A little boy named Ramchand lived in the Thar Parkar district of Pakistan. Angry at his mother for giving him very little tea and nothing to eat, he kicked the tea cup and walked away from his home in a huff. As he kept walking, tears streaming down his face, he crossed the boundary of Pakistan and treaded upon Indian territory. Caught by the border police on what had now become without his knowledge the ‘other’ side, a bewildered Ramchand did not know he had committed a criminal act. He incurred the border police’s wrath and suspicion by stating his name. The name sounded Hindu, but the boy was coming from Pakistan.

(film Ramchand Pakistani, 2008)

Appointed to look out for troublesome elements, the police did not know that when Partition happened, the district of Thar Parkar had a large population of Hindus, predominantly Dalits but also members of the Brahmin and merchant castes. Ramchand was a Dalit but also a Hindu. He was a Hindu, but he lived in Pakistan. He disturbed too many neat categories. Ramchand had committed the sin of crossing too many borders and confounded the state’s representatives who needed identities to be neatly sealed. He was arrested and detained in a prison in Kutch.

Ramchand may well have been a Meghwal or a Koli. Had he not been a member of such an underprivileged group, he could have been a Hindu Lohana or Brahmin, or Sodha Rajput from Thar Parkar. Instead of coming to Kutch, he may well have crossed the border taking him to Barmer in Rajasthan. Instead of crossing the border by mistake, he may well have done it consciously. The argument needed for this discussion would remain the same, which is to say that movements of certain groups in the Western region comprising Lower Sindh, Northern Kutch, and Western Rajasthan are historical and consistent. Ramchand’s movement, however unconscious, was a correct one; historically speaking.

As far as the legalization of the border in Kutch is concerned, it began as a diplomatic exchange, deteriorated into an armed conflict, and ended with a tribunal judgement on the determination of the border in the Gujarat-West Pakistan region. After the outbreak of hostilities in April 1965, both India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire and have the demarcation of
the boundary assessed and determined by an international tribunal. A three-member tribunal including representatives nominated by India and Pakistan as well as a member representing the United Nations oversaw the making of the boundary.

This chapter is based upon ethnography in the region of Banni in northern Kutch. Isolated from mainstream imagination for the longest time, the region is now a theatre of vibrant Gujarat campaign where the desert festival of Kutch is held. Banni is predominantly inhabited by pastoralist and artisan communities that are Muslims and Hindu Dalits. The Banni grassland, considered to be the finest in Asia, has held an enormous ecological significance. It witnessed through centuries the free movement of people and cattle for pastures until it became confined to the Indian state after the promulgation of the border which the inhabitants of Banni have a vague notion of. As far as they are concerned, a generation that had moved freely through the Rann of Kutch was rendered sedentary and Indian, while Pakistan had become an ‘enemy’ state. Their own relationship has been local in nature, with the villages of Sindh which they continue to visit, marry from, and feel an affiliation with. ‘We were almost forgotten by history. The British didn’t come here, the Maharao of Kutch left us alone. What did we have to do with these political events?’ (Kaladhar Mutwa, personal communication). What impinged upon them was the fact that Sindh was out of bounds – a different region, now in an enemy state. The closure of Sindh, followed by the non-ecological measures taken by the state discussed earlier, further reduced the Banni grassland to a dry and thorn-filled region, with shrinking possibilities of fodder. The legalization of the border also turned a lush common of the past into a closely surveilled border region. Today, one of the Indian Army’s elite Infantry Divisions undertakes constant vigil over the border deep inside the Rann of Kutch. Barbed-wire fencing, extensive enough to leave ‘no portion of the Indo-Pak border easy for intrusion’, protects the nation from its own history. The strengthening of Gujarat’s border with Pakistan takes the form of fencing and lighting, the building of roads, and continuous investment in recruiting security forces. It is justified on the grounds that after the sealing of borders in Punjab and Rajasthan, Gujarat presents the danger of intrusion from ‘outsiders’. Silence is maintained on the perception of fractured citizenships ‘inside’ the nation necessitating these anxieties of security.

