

SANJOY HAZARIKA



Rites of Passage

BORDER CROSSINGS,
IMAGINED HOMELANDS,
INDIA'S EAST AND BANGLADESH



Penguin Books India (P) Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi 110 017, India
Penguin Books Ltd., 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, UK
Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014, USA
Penguin Books Australia Ltd., Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 10 Alcorn Avenue, Suite 300, Toronto, Ontario M4V 3B2, Canada
Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd., Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand

First published by Penguin Books India 2000

Copyright © Sanjoy Hazarika 2000

This book was written under the auspices of the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi

All rights reserved

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Typeset in Sabon by Mantra Virtual Services, Delhi

Printed at Basu Mudran, Calcutta

NEHU LIBRARY
Acc. No. 212912
Acc. by
Date 26/8/02
Class by
Sub. Heading by
Enter by
Transcribed by

NE
954.164
HAZ;1

COMPUTERISED

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior written consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser and without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above mentioned publisher of this book.

F241
1520

For Myron Weiner, friend, scholar, social historian,
well-wisher of India and its North East

Foreword	ix
Acknowledgements	xii
Chapter One	
Introduction	1
Chapter Two	
Mahesh: Encounters of the First Kind	11
Chapter Three	
Crossing Thresholds: Land and People	16
Chapter Four	
The Roads to Nellie	25
Chapter Five	
Where? & the Bodies?	41
Chapter Six	
The Roads Away from Nellie	48
Chapter Seven	
A Place Called Home	57
Chapter Eight	
An Inner World: Chars, Islands and Disappearances	108

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Chapter One</i>	
Introduction	1
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
Mahesh: Encounters of the First Kind	9
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
Crossing Thresholds: Land and People	16
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
The Roads to Nellie	25
<i>Chapter Five</i>	
'Where Are the Bodies?'	49
<i>Chapter Six</i>	
The Roads Away from Nellie	54
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	
A Place Called Home	75
<i>Chapter Eight</i>	
An Inner World: Chars, Islanders and Diwanis	100

<i>Chapter Nine</i>	
Where is Suleman?	122
<i>Chapter Ten</i>	
Memory is a Fickle Companion	137
<i>Chapter Eleven</i>	
Kurigram and Keramat	151
<i>Chapter Twelve</i>	
The Story of Keramat Bhai	179
<i>Chapter Thirteen</i>	
Bangladesh: Standing Room Only	204
<i>Chapter Fourteen</i>	
Seeking Partnership, Renouncing Confrontation	239
<i>Appendices</i>	269
<i>Bibliography</i>	334
<i>Index</i>	341

Foreword

Over the past years, Sanjoy Hazarika, a former reporter for the *New York Times* and currently a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, has been engaged in a study on an extremely relevant issue in eastern India which has defied a solution. The question of migration has spread much bitterness and tension in the North East of India, not to speak of violence, and troubled relations between India and Bangladesh. But many of the substantial issues have been lost in rhetoric and political posturing.

Bangladesh's official position is that there are no illegal migrants and that India is deliberately pushing out its principal religious minority. India says that Bangladeshis are pouring into its territory. What is the truth? Why do people move? What are their stories, beyond the debris of statistics and sharp rhetoric which obfuscate the real issues?

The phenomenon of illegal migration is not limited to the geographical area of South Asia, or even Asia taken as a whole. It is an international problem that has led to conflicts in different parts of the world and an exacerbation of social, economic and environmental pressures. The Centre for Policy Research has long taken

an interest in issues of population and population movements and this book is part of a larger concern in CPR about peace, development and security in the South Asian region.

The reasons behind migration, where people move from and where they are headed, the lack of a comprehensive strategy to tackle the economic and social roots of these difficulties, the use of religious radicals for purposes of ideology and destabilization, and the personal stories of tragedy, despair and hope—these combine to make an extremely readable book, written in a non-academic style that will make it appeal to a wider audience.

