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**Marginal lives, peripheral practices: a study of border narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border**

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**MARGINAL LIVES, PERIPHERAL  
PRACTICES: A STUDY OF BORDER  
NARRATIVES ALONG THE  
WEST BENGAL-BANGLADESH BORDER**

**DEBDATTA CHOWDHURY**

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requirements of the  
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## Abstract

The sovereign power of the state is in its most manifest form at its borders, embodied in the border guards, surveillance mechanisms and border regulations. But the negotiations between the border civilians and the state apparatuses are as integral to the understanding of the border milieu as are the state apparatuses themselves. This thesis looks at some aspects of border narratives with reference to the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, which has its genesis in the partition of Bengal in 1947. Secondary sources have been used in framing the research agendas, and field studies conducted in the border areas of West Bengal and Bangladesh have provided the evidence for the arguments made.

### Thesis:

There are two parts to this thesis:

The first part emphasises that a study of the various strands of border narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, represented here mostly through personal experience-centred narratives of border dwellers, hint towards the existence (and continuous evolution) of a unique spatial consciousness, that has been termed here as a **'border consciousness'**. The various socio-cultural and economic practices which the border people along the said border, including the civilians and the border guards devise over the years, crystallise into a consciousness, made unique by the specificity of the spatial status of borderland. Such practices and narratives include unique forms of interaction, co-operation and even enmity between the civilians (of diverse socio-economic backgrounds), border guards, administrative officials and police on either side of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border as well as across the borderline. The practices gain significance because of their spatial vulnerability and sensitivity of being an international border between India and Bangladesh. The involvement of the border guards on both sides, as representatives of the states, in the border narratives and consequently the border consciousness, makes for a very interesting study of borderland psyche along this border.

The second part emphasises that border consciousness along the said border is characterised by a **re-interpretation of statist agendas** of both India and Bangladesh, of sanctifying their borders, reinterpreting and **reproducing the border space**, in the process. The border people devise alternative access to certain basic resources which might not be available to them otherwise, given the underdeveloped state of being of this borderland area. In doing so, they often question the sovereignty of the state and the premise for the creation of the border, in the first place. Border narratives along this border, thus, question the active user-passive victim roles of the states and the civilians, respectively.

The research takes up four strands of narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border to argue that socio-political and economic narratives (also seen elsewhere in non-border areas but which attain a new perspective in this borderland area) converge at the borders and eventually crystallise into a larger spatial narrative of the borderland. Livelihood, Enclave, Caste and Gender forms the four strands of narratives which have been chosen to support the argument.

The main contributions of this thesis towards knowledge are:

- Its stress on the territorial predicament of the states in a globalised world, and emphasising the fact that border narratives often question the discourses on borderlessness by highlighting the increasing significance which borders around the world are attaining.
- Its emphasis on the need to consider ‘border psyche’ in understanding borderlands and the everyday practices of borderlanders, which are spontaneous and rudimentary in nature, and at the same time, questions statist discourses on state/nation, citizenship/infiltrator, inclusion/exclusion, religious affiliation etc.

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Most of the photographs reproduced in this dissertation are mine, and therefore they appear without acknowledgement. For the others, their sources are duly mentioned. In cases where I have not been able to locate the exact source, copyright holders are welcome to contact me.

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## Introduction

The effects of the partition of India in 1947 have been way more far-reaching and complex than the existing partition narratives of violence and separation reveal. The immediacy of the movement of refugees between India and the newly-formed state of Pakistan overshadowed, for the time being, the actual effect of the drawing of the border between the two states. As communal violence and refugee exodus subsided after 1947, the ground reality of the creation of the border started revealing itself. Partition affected almost everyone in India and Pakistan, directly or indirectly, although the effect was most strongly felt in the provinces of Punjab and Bengal, which underwent the cartographic partition. West Pakistan was carved out of Punjab and East Pakistan was carved out of Bengal. For the people who were settled and rehabilitated in the mainland territories of India and Pakistan, i.e. those not in close proximity to the newly-created border, the effect of partition gradually began subsiding as they went about resettling their lives and livelihoods. However, for the people whose lives, homes and livelihoods were directly affected by the creation of the border, a new struggle began. The effect of partition did not remotely subside for the people who now found themselves along the newly-created border, by fate or by choice. Partition literature (both non-fiction and fiction)<sup>1</sup> ended with the ‘creation’ of

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<sup>1</sup> Following are some of the more important non-fictional and fictional works on the partition of India, and specifically Bengal: Non-Fiction— Samaddar, R. (ed.). (1997) *Reflections on Partition in the East*. Delhi: Vikas Publishing House; Butalia, U. (1998) *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. New Delhi, London: Penguin; Kaul, S. (ed.). (2001) *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Divisions of India*. Delhi: Permanent Black; Chatterji, J. (1994) *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Menon, R. and Bhasin, K. (1998) *Borders and Boundaries. Women in India's Partition*. New Delhi: Kali for Women; Chatterji, J. (February 1999) The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52. *Modern Asian Studies*. 33(1). pp. 185-242; Talbot, I. and Singh, G. (eds.). (1999) *Region and Partition: Bengal, Punjab and the Partition of the Subcontinent*. Karachi: Oxford University Press; Fraser, B. (2006) *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*. (trs. Sheila Sen Gupta). London: Anthem; Pandey, G. (2001) *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Ahmed, I. (ed.). (2002) *Memories of a Genocidal Partition: The Haunting Tales of Victims, Witnesses and Perpetrators*. Colombo: Regional Centre for Strategic Studies; Chatterji, J. (2007) *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Fiction— Zaman, N. (1999) *A Divided Legacy: The Partition in Selected Novels of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press Limited; Bandyopadhyay, A. (1971) *Nilkantha Pakhir Khonje*. Calcutta: Karuna Prakashan; Ganguli, S. (1988) *Purba Pashchim*. Calcutta: Ananda Publishers; Sengupta, M. (2003)

the Bengal border but rarely, if at all, ventured into discussing the border as a space where socio-cultural and spatial identities continued to be made and unmade.

In this regard, this thesis aims to look at the lives and narratives of the people living along the India-Pakistan border, with specific focus on the West Bengal-East Pakistan border, later the Bangladesh border from 1971, in order to analyse how border identities are made, unmade and remade.

## I. Creation of the West Bengal-East Pakistan Border

The basis for the creation of the West Bengal-East Pakistan border was faulty from its inception. The drawing of the border was far from a ‘clean-cut vivisection’<sup>2</sup> of a territory, ‘executed with clinical precision’.<sup>3</sup> The Chairman of the Boundary Commissions and the author of the Boundary Awards, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, was a complete outsider when it came to knowledge about India and its administration. He had no prior experience in adjudicating disputes such as the ones leading to the partition and no knowledge of the settlements in the areas to be partitioned. It was no surprise then that Radcliffe’s drawing of the border on the maps was flawed.

Moreover, the basis of the partition, as revealed from partition votes obtained from the Bengal Legislative Assembly, seemed to bend more towards territorial considerations rather than communal aspirations, contrary to the general idea that the partition was executed on a communal basis.<sup>4</sup> The Bengal Legislative Assembly divided itself into two parts—one consisting of the representatives of Muslim-majority districts and the other consisting of representatives of Hindu-majority districts. The two units met at the Bengal Legislative Assembly on 20 June 1947 to indicate their views on partition. Neither of the units, though, had any knowledge of the actual plan of the Boundary Commission nor to which state their constituencies would eventually belong when the Award was finally made.<sup>5</sup> From the very beginning, territorial considerations gained stronger favour with the units rather than

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*Bishadbriksha*. Kolkata: Subarnarekha; Sikdar, S. (2008) *Dayamayeer Katha*. Kolkata: Gangchil.

<sup>2</sup> Chatterji, 1999, p.186.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp.188-189.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.189.

the communal right to self-determination, as Joya Chatterji rightly points out.<sup>6</sup> This explains the meeting between the representatives of Hindu and Muslim-majority districts rather than Hindu and Muslim members ‘to determine their collective communal will on what was, in its primary form, a communal question’.<sup>7</sup> While communal autonomy might still be achieved within a single state, i.e. without territorial separation per se, the principle of territorial autonomy demands a sovereign, bounded space which, in the case of Bengal, could only be achieved through territorial separation.<sup>8</sup>

The self-interest and bias of the political parties involved in the partition plan, namely the Congress and the Muslim League, also played significant roles in the formation of the Boundary Commissions and, hence, the final execution of the boundary plan. This was coupled with the influence of Lord Mountbatten (the then Viceroy of India) on Radcliffe in the drawing of the boundary. The immediacy of the need to finalise the boundary was stressed by Jawaharlal Nehru, member of the Indian Constituent Assembly and Prime Minister-designate, on the premise that once the Boundary Awards were finalised, India and Pakistan would sort out the rest of the disputes themselves and come to a mutually satisfactory agreement. Hence, Nehru emphasised on a make-shift border for the purpose of a quick transfer of power.<sup>9</sup> Along with the ‘contiguity of majority areas of Muslims and Hindus’, another index called the ‘other factors’ was also taken into account in demarcating the boundary.<sup>10</sup> The fact that ‘other factors’, however much vaguely defined, played a crucial and far-reaching role in the creation of the border has been amply proved, as will be evident from subsequent chapters. Short-term gains conceived by the political parties and a rushed execution of the transfer of power by the Viceroy resulted in a territorial fabric which would have long-term effects way beyond the conception and life span of its creators.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.190; Jinnah’s two-nation theory, in fact, was not a territorial concept but a demand for parity between Hindu and Muslim representation in the soon-to-be-formed government of independent India. Jalal, A. (1985) *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Chatterji, 1999, pp.191-193.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

The fact that the Boundary Commissioners were judges and the Chairman a lawyer created an impression that the Boundary Award was a matter involving ‘legal expertise, resting on judicial rationality’<sup>11</sup> and that the ‘rulings met the technical requirements of legal justice’.<sup>12</sup> But, as some studies of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border have shown and later chapters will reveal, socio-cultural, political and economic factors have had an overwhelming effect on the creation and evolution of the border. Such effects challenge and call into question the legal basis of the creation of the border.

