Citizens in Suspense? Portraying the Voices of the Borderlanders along the Indo-Bangladesh Border

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The India-Bangladesh border, demarcated by the Radcliffe Line in 1947, stretches around 4,096 km along the Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. The border fencing was introduced to curb illegal migration and enhance national security. However, in Assam, the fencing has introduced a range of social and economic challenges. Many residents of border villages, especially those living outside the fence or near the zero line, face restricted access to land, mobility, healthcare, and other basic services. Movement across the fence is strictly regulated by the Border Security Force through scheduled gate timings and with mandatory identification checks. While existing literature has largely focused on security concerns, migration, and territorial integrity, there remains a significant gap in understanding the everyday realities of those residing in these fenced border areas. Issues such as disrupted livelihoods, displacement, psychological distress, and limited compensation for land loss are underrepresented in both academic and policy discussions. This study, therefore, explores the socio-economic conditions and human security status of border villages in Assam. Engaging with the conceptual framework of citizenship in suspense, it argues that residents in these zones occupy a paradoxical position where they are legally recognised as citizens but functionally excluded from full political and material inclusion. The paper calls for a rethinking of border governance that goes beyond security logics to address the rights, needs, and uncertainties faced by those who live under constant surveillance but remain beyond protection.

Keywords: Border Fencing, Indo-Bangladesh Border, Border Villages, Human Security, Livelihood, Socio Economic Impact

Introduction

The India-Bangladesh Border in Assam presents a compelling site to study how national security frameworks shape the daily lives of the residents living at the margin of the country. While the borders are conventionally seen as static lines separating sovereign territories, they are dynamic spaces constantly shaped by policy, politics,

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and people. The border fencing,[1] built in the name of national security to prevent illegal immigration and smuggling, has produced new forms of displacement, restriction, and marginalisation, particularly for those who live beyond the fence in what is often called the 'no man's land.' These outcomes reflect what Amartya Sen (2004: 4) describes as the erosion of essential freedoms that constitute the foundations of human rights, economic opportunity, social security and the ability to live with dignity. However, Sen's formulation of 'development as freedom' is not merely moral but also institutional. It demands that state actions expand, rather than contract, citizens' capabilities. When applied to border governance, it exposes how security infrastructures often reverse this logic by restricting mobility, livelihood, and social participation. Sen's idea also becomes central here because it helps translate what appears to be a spatial or infrastructural intervention into a deeper question of justice and capability. In this context, the fencing scheme itself has been critiqued as a form of exclusionary governance. Datta (2018) argues that India's border fencing regime in Assam violates land ownership rights, disrupts access to basic necessities, and undermines the citizenship entitlements of those residing near the territorial edge. Datta's argument, while strongly legalistic, tends to frame exclusion in terms of policy failure. This paper extends that critique by suggesting that exclusion is not accidental but embedded in the very design of securitisation, an argument that shifts from viewing fencing as an outcome of weak governance to seeing it as a technology of control. While intended as a national security measure, the fence has paradoxically alienated legitimate citizens from the very state that claims to protect them.

The placement of the fence is not neutral. It does not align with the international zero line, and instead often slices through villages, cutting off public institutions like schools, temples, mosques, and farmland, thereby physically fragmenting the social and economic fabric of daily life (Banerjee & Chen, 2013). By documenting this physical dislocation, Banerjee and Chen help illustrate how spatial decisions materialise political hierarchies, showing that the state's claim of protecting territory often comes at the expense of its own people's territorial belonging. These disruptions are structural, which is built into how the border operates. Borders, while commonly understood as fixed lines, actually carry both symbolic and functional weight, shaping how people move, live, and relate to the nation-state (Shahriar, Qian, & Sokvibol, 2019). Rather than serving as neutral markers of sovereignty, border infrastructures like fencing create fragmented and contested spaces. As Cons (2016) explains in his study of the Indo-Bangladesh border, the fence transforms the borderland into a 'sensitive space', a zone where territoriality is enacted unevenly and state control is experienced through surveillance, uncertainty, and fragmentation. Cons's concept of the 'sensitive space' is a turning point in critical border studies because it shifts focus from territorial demarcation to affective governance. However, Cons treats sensitivity primarily as a condition of uncertainty. In contrast, this study interprets it as a condition of permanence, a routinised uncertainty, where citizens adapt to unpredictability as the only stable feature of their political existence. This reorientation transforms Cons's framework from one about the fragility of sovereignty to one about the endurance of suspended belonging. What emerges is not a neatly bounded territory, but a layered and unstable geography of control and exclusion.

The Indo-Bangladesh border stretches across Bangladesh's divisions, Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Sylhet, and Chittagong and the Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram (Hassan & Bala, 2019). These regions together form one of South Asia's most complex and densely populated border zones, where everyday life is shaped by overlapping histories, security practices, and national imaginaries. Borders are everywhere in our social and political lives. They organise space, define belonging, and regulate who can move or stay still. Certain moments and places reveal how borders actually work, showing that they are both material and psychological boundaries (Marsico, 2016). Marsico (2016) further argues that a border is not a passive line; it is a site of tension and negotiation, where contact and conflict coexist. Marsico's psychological reading of the border allows this study to move beyond geopolitical frameworks and engage with how fear, suspicion, and endurance shape borderland subjectivities in Assam. However, at the point of crossing, where officials inspect people and goods, the nation becomes visible and fragile at once. It performs its sovereignty while also exposing its vulnerability (Vila, 2003). Vila's notion of performance invites a productive tension: if sovereignty is performed, is it not always contingent? In the fenced borderland, every gate check or document verification becomes a repetitive ritual of reassurance, where sovereignty proves itself daily through routine, revealing both its endurance and exhaustion at once. This performative aspect of the border shows that sovereignty is not a settled fact but an act repeatedly enacted through surveillance, questioning, and control. McDuie-Ra (2016) points out that while the idea of the 'state of exception' helps explain how borderlands are governed, it does not fully capture the social and political life that continues within them. McDuie-Ra's critique of Agamben is central to this discussion. Where Agamben locates the border as a juridical void, McDuie-Ra restores agency to the borderlanders. This study, however, extends his intervention by arguing that life beyond the fence exemplifies its selective enforcement, akin to a suspension that normalises partial citizenship rather than annihilating it.

In this sense, the border divides, but it also shows how power works. Kara and Sabri (2016) conceptualise the border as the 'front door' of the state, both a threshold and a site of national performance, where sovereignty is declared but not always equitably delivered. Anderson (2006) reminds us that nations are imagined as limited communities, defined by boundaries that are finite even when flexible. No nation imagines itself as coterminous with all humanity. Borders thus set both the physical and conceptual limits of this imagination. Green (2018) adds that borders as lines conceal the complexity of lived relations by simplifying them into binaries, inside and outside, maintained by state power. The contrast between Anderson's imagined coherence and Green's critique of binary reduction reveals a productive contradiction where nations must imagine unity through division. The fence in Assam literalises this imagination by turning fluid histories of movement into rigid cartographies of belonging. In contrast, Massey (2005) suggests that space is dynamic and filled with many stories happening at once, rather than a dead or closed geography. This approach strengthens the argument that fenced-out citizens are not outside the nation but inhabit an alternate rhythm of belonging.