Rites of Passage's passionate style and rich narrative prose plus rigorous research, are typical of Mr Hazarika's despatches as an international reporter for the *New York Times* out of South Asia, and his earlier acclaimed books, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's North East*; and *Bhopal: The Lessons of a Tragedy*.

The voices of the unheard in the entire debate on migration are heard through this book. These are what should help determine policy on a subject as difficult as the movement of people.

Migration has resonance for the subcontinent. It raises extremely touchy emotional issues, for India and Pakistan were born in the bloodshed of Partition, and Bangladesh had a similar, bloody birth.

In parts of India, especially its North East, migration is not just an emotive question but one that is seen as related to the very survival of communities. The Assam students' movement of the 1970s and 1980s, and other agitations elsewhere have forced even national political parties to take the issue on board. This is an important part of

democratic change and debate, to bring greater understanding on a sensitive issue. Unfortunately, much of the discussion has become bogged down in rhetoric. This is where Mr Hazarika's work comes as a breath of fresh air in policy advocacy.

There are numerous innovative ideas in *Rites of Passage*. Not only do they shed light on macro issues which need discussion, but they point to the direction of strategies at the ground level which can transform extremely complex problems, in a very difficult area, into opportunities.

Mr Hazarika is acknowledged as a specialist in issues relating to the North East and its neighbourhood. Through other initiatives, he also seeks to promote dialogue and understanding in civil society in that region.

The CPR is glad to have given him a base for this study. We wish to acknowledge the role of the Population Foundation for India as well as HIVOS, the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries, of the Netherlands, both of which funded the research.

Dr V.A. Pai Panandiker
President
Centre for Policy Research
New Delhi
21 November 2000

Acknowledgements

Without question, the first line of credit must go to Dr V.A. Pai Panandiker, President of the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), who backed this idea from the very beginning and placed the superb facilities at CPR at my disposal. Dr Pai, who has been supportive in other areas of common concern—the North East and Indian policy-making—has built up a unique institution at CPR with a good team. CPR has been a kind host to me, and my office, with greenery bursting through the windows, has been both base and sanctuary.

The Population Foundation of India (PFI) deserves many thanks for its financial support which helped fund part of the project. I am especially grateful to Dr Bharat Ram, Dr K. Srinivasan, Executive Director of the PFI, and Dr R. Natarajan, former deputy director and leading demographer. All of them must have despaired at my work ever seeing the light of day.

HIVOS, the Dutch NGO, with its South Asia base in Bangalore, provided the other funding for the study. Ben Witjes, whose initial interest led to HIVOS extending this support, was extremely helpful and so was Ms Susan Mathews.

Without this support provided by all three groups, *Rites of Passage* could not have been completed.

The responsibility for the delay in putting this book together is entirely mine. Filming of the documentary on Brahmaputra river in India, Tibet and Bangladesh, membership of the first National Security Advisory Board and frequent travel in India and abroad ate into both time and energy.

My family, Minal and Meghna, gave immense support and showed abounding generosity; a writer under stress, or at any time, is more than a handful.

Anindita Dasgupta of Guwahati, between a full-time job teaching history at Cotton College, Guwahati, and finishing her Ph.D., showed initiative, courage, patience and persistence in conducting extensive fieldwork, interviews and documentation in Assam and Meghalaya under difficult conditions. I still have a lot of material which I hope to publish gradually—but all of which couldn't be put in here. Although we may not agree on some issues, I think we respect each other's perspectives.

In Bangladesh: Anwar-ul Raquib of Dhaka University made several trips to Kurigram and other research sites, collected data and helped with my travel. His associate, Firdouz, was a cheerful companion in the last field trip. I wish them well in their plans for the future, in management and in government respectively.

Others in Bangladesh who were supportive and kind: my dear friends and frequent hosts, Shaheen and Mahfuz Anam and their daughter, Priti, who so willingly parted with her room in their old home in Dhanmondi, particularly on one occasion when the Ambala Inn cancelled my booking and I found myself without a place

to stay! There were many wonderful meals and conversations.