The account that follows is constructed out of the visits that people of Banni make to Sindh, a natural corollary to the circularities of movements in Western India. Despite being legal, they acquire an illicit dimension in the logic of nation-states; especially given the perception of ‘border’ Muslims in Gujarat. I make two related arguments in this context: Seeking our assessment of such visits as a part of historic continuity driven by commonalities of language, occupation, and ethos over centuries; and also that contrary to their perception as ‘anti-nationalist’ movements, they are seen as validation of commonalities accompanied with, rather paradoxically, extensions of nationhood.

Standing on the vast cracked earth of the desert near Dordo in Banni, I had met a man called Virji Sodha. He was an engineer working at the Agrocel factory situated right next to Dhordo, which is also the last village at the border. As he came out on his motorcycle, I was introduced to him and informed that he had ‘recently’ migrated from Thar Parkar to Kutch. Although I did not have a chance to talk to him much, it reminded me of my meeting some Hindus from Thar Parkar in the city of Karachi in Pakistan. In the bustling Zainab Bazaar in Karachi, a series of fabric and garment shops are owned by Hindus from Thar Parkar. Over the years, there has been in this group, not unlike in Rajaram Lakhani, a restlessness to live in safer places, triggered first by Pakistan’s war with India in 1971, then other forms of lawlessness in subsequent years.

Movements such as these are framed by the argument of religion; of being Hindu in an Islamic nation, and therefore seeking asylum where Hinduism is a ‘natural’ religion. Similarly, movements by Muslims from India to Pakistan would satisfy the reverse logic, crudely speaking.
However, both situations ‘limit’ this phenomenon to the making of nations: India and Pakistan, in 1947. The moment of the modern nation-state also foregrounds the role of religion in these movements. The two are inseparable in our imagination now; however, both dimensions are recent and inadequate in assessing movements that go back centuries; circular flow through the desert and water, with cattle and camels, carrying traditions and swords, words, and songs. Rajaram’s extended narrative below also makes an appeal to this long-standing tradition:

When I first came to Khavda, I did not know anybody, although I had a sense that people from Sindh had been moving to Kutch. One day I was told that an old man in Banni needed immediate medical assistance. I rode on my bicycle, and this was my first visit to Banni. Believe me, if I were to take you to any of the villages in rural Sindh, it would be exactly like Banni. Anyway, I went to see this old man to treat him. He asked me questions on where I was from, which lane, which gulli, and it seems the man knew my entire family. Imagine what it must have felt like, to somehow escape the Punjabis of Pakistan, and come with such anxiety to Kutch, and find friends of your father and grandfather in this place, Banni.

(Rajaram Sodha, Personal communication)

Banni in the account above, and in this chapter, is an illustration of both meanings that must be attached with the border; the one that evokes the civilizational continuity by which Rajaram had found people who knew his ancestors, and the political one by which Banni finds itself in the bounded nation-state of India. It is against this background – where on one hand we see civilizational continuities formed through the movements by migrants, traders, pastoralists, or pilgrims; and also the discontinuities caused by the politico-modern border which makes the same movements appear as ‘cross-border’ ones – that I wish to situate the visits Banni people make to Sindh.

Banni to Badhin

Among the various kinds of documents issued by the governments, supposed to act as guarantees of belongingness, passports are the most elite (Das and Poole, 2004: 15). People in Banni very often struggle for documents that would allow them to access rations at a fair price, or get them jobs. Living amidst abysmally low levels of written literacy, and in a region that receives barely six newspapers, they are very often unaware of what they might be entitled to from the government. The state appears as a reality through the border security force, a form of surveillance they continue to live with for doing what should have been natural, talking to relatives and loved ones in Sindh. However, in the face of the many borders drawn around them, it is the passport that allows the people of Banni to experience citizenship and freedom. The discussion below provides an explanation of why Banni pastoralists visit Sindh when they have a choice, and simultaneously, why such visits remain a local subject, quiet, and subtextual. The narratives below capture the joy, poignancy, inventiveness, and ambivalent nationhoods mirrored in the visits made to Sindh, a region that they were suddenly severed from, but which has now reopened, albeit through the mechanics of visas and passports.