In Assam, for many residents, this front door remains half-open. They are within the territory of the nation, but outside its everyday reach. This ongoing securitisation is often justified through ideas of national unity and homogeneity, which allow the state to expand its control over local socio-cultural life in the borderlands (Bhaumik, 2021; Konrad, 2015; van Schendel, 2005). Such justifications are rooted in the assumption that territorial control guarantees political stability. Nevertheless, the experience of residents in these areas shows that security infrastructure does not simply produce safety; it rather reorganises everyday governance. The state's emphasis on surveillance and fencing changes how citizenship is administered, as local movement, trade, and kin relations come under continuous monitoring. However, these same regions sustain their own social narratives and cultural practices that question and complicate the state's version of order (Das, Hoque, & Anisujjaman, 2024). These kind of community practices like informal trade across the fence, shared religious observances, and inter-village cooperation demonstrate that the social order of the borderland operates on principles of coexistence that differ from the state's security logic. The contrast reveals that the problem is not a lack of loyalty, as often claimed, but a mismatch between administrative rationality and local reality. Border residents are also aware of the growing constraints on their freedom and mobility, and they develop subtle and open forms of resistance to maintain dignity and belonging (Payan, 2011). These practices reveal that the border is not only a space of restriction but also of resilience and creativity, a condition that this paper defines as citizenship in suspense.

These citizens who are living ahead of the fence are not stateless or outsiders, but the placement of the fence has reconfigured their relationship with the state in deeply unequal ways. While fencing may appear as a straightforward act of protecting national boundaries but it also creates tangible and intangible burdens for those living on its fringes. This phenomenon of exclusion of the border villages along with fencing (as a major part of national security) is a common practice in the world. As Saddiki (2017) notes, such barriers exist globally, from the US-Mexico border wall to the Israel-Palestine separation fence, and they often disrupt more than they secure. The global comparison underlines that physical barriers seldom resolve underlying political or demographic anxieties. In India's case, the difference is that fencing fragments internal citizenship rather than separating two foreign populations. The barbed wire transforms Indian territory into zones of graded sovereignty where areas are technically inside the nation but functionally outside its civic and administrative coverage. In Assam, several villages now lie outside the barbed-wire fence. They are physically located in the Indian soil but separated from it in crucial, legal, economic, and symbolic ways. These communities are officially the citizens of India, but they are forced to navigate life at the threshold, which is mostly controlled, in constant surveillance, and often neglected. Academic research on border studies has grown substantially in recent years, and much of it has revolved around questions of sovereignty, security, and statecraft. For instance, Duncan McDuie-Ra (2014) examines the India-Bangladesh border fence as a political narrative of fear and control. Similarly, Malini Sur (2021) details how border infrastructures like fences and gates become tools of mobility control and bureaucratic filtering, shaping who belongs and who does not. Sahana Ghosh (2020) writes of 'a

thousand tiny cuts' that cumulatively produce experiences of insecurity and exclusion in these regions. These studies demonstrate that borders function as dynamic spaces that actively shape patterns of mobility, identity, and everyday governance.

Between National Security and Human Security

Nevertheless, the India-Bangladesh border has long been viewed mainly through the lens of national security[2], which emphasizes sovereignty, territorial control, and protection from external threats. This approach has justified the construction of fences, checkpoints, and surveillance systems. But these measures often hide the realities of citizens who live near or beyond the fence but still hold valid Indian documents. They expose a deep paradox as people recognised as citizens in official records can still remain unprotected, watched, or excluded by the very state meant to defend them.

In traditional political thinking, security is equated with the strength of the state (Anggayudha & Rafsanjani, 2023). Kim Holmes (2015) defines national security as a nation's ability to protect its sovereignty and future, but warns that this can become dangerous when citizens themselves are treated as potential threats. Barry Buzan (1991) expands the idea of security beyond the military to include political, economic, and social dimensions, showing how the state's quest for sovereignty can endanger its own people when collective goals override individual rights. This contradiction is most visible in border regions where the presence of security forces replaces access to schools, hospitals, or roads. To address this gap, the concept of human security shifts attention from the state to individuals. The United Nations Development Programme (1994) defined it as protecting people's health, food, environment, and freedom. Tadjbakhsh (2005) further argues that true security also means addressing poverty, isolation, and neglect when the state fails to protect its citizens, which in other words is Human Security.[3]

This failure challenges what citizenship means. T. H. Marshall (1987) described citizenship as full membership in a community with civil, political, and social rights. But when people with voter IDs or Aadhaar cards cannot move freely or access welfare, the distance between legal and lived citizenship becomes clear. Galtung (1969) calls this structural violence, or harm done through institutions that deny opportunities and reinforce inequality. Ken Booth (1991) adds that real security should mean emancipation-freedom from fear and want. The process of securitisation, as Ole Wæver (1993) describes, turns ordinary issues like migration into existential threats, allowing exceptional measures such as fencing or curfews that often harm citizens more than protect them. Amartya Sen (2000) reminds us that development must expand freedoms, but not restrict them. When border residents are denied healthcare or economic access in the name of national security, their human security and their citizenship are weakened. In the same context, Linda Bosniak (2006) shows that exclusion can also affect citizens who are legally inside the state but treated like outsiders. They are citizens on paper but remain socially invisible and politically powerless. Van Schendel (2013) describes such borderlands as places of fear and abandonment, shaped by uncertain sovereignty and fragile belonging.

The tension between national and human security is therefore not only theoretical.

It defines the lives of fenced-out citizens in Assam whose daily reality is marked by surveillance, uncertainty, and neglect. Their citizenship is not denied but it is suspended. When national security ignores human dignity, it creates internal border zones within the nation itself.

Despite this growing body of literature, much of the academic attention has focused on macro-level questions, like national security, migration control, and geopolitical anxieties. What often remains underexplored are the micro-realities of those who dwell in the shadows of the fence, their everyday negotiations with the state, their altered economic livelihoods, their emotional responses to surveillance, and their curtailed access to basic services like education, healthcare, and farming rights. In other words, while we know what borders are meant to do from above, we know less about what borders actually do on the ground.

This paper addresses that gap by focusing on the socio-economic and psychological experiences of Indian citizens residing in communities located beyond the Indo-Bangladesh border fence in Assam. These residents are not undocumented migrants or stateless people. They are citizens by law, but their geographic placement and the bureaucratic rules of the fencing project place them in a peculiar limbo. This is not just a logistical inconvenience, it is rather a deeply political condition. These individuals find themselves subjected to the full force of state control (through gates, checks, and surveillance), but not to its full protections. Hospitals are distant and difficult to access. Farming restrictions are imposed in the name of security. Mobility is conditional. Identity is questioned.