Others I wish to thank include former Foreign Secretary, Farooq Sobhan, and Rehman Sobhan, Executive Director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue; Imtiaz Ahmed, C.R. Abrar and Ameena Mohsin of Dhaka University for their openness and frankness; Dr Iftekar Ahmed (Ifty), formerly of the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies in Colombo, the Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies for their library facilities and discussions with faculty members Debopriya Bhattacharyya and Dr Sharifa Begum; the Bangladesh Institute for International Strategic Studies, especially Dr Abdur Rob Khan.

Thanks are also in order to Shyamal Roy and others in Terres des Hommes in Kurigram and the staff at the Rongpur Rural Development Society, and particularly Keramat Bhai and his friends in Chilmari and around, whose stories are the core of this book.

In India:

In Assam: Sunil Baruah of the State Census Department; Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta; police officers in Guwahati, Dhubri and elsewhere; former Deputy Commissioner of Dhubri, L.M. Singhvi ; Dilip Chakravarty; members of the Asom Sahitya Sabha and the Bar Association, Dhubri; Jahnu Barua, film-maker; Gautam Bora, film director and cinematographer; Dilip Chandan, editor, the *Asom Bani*; former Home Commissioner Tapan Lal Baruah; Justice S. N. Bhargava of the IMDT; Prof Monirul Hussain of Guwahati University; Dhiren Bezbaruah, editor, the *Sentinel*, Opu Dutta-Chowdhury of Bellevue Hotel, Guwahati, and his incredibly helpful staff; Manoj and Vineeta Jalan in

Dibrugarh whose hospitality and support appear unending.

In Meghalaya: Niketu Iralu, my mother Maya Hazarika, my brother Suzoy and Sandi S. Syiem

In Calcutta: Ranabir Samaddar and Paula Banerjee, Subir Bhowmick and Prof Barun De; the family of Shri Mahadeo Jalan for their generous hospitality

In New Delhi: My cousin Sumita for getting hold of Supreme Court documents and decisions; Dr M.R. Vijayunni, then Registrar-General of India, and the staff of the Census Commission; Jaswant Singh, External Affairs Minister (EAM) and friend of the North East; R.S. Jassal, spokesman of the Ministry of External Affairs; Lalit Mansingh, Foreign Secretary; Salman Haidar, former Foreign Secretary; Arun Kumar, Joint Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs (Policy Planning); S. Deb-Mukherjee, former High Commissioner to Bangladesh; Ranjit Rae, former Director in the EAM's office; Raghuvendra Singh, former Personal Secretary to the EAM; Chaman Lal, Special Rapporteur in the National Human Rights Commission; K.P.S. Gill, and G.K. Pillai, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, who was a source of information. It was a pleasure to discuss issues related to the North East with him. He made time even during the most demanding of schedules.

At CPR: Prof B.G. Verghese, K.C. Sivaramakrishnan, former Urban Development Secretary, Rajmohan Gandhi, Ved Marwah, recently appointed Governor of Manipur, and Gen V. K. Nayar.

Kamaljit Kumar and the CPR library staff who were always helpful.

Mr P. Dhokrekar, Chief of Administrative Services, and his accounts team, P.K. Rao, P. Khanna and M.C.

Bhatt helped me keep track of the health of my project's finances.

Among others, Kamini Mahadevan, my editor at Penguin Books India, who prodded, pushed, cajoled and made key suggestions.

Preeti Gill, for reading the initial drafts, and urging me to discipline my writing hours.

In Switzerland:

Rajiv Kapur of UNHCR and his wife Smriti for their help and hospitality in Geneva, and the solitude of their farm house in Delhi, and Mohan Ram's quiet efficiency which helped fine-tune a chapter and other work.

In Britain:

Belinda Wright, Barbara Harrell-Bond, David Turpin of Oxford University's Refugee Studies Programme; also Dr Amrita Dhillon and Dr Fabian Essler.