That ‘territory’ was the most crucial factor underlying the demands of the various political parties in the partition plan has been proved by their conflicting claims over territory. Each party had its own reasons and interests in demanding the maximum area of Bengal to accommodate a religious majority, including the refugees (refugee exodus had already started by 1946 following the Noakhali riots),<sup>13</sup> and to ensure the latter’s economic requirements, even if that meant laying claims over some of the other religious-majority areas. The decisive political figures behind the creation of the border had realised that the Radcliffe line would not simply ‘demarcate the boundaries between two nations’,<sup>14</sup> but would also ‘shape the very contours of control and influence in the divided successor states’.<sup>15</sup> They had no doubts about the fact that ‘the shape of the border would have implications for the future of their respective parties’.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the choice and claim over space required careful consideration. Territory, thus, played a central role in the vision of the new states to be created.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.197.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> The Noakhali Riot was a communal riot that broke out in the Noakhali district of the Chittagong division of the eastern part of Bengal in October 1946 following the decision to partition Bengal on religious grounds. The then undivided district of Noakhali, with 80.57% of Muslims and 19.31% of Hindus, became the hotbed for a communal breakout, where Hindu lives and properties came under attack from the Muslims, and included forceful conversions of Hindus to Islam. Mohandas K. Gandhi camped in Noakhali and toured the district for four months in an effort to restore peace, though with little positive outcome. A majority of the survivors of the riot migrated to West Bengal, Tripura and Assam.

<sup>14</sup> Chatterji, 1999, p.212.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp.199-202.

Eventually, the Radcliffe line created two states where the ratio of the majority to the minority population was almost exactly the same. *Thanas* (police stations) were taken as the unit for partitioning. The Muslim-majority districts of Murshidabad and Nadia went to West Bengal, while Hindu-majority Khulna went to Pakistan. ‘The Award placed 71% of the Muslim population in East Bengal (East Pakistan) and 70.8% of the Hindu population in West Bengal’.<sup>18</sup> Though the Boundary Award was generally accepted without much discontent, some of the Hindu and Muslim areas (especially in Murshidabad, Nadia and Khulna) were disgruntled because of their inclusion in the wrong side of the border and for being ‘shut out of their promised land’.<sup>19</sup> The most affected were the people who ended up near the borderline, since the chances of their incorporation into the other state were the highest.



Figure 1. Map of the India-Bangladesh border. Source: Maps of India, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp.215-216.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp.217-219.



## II. Complex Nature of the West Bengal-Bangladesh Border

As noted earlier, the border was, from the very beginning, vaguely demarcated as it was based on outdated maps of *thana* and district boundaries. Moreover it ran over rivers and agricultural land which were difficult to demarcate clearly except for an imaginary line. The rivers specifically posed a major problem for the border because of the seasonal nature of some of them, implying a drying-up during winter and flooding during the monsoon with disastrous effects on the demarcation as well as the security of the border. Moreover, these rivers often changed (and still do) their course, resulting in perennial confusion over disappearing and reappearing lands (*Chars*)<sup>20</sup> along the borderline. In the event of disputes over territories, the resolution would have to depend completely on the goodwill and co-operation of the concerned states. Confusion regarding the borderline was enhanced because of the contradictions between the *thana* maps and the settlement maps, on which the demarcation was based.<sup>21</sup> None of the political parties or commissioners thought it necessary to survey the land before drawing up the final borderline. It is, thus, no surprise that the border that was finally created was full of flaws and inaccuracies, the price for which has been paid ever since by the people who live along the line.

It is easy to imagine what the outcome of such a hastily-created border pushed by narrow self-interests and planned without prior ground-knowledge might have been. The Bengal landscape, therefore, saw the border running right through the homes, hearths and lands of the rural communities, separating people from their families and livelihoods, and the towns from their hinterlands. The border, as Chatterji puts it, ‘ruptured agrarian communities all along its lengths’.<sup>22</sup> The border also had

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<sup>20</sup> *Char* is the Bengali term used for a strip of land which appears on the riverbed when the river changes course. The *Chars* along the riverine borders gain strategic importance due to their location on the border and, hence, become reasons for dispute between the states on both sides of the border who claim control over the *Char*. Dispute over *Chars* became a perennial source of dispute between India and Pakistan given the formation of new *chars* every year due to the changing course and flooding of the rivers. The idea of treating the *Chars* as ‘no-man’s land’ did not work out well for either of the states given that these often housed entire villages who had lost lands to river erosion and had, thus, re-settled on the *chars* when they happened to appear mid-river. A lot of such *chars* had actually to pay the price for being located along the borderline, when its people had to prove their allegiance to either India or Pakistan as the situation demanded. A lot of the *char* residents lost their lives to cross-border firing between the border guards and the police.

<sup>21</sup> Chatterji, 1999, pp.220-222.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.226.

disastrous consequences for peasant movements like *Tebhaga*<sup>23</sup>, cutting off *jotedars*<sup>24</sup> from the sharecroppers.<sup>25</sup> Traditional kin and associate links and economic ties were disrupted, and illegalised, and traditional practices criminalised by the creation of the international border. The communication system was heavily jeopardised and public institutions, like administrative headquarters, hospitals and courts, were cut off from the suburbs.<sup>26</sup>

The Bengal border became all the more complex in nature due to the official intention of the Nehru government to keep it porous, and the regulations regarding property evacuation and compensation flexible. While this flexibility and porosity remained merely on paper for those migrants who settled in places far away from the border, it meant physical attempts for those settled near the border, as they tried to access and exercise their control over their property that was left behind on the other side.<sup>27</sup> This implied that even after years of the partition and the creation of the border, the cross-border movement of people and goods was a fact, and an officially recognised one at that.<sup>28</sup> Yet such government policies failed to have the desired effect of a peaceful border obtained through porosity due to the interpretations of the border by the border police and militias. In their zeal to protect the religious majorities and control the borders, the border police violated the official policies of porous borders and physically abused (and even killed) the border crossers.<sup>29</sup> This was the root of an uncomfortable relation between the state, on the one hand, represented through the government policies and the border police (border guards

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<sup>23</sup> The *Tebhaga* movement was a militant campaign of the peasants (mainly tenants or sharecroppers) led by the Kishan Sabha (peasant front of the Communist Party of India) in Bengal in 1946, where the peasants demanded that only one-third (*Tebhaga*) of the harvest be given to the landlord as his share instead of the existing rule of giving half the produce. In many areas, the movement became violent, forcing the *zamindars* to flee their villages. For detailed knowledge of *Tebhaga*, see Chattopadhyay, K. (1986) *Tebhaga Andolaner Itihas*. Kolkata: Progressive Publishers.

<sup>24</sup> *Jotedars* were the tenants of the revenue-collecting *zamindars* and *taluqdars* in Bengal, who owned sizeable portions of village lands and cultivated their broad acres with the help of sharecroppers, tenants-at-will and hired labourers. Ray, R.K. and Ray, R. (1975) *Zamindars and Jotedars: a study of Rural Politics in Bengal*. *Modern Asian Studies*. 9(1). p. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Chatterji, 1999, p.226.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.230.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.232-233.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.232.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.233.

created for the purpose), and the border civilians, on the other, that continues till date in modified versions all along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

By the time porosity threatened India and Bangladesh with security concerns and the states took steps to stop cross-border movements, the latter had become commonplace and integral to the lives of the border people on both sides of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. Stringent border rules failed to stop such well-networked movements; it simply tagged such movements as illegal and criminalised the participants.

The newly-created West Bengal-Pakistan (Bangladesh) border changed the lives, livelihoods, economies and politics of the people it directly involved itself with. ‘Village politics that had, so far, revolved around the caste councils, union boards and tenancy disputes, now began to be the site where citizenship and patriotic duty were propagated, where ideological battles between nations were fought.’<sup>30</sup>

The West Bengal-Bangladesh border can, thus, be viewed as an example of what Oscar Martinez terms an interdependent borderland—characterised by symbiotic links between societies on both sides of the border, resulting in a considerable flow of economic and human resources across it.<sup>31</sup>

It is in this context of the links between border societies that the following chapters aim to analyse certain aspects of the negotiations between the civilians themselves and between the civilians and the border guards along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. The need to understand patterns of such negotiation in a complex border like the Bengal border not only enlightens one on the uniqueness of state-building ideologies in South Asia but also contributes in a large way to the genre of border studies in general in a global context.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.241.