This study primarily explores how residents of fenced-out[4] border villages especially in Karimganj,[5] now Sribhumi, Cahar, and Dhubri districts of Assam, experience state power as both present and absent. It introduces the conceptual framework of citizenship in suspense[4] to describe the uncertain and fragmented status of individuals who hold valid citizenship documents but remain outside the everyday guarantees of rights, services, and recognition. The concept captures the gap between legal inclusion and practical exclusion, especially in spaces where the presence of the state is felt through surveillance and regulation rather than support and protection. The theoretical framing is discussed in detail in a later section.

This research has used a qualitative methodology combining primary fieldwork (in-depth interviews, observations) with secondary data (official documents, scholarly literature, and media reports). Field visits were conducted in selected villages such as Bhokdanga, Fauskurkutti of Dhubri District, Govindapur, Lafaisail, of Shribhumi and Pirnagar of Cachar in Assam. The respondents were the residents living ahead of the border fence, including local leaders, and border guards. These narratives help portray not only the material conditions but also the emotional and political subjectivities that emerge in these spaces. By foregrounding these everyday experiences of the residents, the paper seeks to reorient academic discussions away from top-down analyses of borders toward a bottom-up, more grounded understanding of their lives and livelihood of the borderlanders.

In doing so, this paper does not dismiss the importance of national security or migration control. Rather, it proposes for a more balanced and humane strategy for border governance, particularly the one that recognizes the voices of those who live

the border every day. As the world continues to erect fences in the name of sovereignty, it becomes increasingly urgent to ask what happens to those who find themselves fenced out from the state that claims to protect them.

Historical Border Agreements and the Legacy of Territorial Uncertainty

In order to understand the present scenario of the borderlanders, it becomes crucial to understand the history that led to the cartographic anxiety of the borderlanders. The history and political framing of the India-Bangladesh Border has its roots in the legacy of contested territorial demarcations, incomplete agreements, and shifting sovereignties. Before the introduction of physical border fencing, a series of diplomatic arrangements and boundary decisions had already shaped the region's geopolitical structure. These early agreements continue to influence the contemporary border management policies and the daily life of the people residing in the adjacent areas. Understanding this legacy is crucial for unravelling the socio-economic or political motivations behind the present fencing practices and the ongoing marginalisation of the borderland communities.

The Radcliffe Line and the Partition of 1947

Although, Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971, it becomes significant to regress to the partition period of 1947 to understand the root cause of the cartographic anxiety that the people residing in the border villages still suffer. The partition commission was established on June 30, 1947, under Section 3 of the Indian Independence Act, with the responsibility of presenting its report to the Governor-General of India by August 15, 1947 (Jamwal, 2004). Separate boundary commissions were formed, one to address the Bengal region in the East and another for Punjab in the West which was to be chaired by the same individual, Sir Cyril Radcliffe (Chester, 2002). Assigned to draw borders based on religious majorities for a peaceful transition, Radcliffe faced political pressure, scarce resources, and limited time, and notably did not attend public hearings Chowdhry, (2022); Ali, (1967).

Thus, the Radcliffe Award[6] delineated the boundary between India and East Bengal, later becoming the international border between India and Bangladesh after 1971 (Rabbani, 2024). Despite this, disputes persisted. The border remains complex, often marked by undocumented migration and illegal trade due to shared cultural, ethnic, and linguistic ties (Das & Anisujjaman, 2022). After 1971, India began fencing the border in the 1980s to curb illegal crossings and anti-social activities (Riaz, 2020).

The Indo-Bangladesh border stretches 4,096 km across five Indian states: West Bengal (2,217 km), Assam (262 km), Tripura (856 km), Mizoram (180 km), and Meghalaya (443 km) (Dabova, 2014). The first phase of fencing began in 1989, but by 1999 only 854 km was completed (McDuie-Ra, 2014). Damaged sections were repaired in 2007 (Riaz, 2020). Though built for security, the fencing isolated many villages, disrupting daily life. Subsequent efforts to resolve cartographic issues included the Bagge Awards (1950), Nehru-Noon Agreement (1958), and the Land Boundary Agreements of 1974, 2011, and 2015. To implement the 1958 agreement, India enacted the Ninth Amendment and the Acquiring Territories (Merger) Act in 1960 (Bhardwaj, 2015).

Bagge Award

Before the demarcation of the boundary, a spate of disputes arose concerning the implementation of the Radcliffe award. During the Inter-Dominion Conference held in Delhi on December 14, 1948, India and Pakistan agreed to establish a forum by January 31, 1949, to resolve disputes and demarcate the boundary (Ahmad, 1953). Subsequently, in December 1949, a dedicated tribunal was constituted to address these disputes. Chaired by Justice Algot Bagge, a former judge of the Swedish Supreme Court, and including representatives from India and East Pakistan, the tribunal was tasked with adjudicating issues arising from the Radcliffe Award and assisting in boundary demarcation (Jamwal, 2004).

The tribunal's primary mandate was to provide a conclusive settlement of unresolved boundary issues. It examined disputes between Murshidabad and Rajshahi districts, particularly the border stretch from where the River Mathabhanga branches off from the Ganges to the upstream junction where the river intersects the boundary between Daulatpur and Karimpur. It also addressed issues concerning the Patharia Hill Reserve Forest and the shifting course of the Kusiyara River in the East Bengal-Assam region (Raju, 2016). Both India and Pakistan claimed possession of these areas, accusing each other of boundary violations. Armed clashes occurred between the forces of both nations, prompting the tribunal to instruct both governments to mark the boundary line within a year of its ruling, which favoured India (Anant, 2019). Several sittings of the tribunal were held in Calcutta and Dacca, and the legal determinations were announced at the end of February 1950. Although the deadline for completing the demarcation between West Bengal and East Bengal was extended to August 5, 1951, the task remained unfinished even then (Ahmad, 1953).

Nehru-Noon Agreement (1958)

The Nehru-Noon Agreement came into effect on 10th September 1958. This bilateral accord was intended to address unresolved territorial claims post partition between India and Pakistan. It was drafted between Prime Ministers, Jawaharlal Nehru and Feroz Khan Noon. For the first time, two Prime Ministers convened in New Delhi to deliberate on the terms of boundary settlements at a political level in 1958 (Bhardwaj, 2015). The agreement's main focus was addressing territorial disputes arising from the demarcation of boundaries post partition, particularly in the regions of East Bengal (Bangladesh) and Assam in India. This agreement included several subjects between India and Pakistan and the way for their solution (Mahur, 2014). Some of the major resolutions of Nehru-Noon agreements were the implementation of the Bagge Awards, Division of Berubari Union No. 12, adjustments of the Radcliffe line, Resolution of 24 Parganas Boundary Disputes, exchange of enclaves, etc., (Commonwealth Legal Information Institute, 1958).