At the Bhuj railway station one morning, I waited thinking of which mode of transport to take to Banni. ‘Gaadi chhe, Ben, jauv hoye to,’ I was addressed. I saw a man in his twenties, in a tight yellow shirt and black trousers. A car was available, should I wish to hire it, he had said to me in Gujarati, the official language of Gujarat. ‘Jauv to chhe, Banni jauv chhe. Kutchi-Sindhi ache tawaan khe’. In my reply, my first sentence was in Gujarati, and then I took resort to familiar ambiguity.
by asking him whether he knew ‘Kutchi-Sindhi’, a convenient description for the moment. There is very little that separates Kutchi from Sindhi in terms of syntax and vocabulary, but people define themselves in Kutch by one or the other label, depending upon who they speak with and how they wish to be seen in that context. I remember Kaladhar Mutwa mentioning to me that if Kutchi writers exclude him because he is a ‘Sindhi’, he sees no reason why he should not use the label ‘Sindhi’ to mark his distinctness. If my cattle are Sindhi, my music is Sindhi, I suppose then my language is Sindhi, although I used to think it was something else, he laughed as he narrated this.

‘Bilkul, tawaan kithan ja aahiyo?’ My credentials had been established or at least enough to receive that reply in Sindhi. I sat in a large Qualis car with the driver, Salim Node, from a community found in Kutch as well as Sindh. The drive from Bhuj to Banni is long, and Salim had sufficient time to share with me his experience of visiting Ahmedabad – the city I come from – and other random pieces of his life. Upon asking whether he had any relatives in Sindh, Salim talked about his recent visit to Pakistan.

I wanted to go for many years, but you know it wasn’t possible. Then once I had enough money, not that you need much to go to Sindh, I requested my uncle in Karachi to co-ordinate my visit. My uncle is a superintendent of police in Karachi; in fact, you must tell me if you want to go there someday. I took the Khokhrapar train from Rajasthan to Hyderabad. There was of course the usual ‘formality’ by which everybody from India is questioned by the ISI in Pakistan. Even I had to go to the police station and answer some questions. I told them I am a zaahil ganwaar person (uneducated and rustic), I earn barely 40 rupees a day, and I don’t know how to even use a mobile phone (laughs). I had told them I don’t even go to Bhuj. I was not wearing pant and shirt, you see.

Salim asked me if I had visited Pakistan. He assured me that he would arrange for my visa next time since he knows someone called Zuber from the Pakistan Embassy. Salim was busy talking on the cell phone while in the Embassy and he was ticked off for the same by Zuber. He reminded Zuber that there was no notice saying that the use of cell phones was prohibited. If it did in Urdu, he couldn’t be blamed for not reading it, because he could have managed English, not Urdu! Thereafter, Salim and Zuber shared notes on some places they knew in common in Pakistan.

Salim then also mentioned how much lawlessness exists in Pakistan, and how even a child would be found carrying a gun. But that has nothing to do with India, he assured. When people blow up buildings here, we blame Pakistan for it, whereas Pakistan makes no accusations about India. They know that the Taliban blew up buildings in Karachi and Islamabad. Our people are more hypocritical, he said. Salim’s critique of the Indian nation-state then veered to his triumphs in other matters. Given his upward mobility, Salim had moved out of Banni, and lived in Anjar. He owns two SUVs. He was very keen on acting in films and said with confidence that I would be seeing him soon on the big screen. ‘I just need to go the Gulf now and earn mad money for a year’.