<sup>31</sup> Besides the model of *interdependent borderlands*, the other three models of borderlands suggested by Martinez are *alienated borderlands*: where animosity between the two sides of the border prevents any kind of cross-border interchange; *coexistent borderlands*: where despite unfriendly relations, a minimum cross-border exchange exists and *integrated borderlands*: where all barriers to movement of economic and human resources have been abolished. Martinez, O. (1994) *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. pp.5-10.



*Plate 1.* The ‘zero point’ cuts through this pond. The right bank belongs to Bangladesh and the left to India, 2011.

### III. Features of the West Bengal-Bangladesh Border

#### i. Topography

The stretch of Bengal (including West Bengal and Bangladesh) through which the border passes can be broadly categorised into plain land and riverine, with no natural obstacles. It is heavily populated and cultivated ‘till the last inch of the border’.<sup>32</sup> The boundary line, in most places, is marked by border pillars. The riverine borders are of specific concern to the border guards because of the difficulty in marking the border through the rivers. Borders, in the case of rivers, are merely imaginary lines perceived as equidistant from the banks on both sides. Moreover, the changing course and flooding of the rivers also pose a challenge to border management due to

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<sup>32</sup> Jamwal, N.S. (January-March 2004) Border Management: Dilemma of guarding the India-Bangladesh border. *Strategic Analysis*. 28(1). p. 8.

the disappearing of border lands and the reappearing of *chars* in the midst of the rivers. *Chars* are strategic locations both for control of the border by border guards on both sides, as well as for the cross-border smugglers and infiltrators who use the ambiguous location of the *chars* to operate in.<sup>33</sup> Border rivers have, perpetually, been a cause of concern and dispute between India and Bangladesh over their sharing of waters, building of dams and maintenance of navigability. Disputes over the Farakka Barrage and the sharing of the water of the river Tista are examples of such disputes between India and Bangladesh.<sup>34</sup>

## ii. Habitation

The entire stretch of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border is densely populated.<sup>35</sup> Hence, the border passes through residential areas, cutting through houses and plots of lands. The profile of the people on both sides of the border is largely similar in terms of ethnic origin (Bengali), physical characteristics, language (*Bangla*) and culture.

## iii. Livelihood

Given the vast stretch of farmlands along the border, it is easy to understand the predominance of agriculture and agriculture-related occupations along it. Fishing constitutes the next prominent livelihood activity due to the presence of rivers in the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Roy, A. (6 May 2012) Bangladesher arthamantri ke shangey niyei Dhakaye Pranab. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1120506/6bdesh2.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013]; Staff Reporter (9 May 2012) Tista o Chhitmahal chukti niye fer chap dilen Dipu. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/9bdesh3.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013]; Staff Reporter (10 May 2012) Farakkar gate bodol. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1120510/10mur4.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>35</sup> The population density of West Bengal is 1029 per sq.kms. according to the Census of 2011. The population densities for the border districts according to their ranks in descending order are as follows: North 24 Parganas- 2463, Murshidabad-1334, Nadia-1316, Maldah-1071, North Dinajpur-956, Cooch Behar-833, South 24 Parganas-819, South Dinajpur-753, Jalpaiguri-621, Darjeeling-585. *Census of India 2011*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. According to the 2011 Census, the population density of Bangladesh is an average of 964, with the density in its border districts (with West Bengal) as follows: Kushtia-1207, Nilphamari-1162, Rajshahi-1069, Jessore-1068, Lalmonirhat-1006, Chapai Nawabganj-960, Chuadanga-954, Joypurhat-942, Meherpur-910, Jhenaidah-895, Kurigram-893, Dinajpur-864, Thakurgaon-762, Naogaon-750, Panchagarh-696, Satkhira-511. *Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics*, Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

region. Cottage industries like *beedi*-manufacture,<sup>36</sup> handicrafts and gardening also contribute towards the economy of the border area, as do small-scale industries like brick-kilns, rice-mills and jute-mills. The border itself has created a vast range of livelihood opportunities for the people, including the camps of the border guards, border Land Ports (LP) as well as illegal trade. The currency of West Bengal is Indian Rupees (Rs.) and that of Bangladesh is the Bangladesh Taka (Tk.), though that does not hamper cross-border transactions (especially the illegal ones) in any way.

#### iv. Local governance

West Bengal has its own Legislative Assembly (*Bidhan Sabha*) where the various constituencies are represented through elected ministers (MLAs) and are represented, in turn, in the House of the People (*Lok Sabha*) of the Parliament of India (*Sansad*) through elected ministers (MPs). The districts of West Bengal also have their local three-tier governance system, consisting of the *Gram Panchayat* (at village level), the *Panchayat Samiti* (group of *Gram Panchayats*) and the *Zilla Parishad* (group of *Panchayat Samities*). There is a local governance system at the village, block and district levels of West Bengal consisting of elected representatives from the respective villages.

The districts of Bangladesh are represented by their elected ministers (MPs) from respective constituencies in the Parliament of Bangladesh (*Jatiyo Sansad Bhavan*). The districts also have their own local governments (*Union Parishad*) consisting of nine wards (1 village is considered a single ward), each ward containing a chairman and twelve members. The number of wards in a district depends on its size.

#### v. Border guards

The origin of border guards along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border can be traced to the initiative of the Pakistani government to build a non-official military

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<sup>36</sup> *Beedi* is a thin, Indian cigarette filled with tobacco flake, and wrapped in a *tendu* leaf tied with a string at one end. It is widely popular in South Asia and parts of the Middle East—the cheap price being one of the major reasons for its popularity. *Beedi* consumption outpaces that of conventional cigarettes, though they are more harmful than the latter. Due to restrictions on factory-regulations, *beedi* production over the years became a cottage-industry with home-based women workforce predominantly employed in *beedi* rolling, while males continue to be employed in all aspects of *beedi* production.

organisation called the *Ansar Bahini* in February 1948 for the purpose of guarding its borders with India,<sup>37</sup> though a separate paramilitary force was also formed out of the existing Eastern Frontier Rifles (EFR: formed under the colonial administration in 1920) and was renamed East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) in 1947 following the partition. After the creation of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971, the EPR was renamed Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). Following a coup in February 2009, the BDR underwent organizational changes and was renamed Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB). The BGB is under the administrative control of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. The BGB has its Central Headquarters in Pilkhana, Dhaka, besides its North Eastern (Sarail), North Western (Rangpur), South Eastern (Khagrachari) and South Western (Jessore) Regional Headquarters.

West Bengal also created its own semi-military frontier corps in March 1948 called the *Jatiya Rakshi Dal* (Bengal National Protection Brigade) formed of volunteers from the six border districts of Jalpaiguri, West Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia and 24 Parganas. This force was administered in each district by the Magistrate, Superintendent of Police, the president of the District Congress Committee and the local Assembly Member.<sup>38</sup> Following the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965, the Border Security Force (BSF) was officially created as a part of the Central Armed Police Forces for the purpose of guarding its international borders. The BSF is under the administrative control of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. The BSF has its Force Headquarters at New Delhi, its Western Theatre Headquarters at Chandigarh, and its Eastern Theatre Headquarters at Kolkata. The Eastern Theatre Headquarters includes North Bengal, South Bengal and Malda Frontier of West Bengal (besides other frontiers in Assam, Tripura and Mizoram).

Both the BSF and the BGB have their respective Border Outposts (BOP) along the border. There are approximately 725 BSF BOPs (located at a distance of approximately 2-3 kilometres from each other) and 650 BGB BOPs<sup>39</sup> (located at a distance of approximately 5-6 kilometres from each other) along the 4096.7 kilometres long border between India and Bangladesh of which more than half the

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<sup>37</sup> Chatterji, 1999, p.236.

<sup>38</sup> Chatterji, 1999, p.238.

<sup>39</sup> Jamwal, 2004, p.9.

BSF BOPs are along the 2216.7 kilometres long border between West Bengal and Bangladesh.<sup>40</sup>

The exchange of fire between the BSF and BGB is a common occurrence along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, especially over issues of infiltration and attacks by miscreants of the neighbouring state.<sup>41</sup> However, the BSF and BGB also meet at the border to discuss issues related to infiltration, smuggling or any other border-related incident that might be resolved between the border guards of the two states, without resorting to violence. Such meetings are called Flag Meetings<sup>42</sup> in official parlance. These meetings are usually held at a particular place on the land between the zero point (borderline) and India's border fence, which in official terms is known as No-Man's Land. Flag-bearing troupes of the border guards, led by the Company Commanders of the concerned outposts, meet to discuss the issues at hand. Meetings are also held in mid-river in riverine border areas where the BSF and BGB meet in the middle of the river at an equidistant location from both the banks on official speed boats which carry the flags of both states.

vi. Border fence, border roads and floodlights

The Ground Rules formulated by the Military Sub-Committee of the Indian and Pakistan delegations on 20 October 1959 stipulated that: After an identifiable boundary line whether real or working has been demarcated, neither side will have any permanent or temporary border security forces or any other armed personnel within 150 yards on either side of this line. Also no permanent posts will be constructed till the final demarcation has been done....If defensive works of any nature including trenches exist in the stretch of 300 yards (150 yards on each side of

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<sup>40</sup> 96 new BSF BOPs are being constructed besides the existing 230 BOPs in the South Bengal Frontier (to make a total of 326 BOPs), while 127 new BSF BOPs are being built besides the existing 180 BOPs in North Bengal Frontier (to make a total of 307 BOPs). The work is to be completed by 2013-14.

