

WHO CARES about Bangladeshi women prisoners in India?



RIMPLE MEHTA

As I read the news of the political crisis in Bangladesh unfold in August 2024, I was reminded of Salma, Hasina, Rumpa (pseudonyms have been used for reasons of anonymity and confidentiality) and several other Bangladeshi women I met in prisons in India between 2010 and 2011. Their narratives of Bangladesh and the echo of their voices singing *Amar Shonar Bangla* in unison are still fresh in my mind.

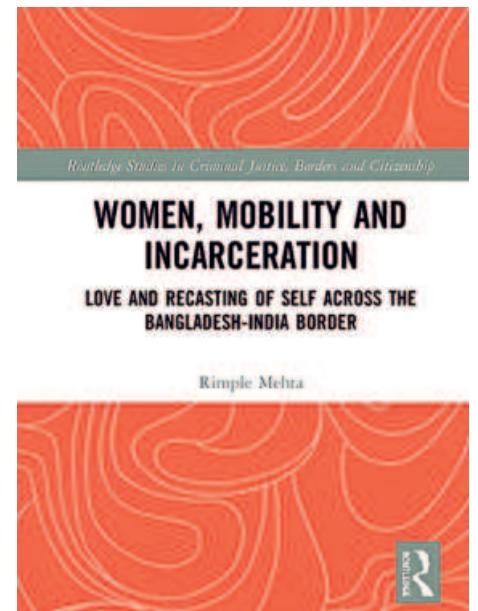
Where would they be now? How has the crisis impacted them? What do Sheikh Hasina's downfall and subsequent changes in political history mean for the India-Bangladesh border and the people who live in the borderlands or move across these borders? Are border crossers even a consideration in this turmoil and change, or do they continue to be on the margins and invisible? Political changes across the world—UK, USA, Australia, and India—have either used issues of borders and migrants for furthering political gain, or there remains a silence on these issues. How this translates in Bangladesh is yet to be seen.

The young women I met in two prisons

grit and resilience in the face of violence they experienced in Bangladesh, during the process of crossing the border, and once they reached India. However, when I asked them questions about their experiences of violence, they said they would rather talk about their experiences of love in prison.

Conversations about love in prisons revealed how it enabled them to make meaning of their everyday monotonous life there. Thinking about love, or establishing relationships of love in prison, enabled them to explore a sense of self that was not tied to the role of a daughter, a wife, or a mother. The women wanted to be represented through their stories of love. These stories reflected the structural and institutional violence they had experienced in India, Bangladesh, or at the border. The women expanded the horizons of what I understood as feminist research, as well as the way women in prison are perceived.

The second conceptual exploration that was furthered by the narratives of the women was the understanding of borders and the alternative ways in which they may be conceptualised. The women's narratives offered possibilities for critiquing as well as



community because their daughter was in a prison in India.

In cases where the family was unaware of their imprisonment, the women were concerned that aspersions would be cast on their character, as the family and community members would assume that they were involved in *kharap kaaj* (sex work) in India. In prison, the women were concerned about upholding the honour of Bangladesh. They often policed each other's behaviour in prison so that they did not bring dishonour to their country while incarcerated in India. The border, police station, prison, and brothel were also spaces where they were concerned about a 'loss' of honour. They feared that when they returned to Bangladesh, they would not be accepted into their families and/or communities.

The theme of resistance cuts across the different narratives. Resistance to institutional and socio-political norms is prominent in the narratives of the women. They did not want to be represented as victims but as agents actively engaging in changing the conditions of their existence. They moved from one space to another,

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A section of the Bangladesh-India border.

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in Kolkata as part of my doctoral research were incarcerated under Section 14 (a) and (b) of the Foreigners Act 1946 for crossing the India-Bangladesh border without valid documents. What started as a curiosity about the trajectories of violence, experiences with the criminal justice system in India, and the role of honour in their lives, resulted in a revelation of diverse conceptualisations of borders, meanings of love in prisons, and the role of *maan-samnaan* (honour) in their lives.

The book *Women, Mobility and Incarceration* is based on the ethnographic fieldwork I carried out in two prisons in Kolkata, India, and delves into the experiences of 40 Bangladeshi women I interviewed there. The women were between 18 and 22 years of age and came to India for varied reasons ranging from the hope of making a living to escaping violent and abusive marriages; others came to meet relatives on the other side of the

border. They questioned the naturalness of the border by highlighting that it was a human construct. The distinctive nature of city, state, and country was not assumed by the women. They often merged into each other in their understanding, thereby creating a continuity between India and Bangladesh. Little did they know that this continuity and fluidity of borders, as they understood it, would land them in prison.