The car we were in had a small picture of the goddess Kali. When asked how he came to possess that, he revealed that he had bought his car from a kutter (staunch) VHP Hindu in Ahmedabad who in fact refused to sell his car to him on the grounds that ‘Mohammedan ne nathin vechvi’ (I don’t want to sell it to a Muslim). A friend of his bought it from the Hindu man and then gave it to Salim. The picture was already there, so he saw no harm in letting it remain in place. Perhaps it is a good business decision. In any case, he smirked, the number plate has the number 786!!
Salim Node is an entrepreneur, who is likely to have more cars in the future, or perhaps actually manage to go to the Gulf. His inventive and matter-of-fact way of dealing with suspicion between nations is characterized by the same chutzpah and inventiveness that he brings to the business. His manner of dealing with surveillance in Pakistan and customs in India is not any different from the communal prejudice he faces while buying a car from a Hindu in Ahmedabad. His religious identity as a Muslim evokes suspicion from a Hindu in Gujarat; while his national identity as an Indian does the same in Pakistan. Seeing both as matters of routine, and armed with equally irreverent humour for both situations, Salim goes through life without an overdue seriousness about either. All the same, Salim’s narrative would remain unheard or unknown in most contexts as he would have wanted to avoid the risk of being labelled as ‘anti-nationalist’ or ‘anti-Hindu’. It would have been buried under nations demanding performance of nationalist loyalties. On the other hand, Sadiq Halepota, a contemporary of Salim Node, continued to be guarded and circumspect, revealing all the same, the significance Sindh holds as an imaginary in Banni.

Sadiq Halepota is associated with a hotel in Banni, the first hotel in Banni formed through locally nominated committee members drawn from both the Muslim as well as the Meghwal communities. Like all men in Banni, and also the waiters in the hotel, Sadiq wears a shalwar and khamees, with an ajrakh scarf thrown over his shoulder, sporting thereby his Sindhi identity. The ajrakh is a block-printed material that has increasingly come to signify an overt symbol of ‘Sindhi identity’ in Pakistan as well as in India. Apart from this symbolic communication, it also helps promote Sham-e-Sarhad as an authentic expression of Banni. The Halepota community he belongs to claims to have been in Banni for at least 300 years. His family owns 50 cows, but he found it difficult to stay with pastoralism and now spends considerable time attending to different tourists visiting the hotel.

When I met Sadiq, he had just returned from a visit to Mirpurkhas, where he has relatives, by the Khokhrapar. This was his first trip, although his father had visited Sindh several times. He mentioned that his relatives in Sindh were the Waderos (feudal chiefs), which suggested that they would have been socially and perhaps even economically assured people. Sadiq himself comes over as an extremely efficient and poised young man, who shifts registers depending upon who his client in the hotel is. It was clear that by and large his clients were either people from Kutch, or more commonly, well-heeled Gujarati Hindus from cities such as Surat, Ahmedabad, and Baroda. With them, Sadiq speaks only in Gujarati, and in any case, he makes sure to serve only vegetarian Gujarati meals. I had asked Sadiq if there was any special difference between Banni and Sindh, and he replied, ‘Uha vadhika pure shai aahe’ – ‘That is more pure’; that, being an elliptical reference to Sindh. If Salim Node’s entrepreneurial approach to nations and religions had made him relate his experience with relish, Sadiq’s reality as an employee responsible to urban, boundary-conscious tourists as well as employees had made him particularly circumspect. Even as he related his experience, he communicated an unwillingness to spend too much time talking about it. However, his brevity had managed to convey the sense of similitude that Banni had continued to establish with Sindh. An older man from the same community, Hashim Halepota, on the other hand, talked of his relation to Sindh much more openly.