<sup>41</sup> Staff Reporter (30 October 2009) BSF-BDR guli binimoy. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1091030/30south11.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>42</sup> Staff Reporter (3 November 2009) Simantarakshi der flag meeting Raninagar e. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1091103/3mur6.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].



the working boundary) they must be destroyed or filled up.<sup>43</sup> These Ground Rules were confirmed in the Joint India-Bangladesh Agreement for Border Authorities of the Two Countries in 1975.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, India planned and began executing the construction of a border fence (on grounds of preventing infiltration) and a border road at a distance of 150 yards (137 metre) from the 'zero point' (actual borderline), which left substantial areas of Indian farmland and homesteads (about 450 villages)<sup>45</sup> outside the fence.<sup>46</sup> These lands and houses can be accessed through gates constructed along the border fence guarded by BSF guards, on presenting identity cards at the check-posts. Whenever a person needs to cross the gates either for cultivating his land outside the fence or for moving in and out of his house across it, he needs to submit/present his identity card (Voter Cards, in most instances) to the guards or the commander at the check-post near the gate.

Bangladesh, on the other hand, objected to the construction of fences within 150 yards from the International Border (IB) on the pretext that fencing and border roads violated the guidelines of the Ground Rules.<sup>47</sup> Hence, Bangladesh neither has border fence nor border roads.

Till 2012, 1222 kilometres of fencing of the sanctioned 1528 kilometres had already been completed<sup>48</sup>; of the 1770 kilometres of border road sanctioned in West Bengal, 1616.57 kilometres had been constructed<sup>49</sup>; of the sanctioned 2840 kilometres of sanctioned flood lighting along the India-Bangladesh border road, 775 kilometres

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<sup>43</sup> Bhasin, A.S. (ed.). (2003) *India-Bangladesh Relations: Documents, 1971-2002*. Volume 5. New Delhi: Geetika Publishers. p. 2738.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp.1902-1907.

<sup>45</sup> Van Schendel, W. (2005) *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem. p.213.

<sup>46</sup> Jamwal, 2004, p.30.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.; Agreed Minutes of the 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Working Group (JWG), Dhaka, October 20 1997. In Bhasin, A.S. (ed.). (2003) *India-Bangladesh Relations: Documents, 1971-2002*. Volume 1. New Delhi: Geetika Publishers. p.446.

<sup>48</sup> Out of the total 3436.59 kilometres of sanctioned fencing in India (including West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram), 2760.12 kilometres had been completed by 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Out of a total 4426.11 kilometres of border roads sanctioned in India (including West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram), 3605.20 kilometres had been constructed by 2012.

had been completed (including 277 kilometres of flood lighting along West Bengal-Bangladesh border), while another 750 kilometres was in progress.<sup>50</sup>

vii. Border zones

The definitions of the various zones of a border region by Willem van Schendel and Michiel Baud<sup>51</sup> help us to understand the characteristic features of the geographical region of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. The *border heartland* consists of the zone on the border or zones dominated by the border. Here, the social networks are directly shaped and affected by the border. The networks depend on the border for their survival and have no option but to adapt to its caprices; the *intermediate borderland* consists of the region which is affected by the border with varying intensity, from moderate to weak; and *outer borderland* consists of those regions which feel the effect of the border at certain times and under specific circumstances.<sup>52</sup> It would be helpful to keep these definitions of the border zones in mind while studying the West Bengal-Bangladesh border in order to understand the effect of the border on the people and the extent of its influence on the surrounding regions. It would also help in our understanding of the nature of what the thesis will aim to establish as, *border narratives*, *border people* and *border consciousness*.

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<sup>50</sup>*Management of Indo-Bangladesh Border*. Available from:  
[http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/BM\\_MAN-IN-BANG\(E\).pdf](http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/BM_MAN-IN-BANG(E).pdf).

<sup>51</sup> Van Schendel, W. and Baud, M. (1997) Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands. *Journal of World History*. 8(2). pp.221-222.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



Plate 2. 'Zero point' marker, 2011.





*Plate 3.* Border pillar facing India with Bangladeshi road beyond, 2012.



*Plate 4.* Border pillar facing Bangladesh by the road to the 'zero point', 2012.

#### IV. The root of my interest in the West Bengal –Bangladesh Border

In March 2008, I was working as a research associate in an organisation in Kolkata that researched issues related to refugees, migration, human rights, social justice and gender politics. I went on an official visit for two days to a border village in the border district of Nadia (West Bengal) for a survey of the situation of violence perpetrated by the BSF on the civilian<sup>53</sup> population living along the West Bengal border. I had certain pre-conceived notions about life in the border areas, especially along the international borders— notions pertaining to the stringency of border regulations and the patrolling of border guards. I had never been a border resident and so my knowledge about border areas was restricted to newspaper reports and a few official survey reports. Most of the existing literatures on borders pertained to dealing with them as issues of international relations and bilateral affairs between the states concerned, i.e. India and Bangladesh, and were, understandably, a simplistic narrative of diplomacy and international relations.

The works of Avtar Singh Bhasin<sup>54</sup>, Farooq Sobhan<sup>55</sup> and Garry Purcell<sup>56</sup> constituted literature which dealt with bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh at a purely diplomatic level, highlighting aspects of trade and economy which these states could pursue for improved relations. Narratives of (and from) the border between the two states were conspicuous by their absence in these literatures. While these works gave me a fair idea about bilateral ties between the states, they failed to highlight the local narratives of the people who negotiate the border—which was the purpose of my visit to the border village.

A brief survey of reports and articles prepared by the government officials of India and Bangladesh before the visit exposed the dearth of literature which dealt

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<sup>53</sup> The people who live at the border areas, i.e. those common people who are not the official border guards or who do not belong to the police/military force in any way are generally called ‘civilians’. This term has become part of the everyday vocabulary of both the civilians themselves as well as the border guards all along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

<sup>54</sup> Bhasin, A.S. (ed.). (2003) *India-Bangladesh Relations: Documents, 1971-2002*. New Delhi: Geetika Publishers.

<sup>55</sup> Sobhan, F. (ed.). (2005) *Dynamics of Bangladesh-India Relations: Dialogues of Young Journalists Across the Border*. Dhaka: The University Press Ltd.

<sup>56</sup> Purcell, G. (2006) *India-Bangladesh Bilateral Trade and Potential Free Trade Agreement*. Dhaka: World Bank Office.

essentially with border life.<sup>57</sup> These reports were primarily viewing the border areas as disorderly spaces in need of stringent disciplining mechanisms and as sites in need of strengthened security apparatuses.<sup>58</sup> Literature prepared by the various NGOs and human rights organisations, on the other hand, emphasised more on the hapless condition of the border residents under the state machinery.<sup>59</sup> As part of a research organisation working on human rights and social justice, my visit was meant to serve a similar purpose, i.e. to take stock of the situation in the border village with regard to the condition of the border villages in general under the stringent presence of state machinery.

The visit served a bigger purpose than initially it aimed. Apart from giving me an idea about the various instances of human rights violations of the border civilians by the border guards and the hazards associated with the daily lives of the people along the border (these formed part of my official study), the visit made me realise that the responses, perceptions and activities of the people living along the border reveal much more than meets the eye. The everyday lives and activities of the people produced a narrative which might be vastly different from the narratives of a person who lived away from the border, like myself. I was convinced that a closer study of such narratives would yield an interesting and possibly unique understanding of the border as the state's space for wielding control and as the civilians' space for negotiating such control mechanisms. Though my ideas about these narratives were still vague, given the short length of my stay in the village, I came back with a wish to study them in-depth in the future.

## V. Nurturing my interest

On my return, I took to learning more about the West Bengal-Bangladesh border and the India-Bangladesh border at large, apart from surveying literature on border

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<sup>57</sup> For example, Jamwal, 2004, pp.5-36.

<sup>58</sup> For an idea on how the state (mis)reads border activities, see Samaddar, R. (1999) *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*. New Delhi: Sage.

<sup>59</sup> Reports prepared by organisations as *Odhikar* ([www.odhikar.org](http://www.odhikar.org)) and Human Rights Watch ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)) exemplify such literature.

studies in general. Eventually, my interest led me to pursue the study of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border as a doctoral project.

