re-crossed international borders and negotiated, countered and sometimes ignored India and East Pakistan’s demands that they declare their nationalities and loyalties.

In this paper I put these negotiations at centre stage by focusing on the part documents such as passports, visas, and migration certificates played in re-enforcing the jurisdictional boundaries of each nation and in the process projecting de facto citizenship on border-crossers. I focus on the Bengal border, dividing India from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), where, in the absence of tangible markers that defined the new border, such documents became the primary cordon that sought to control entry and exit from one country to another. I argue that what began as paper regulations for travel soon began to perform the task of documenting identity, and were critical in marking the line between legitimate and illicit migrations. In essence, documents such as passports and visas introduced a new notion of documentary identity in a relatively paperless and non-literate society. Owners of a particular slip of paper could be identified as a migrant, refugee, intending evacuee, or a citizen of one country; non-ownership of such papers exposed one to the possibility of being officially marked as an alien, infiltrator, or a trespasser, and to the possibility of being incarcerated. Furthermore, given the communal logic of the Partition, the fate of minorities, Hindus in East Pakistan and Muslims in India, was central to both the framing and the operational logistics of such a document regime.

By connecting Partition generated migration and the evolution of documentary nationalities, this paper aims to contribute to our understanding of the technologies of post-partition nation building and how new citizens, especially minorities, negotiated and adapted to their post-colonial predicaments.