Swaran Singh-Sheikh Ahemed Agreement 1959

India and Pakistan continued to face unresolved boundary disputes even after the agreement of 1958 between Nehru and Noon Agreement. The 1959 agreement between Swaran Singh and Sheikh Ahemed became another diplomatic attempt between the two countries to resolve border disputes and address tensions that arose after the

partition of 1947. In between, Bangladesh was engaged in the liberation war with Pakistan and became an independent country in 1971 (Shehabuddin, 2016). While the agreement between Nehru and Noon attempted to address some of the boundary disputes, the rising hostilities between India and Pakistan prevented their resolution. The border disputes continued despite the creation of Bangladesh.

The Assam Accord and the Push for Border Security-1985
The Assam Accord was a major political response to the long standing concerns about the illegal immigration from Bangladesh. It was signed on August 15, 1985, between the central government, the government of Assam, the All Assam Student's Union[7], and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad[8] (Government of Assam, n.d).The accord was the outcome of prolonged political unrest and civil agitation in Assam over unchecked immigration from Bangladesh. The issue became serious after the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War as local communities feared that the continuous influx of migrants would alter the region's demographic balance. In 1979, the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) launched the Assam Movement to press the government to identify and expel illegal immigrants through protests and demonstrations (Das & Dowarah, 2024). As Sanjoy Hazarika (2000) notes, Assam had become a tinder keg of hatreds and suspicions where tensions between communities grew rapidly. The AASU led a mass movement in the Brahmaputra Valley, claiming that indigenous people were being marginalized by a relentless flow of migrants, allegedly supported by political patronage from the ruling Congress Party (Hazarika, 2000).

On February 2, 1980, AASU submitted a formal petition to the Prime Minister of India outlining their concerns and demanding the identification and repatriation of undocumented individuals (Das, 2007). The agitation and negotiations resulted in the signing of the accord. Among its key provisions were mechanisms for detecting and deleting undocumented migrants and regularizing those who had entered Assam before 1966. Clause 9 of the accord emphasized the creation of solid barriers such as walls and barbed wire fencing in vulnerable areas (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2000). As a result, the government of India began implementing border security measures, and border fencing construction started in the mid-1980s (Dabova, 2014).

The Land Boundary Agreements
Many attempts have been made to make an inclusive settlement of the land boundary along the India and Bangladesh border. Later, the Land Boundary Agreement across India and Bangladesh was designed at 'setting things right' (Chowdhury, 2020). However, following the partition in 1947, the demarcation line shared by India and East Pakistan, present day Bangladesh was demarcated by the Radcliffe Award, which led to the creation of numerous enclaves. This became the source of administrative challenges. With a series of agreements to rectify the boundary errors, the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) was finally signed in 1974 by the two Prime Ministers, Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of India and Bangladesh respectively. The agreement's unresolved issues primarily revolved around three key aspects, the demarcation of approximately 6.1 kilometres of unmarked land boundary, the swapping

of territorial enclaves, and the settlement of adverse possessions (Ministry of External Affairs, 2011). The Bangladeshi Parliament ratified the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) within a month of its signing. However, the ratification process in India faced significant delays, as it necessitated a constitutional amendment which is a politically challenging procedure (Ali, 2023). In 2009, the two countries revived the discussions on the LBA and in 2011, protocol to the 1974 LBA was signed. This agreement reaffirmed the terms of the 1974 treaty and addressed the unresolved issues. The final ratification of Land Boundary Agreement was signed on 2015 by both countries.

Citizenship and the Border: Reviewing Issues, Theories, and Perspectives

While national security has long dominated the discourse on the India-Bangladesh border, scholars have increasingly shifted attention to how fences and security infrastructure transform everyday realities. Malini Sur (2021) foregrounds how fencing not only restricts movement but reconfigures social relationships, identities, and survival strategies along the Northeast border. Yet her emphasis remains largely cultural and symbolic. Sahana Ghosh (2023) extends this focus by examining how militarized surveillance reshapes domestic life and gender roles, especially for women. Ghosh draws attention to affective and emotional costs, yet does not engage fully with the material fallout on livelihoods and entitlements. Ali Riaz (2020) critiques the state's securitized narrative and shows how the border fence exacerbates marginality for residents by interrupting economic practices and enforcing surveillance. Yet unlike Ghosh, he is less concerned with emotional or everyday adaptation. Together, these works establish that securitization is not only territorial but equally social, still they stop short of addressing how it fractures the citizen-state contract itself. Das, Hoque, and Anisujjaman (2024) respond to both by applying Rumford's notion of 'seeing like a state' to demonstrate how borderlanders narrate their lives beyond security logics. Their work challenges state-centric accounts and shows how marginal residents make claims to legitimacy, disrupting simplistic views of passivity. However, even this attempt to decentralise state authority remains framed by recognition and viability, assuming that citizens seek to be seen, rather than questioning what happens when visibility itself produces exclusion.

McDuie-Ra (2014), working in Meghalaya, shifts the discussion to political negotiations, showing how communities resist the fence not just as a security project, but as an encroachment on land and autonomy. Ferdoush (2021) critiques the use of Agamben's 'bare life'[9] to explain statelessness, arguing that such frameworks often ignore how border dwellers engage in resilience, create informal systems, and assert claims. His view strengthens the call to recognize agency without romanticizing suffering. This resonates with James Scott's (2009) theory of state evasion, which highlights how marginal communities tactically withdraw from formal structures to retain autonomy, an insight relevant to how residents in fenced zones navigate bureaucratic gaps and rework rules of belonging. These interventions illuminate agency, nevertheless, they often situate it as a counterpart to the state rather than as an ambiguous negotiation within the state's own apparatus of control. Jason Cons (2016) adds a psychological dimension by illustrating how borders create a sense of confinement and limited selfhood. Residents articulate their mobility as being let out

and locked in, showing that fences govern not just movement but imagination and emotion. Meanwhile, Henk van Houtum (2021) reframes borders as ongoing performances of inclusion and exclusion through acts of bordering, ordering, and othering. For him, the fence is not just a structure; it is an identity-producing machine that legitimizes divisions. This helps locate the fence within a broader politics of belonging, where identity itself becomes securitised.

From a technological lens, Amelung and Galis (2023) examine border infrastructures as sociotechnical systems that shape (im)mobility. Their notion of 'non-publics' helps explain how certain populations, visible to control but invisible to care, emerge from these regimes. Their work complicates static readings of control by showing how border technologies both enable and marginalize, depending on their articulation. However, despite these valuable interventions, the central paradox remains unresolved: what form of citizenship exists when belonging is formally granted but materially withdrawn?