I realised that a study of the entire India-Bangladesh border<sup>60</sup> would be too big a project. So I had to narrow the scope of my study in ways that would help me analyse the border narratives in practically feasible ways without compromising the theoretical or empirical rigor. The fact that I shared the same language (*Bangla*) and similar ethnic origin/cultural traits (of being Bengali) with the majority of the people living along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border<sup>61</sup> acted as an encouraging catalyst behind my decision because I could grasp their socio-cultural aspects, being Bengali myself. To add to this was my western education that put me in a unique position to amplify the voices from the border to a larger audience.

Before I embarked on my field visit to the border areas as part of my doctoral research, I gave myself time to understand the evolution of border studies in literature, since its inception during the later phases of the Cold War, i.e. from the 1960s.

## VI. Literature survey: preparation for field studies

The literature survey gave me a broad overview of border studies from the 1960s till about 2011, which is when I visited border areas as part of my empirical research. I understood that the study of borders had moved from being primarily a theorisation of the bordering process and understanding terminologies associated with borders,<sup>62</sup> to being sociological and cultural studies of borders and the people who live in proximity to it.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Bangladesh shares its border with West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram in India.

<sup>61</sup> A stretch of 2216.7 kilometres.

<sup>62</sup> Prescott, J.R.V. (1968) *The Geography of State Policies*. London: Hutchinson & Co; Prescott, J.R.V. (1978) *Boundaries And Frontiers*. London: Croom Helm.

<sup>63</sup> Donnan, H. and Wilson, T.M. (eds.). (1994) *Border Approaches: Anthropological Perspectives on Frontiers*. Lanham, London: University Press of America; Donnan, H. and Wilson, T.M. (eds.). (1998) *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press; Donnan, H. and Wilson, T.M. (1999) *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*. Oxford: Berg; Martinez, O. J. (1994)

There has also been much writing on borders as geographical spaces of exclusion and the formation of peripheral subjectivities,<sup>64</sup> besides works studying them in the context of state and security issues.<sup>65</sup> These works are studies of the vulnerable nature of the border as demarcations of the state's sovereignty and how these vulnerabilities are policed by the state. The other significant contribution of these works towards border studies has been their emphasis on going beyond discursive studies of borders, and highlighting the importance of empirical studies as integral parts of methodological questions in studying these. The shift from studying borders as a straightjacketed political phenomenon to understanding them as catalysts for identity formations was also highlighted in some works in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>66</sup> Of the works mentioned so far, those of Ranabir Samaddar and Willem van Schendel pertain specifically to the India-Bangladesh border (including the West Bengal border).

The lack of a specific focus on the responses of the people living along the border in the existing literature disturbed me. Whatever empirical studies did exist either related to certain specific issues (mostly smuggling or trafficking)<sup>67</sup> or focussed on

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*Border People: Life and Society in the US-Mexico Borderlands.* Tuscon: University of Arizona Press.

<sup>64</sup> Aggarwal, R. (2004) *Beyond Lines of Control: Performance and Politics on the Disputed Borders of Ladakh, India.* Durham: Duke University Press; Kumar Rajaram, P. and Grundy-Warr, C. (eds.). (2007) *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Eilenberg, M. (2010) Negotiating autonomy at the margins of the state: the dynamics of elite politics in the borderland of West Kalimantan, Indonesia. *South East Asia Research.* 17(2). pp. 201-227.

<sup>65</sup> Samaddar, R. (1999) *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal.* New Delhi: Sage; Van Schendel, W. (2005) *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia.* London: Anthem; Van Schendel, W. and Abraham, I. (eds.). (2005) *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalisation.* Bloomington: University of Indiana Press; Coleman, M. (2009) What counts as the politics and practice of security, and where? Devolution and immigrant insecurity after 9/11. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers.* 99(5). pp. 904-913; Jones, R. (2009) Geopolitical boundary narratives, the global war on terror and border fencing in India. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers.* 34. pp. 290-304.

<sup>66</sup> Asiwaju, A.I. (ed.). (1985) *Partitioned Africans: Ethnic Relations across Africa's International Boundaries, 1884-1984.* London: C. Hurst & Co; Anzaldúa, G. (1987) *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza.* San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books; Sahlins, P. (1998) State formation and national identity in the Catalan borderlands during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries. In: Wilson, T.M. and Donnan, H. (eds.). *Border Identities.* pp. 31-61. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Stokes, M. (1998) Imagining 'the south': hybridity, heterotopias and Arabesk on the Turkish-Syrian border. In: Wilson, T.M. and Donnan, H. (eds.). *Border Identities.* pp. 263-288. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>67</sup> Schendel, W. V. and Abraham, I. (eds.). (2005) *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalisation.* Bloomington: University of Indiana Press;



the deprivation of civilians from resources and basic facilities. The focus on such pressing issues brought out the conflicting nature of the relation between the state and its people. They studied the active-user and passive-victim roles of the state and the civilians, respectively, as witnessed along the border—a structure which some of my own interactions with civilians in 2008 failed to fit into. Most of the existing literature treated the geographic reality of the border as a pre-given condition on which such narratives were produced. But the geographical and cognitive production and reproduction of the border by the border people hardly found a place in the literature. The works of Van Schendel was, by far, the closest indicator to what I was aiming to examine, i.e. border narratives of the people living along the stipulated border.

The aim of my doctoral research was, thus, to study the lives of the people living on both sides of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, including civilians and border guards, and to understand if their narratives did, in fact, reproduce and reinterpret the border. My aim was also to understand if such narratives fitted into the frame of subaltern narratives more as being alternate routes to resources rather than essentially subversive or even belligerent narratives against the presence of the state at the borders (embodied in the border guards, border fences and surveillance mechanisms). The goal was to keep the study interdisciplinary so as not to choke the potential of the research.

A study of secondary materials in the various libraries and archives in India and Bangladesh in 2010<sup>68</sup> formed my initial knowledge of the areas which I was to study, in terms of an idea of the changing profile of the population (from the first Census of the states in the second half of the twentieth century till date) and statistical information about the economic, ethnic and religious aspects of the people whom I intended to interact with during my field visits. Newspaper reports related to the West Bengal-Bangladesh border played an important role in shaping my idea about the chosen area of study. Both national and regional newspapers from India and

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Banerjee, P. and Basu Ray Chaudhury, A. (eds.). (2011) *Women in Indian Borderlands*. New Delhi: Sage.

<sup>68</sup> National Archives, New Delhi, India; National Library, Kolkata, India; Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics, Department of Planning, Government of West Bengal, India; Census of India Regional Office, Kolkata; Ramkrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, India; West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, India; Dhaka University Library, Bangladesh; National Archives, Dhaka, Bangladesh; National Library, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Bangladesh were consulted during the pre-field visit period as well as later, during analysing the field data. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, the Bengali-daily published from Kolkata, has been the most frequently cited newspaper, due to its consistency in reporting border-related issues, at least in its district supplements, as well as its effort in addressing some border issues, otherwise neglected by official reports or other media.

Of the 10 border districts in West Bengal<sup>69</sup> and 16 border districts in Bangladesh,<sup>70</sup> I chose to focus on 6 border districts of West Bengal<sup>71</sup> and 11 border districts of Bangladesh<sup>72</sup> between September 2011 and March 2012. My choice was informed by the geographical peculiarities of the areas (covering land borders and riverine borders), as well as their being important areas in terms of strategic location and economy (covering Enclaves,<sup>73</sup> *Chars* and Border Land Ports).<sup>74</sup>

Having equipped myself with a fair idea of my chosen field of study, and an aim to frame my thesis in a multidimensional approach, I set out on my fieldwork in the chosen areas along the border between West Bengal and Bangladesh. The plan was to interview the people living in the border areas, including civilians involved in a wide variety of livelihood practices, and across gender, religion and caste; border guards posted along the border outposts; public figures associated with administrative offices, mainly *Panchayat* members and heads (since most of the border areas are rural in character and, hence, form parts of local village governance) and political figures. The aim was to understand the strands of social, political and economic narratives produced along the stipulated border.

Methodological questions and theoretical frameworks were only vaguely formed in my mind when I set out on this journey—a journey that turned out to be far more

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<sup>69</sup> Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas.

<sup>70</sup> Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Dinajpur, Jaypurhat, Naogaon, Nawabganj, Rajshahi, Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga, Jhenaidah, Jessore, Satkhira.

<sup>71</sup> Cooch Behar, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Murshidabad, Nadia, North 24 Parganas.

<sup>72</sup> Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Rajshahi, Kushtia, Nilphamari, Chuadanga, Jhenaidah, Jessore, Satkhira.

<sup>73</sup> Enclaves are pockets of land surrounded completely by territories of the neighbouring state. The West Bengal-Bangladesh border enclaves are examples of a unique territorial configuration, not to be found anywhere else in the world (discussed in Chapter 2).

<sup>74</sup> Discussed in Chapter 1.

interesting but complicated than I had initially envisioned. The paraphernalia associated with fieldwork served as an indication of the complexities associated with studying sensitised areas such as the borders.