Hashim Halepota is in his 70s. A tall and impressive-looking man, Hashim Dada truly looks like an Afghan. Dressed in a printed lungi and kameez, with a patko thrown on his shoulder, he walked up to me at Hotel Sham-e-Sarhad one day. We talked about this, that, and the other – Sindhi folk songs, qafis, embroidery, and so on. He suggested strongly that I meet Dr Rajaram Lakhani in Khavda. Dr Lakhani had moved from Sindh to Kutch and had established a successful medical practice. ‘He is an educated person, you will get to know a lot from him’, he said. Although I have developed some wariness of ‘educated’ people that come with
recommendations, I went along with Hashim Dada because I liked him too much to refuse. The journey was also a ruse to be able to talk to him in a casual and un-self-conscious manner. On our way to Khavda, Dada Hashim showed me to the left a patch of the Rann, and pointing his finger he said, ‘We used to go from here on camels. We bought our groceries from Sindh. This was much closer to us than Bhuj is today.’ ‘But, Dada, in the years that you were unable to go to Sindh, and your relatives could not come here, how did you and your future generations sustain this relationship?’ I asked him. ‘What would you do if you had to live in America for some years? Would you forget your family? Would you not talk to your daughter about them, so that when she grows up she may want to see them? And this is not even the distance of India and America. It is more like Ahmedabad and Surat. What has also helped is that the Sindhi language survived, largely because of the Koran. When the border happened, it did not sink in properly. We kept thinking it was all ‘out there.’ In a matter of time, we would be able to go to Sindh again. Two or three decades went by, and we could not manage to head there. Some people tried to go, not believing that something had drastically changed. They got into trouble. So we sat quietly, keeping Sindh in our consciousness. Now the routes have opened up again, and I have been there twice in the past three years. Sindh has meethi zabaan, muhabbat, shaafaqat (sweet language, love and culture)’.

Unlike most people in Banni, Irfanbhai is a man about town. He belongs to the Mutwa community and is one of the most respected men in Banni. He spent some years in the Gulf trying to earn money when Banni’s ecology degenerated badly and pastoralism seemed less and less sustainable. Ever since he came back, Irfanbhai also explored other options of earning, and now runs a small business in Bhuj in addition to looking after his community and cattle at home. He represents Banni as a resource person and advises non-governmental organizations on issues of water. Irfanbhai visited Pakistan a couple of years into our acquaintanceship. He had been to Badin, Hyderabad, Karachi, Shah Begtai, and many other places in and around Thar Parkar. He had managed a visa through an agent, a man called Adam from the Koraara community. Irfanbhai said to me, ‘I thought I would stay for ten or fifteen days, but there were so many people from here who wanted me to visit their relatives – the Raysipotas, Halepotas, Jats – whoever came to know that I was going, asked me to convey regards to their relatives. Most of the people are in district Badin’. It used to mystify me how even the generations born and brought up in Banni, continued to be moved by the idea of ancestry ‘back’ in Sindh, and what made these connections so alive and meaningful even today. ‘Well, people write to each other, now there are mobile phones’. Superseding the technological forms is also the most primal method of keeping the connection alive, for as Irfanbhai says, ‘There are stories passed from one generation to another; you meet somebody whose grandfather knew our grandfather … There was a wave of travelling to Sindh all the way up until the 1960s, so connections continued. There was only a period of forty years when things were difficult. But now once again the connection is kept alive by going there, and phoning. Achvan vanyan chaalu aahe (The comings and goings have not stopped). Confirming this, Moosa Jat mentions, ‘About 100 people from my village have gone to Sindh’. This little boy, pointing to his ten-year-old son, has also been there. ‘It’s very easy to get a visa. We have as many relatives there as here’, he says.

It may be worth asking whether the movements of the kind described, the silences notwithstanding, destabilize the apparently ‘secure’ and ‘seamless’ relations between nations and identities, or throw light on ‘anomalies’ of citizenship (Zamindar, 2008). Complex and inconsistent experiences characterize the answer to this question. The process of going to Sindh, negotiating surveillance and customs, makes the travellers of Banni feel unduly noticed and targeted, and draws attention to their being Muslims, and how citizenship in the Indian nation-state does not extend to their being trusted. This disaffection and sadness is as true as their feeling a sense
of relief on seeing Sindh and its impoverished condition; that they live in better circumstances. Going to Sindh validates in the travellers from Banni a sense of continuity and similitude, acceptance, and validation, but conditions in Sindh often evoke among them relief and pride at being in India. Irfanbhai Mutwa mentions that ‘Sindh is our asli shaqat, the source of our culture, and we have tried our best to preserve that here. Par hee salamati jo desh haa (This is a safe country though). We have real independence here. There’s so much crime, robbery, and kidnapping there. Even children carry weapons. It is so easy to get revolvers even without a licence. We had gone to attend a wedding, but something happened, and the poor artists had to worry about their lives than sing!’