Taken together, these studies offer powerful insights into surveillance, affect, exclusion, and everyday navigation of border life. However, most still rely on categories such as statelessness, marginality, or resistance that fail to fully grasp the complex in-betweenness of citizens who are formally recognized but practically abandoned. These residents do not neatly fit into frames of the excluded or the rebel. Their presence in state records and simultaneous absence in protection calls for a new conceptual lens, what this study terms 'citizenship in suspense.'

The security discourse in borderland regions has traditionally centred the nation-state. National security has been treated as synonymous with border protection by emphasizing territorial sovereignty, surveillance, and threat deterrence. But this approach often renders invisible to the very citizens who live in precarious geographies, such as those residing outside the India-Bangladesh border fence. These residents possess citizenship documents but continue to face deep insecurity in their everyday lives. Their exclusion challenges the completeness of the state's protective claim. In effect, the state becomes both omnipresent and absent. It raises a key question: if citizens are part of the nation, why do they remain outside its security umbrella?

This is where the debate around citizenship becomes central. While scholars such as Tadjbakhsh (2005, p. 5), Buzan (1991, pp. 49-55), and Sen (2000, p. 228) propose people-centric alternatives through human security frameworks, these perspectives still fall short in accounting for the ambiguous position of citizens living in exceptional zones like fenced-out villages. T.H. Marshall (1950) conceptualised citizenship as a combination of civil, political, and social rights. However, for many border residents, this holistic experience of citizenship remains incomplete. Legal documentation exists, but access to rights and services does not. Agamben's idea of 'bare life' (1998) helps us understand this contradiction. He argues that the sovereign can suspend the law to create a space where individuals are governed without the guarantees of legal protection. These individuals are included in the law only through their exclusion from its protections. For fenced-out citizens, the state is present through surveillance and restriction, but absent in protection, services, and care. Their lives mirror Agamben's figure of 'homo sacer' a person who can be killed but not mourned. Nevertheless, this conceptualisation remains powerful but it flattens their agency and

everyday negotiations with the state. It does not account for the social or political claims these citizens continue to make.

In the same way, Foucault's idea of governmentality[10] (1991) shifts the focus from sovereign rule to how power is exercised through everyday institutions by normalising control. Border residents are not governed by overt violence alone, but through routine regulations, check-posts, identity verifications, and restricted mobilities. Their condition is not exceptional in the sense of being outside the state, but in being overly regulated while still under-protected. Houtum and van Naerssen (2002, p. 129) further argue that borders operate through the logic of ordering and othering. This logic is socially maintained and not merely imposed from above. Borders create insiders and outsiders, often within the same legal category. The fenced-out citizen becomes 'the other within' the nation. These bordering processes become more than spatial strategies as they are mechanisms of inclusion through exclusion.

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, p. 3) adds an affective and identity-based dimension to this discourse. She describes borderlands as emotional and existential spaces marked by pain, uncertainty, and contradiction. This metaphor aligns with the everyday experiences of residents whose rights are suspended despite formal citizenship. However, her framework centres more on identity negotiation and less on the legal and administrative paradoxes faced by borderland citizens. Balibar (2009, pp. 1-5) extends this argument by asserting that borders are no longer confined to peripheries but dispersed throughout society. He sees borders as mobile and socially embedded, shaping who belongs and who does not. In this way, citizenship is no longer determined solely by legal documents but through practices of inclusion and exclusion. Borderland residents fall into what Balibar calls the 'triple point,' where social, legal, and territorial contradictions collide.

Despite these frameworks, there is no complete explanation of the living contradiction of citizens who are recognised on paper but excluded in practice. These residents are not political outsiders or stateless persons. They are citizens whose inclusion is incomplete, insecure, and constantly suspended. Hence, there is a need for a new conceptual framework, 'citizenship in suspense', to capture how legal belonging coexists with material abandonment.

Citizenship in Suspense: A Conceptual Intervention
Citizenship in suspense[11] describes the condition where individuals possess formal legal citizenship but lack the practical guarantees and protections that citizenship is meant to ensure. It reflects an unstable position, neither fully included nor formally excluded. It is suspended, incomplete, and contingent. In this liminal state, people are documented as citizens of the nation-state but they live without stable access to public services, legal protection or political visibility. This concept captures a contradiction where the state both includes and excludes these individuals at once. They are counted but not cared for, watched but not supported, recognized but not protected. Their rights are conditional and their access to the state is filtered through barriers of geography, bureaucracy, and suspicion. What distinguishes citizenship in suspense from statelessness is that it occurs within the framework of formal citizenship. It is simply the deferral or denial of rights despite legal recognition.

Importantly, this condition is not passive. Those living in suspense continue to engage with the state. They vote, demand services, negotiate borders, and assert their belonging. Hence, the concept does not erase their autonomy. Rather, it acknowledges that even in the absence of full state support, these individuals craft strategies of survival, negotiation, and resistance. But these efforts occur within a constrained environment shaped by structural uncertainty, geographical marginality, and legal ambiguity.

In borderland contexts, especially in fenced regions like parts of Assam along the India-Bangladesh border, citizenship in suspense is not an exception but it is the rule. These citizens live under constant surveillance, without consistent access to development schemes or state welfare, and often face challenges in asserting their political or legal rights. Their condition reveals the gap between 'citizenship as a legal status' and 'citizenship as an actual secure experience.' Thus, Citizenship in suspense urges us to reconceptualize citizenship as a spectrum shaped by space, state priorities, and political ambiguity, rather than a fixed binary between citizen and non-citizen. Citizenship in suspense is a conceptual intervention that exposes the unstable position of individuals who are formally recognised by the state but denied its protections. This framework addresses the limitations of existing theories by shifting the focus to how citizenship is not simply granted but constantly negotiated, particularly in borderland regions where sovereignty, recognition, and security are always uncertain.

Border Lives and Everyday Governance: Socio-Economic Impacts of the Fence in Assam

The displacement in India's border villages along the boundary between India and Bangladesh is a form of internal displacement. This displacement is not caused by migration but rather by the very infrastructures meant to secure the nation. The construction of the border fence has reordered village life by turning familiar routes into checkpoints. As Datta (2018) notes, these architectures of security have gradually transformed settlements into surveillance, and belonging into conditional access. The fencing often separates families and communities, making daily interactions with those in the neighbouring country challenging. The situation in Assam's border villages is no different than that of the other border villages around the world. Assam shares a 267.5 km-long border with Bangladesh. Out of this, 141.9 km falls within the districts of Dhubri and South Salmara-Mankachar, the outstanding 125.6 km is divided between Cachar (27.3 km) and Karimganj (98.3 km) two South Assam's districts (Singha & Bhattacharjee, 2023). Karimganj is officially renamed to Shribhumi. From hereafter, Karimganj will be referred as Shribhumi. There are border villages in Shribhumi, Cachar and Dhubri districts of Assam that lie beyond of the border fence.