Borders, as territorial delimitations of a state, are spaces which mark the strongest manifestations of a state's sovereignty. Thus, they are also the spaces which witness the most visible presence of state machinery in terms of border fences, border guards and surveillance mechanisms. While the people living along the border areas negotiate such state presences in their everyday lives, the borders are virtually inaccessible, if not completely out of bounds, for a person living elsewhere but wanting to visit/study the borderlands, as in my case. My interactions with the senior members of the border guards regarding my plans of field visits also indicated the sensitivity of the state towards its borders. A feeling of suspicion and apprehension was present throughout our conversation as they took note of my plans. The paraphernalia included obtaining consent from the ethics committee of my university for conducting field studies and convincing them of my plans for handling possible risk hazards; preparing the Questionnaire, Consent Form (CF) and Participant Information Sheets (PIS); obtaining permissions from the Headquarters of the border guards of BSF and BGB for visiting the border areas and talking to border guards (written permissions were not available); contacting key persons and field assistants in the field areas which I planned to visit; arranging for my accommodation and travel in and around my field areas and chalking out the dates for my visits. The process of setting up the scene for the actual field work to take place was tedious and bothersome. This also, in a way, made me realise the gap between institutional research procedures and actual field studies. The formalities associated with institutional research procedures often fail to address or gauge the complexities of lived reality, especially when it comes to sensitised places like the borders. They often fail to see the everyday survival negotiations from their straightjacketed viewpoints. These gaps became visible to me even before I started my field visits. My experiences during my field visits only confirmed my apprehensions about the gap. Having gone through the ordeal of preparing for my field work, I finally set out on the much-awaited experience. Equipped with a recorder, a notepad and the pertinent field documents, I went about interacting with the people living along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

## VII. Field Studies

The idea was to cover as many categories of people across caste, religion, gender and livelihood so as not to restrict myself to a particular strand of narrative. Accordingly, I did not chalk out focus groups for my interviews and deliberately kept the questionnaire open-ended.<sup>75</sup> Apart from some fundamental questions related to the identity (name, age, religion, caste, gender, profession) of the person, the conversations were left to follow their own path, though roughly centring on certain larger issues which I had planned beforehand.<sup>76</sup> The aim was to provoke various kinds of outcomes from the conversations and not restrict them to a set pattern of responses.

The experience of carrying out the actual field work was far more exciting and challenging than I had imagined it would be. Getting access to the border areas, interacting with the local people (sometimes as individuals, sometimes in a group), interacting with the border guards, staying in the residences of the local civilians or in a tourist lodge in the border area, moving from one area to another in the private vehicles of the local people (mostly motorbikes and sometimes bicycles) and sometimes in hired cars as well: none of these activities turned out to be trouble-free, and understandably so. To travel around the border areas alone and as a woman, to be ferried around the place on a bike/bicycle driven by a man,<sup>77</sup> having to answer the border guards every now and then about my identity and purpose of visit,<sup>78</sup> being prevented from visiting certain areas of the border by them on the grounds of 'security issues', and getting them to speak to me were some of the recurrent troubles throughout the visits. To add to that was the expanse of area that I had planned to cover on both sides of this border within a limited period of six months.

Carrying out fieldwork in sensitised areas such as the borders, especially international ones, posed several challenges in not just interacting with the local civilians or the border guards, but also on deciding the ways of data collection, since

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<sup>75</sup> The total number of interviews conducted was 137. For details of the interviewees, see Appendix 2. The names of my interviewees have been anonymised (unless specified otherwise) to protect their identities.

<sup>76</sup> For the structure of the questionnaire, see Appendix 1.

<sup>77</sup> This was often a cause of considerable embarrassment for the man doing it, given that I was not of his family relation.

<sup>78</sup> The border guards often did not seem to be satisfied by my answers and continued being suspicious of my purpose.

organised settings for carrying out interviews were often not available.<sup>79</sup> Recording every response or using recorders was often not possible or even welcomed. This made the process of data collection and data storage difficult. Field dairies played important roles in filling up these gaps. Besides being used for noting down the details of the places and circumstances of the interviews, they were often used for jotting down entire interviews as well.

Briefly put, the fieldwork enriched me not simply as a researcher but, more importantly, as a person, as it helped me know myself better. My capacities, incapacities, stamina or sometimes the lack of it were revealed to myself during the process. I returned with a huge amount of field data and larger amount of questions than what I had with me before the study.

The open-ended interactions brought out certain responses which I had least expected, which provided new dimensions to my thesis. The themes which I eventually categorised my thesis into, i.e. livelihood, enclaves, caste and gender—are common to sociological literature. In the course of the field work, they fell into thematic clusters reaffirming not just the resilience of analytical categories in contemporary sociological discourses, but also the fact that these themes reflected the border narratives in their most spontaneous forms. Conversations around those themes seemed to have emerged, almost automatically, in every interaction. Likewise, the process of categorising my data into chapters became easy, with some of the recurrent themes forming the topics for each of the chapters—themes which did not find any resonance in earlier work on the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Situations were often not conducive for a formal set-up of the interviews or going through the formalities of Consent Forms, Participant Information Sheets, etc. Many of the interviews were impromptu and quick. Some of the informal conversations turned into interviews eventually, with no prior preparation.

<sup>80</sup> Aspects related to some of the themes such as gender, caste and livelihood practices (besides illegal cross-border practices) along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border have not been studied by Willem van Schendel, Ranabir Samaddar or Paula Banerjee—researchers who have worked extensively in this area.

## VIII. Shaping the thesis

I noticed a pattern in the responses of my interviewees that was characterised by the overwhelming presence of the reality of the border in their lives. Many of the issues which formed parts of the interviews were no more unique to the border than to any other non-border area, either in Bangladesh or in India. However, what was noticeable was the recurrence of the border in the responses regarding such issues and, more importantly, how the same issues seen elsewhere in India and Bangladesh went through a modification in the context of the specificity of their operation along the border. The responses also suggested (a hint of which I had borne with me right from my first interaction with the border people) that the people living along the border have their own ways of perceiving and interpreting its reality. The (re)interpretations are neither necessarily engineered by the state, nor are they necessarily signs of victimisation of the people. This is not to suggest that victimisation is absent along the border, but is meant to draw attention to the complex relation between the state and the border people which might not always be addressed through the straightjacketed binaries of the perpetrator-state and victimised-civilians.

Such re-interpretations of the space of the border formed a binding factor among the people living along the border which, surprisingly, included the border guards as well. In fact, the responses of the border guards and their spontaneous answers to some of my random curiosities revealed the irony of their situation—uncomfortably wedged between their duties as representatives of the state at the borders and their everyday negotiations with the reality of border life. In the process of living along the border over a period of time (ranging from six months to few years depending on the terms of their posting), the border guards undergo similar hazards as the civilians do, albeit in different versions. But the reality of surviving the border is true for both. *Border life*, thus, makes the border guards more a *border people*, often overshadowing their roles as representatives and spokespersons of the states concerned. It is the overarching presence of the spatial uniqueness of the border and the everyday negotiations of the civilians and the border guards which form the fundamental content of what I choose to call *border narratives* in my thesis.

Border narratives, discussed in the following chapters, also contribute towards the understanding of the negotiations between the border people and border laws and regulations. Many aspects of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, including the undercurrents of violence and cross-border smuggling practices, have been consequences of the very laws designed to contain and control it. Having been affected by the partition and the border culturally, historically, linguistically and economically, the border people have devised ways of negotiating the laws and regulations which were devised to control them— through violation, re-interpretation and reproduction. The subsequent chapters aim to highlight aspects of such negotiations through discussions on the border narratives along the stipulated border.

While the basic idea and knowledge about the West Bengal-Bangladesh border was premised on the existing secondary materials (census reports, survey reports, newspaper reports) and literature, my understanding of this border as a socio-spatial process required me to look at the border lives myself as an active observer and as a direct communicator with the border people. Analysis of the interviews cleared my thoughts with regards to the re-interpretation and reproduction of the border space by the people who negotiate it every day. It also highlighted the pattern of psyche, i.e. a particular mind-set or mental make-up, in the people that expressed itself spontaneously but persistently, nevertheless, in their responses. Newspaper reports were used in support for some of my arguments as well as in highlighting the recurrence of some of the border-related issues in the narratives. In the process of understanding the responses, some of my pre-conceived ideas about the West Bengal-Bangladesh border changed considerably. The more difficult parts of analysing the data were:

- Narrowing down the relevant data, i.e. deciding the importance of one set of data over another, largely because of the overwhelming amount of data collected.
- Interpreting and analysing contradictions in the responses of the interviewees in support of my argument.

Methods of tackling such difficulties were, interestingly, found in the data themselves. I could recognise that there was an internal logic to the narratives. This logic bound the smaller socio-cultural narratives into a larger spatial narrative,

though some of the responses in the narratives seemed contradictory on the surface. From here, the field data started shaping up into a thesis.

Theoretical discourses dealing with spatiality and subalternity in the context of the omnipresence of the state machinery vis-à-vis the marginal people (geographical marginality as seen from the state's perspective) seemed to form the basic tools of analysis. While the works of Henri Lefebvre<sup>81</sup> and Edward Soja<sup>82</sup> provided me with the tools to understand spatial reproductions, James C. Scott's<sup>83</sup> concept of everyday forms of resistances helped me realise the rudimentary nature of such border narratives. Works by scholars of subaltern studies<sup>84</sup> provided the necessary understanding of subalternity in the context of Indian social, political, economic and cultural discourses.