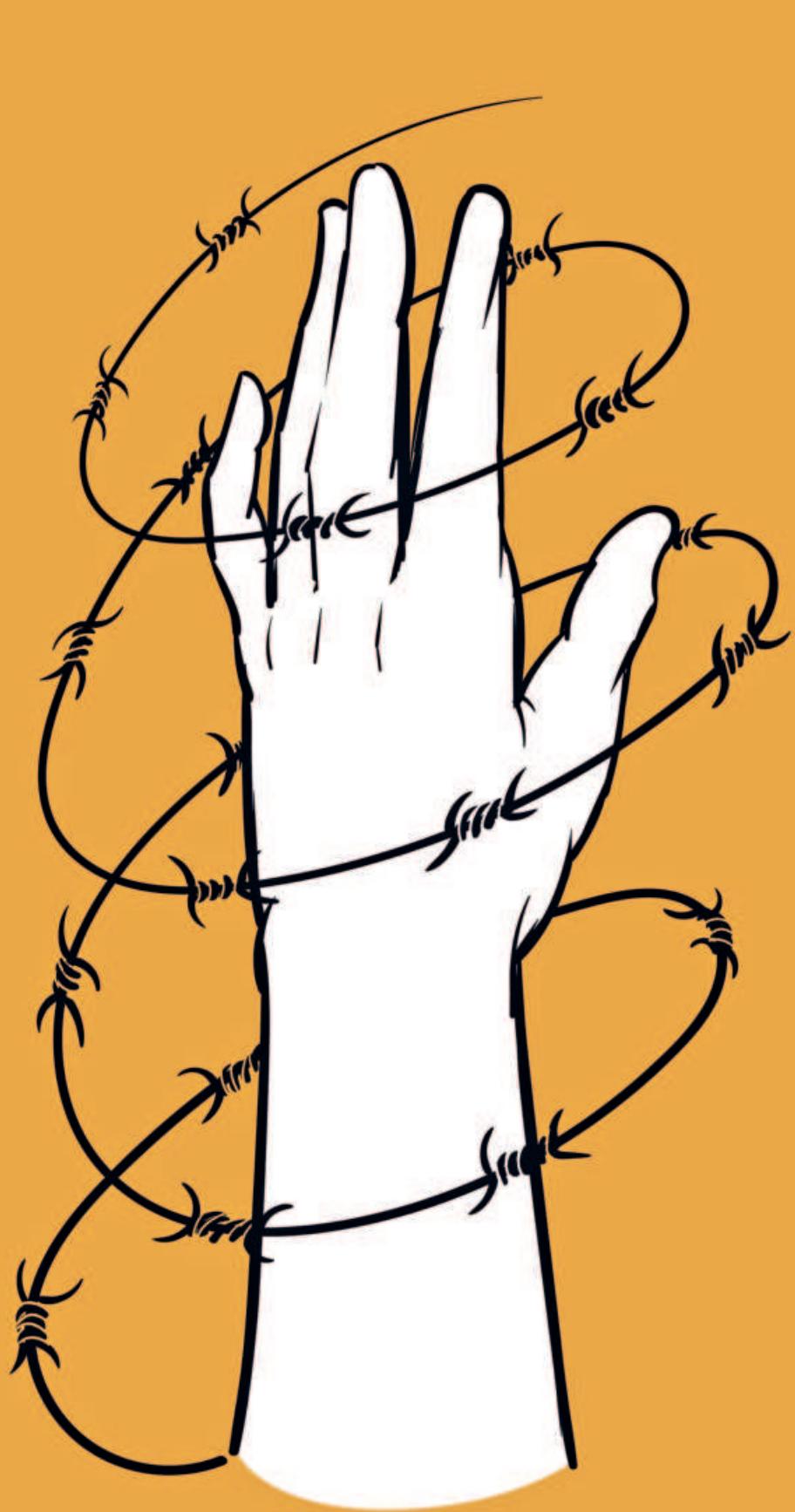
India and Bangladesh—the nation-states—had a different conceptualisation of the border, which stood in sharp contrast to the way the women understood it. They challenged the idea of borders, resisted the monotonous and desexualised space of the prison by forging relationships of love, and even challenged my methodological approaches as a researcher. The women formed solidarities with each other and supported one another at times when their interests were under challenge from the prison authorities. These solidarities were often fragile and did become strained in the context of limited resources in prison, which created grounds for competitive claims.

The narratives of the Bangladeshi women I met are about the pain, shame, and desire that they experienced as they moved across the India-Bangladesh border and were imprisoned in India. They urge us to take a humane approach to the lived realities of these women and not merely perceive them as 'illegal' migrants in India.

As they experienced these emotions, alongside others, they went through a process of recasting the 'self'. In prison, they conceived of themselves outside the normative gender roles. The anonymity in a prison in India provided them with a space to recast themselves, even if momentarily. While they underwent this process of recasting themselves, they navigated the structural forms of disadvantage with which they were confronted as a 'foreigner', 'prisoner', and 'woman'. The fear of institutionalised forms of violence at the border continued to thwart their imagination of a future after prison. The uncertainty surrounding the time and process of deportation loomed in the background.

The book has been written with the intent of raising awareness about the circumstances that women like Salma, Hasina, and Rumpa find themselves in, and to develop a humane lens through which to view the lived realities of people who move across borders and are consequently incarcerated.

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Lured by promises of work and safety, many Bangladeshi women and girls are trafficked across the border into India, where they often end up in brothels or prisons instead of the better life they were promised.

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border. Some women had been trafficked across the India-Bangladesh border.

The women's education levels ranged from no schooling at all to an average of five years in formal education, while a few had attended madrasas for religious learning. A majority of them could not read or write and belonged to impoverished backgrounds, residing in temporary settlements in rural areas. They had been employed in different forms of labour from childhood, and some had worked in garment factories before they came to India. Although several of the women were married, they came to India without their husbands and children, except one.

The time I spent with these women in prison had a transformational impact on the research as well as on me as a researcher. The women were exemplars of

to their own understanding. This prompted the women to make a distinction between *bhool* (mistake) and *aporadh* (crime) when referring to their act of crossing the border. They referred to the role of awareness and intentionality involved in the crossing of borders, which could determine whether a border crossing was a *bhool* or an *aporadh*.

Maan samnaan was the third important concept that women brought up in their narratives. The idea of *maan-samnaan* played an important role in the lives of the women. They grappled with the idea, sometimes conforming to gendered norms and at other times negotiating or resisting them. Crossing the boundary of the home to cross the borders of another country, the women believed, would bring them dishonour. They worried that their families would be shamed within the broader