The residents of the border villages in these areas face the greatest vulnerability to socio-economic hardships especially because they are isolated from the mainland country. These regions are separated from the mainland by the fencing and can only be accessed through a few gates and checkpoints requiring identity cards and biometric verification (Das et al., 2024). Villages like Bhokdanga and Fauskarkutti, in Golokganj of Dhubri district, Govindapur, and Lafasail in Sribhumi, Pirnagar in Cachar district is a thin belt of land that extends beyond the border fencing of India. Bhokdanga and

Fauskarkutti villages of Dhubri district accommodate a population of 780 families. Whereas, North Lafasail, Jarapata, Govindapur, Latukandi, and other villages of Karimganj district have 140 families who continue to reside beyond the fenced border zones (Datta, 2018).

These villages are some of the mostly affected by border fencing where everyday life is moulded by restricted movements, lack of access, and the daily struggle of living outside the fence. The experiences of the people living in these areas reflect how deeply the fence has changed the ordinary life. One elderly resident from Govindapur, in Shribhumi district, recalled witnessing the 1971 Liberation War and stated that he has lived on the border since birth. He remembered a time when there was no fencing in the Shribhumi area and the residents moved freely without carrying identity cards or gate passes.

> The fencing started sometime around 2005 and now, every time we leave or return home, we must carry a gate pass and wait for the gate to open. We are checked thoroughly. Imagine being frisked every time you enter and exit a house. It gets very frustrating on a deep psychological level. There is no major change in terms of development. This is the only major changes we are living with every day.

His words captures the slow internalization of control as what Agamben (1998) would call a life stripped to procedure or the one that remains within the law but beyond its protection. The fence has replaced the line between state and citizen with a line between permitted and unpermitted movement.

These villagers who are located outside the border fence can access the Indian Territory only through a BSF checkpoint which has a predetermined schedule for opening and closing of the border gate[12]. Hölzle (2017) states that with the existence of a border, the lives of the villagers have always been volatile. Some of the villages often lack a proper road connectivity which restricts their access to essential services like healthcare, education, and even the local markets. The economy of these villages is predominantly agricultural and has a heavy dependence on subsistence farming. This dependence on a single sector makes them vulnerable to market fluctuations mostly resulting in economic instability. During field interactions[13] in Bhokdanga and Fauskarkutti villages, many families shared that they were unable to cultivate their full crop yield particularly jute and maize due to restrictions imposed by the Border Security Force. Both crops tend to grow above three feet in height, and security personnel have expressed concerns that such tall crops could obstruct visibility or be used for illegal activities. A farmer from Bhokdanga explained:

> Jute grows above six feet in height. The height of maize varies, but jute was our support system. I have left three bighas of land vacant this year because our permission to grow jute was denied. I want to grow it again because from just three bighas we can harvest up to four quintals annually but that source of income is now gone.

Here, security logic folds into agrarian logic. These restrictions limit the range of crops that farmers can cultivate and reduce access to cash crops that previously contributed to household income. In areas with limited livelihood alternatives, the loss of even a single cropping season can lead to notable economic strain.

The everyday life of villagers living ahead of the border fence unfolds under constant surveillance, which is often infringing upon their basic rights and ordinary freedoms. Routine activities that elsewhere might pass unnoticed, such as buying household goods in bulk, these things are closely monitored and frequently misunderstood as acts of smuggling. It can be told that the border economy functions on a fine balance between survival and suspicion.

During the field survey, a small time labourer in Dhubri narrated how his toto (battery rickshaw) had been confiscated by border officials.

> My toto has been kept at the camp for the last two days because I bought five kilograms of potatoes at a cheaper rate. I was riding home, which is ahead of the fence and the check post. We have to undergo regular checking and frisking. When they saw the potatoes, they questioned me harshly. I explained that the shopkeeper gives a discount for larger quantities, but they didn't believe me. They took away the potatoes and also my toto. They said I was trying to smuggle goods to Bangladesh. I had to visit the BSF camp several times to get it back. For those two days, I earned nothing. My family had to manage without income.

Such incidents show how border security rules make even simple acts like buying vegetables seem suspicious. Such encounters reveal what Ghosh (2020) calls ambiguous intimacy or the proximity with the state without reciprocity. People's economic survival depends not only on their work or market prices but also on the decisions of border officials. Suspicion has become a part of daily life, where people must keep proving that their actions are harmless and seek permission for what others would call ordinary living. We can say that their economic life is not illegal but it must constantly prove its legality.

The main source of livelihood for people in the border villages is farming. However, they face several challenges that reduce their agricultural productivity as the welfare programs bypass these villages. Agriculture department distributes seeds and implements the schemes only to those who are 'inside' the fence. One of the farmers shared:

> We plant seasonal vegetables along with paddy. It takes months to harvest paddy, and it can be done only once a year. We grow vegetables like ladies finger, brinjal, and tomato. We keep the seeds for the next year. We do not get improved seeds or saplings. The agriculture department does not coordinate with us. They distribute seeds and saplings only to the people who live inside the fence. They do not even know that we exist. During the paddy season, our main threat is floods. Heavy rain sometimes destroys all our crops.

These absences reflect what McDuie-Ra (2014) calls infrastructural marginality, where the apparatus of inclusion, schemes, services, subsidies stops at the gate. It also shows how exclusion extends beyond security and identity to basic livelihood. The absence of state support and the lack of infrastructural facilities increase the economic burden on farmers. Their dependence on traditional methods reflects both their resilience and the continued neglect by the state.

Women in these villages face a different layer of challenges. While most women are homemakers, many must support the family income when the male members are away or unable to earn. Employment opportunities for women are very limited. Men can work as labourers or in brick factories, but women find very few options. They

often have to migrate to nearby towns for work as domestic help or engage in small-scale activities near their homes. A woman from Govindapur said:

> We do not have work here. Men can go for daily labour or drive a rickshaw, but we women have no such work. All we can work is as housemaids, but we have to go out of the village towards cities and that is not possible as we have to look after the house and the children. We have some education but that can't give us jobs.

For them, the fence is not only about a boundary but a gendered condition of immobility. Sur (2021) observes that border infrastructure re-inscribe dependency in ways that are invisible but enduring. The fence multiplies that dependency spatially as women depend on passes, on male relatives, or on a gate timing which is not convenient for them.

Women in the border villages experience exclusion not only through lack of resources but also through limited access to work and mobility. Their social roles, combined with economic uncertainty, deepen their dependence on men and on informal support networks. Employment opportunities are rare, and state welfare programmes hardly reach these areas. In this context, women's daily lives reveal how the fence and the state's absence together produce a fragile existence. A woman from Govindapur shared her story.