In the United States:

Dr Amartya Sen, then of Harvard University, and Dr Sharon Stanton Russell of MIT and her many colleagues and assistants in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Prof Ashutosh Varshney and Vibha Pingle, and also Michael Teitelbaum of the Sloan Foundation.

But above all, my thoughts go to the one person to whom I owe this interest and involvement in issues of migration, displacement and refugees, and the deeper underlying questions: the late Myron Weiner. This book is dedicated to his memory.

Myron was without doubt one of the extraordinarily gifted persons I have had the privilege of knowing. His interest in the world and especially the subcontinent and our little North Eastern corner was deep and abiding. I had the privilege of sharing a platform in December 1993 at MIT with Myron in the chair and Prof Amartya Sen as

one of the speakers. I was also the second listed speaker on Ayodhya: India, a year later. I suppose I was asked to speak since I had reported on the situation for the *New York Times* after the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya.

Representing the BJP was a Dr Mody from New York. Myron steered that discussion through a potential minefield with skill and sensitivity, silencing an angry scholar who interrupted Dr Mody, and ensuring that everyone got a decent hearing. Of course, we can all guess what the sentiment of the house was!

His intellectual brilliance apart, Myron was an extremely warm and caring man who wrote with dedication every summer at his Vermont home; he loved the winter skiing at Vermont and spent time with his family. He had the instincts of a first-rate investigative journalist and field researcher: he could 'smell' a situation that was blessed with many opportunities and complications and swiftly see ways to move forward.

We miss him and his energy, curiosity and honesty which touched all those who had the privilege of knowing him.

Sanjoy Hazarika

New Delhi

14 November 2000

Credits

1. Map of Assam and North East courtesy Survey of India
2. Map of Bangladesh Administrative Units courtesy Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Dhaka

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

For more than three years, I have been working on issues relating to the demographic and cultural crisis arising out of the migration of people from Bangladesh into Assam. Constituting a wedge of fertile land in India's North East which is watered by the Brahmaputra, Assam is hemmed in by Bangladesh, Bhutan, Tibet/China, and other Indian states of the region.

This project and other associated ones have taken me several times to Bangladesh and various parts of Assam as well as elsewhere in the North East. And as my knowledge of the area and its issues has grown, so has despair at the realization of how much more needs to be done, urgently, desperately, beginning with making available better information about the area. Home to nearly 150 million people, set amid the stunning landscapes of fertile valleys, here we find back-breaking poverty and a rich cauldron of ferocious and ancient ethnic divisions and feuds. Yet, for the rest of the world, this geographical and cultural entity may as well not exist, so little is the interest in or knowledge about it. And this indifference is well known among the local people. It is a wound that festers and worsens with every passing day. After more than fifty

years of independence in India, people in its North East now realize how marginalized they have become in relation to the policy-making apparatus in New Delhi and their own ruling elites at home, and how great remains the ignorance of officials and politicians who govern them, despite all attempts to educate them. The mindsets in Delhi and Dispur remain largely unchanged.

My present concerns also flow out of interactions with villagers, scholars, professionals, politicians and bureaucrats during the course of my research, as well as with non-governmental groups and the media. Though a detailed study of relevant documents, and other theoretical literature on the subject has been done, my approach is not purely academic—anyway I am not particularly qualified to pursue such an enquiry. Our knowledge of the depth of the problems discussed here and their interconnectivity with other concerns is limited; they need to be understood through a multidisciplinary approach. The mere collection of data or compilation of interviews is inadequate for this task. Alejandro Portes writes: 'Data, whether quantitative or qualitative, may accumulate endlessly without producing any significant conceptual breakthrough. Indeed, much of what we do as part of our everyday work is simply to produce information on one aspect or another of social reality within the intellectual frameworks already in place, without altering them to any significant extent. Ideas, especially those of a broader reach, are few and far between and certainly do not emerge out of masses of data.'¹

1 'Immigration Theory for a New Century', in *Immigrant Adaptation and Native-born Responses in the Making of Americans*, (eds.) Josh DeWind, Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz, *International Migration Review*, Vol. 31, Winter 1997

If the problems are multidimensional, so also must be the search for answers. A purely humanist or purely scientific and theoretical approach will not do.

