



# BREAKING BOUNDARIES

## The Timely Demise of the Third-Order Enclave

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This summer, the governments of India and Bangladesh implemented a historic land swap. On August 1<sup>st</sup> the two states took a major step forward in resolving what has proved to be one of the more complex border situations in the world – the massive amount of Indian and Bangladeshi enclaves speckled within each other’s territory. The situation has been described as an archipelago of landlocked islands, and the relative isolation of islands has been an appropriate way to look at life for thousands of people enclosed within these territories.

Under the new deal, ratified by the prime ministers of both nations, 162 enclaves, 111 within Bangladesh and 51 within India were formally dissolved into the two countries. This is a great relief not only for geography students, but also for over 50,000 people



whose freedoms of movement and access to public services and resources have been blocked by the convoluted border network for the past 68 years.

### ENCLAVES WITHIN ENCLAVES

An enclave is a country’s territory separated from the mainland and isolated within the boundaries of a separate country. Think of the hole inside of a donut. In the India-Bangladesh situation, over 106 separate Indian territories were enclosed within Bangladesh, and 92 Bangladeshi territories were encased by India. Until the dissolution of many these enclaves through the August land swap the area in question, a long strip that includes part of West Bengal in India and the Northwestern border of Bangladesh, contained over 80% of the world’s enclaves. To make matters more complicated, the area housed 24 second-order enclaves, or enclaves within enclaves. For instance, there were many

Indian enclaves within Bangladeshi territory, which was itself an enclave surrounded by the wider India.

The advent of the land swap also heralded the demise of a true oddity – the world’s only third-order enclave. The Indian Dahala Khagrabari territory, encapsulated within a Bangladeshi enclave, in turn wrapped in an Indian enclave, is no more. For those who value geographical eccentricities the loss of this one-of-a-kind entity might seem tragic, but for those living inside the complex web of international barriers, and for those diplomats who have spent decades seeking a resolution, the extinction of the third-order enclave is a welcome relief.



## THE HISTORY AND CONSEQUENCE OF THE ENCLAVE ARCHIPELAGO

While the precise origins of these enclaves, locally known as chhits (roughly translating to “specks” in Bengali), are debated, they stretch back at least to the 1500s when the Mughals invaded Rangpur. After the partition of India in 1947 the southern Rangpur district joined East Pakistan, while its neighboring Cooch Behar district remained with India, creating the speckled boundary that would last for nearly 70 years. While attempts were made to “de-enclave” the region as early as 1958, legal challenges and the deteriorating relationship between India and Pakistan prevented progress. Negotiations were halted until the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 after the Bangladesh Liberation War.

Even with a newfound desire to resolve the issue little headway was made. The 1974 Indira-Mujib Land Boundary Agreement set

the framework for the eventual 2015 deal and sought to begin an enclave swap despite a net loss of land for India. However, the deal met resistance and remained in limbo for nearly 40 years. Finally progress was made in 1992 when India leased the Tin Bigha Corridor to Bangladesh. The corridor, less than 600 feet wide at its narrowest point, separated the Bangladeshi Dahagram-Angarpota enclaves from the mainland. Its long-term lease allowed for a *de facto* reunion between the Bangladesh and its long-separated enclave.

Despite this progress, serious challenges remained for those living within the enclaves. Residents were often cut off from basic amenities – including water and electricity. Civil services such as schools, hospitals, and legal recourse were limited. The closed-border situation also prevented residents from relocating to avoid these hardships. Chhit dwellers often relied on family ties and cross-border trade for money and sustenance, a testament to how the ethnic and historical identities of the people were not nearly as well defined as the borders that divided them.

## BREAKING THE BOUNDARIES

The historic deal struck just a few months ago finally made headway by dissolving many enclaves and bringing the formally isolated territories under the responsibilities of their geographical homelands. The hope is that at long last the dissolution of bureaucratic roadblocks to the development of these areas will lead to an improvement of life for the tens of thousands of former enclave residents, as well as an improvement in diplomatic relations between India and Bangladesh.

Despite the optimism, the resolution of such a long-standing issue is not as simple as merely erasing lines on a map. The former chhit residents had to decide whether they would accept Indian or Bangladeshi nationalities and to relocate depending on the choice. It is not surprising that all of the former residents of the Bangladeshi enclaves decided to remain in India, the wealthier of the two countries. However, out of the approximately 37,000 Indian enclave residents, only 1,000 decided to relocate to India, indicating the reliance of these populations on the local economy and their inability to simply pick up and move. Bringing these new nationals into the framework of existing civil and economic networks will take time, but it should mean a boost to the standard of living of thousands who were previously isolated inside the enclaves.

The deal is set to improve more than the living situation of formerly isolated peoples. It is also expected to boost diplomatic relations between India and Bangladesh by decreasing tension over border regions and treatment of enclave residents. A more stable border should also strengthen cooperation between the two states on the issue of smuggling and other cross-border issues. Finally, the long forestalled land-swap could signal that India is a positive actor in the region and is able to engage in progressive dealings with its neighbors. All in all, the dissolution of the enclaves is a refreshing and long overdue success in foreign relations. The realization that long-standing border disputes do little to favor either side, but instead foster distrust and harsh consequences for those living within, is a positive development that should be taken as an example of how to overcome long-standing disputes and resolve similar issues in other parts of the world.

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