I have used the concept of subalternity here, more as a form or set of practices by which people find alternative ways of accessing many of the basic resources as access to livelihood, sanitation, health, education etc. which they are otherwise devoid of. Subalternity, in the case of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, has been used to define the practices which the border people, i.e. people living along the this particular border, including the civilians and the border guards alike, have devised over the years to gain access to such basic resources which they have been denied by the state machinery, due to the vulnerability and sensitivity of the space that they live in, i.e. the international border between India and Bangladesh. Thus, the concept of subalternity has been used here more as a definition for their practices rather than a definition of their state of being.

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<sup>81</sup> Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*. (trs. Donald Nicholson-Smith). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

<sup>82</sup> Soja, E. (1989). *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London, New York: Verso; Soja, E. (1996) *Thirdspace*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

<sup>83</sup> Scott, J. (1986) Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance. In: Scott, J. and Tria Kerkvliet, B.J. (eds.). *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South-east Asia*. Library of Peasant Studies. No.9. London: Frank Cass & Co.

<sup>84</sup> Guha, R. (1988) *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Guha, R. (1997) *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Amin, S. and Chakraborty, D. (1996) *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Delhi: Oxford University Press; Chatterjee, P. (2004) *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press; Chakravorty, S., Milevska, S. and Barlow, T.E. (2006) *Conversations with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. London: Seagull.



Over years of negotiating the border, the space of the borderland turns into a unique space—a space beyond the limited scope of binaries as perpetration-victimisation. It becomes a space which sees the creation and evolution of certain unique practices, customs, culture, language, co-operation and even enmity between the civilians and the border guards on either side of the border as well as across the borderline, between the border people of the two states. It is a space which not just sees the civilians devise access to resources which they are otherwise devoid of, but also sees the border guards, as representatives of the states, get enmeshed in the survival practices. The concept of the *thirdspace* has been used here to define this unique nature of the borderland, where the production of space moves beyond the first space of the state's vision, second space of the civilians' resistance and creates a *thirdspace* that sees many of the generalised notions of state-civilian relations questioned and, often, redefined. The concept of *thirdspace* has also been helpful in explaining the role of the borderland space in being the joining line or meeting space of the two states, rather than as the line of separation. The border life brings the people on either side of the border together developing some common ways of negotiation, common forms of practices and a given understanding between the two, mostly in a spontaneous, unplanned manner. The concept of *thirdspace* helps in defining this uniqueness of the border because it explains how the space of the borderland moves beyond the first space of defining the territorial limitations of the state and containing the civilians within that territorial boundary, the second space of the civilians either accepting the delimitations or resisting it in an organised manner (for example a separatist movement) and creating a *thirdspace* where the border people redefine the definition of the border and question the very foundation of the borderline through their everyday practices, but which is spontaneous and rudimentary in nature.

## IX. Choice of experience-centred narratives in shaping the thesis

The border narratives obtained in the course of the interviews have themselves been powerful texts and foundations for my thesis. The subaltern nature of the narratives has been amply reflected in the resistant or rather re-interpretive nature of the narratives, as expressed in the interviews. The narratives bear possibilities of questioning the sovereign nature of the state, though the narratives themselves are

open to interpretations in various different ways. The narratives obtained through the interviews have been mostly *experience-centred*,<sup>85</sup> though *event-centred* narratives have also been recorded from time to time. Given the vast scope of interpretation that the narratives created, it has often been difficult for me to logically interpret or analyse the data. Yet I sincerely believe that the everyday life experiences of the narratives (which is what the narratives mostly consisted of) have been the nearest credible expressions of reality—as constructed by the narrators—the border people themselves. Experience-centred narratives often ‘vary drastically over time, and across circumstances within which one lives, where a single phenomenon may produce very different stories, even from the same person.’<sup>86</sup> This explains the challenge I faced in accommodating contradictory responses, while, at the same time, baring their spontaneous nature. But despite such challenges, the choice of experience-centred narratives of the border people was driven by their human nature and their capacity to ‘re-present experience, reconstituting it as well as expressing it.’<sup>87</sup> Their capacity to ‘display transformation’ has helped me highlight the evolution of border narratives expressed by the border people over a period of six decades.

## X. Focus of the thesis

My argument in this thesis is that spontaneous and everyday forms of negotiation which the border people produce over the years crystallise into a pattern of consciousness characterised by a common psyche among the people which is not always necessarily consciously designed. The consciousness is spatial in character in being a result of and tied to the specificity of the borderland. The border consciousness thus produced constitutes other social, political or economic narratives, which might also be witnessed in other non-border spaces within the territorial limits of a state. Yet these smaller strands of narratives get engulfed by the larger spatial narrative of the borderland, producing, in the process, a unique psyche—a border consciousness.

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<sup>85</sup> Andrews, M., Squire, C. and Tamboukou, M. (2009) *Doing Narrative Research*. London: Sage. p.5.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>87</sup> Squire, C. (2009) From experience-centred to socioculturally-oriented approaches to narrative. In Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2009, p. 48.

The term 'border consciousness' has been adapted from Gloria Anzaldua's concept of 'Mestiza consciousness', which she describes as a specific form of consciousness resulting from hybrid ethnicities of people born out of mixed parentage between the US and Mexico.<sup>88</sup> While people belonging to such hybrid ethnicities can mostly be found along the US-Mexico border, she uses the Mestiza or border consciousness as more of a social consciousness—born out of social marginalisation that these people of hybrid ethnicities (as also alternate sexualities) face. I have used the concept of border consciousness as more of a spatial consciousness in analysing how the specificity and the reality of surviving the border bind all those who live along it.

Spatial consciousness in the context of the border differs from spatial consciousness witnessed elsewhere; for example, in spaces where a specific social/ethnic/religious/gendered community comes together. In such instances, it is the coming together of the community in a specific bounded space that eventually produces the spatial consciousness. But in the case of borderlands, as exemplified by the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, it is the specificity of the space itself that produces the consciousness and not the other way around. Moreover, few other spatial psyches are seen to affect such a wide variety of people across age, class, caste, religion, gender and economic position, as those seen to be affected by the spatial psyche of the borderland.

Since this study is primarily based on empirical study, the methodological challenge lay in justifying such claims, purely through the process of analysis of the field data. The recurrence of the spatial disposition of the borderland in the responses of my interviewees, including the border guards, helped me give shape to my understanding of the border consciousness. In fact, the varied nature of my interviewees, in terms of their socio-political, economic and professional locations, helped me realise that the spatial specificity of the borderland engulfs all those living along the borderline into forming the border culture. Some of the more recent works on the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, as well as some of the contemporary debates on state sovereignty and globalisation, helped me give shape to my ideas.

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<sup>88</sup>Anzaldua, 1987; For further understanding of Anzaldua's concept of Mestiza consciousness, see Feghali, Z. (2011) Re-articulating the New Mestiza. *Journal of International Women's Studies*. Special Issue. 12(2). pp. 61-74; Aigner-Varoz, E. (Summer 2000) Metaphors of a Mestiza Consciousness: Anzaldua's Borderlands/La Frontera. *Melus*. 25(2). pp. 47-62.

## XI. Post-field studies literature survey

Debates on globalisation have emphasised the imminent possibilities of a borderless world,<sup>89</sup> especially in the context of economic interaction between states and the increasing flexibility of border rules in some parts of the globe. These literatures have focused on the need for states and business corporations to adapt to globalisation and the borderless world.<sup>90</sup> Yet studies by some scholars of border studies have, in fact, emphasised the significance of borders amidst such debates on borderlessness.<sup>91</sup> While it is a fact that the blurring of boundaries has, indeed, been a significant feature of economic interaction around the world from the mid-twentieth century, it is also worth keeping in mind that such economic interaction has found more relevance in certain parts of the world like Western Europe, where inter-state borders increasingly became irrelevant with the free movement of the inhabitants of the European Union.<sup>92</sup> While the borders of the EU became much more interdependent and integrated, that of others like India and Pakistan (also Israel and Palestine) hardened and became increasingly alienated.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, the increasing stringency of immigration regulations highlights a contradictory trend—that of making the borders of states non-flexible like never before. Movement of people across a border has been far more problematic than the movement of wealth around the globe.

Some of the recent works on the West Bengal-Bangladesh border have studied the distortive nature of the border narratives of the border people in the context of the

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<sup>89</sup> Ohmae, K. (1990) *The Borderless World*. New York: Harper Collins; Shapiro, M. and Alker, H. (eds.). (1996) *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>90</sup> Ohmae, 1990; Ohmae, K. (1995) *The End of the Nation State*. New York: Free Press.