> I was married at a young age and studied only up to class eight. My mother passed away five years ago, and all three of my sisters are now married. We have no brothers. When I married outside the village in 2023, my father who is paralysed was left alone. We had little money for his treatment or medicines. Soon after, my husband and I returned to the village to take care of him. At present, we live here together. My husband works as a daily wage labourer in the nearby town, and the little he earns goes toward our food and my father's medicine. He also supports his own family financially, which makes it difficult for us to manage. I, too, am willing and able to work to contribute to our household, but there is no opportunity in the village. Even to work as a housemaid, I would have to travel nearly an hour to Sribhumi city. Employment options for women here are almost non-existent.

This account shows how the idea of livelihood in border villages is shaped by restriction and neglect. Such waiting, for permission, for movement, or for rescue becomes a temporal signature of border life (Gosh, 2019). The woman identifies as a citizen but has little access to the structures that ensure a secure life. Her labour remains invisible, and her rights are limited by both geography and gender. This sense of belonging without recognition mirrors the condition of citizenship in suspense, where citizens remain within the nation's boundary but outside its care.

The story is similar in other villages such as Govindapur, where long-term male migration has left many women to manage households on their own. The distance between home and the state is not only spatial but also bureaucratic, as welfare and employment networks rarely cross the fence. A woman from Govindapur shared:

> I am thirty two years old and have two children. My husband works in Silchar as a mason, and he comes home only once in every two or three months. I try to manage the household with whatever money my husband sends, but sometimes even that gets delayed. During those months, I borrow rice or a few hundred rupees from neighbours. I wanted to work in the local market or even in someone's house, but here the work comes rarely and mostly

goes to men. They say women cannot carry heavy loads or work in construction. The only work available for women is cleaning or husking rice in someone else's courtyard, and that too irregularly.

Her words reveal how social expectations, gendered work divisions, and state absence intersect to deepen economic uncertainty. This condition reflects what Giorgio Agamben describes as the threshold of bare life, where citizens remain legally included but materially abandoned, suspended between recognition and neglect. From a Foucauldian perspective, such exclusion operates through governmentality, a form of power that governs by the slow withdrawal of welfare and opportunity and not just by surveillance. The fence thus becomes a mechanism of both control and abandonment, reproducing what Willem van Houtum calls the processes of bordering, ordering, and othering. In this landscape, her belonging is maintained through endurance rather than entitlement, marking a condition of citizenship in suspense, where documentation exists, but protection does not.

Along with agricultural challenges, residents also struggle to access basic services, especially, healthcare. A mother from Govindapur, who gave birth in 2024, recalled how she had to wait for security clearance before the border gate could be opened during a medical emergency.

> The hospital is across the border gate. We have to travel about 15 minutes in an auto-rickshaw. When I had sudden complications during my pregnancy, we had to report to the border guards first. They verify it and contact their higher authority. Only after permission is granted, the gate opens. Sometimes there is a delay in following the protocols. There are instances that people have died due to cardiac arrest because of this protocol but once the gate is open, they even provide vehicles to reach the hospital.

While security personnel often assist once clearance is given, the procedural delay involved in such emergencies can have serious consequences. This everyday dependency on clearance illustrates how infrastructure itself becomes an instrument of power. Foucault's (1991) concept of biopolitics helps explain this condition where states regulate life managing the conditions under which people live and move. These layered challenges from farming restrictions to health access add to the cumulative strain faced by residents. Datta (2018) notes that such constraints reflect how border infrastructures reproduce social hierarchies under the guise of security and development.

Interviews conducted during fieldwork in Bhokdanga and Fauskarkutti reveal that some younger residents have attained higher education, including degrees up to the master's level. Despite their qualifications, many reported that due to a lack of local employment opportunities, they are compelled to return to agriculture or work as daily wage labourers in nearby towns. Others take up work as masons or seasonal labourers in urban areas but often under precarious and low-paying conditions. The lack of diversification in the local economy further narrows income-generating opportunities and reinforces the patterns of underemployment and poverty in these communities. Nevertheless, the lack of diversification in economic activities confines the income generating opportunities and eventually contributes to the persistent poverty in these

regions. Moreover, farmers whose lands lie beyond the border fencing often face harassment from the Border Security Force (BSF) which further complicates their agricultural pursuits. Despite these difficulties, many border residents accept such challenges, viewing the BSF's actions as a reflection of their strict commitment to national security (Das et al., 2024). This acceptance is often embedded in a sense of helplessness rather than genuine agreement with the situation.

Farmers face bureaucratic hurdles to gain permission to access their own lands beyond the fencing. They are required to show their identification, register with BSF personnel, and strictly adhere to designated timings which do not align with the agricultural schedule. Given the high population density and widespread poverty in the border regions, those most affected have often been agricultural workers, petty traders, and frequently, even young children. (Riaz, 2020).

Field observations also indicate that even families residing within the fenced Indian territory may own or cultivate land located outside the fencing. These individuals must pass through the border gate daily to access their own farmland, following the same procedures as residents living outside the fence. Gate passes are issued to them, and livestock taken for grazing are tagged with identification markers to indicate nationality. Both farmers and their cattle are expected to return before the scheduled gate closure. In addition to domestic chores, farmers frequently cross the fence to attend to their agricultural responsibilities. Many own farmland on the other side of the fencing and must visit it multiple times a day, early in the morning for irrigation, later in the afternoon to graze cattle. These tasks often do not align with the fixed timings of border gate operations. Farmers have reported that they are sometimes forced to cut short essential work, return mid-day for meals, and then repeat the gate-crossing procedure, all while keeping track of scheduled opening and closing times. While the BSF personnel stationed at these gates often follow standard operating procedures, farmers from the area have expressed discomfort with the strict surveillance. Some villagers shared that they feel constantly monitored, which adds psychological pressure to what are otherwise routine agricultural duties.

Living under constant surveillance and frequent questioning by security forces has also contributed to a widening sense of alienation and psychological distress among villagers. Furthermore, the residents living in 'no man's land' or border villages remains entangled in the difficult web of state controlled institutions, laws, and procedures as everything from their basic needs such as earning a living, attending social functions like weddings, and seeking medical help is entirely dependent on the scheduled opening and closing of the border gates (Menon, 2016). Menon also includes the field narrative of a border village resident who expressed deep frustration over the restrictive timing of the border gates. Previously open from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., the gates are now operational for only a few hours each day. Such timing is severely disrupting the daily lives and livelihoods of the residents. The villager lamented that the fencing has compounded their struggles, as they are unable to secure loans, receive government grants, or access basic infrastructure like roads, electricity, and healthcare services (Menon, 2016). Such lack of access has left many residents feeling isolated and neglected, with limited avenues to improve their living conditions. These feelings

and emotions were reflected in conversations during the fieldwork where most villagers expressed that they understand the government's concern for national security but their own security and wellbeing is often overlooked. As one woman from Govindapur shared, 'the border fencing might be good for the country. People living inside are secure, but it is not good for us as we are outside the fencing and very cose to Bangladesh. This feels like a jail for us and we are not happy here.'