I stumbled along in this search, looking for a concept that would encapsulate my longing for a multi-dimensional set of answers. Late one night, I looked at a review of the brilliant work of that great scientist and philosopher Edmund O. Wilson in a special number of *World Watch*. And I knew that I had found what I wanted.

A professor at Harvard and a devout Baptist as well as a dedicated biologist, Wilson talks about the unity of knowledge, or consilience (a concept that was given this name by the scientist William Whewell as far back as 1840), which is essential in the logical study of any complex issue in today's world. He urges us to span disciplines, and jump across the boundaries of fact and theory.

It is an exhilarating thought—that the 'experts' do not have the answers. That it is only through the weaving together of many strands by different disciplines of work, study and thought, that we will be able to break away from the deadening influence of fragmented knowledge. Wisdom is never piecemeal—it is complete, and rounded.

According to Wilson, it is that leap across the frontiers that will enable us to address long-term problems by following the path of interconnectivity, not of separate sciences and disciplines. Thus, for example, we have to look at land degradation and crop loss in the context of the fragility of our ecosystems, the instability of political groupings, the gross over-exploitation of water resources, the need to educate all levels of society on these questions, and the need to integrate this knowledge into information systems.

These are seemingly disconnected strands. But they appear disconnected since we have made them so. Problems will remain intractable so long as we divide them into comfortable and neat compartments and rationalize ways of tackling them. Take, for example, migration.

It is the outcome of a series of factors which, as in the case of Bangladesh, a focus of this book, appear to be disconnected. Some of these factors are slow to develop, like land degradation; others are dynamic and immediately visible, such as devastating floods. The reasons for migration thus range from population density, land pressures and land-carrying capacity, erosion of river banks, to even a drop in fish catch and the pull of those who have gone before. There are religious anxieties among smaller groups. These are multidimensional issues.

People may also move because they are attracted by the prospects of 'a better life', not necessarily because they believe they will actually have one. They know that while life may be 'better', it may not be easier, at least as far as social interaction with the host community is concerned. The latter may be hostile, at least for an initial period. For example, locating Bangladeshi migrants in Assam was not an easy task. Few would acknowledge that they had come from across the border because of fear of harassment by the local police and anti-immigrant activists.

This book is an effort to place the Bangladeshi migrations into India, especially into Assam, in a perspective that seeks to reflect a multidisciplinary, multidimensional approach. The book has been organized into fourteen chapters. In the first six, we look at the problem of thresholds—of what comprises 'carrying

capacity' in nations: the thresholds of population, land and water as well as food and energy. The pressures that make people move, the places where they go to and how they are received there, are examined. We look at the scale, scope and concepts of migration, differentiate between refugee flows and migratory movements, and then view the disasters that overtake societies when these basic problems are ignored or not understood adequately. Chapters seven to thirteen analyse the dynamics, and tragedies of the Bangladesh-Assam/North East situation. Built on extensive fieldwork and conversations in Bangladesh and Assam, they tell the stories of both those who move and others who stay behind. The last chapter addresses policy alternatives, questions of nationality and citizenship from the perspective of the people as well as that of government. It looks at what, in my view, can and must be done—now and in the near future.

The telling of this story has been shaped both by my personal experiences and views, as well as by the facts of the situation. I have deliberately avoided placing large chunks of statistics in the body of the book. Readers will find extensive statistical material in the appendices and in footnotes.