Niyamat Pathan, who has not been able to go herself mentions, ‘I am told that Sindhis are worse off in Pakistan. At least we are living quietly in Banni, nobody is bothering us. Hee ta aazad mulk ahe (‘This is a free country’). But in Pakistan, women go to doctors with their faces fully covered, and show their arms when their necks are paining! That one is a crazy country’. Also, she added ‘villages in Sindh are also not very developed. People from Banni come back with feeling good that at least we have light, we have law. People going from here feel Sindh is fifty years behind even Banni, so you can imagine how backward it must be!’

The nostalgia for Sindh in Banni, it therefore appears, is very often for the idea, not the physical territory. As Moosa Jat put it, ‘You know it is completely destroyed. The agriculturalists are miserable; there is no safety for men and women. There is no question of your living there. But it is like a long-lost friend:

Sikka yaar jee sade mukhe kape ain kore  
Jiyan sonaro sona khe take ain tore.

I long for my friend, his memory pokes and pierces me
Like the goldsmith’s saw tearing and testing the gold.

The imaginary of ‘Sindh’ in Banni is thus created, transmitted, and sustained through several modes of communication, of which these narratives provide one. Although the physical movements (made largely by the men) are legal, they have come to constitute an ‘illicit’ nature reflected in the responses they evoke from state representatives and also (rather, leading to) the silences that usually surround the subject of going to Sindh, which we see above. A study carried out in Gujarat mentions that ‘on the border of Kutch is such a population which has family, business, and religious ties with Sindh (Pakistan). This makes it easy for infiltration, and it becomes difficult to identify infiltrators for months’ (Patel and Pandya, 1986: 9–10). The document by Pandya and Patel cited above, recommends that inhabitants of border regions must be counted, provided with identity cards, subjected to night curfews and border policing, and their movements covered in newspapers, to control the possibility of any illegal activities in the region (1986: 43). Such mechanisms of control and discipline evoke considerable resentment, and sometimes humour in Banni. Moosa Jat says, ‘We have all the disadvantages of the border. Constant questioning, where did you go, why did you go? Despite being so close to Sindh, we spend immense amounts of money to go there. It is sad, being a Muslim in this region. A long-bearded maulvi, going merely to Delhi, gets roughed up’. Manzur Mutwa, on the other hand, sees the presence of the Border Security Force as a part of everyday life, and their questioning routine. ‘You know, they have to show that they are doing some work, writing reports, keeping an eye on us … they know and we know that nothing is happening here. The moment we receive any written document from Sindh, they become particularly suspicious. People in the Customs department simply do not allow it to come here. I had asked a friend to bring me the
complete collection of the Risalo, Shah Abdul Latif’s poetry. The Customs simply confiscated it’. Movements of objects, people, animals and the fear of a ‘Muslim language’ in a Perso-Arabic script, incomprehensible, but signalling ‘trouble’ – all of this adds up to the ways by which the state ‘sees’ mobility and aims to control it.4

The discussion above has helped invoke many, and not often, consistent meanings of the border in Banni. Attached with the cartographic anxieties of the state, cushioned with the negative perceptions of those who live next to it but also negotiated through language and memory, the border and its many meanings help us see Banni in both, past and present, its continued circularities of the western region, and suspicion around them today. We see the dual process of the border as a site of control, but also how it gets wrenched out of stasis and is made dynamic through narratives of movements to Sindh.

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Notes


3 ‘786’ is the numerical expression for the Arabic ‘Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim’ (‘In the name of God, most Gracious, most Compassionate’) used by Muslims in India and Pakistan.

4 Given the sensitive nature of this subject, I have quoted the following (Irfan Mutwa, Manzur Mutwa, Sadiq Halepota, Moosa Jat) without using their real names.

References