Her words reflect the deep emotional and psychological impact that fencing has had on the everyday life of the residents living beyond the border fence. It once again brings Agamben's (1998) idea if the state of exception into sharp relief where law excludes even as it governs. However, Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality is equally visible here, as power operates through everyday surveillance and control. Apart from physical restriction of movements, the effects of the fence also create a sense of being cut-off from the rest of the country. Overtime, many have started to feel alienated, left out and helpless.

This sense of marginalisation is further complicated by the conflicting narratives between state authorities and the residents themselves. During field visits, BSF personnel at several Border Outposts expressed that the government has made repeated efforts to shift these populations inside the fencing. According to them, the reluctance to relocate is often rooted in 'illicit interests,' including alleged involvement in smuggling or trafficking activities. One officer remarked: 'We have tried to bring them inside the fence. Many of them don't want to move because they benefit from being in a grey zone.'

Such narratives reflect what Cons (2016) calls the border's 'sensitive space,' where everyday life and suspicion overlap. Seen through Agamben's (1998) state of exception and Foucault's (1991) governmentality, these zones emerge as spaces of ambiguous belonging, governed through both inclusion and distrust. However, villagers offer a very different explanation. Many claim that they own large stretches of agricultural land beyond the fencing, often more than 10 bighas and that government compensation for relocation is both inadequate and unrealistic. A resident of Lafasail recalled that the compensation offered during the construction of border road was 10,000 rupees, which he considered insufficient for the land that was acquired. He questioned the fairness of the process asking how such a sum could possibly. replace their land, their livelihoods and their history.

These contrasting narratives of alleged criminality on one hand and land insecurity on the other reveal the persistent complication of governance in border zones. Security imperatives and state perceptions of risk often overshadow the socio-economic realities of these communities, turning matters of survival into questions of loyalty or suspicion. The everyday frustrations that residents face such as being stopped and searched, restricted from growing certain crops, or kept far from hospitals and schools, reflect more than just inconvenience. These situations reveal a deeper political reality. People are closely monitored and controlled by the state. At the same time, they receive little support or protection in return. This condition reflects a suspended form of inclusion. Citizenship in suspense describes this fragmented and uncertain position, where people are legally recognised but they still remain on the margins of the state's concern.

Conclusion

The fencing along the India-Bangladesh border was introduced to enhance national security and regulate cross-border movement. However, for residents of fenced-out villages in Assam, it has created enduring disruptions in everyday life. People face repeated restrictions on mobility, reduced access to land, healthcare, education, and basic services. The inability to cultivate certain crops, the psychological toll of constant surveillance, and the long distances walked for essential needs are not isolated challenges. These are consistent patterns that reflect a deeper structure of governance shaped by control and neglect.

This study finds that legal recognition does not always translate into meaningful inclusion. Despite holding valid identity documents, residents remain distanced from the state's infrastructure of care. They are regulated by security protocols but excluded from consistent welfare and protection. Their citizenship is acknowledged on paper but withheld in practice. Across interviews and field observations, this gap emerges as the most pressing feature of everyday life in fenced villages. The concept of citizenship in suspense captures this unstable condition. It reflects a form of belonging that remains conditional and fragmented. Individuals are neither fully outside the state nor securely within it. Rights exist in principle, but access is delayed, denied, or made contingent on security perceptions. This suspended inclusion governs how people live, move, work, and claim entitlements.

To address this condition, border governance must adopt a more humane and responsive approach. State schemes aimed at land access, compensation, and rehabilitation must reach affected communities without delay. Policies should be informed by the knowledge and needs of local residents. Secure access to farmland, health facilities, and education must be treated as non-negotiable. Displaced families require structured support, not temporary relief. Moreover, regular evaluation mechanisms must be introduced to ensure accountability in development initiatives. The findings of this study affirm that the effects of fencing extend far beyond territory. They reshape citizenship itself by reducing it to a suspended status marked by uncertainty and partial recognition. A humane and inclusive border policy must centre both security and dignity. Without such changes, the fence will continue to keep people away from their land and from the rights that come with being a citizen.

Endnotes

[1.] The India-Bangladesh border fence, particularly in Assam, has been constructed since the 1980s and accelerated after the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States commonly called 9/11. These attacks profoundly reshaped the global understanding of security. While India-Bangladesh border fence is meant to address cross-border migration and security threats, it has resulted in fragmented communities, disrupted agricultural practices, and restricted access to public infrastructure.

[2.] The term national security is often associated with the safeguarding of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political order.

[3.] Human security, as theorized by Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh (2005) and Ken Booth (1991), shifts the focus from the state to the individual. It addresses safety from poverty, displacement, and fear. It recognizes that threats to dignity and survival are

not always external or military.

4. Fenced-out villages refer to Indian territories situated between the border fence and the actual international boundary (Zero Line) along the India-Bangladesh border. Residents of these areas are Indian citizens who often find themselves physically cut off from essential services, infrastructure, and direct administrative access, due to the positioning of the fence on the Indian side of the boundary.

5. Karimganj, a district in Assam, has been renamed as Shribhumi on 21 November 2024.

6. The Radcliffe Line was hastily drawn in 1947 as the boundary between India and Pakistan (including what would later become Bangladesh). Its lack of clarity has contributed to long-standing territorial ambiguities in the India-Bangladesh border region.

7. All Assam Student's Union is a student's organization established in 1967 in Assam. AASU is mostly acknowledged for the Assam movement against Bengalis of India as well as Bangladesh that lasted for six years.

8. All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad was also a student's organization who was a part of the Assam Movement that lasted for six years. AAGSP was one of the teams who signed the Assam Accord.

9. The metaphor of 'bare life' by Giorgio Agamben (1998) has been used to describe populations reduced to mere biological existence under sovereign control.

10. The concept of governmentality was introduced by Michel Foucault in his 1978 lecture series and later published in The Foucault Effect (1991). It explains how modern states govern through the regulation of population, behaviour, and everyday life via policies and knowledge systems.

11. The term Citizenship in Suspense is coined in this paper to describe the uncertain and unstable status of citizens residing in fenced border areas who possess legal identity but remain outside the routine guarantees of the state. It seeks to offer a conceptual departure from frameworks that flatten these citizens' political presence into passive victimhood or exclusion.

12. Border Security Force (BSF) gate timings and procedures can vary across regions and seasons, with some gates opening only for a few hours per day, limiting movement and access to essential services and some opened throughout the day with strict protocols.

13. Field interviews were conducted in border villages of Assam between March-April, 2025 revealed that residents frequently invoke terms like treatment like outsiders or being doubted to describe their daily interactions with the state, despite holding Indian citizenship.

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