As with my other books, I have chosen to follow the narrative style of writing here, one with which I am comfortable. There may be obvious drawbacks with such a style but I risk taking this approach because I want the book to engage people and provoke them, not to languish in some distant library. I want it to force a debate, to shake up governmental and societal approaches to the issue of migration. Perhaps that is being too ambitious—but innovative thinking must shape the agenda of our governments, whether it is the result of inputs by people

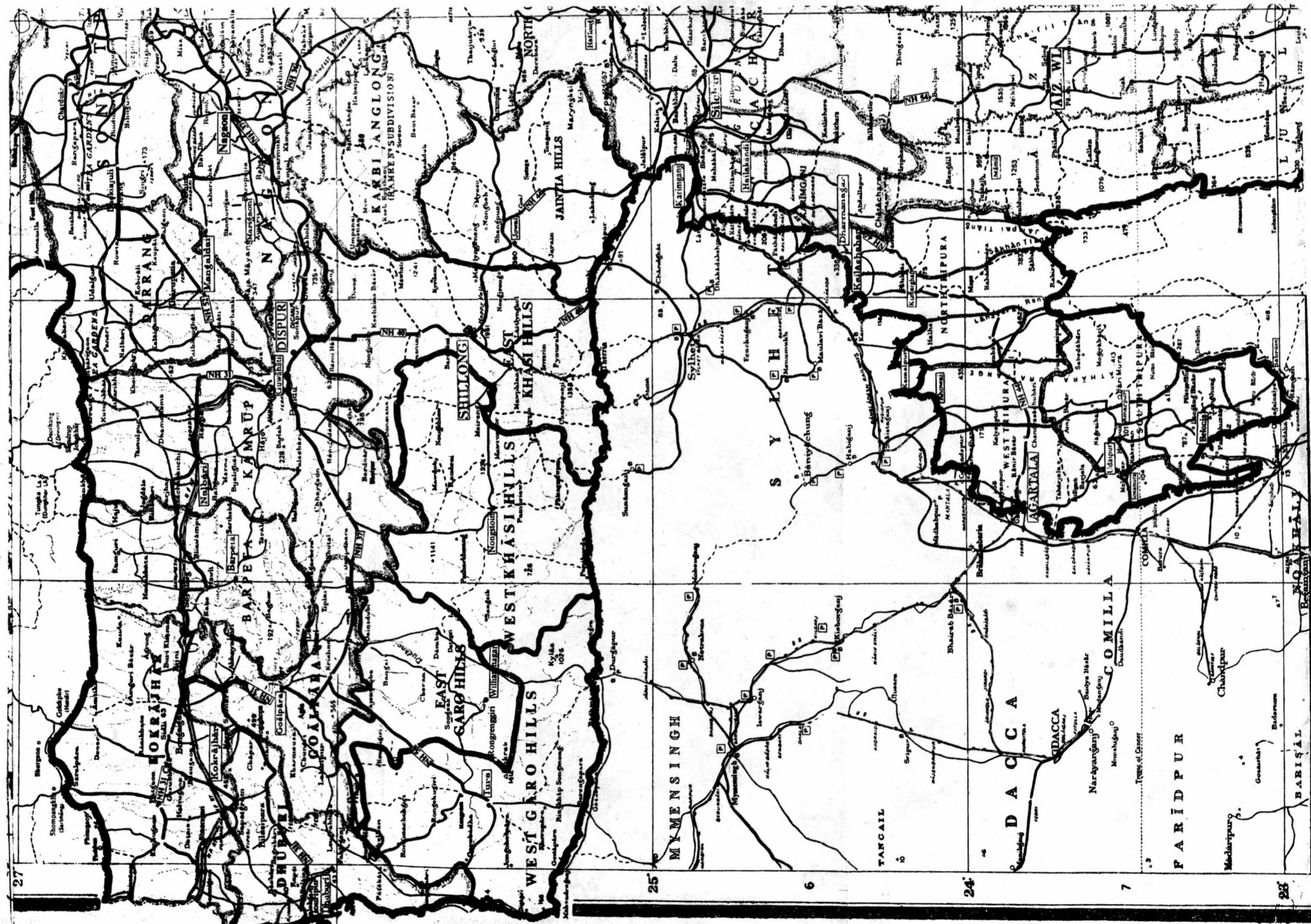
outside the 'system' or those who are in it.

We need to think with our heads. For too long we have thought with our hearts.

This approach becomes even more important when we look at the literature of migration. This can be broadly organized into two segments: one, academic writing, focusing on theory and using case studies as opportunities to establish a particular legal, philosophical or political point; two, documents from international conferences, seminars and 'projects'. In much of this literature, the people who move, who are at the heart of this phenomenon, are mere footnotes, if even that. They are statistics not stories as they should be: voices of people resonating across time and distance, telling us of their tales, forcing us to listen and heed. They do not form the core upon which a 'project' rests but only 'materials' to forge a case and develop an idea.

Rites of Passage is an effort to give migration a human face, merging narratives and analysis. It is based on my own background as a reporter for the *New York Times* and other publications, my travels, especially over the past eighteen years, and the research material I developed and gathered from Assam, Bangladesh and other parts of the world. I have been engaged in this process of dialogue and policy development through my columns and lectures, seminars and workshops over the past several years, as well as through my work with the National Security Advisory Board, the newly-formed Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research and the National Commission for the Review of the Working of the Constitution. In the present work I have sought to stitch together this body of work, built up over the years.

ASSAM



27

25

6

24

7

23

People are on the move and their movement tells the story of a changing world.²

For migration, forced and unforced, is our history. The latter encompasses those who move, voluntarily, across state borders in search of livelihoods and cultural compacts. The former are those who have been pushed out by governments or political and social groups hostile to their very existence. They leave because they fear for their lives.

Bangladesh is an extraordinary example of a nation that has seen both trends. The best known was the 1970-71 outflow of more than nine million refugees who fled a brutal Pakistani crackdown on pro-liberation East Pakistan in 1970-71 before Indian army troops and Bangla guerrillas brought freedom to that land. But preceding and consequent to that tragic chapter in the life of the subcontinent, the movement of people for economic and environmental reasons was (and continues to be) a factor in the Brahmaputra, and Barak valleys, in tiny Tripura, not to speak of West Bengal and even across India. Visibly reshaping and transforming the demographic, ethnic, linguistic and religious profile of large parts of the population in these areas, it stirred a potent brew of hatred, suspicion and fear.

The social, demographic and political tensions spawned by this problem are too deep to gloss over or to seek quick-fix solutions like 'throwing' foreigners out. Some extreme, parochial groups take refuge in the Italian political philosopher Niccolò de Bernado Machiavelli, without knowing that it is him that they quote. Many ideologues of the extreme right-wing who accuse Bangladesh of trying to swamp the North East and take it

2 *State of the World*, World Watch Institute, 1995, p 132

over demographically, and thence politically (not to speak of economically), indirectly quote Machiavelli when they raise these fears. The Italian had declared in the sixteenth century that 'sending immigrants is the most effective way to colonize countries because it is less offensive than to send military expeditions and much less expensive.' It is doubtful if there is an active 'conspiracy' to Bangladeshize Assam and the North East, as some would have us believe. There are different reasons why people are moving and triggering the fears, hopes and concerns that they do. The fundamentalist surge in the lower districts of Assam is one of the factors for worry, but not the only one.

We need to look at the issues dispassionately and find out what solutions will work. Can anything be resolved given the complexities of the issues? During the course of our fieldwork, my researchers and I met extremely pragmatic people on either side of the border. They knew what they wanted, how it could be achieved, but they had little hope that political leaders could do it. They saw the benefits of local choice, local decisions being translated into national and regional realities. Their views as much as, if not more than, those of scholars, social theorists, politicians and officials must direct policy-formation.

Rites of Passage seeks to record and affirm their voices, besides my thoughts, and to span boundaries in a leap across disciplines, and a vision born of history.