<sup>91</sup> Newman, D. (2002) Boundaries. In: Agnew J., Mitchell, K. and Toal, G. (eds.). *A Companion to Political Geography*. pp. 123-37. Oxford: Blackwell; Newman, D. (2006) The Lines that Continue to Separate Us: Borders in a Borderless World. *Progress in Human Geography*. 30(2). pp. 1-19; Newman, D. and Paasi, A. (1998) Fences and Neighbours in the Post-Modern World: Boundary Narratives in Political Geography. *Progress in Human Geography*. 22(2). p. 186-207; Paasi, A. (1996) *Territories, Boundaries and Consciousness*. New York: John Wiley & Sons Ltd; Paasi, A. (1998) Boundaries as Social Processes: Territoriality in the World of Flows. *Geopolitics*. 3(1). pp. 69-88; Paasi, A. (2005) The Changing Discourses on Political Boundaries: Mapping the Backgrounds, Contents and Contexts. In: Van Houtum, H., Kramsch, O. and Zierhoffer, W. (eds.) *B/ordering Space*. pp. 17-32. Aldershot: Ashgate; Yeung, H. (1998) Capital, State and Space: Contesting the Borderless World. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. 23(3). pp. 291-310.

<sup>92</sup> Newman, 2006, pp. 171-186.

<sup>93</sup> Van Schendel, 2005, p.372.

various cross-border practices that they practice. According to Reece Jones (2012), these border practices challenge the state sovereignty by refusing the existence of either India or Bangladesh along the border and where the presence of either India or Bangladesh is disregarded by the border people.<sup>94</sup> My understanding of the border narratives of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border differs from Jones' understanding, in terms of the perception of the border residents about the bordered spaces. My field study suggests that these border narratives do indeed challenge the sovereignty of the states concerned, i.e. India and Bangladesh, at their boundaries. The nature of the contest is not through the blurring of the border through cross-border practices but, in fact, by making it more visible and real. The border, thus, becomes a space where both states meet, i.e. a space of *both* India and Bangladesh rather than the 'neither India nor Bangladesh' discourse suggested by Jones.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, Jones' idea of borderlands as spaces of 'refusal' indicates a conscious decision on the part of the border people to refuse and in the process, challenge the state. My study suggests that the everyday forms of re-interpretation and reproduction of the border space is not an organised or planned narrative of refusal of the state as suggested by Jones, but rather rudimentary narratives of survival well within the hegemonic structure and model of the state machinery (as suggested by Scott)<sup>96</sup>, as the following chapters will reveal.

The West Bengal-Bangladesh border becomes a meeting space of states, India and Bangladesh, and their border people. I argue that this poses a bigger challenge to the respective states since the primary aim of the states at their borders is to separate one people from the other. The dominant presence of the state at the West Bengal-Bangladesh border is highlighted in the official journals of BSF where one comes across 'suggestions to improve border domination' along this border.<sup>97</sup> In the context of this border, the border people's act of re-interpreting the border as the meeting point is a bigger challenge for India and Bangladesh since territorial imperatives formed the basic premise for partition, as mentioned earlier. In re-interpreting the border as a meeting space for states, the border people question the foundation of

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<sup>94</sup> Jones, R. (2012) Spaces of Refusal: Rethinking Sovereign Power and Resistance at the Border. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 102(3). pp. 685-699.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Scott, 1986.

<sup>97</sup> *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2012). 4(11)

partition as well as the role of the 'state as a container'.<sup>98</sup> The borders of the states act as the separating line between the state's 'inside' (internal political interactions) and the 'outside' (international relations), making the state a self-enclosed container of political territory within a nested hierarchy of geographical arenas.<sup>99</sup> But border practices, including cross-border ties and linkages as seen along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, question this role of the state. Such 'horizontally articulated rhizomatic linkages among states' put the vertically scaled 'hierarchical conceptions of political spaces' to test.<sup>100</sup> Globalisation and capital flows perform a similar function of blurring borders and questioning the role of the 'state as the container'. But the movement of people across states (mostly with official documents as passports and visas) and the flow of capital through investments, and the everyday movements of people and goods across the border mostly through illegal means, must not be confused.<sup>101</sup> While there has been an increasing flexibility of borders in some parts of the world and a growth of global money through computer and telecommunication technologies<sup>102</sup>, which hint at an apparent blurring of borders, the reality hints at a re-interpretation and reproduction of the border (rather than blurring or even refusal), making it all the more visible and significant in the backdrop of debates regarding a borderless world. Gearoid O Tuathail (1999) rightly observes: 'The development of borderless worlds does not contradict but actually hastens the simultaneous development of ever more bordered worlds'.<sup>103</sup> Border narratives provide discerning ways of analysing cross-border practices which are neither universal nor planetary, despite constituting long-distance networks across borders.<sup>104</sup> They also provide hints to questions as to who the benefiteres and promoters of borderlessness are. They reveal that the people who survive along the

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<sup>98</sup> Taylor, P. F. (2003) The State as Container: Territoriality in the Modern World-System. In Brenner, N., Jessop, B., Jones, M. and Macleod, G. (eds.). *State/Space: A Reader*. Malden, Oxford: Blackwell. p.101.

<sup>99</sup> Walker, R.B.J. (1993) *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>100</sup> Brenner, N., Jessop, B., Jones, M. and Macleod, G. (2003) Introduction. In Brenner, Jessop, Jones and Macleod, 2003, pp. 14-15.

<sup>101</sup> Glassman, J. (August 1999) State power beyond the 'territorial trap': the internationalisation of the state. *Political Geography*. 18(6). pp.669-696.

<sup>102</sup> Taylor, 2003, pp.109-110.

<sup>103</sup> Tuathail, G.O. (1999) Borderless Worlds? Problematising Discourses of Deterritorialisation. *Geopolitics*. 4(2). p.143.

<sup>104</sup> Cooper, F. (2001) What is the Concept of Globalisation Good For? An African Historian's Perspective. *African Affairs*. 100. p. 189.

border and depend on it for their livelihoods rarely, if at all, are champions of borderlessness.

The nature of questioning the sovereignty of the state by the border people is not through a 'refusal of the state-imposed border' but rather through a re-interpretation and reproduction of the border—producing, what Soja calls, a *thirdspace*<sup>105</sup> of lived reality in the process. It becomes the space that the people construct, characterised both by confusion and clarity, direct experience and conceptual elaboration.<sup>106</sup> Re-interpretation of the border poses a bigger discomfort and challenge for state sovereignty, since it is the borders which mark the strongest manifestations of the sovereign nature of the state.

Involvement of the border guards (as embodied representations of the state) in the creation of border consciousness together with the civilian border population is integral to the understanding of the subaltern nature of border narratives. The role of the border guards is often plagued by deceptiveness. While it seems that as representatives of the state, they administer and control the border space, 'in practice, however, they substitute another space for it, one that is first economic and social, and then political. They believe they are obeying something in their heads—a representation (of the country etc.). In fact, they are establishing an order—their own.'<sup>107</sup> And it is through this *re-ordering* of the border that the border guards re-interpret the border differently from the order of the state.

Borders always have been seen as a space of expropriation, peripheral subjectivity and a platform for claiming inclusion—which is not always the case.<sup>108</sup> It has also been a space for redefining certain statist definitions like belonging, citizenship, legal, illicit and so on. The spontaneous and free-flowing nature of the interviews during my field study contributed towards such unique revelations regarding the creation of border narratives and their gradual evolution into a border consciousness.

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<sup>105</sup> Soja, E. (1996) *Thirdspace*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

<sup>106</sup> Poulantzas, N. (2003) The Nation. In Brenner, Jessop, Jones and Macleod, 2003, p. 85.

<sup>107</sup> Lefebvre, H. (2003) Space and the State. In Brenner, Jessop, Jones and Macleod, 2003, p. 87.

<sup>108</sup> (In Press) Cons, J. (2012) Narrating boundaries: Framing and Contesting Suffering, Community, and Belonging in Enclaves along the India-Bangladesh border. *Political Geography*. [Online] Elsevier. pp. 1-10. Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2012.06.004>. [Accessed: 14 June 2013].

## XII. Flexible approach towards establishing the thesis

My attention towards the spontaneous narratives of lived experiences of the border people and my flexibility with methodological and theoretical questions, have helped me understand the complex nature of border life at the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. They have helped me reveal the multi-dimensional narratives which are produced by the border people—narratives which accommodate religious, social, political and economic factors and yet cut across all these strands to create a psyche that has its foundation in the unique spatiality of the borderland. An interdisciplinary approach towards analysis of the narratives, bringing together discourses on state theories, space, geography and subaltern studies, have helped me in explicating the complex yet interesting web of relations laid out along this border. That the fruitfulness of a research lies not in ‘proving the correctness of a hypothesis’<sup>109</sup> but in ‘finding out something’<sup>110</sup> has been amply qualified by my own research trajectory. A flexible approach has helped me find some unique aspects of the border narratives created along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, hitherto unnoticed.

Livelihood, enclaves, caste and gender have been identified as the four strands of narratives, which, as the responses suggest, have converged in the spatial uniqueness of the borderland to be modified and crystallised into a larger spatial narrative. All the four strands of narratives contribute in their own way towards the production of border narratives. These four strands form the four following chapters, each one highlighting the spatial specificity of each of the four narratives. The four chapters together knit into what I have chosen to call the border consciousness, as witnessed along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. As Maria Tamboukou explains, narratives constitute realities and shape the social, rather than being determined by it.<sup>111</sup> Border narratives, as revealed in the following chapters, do indeed shape other social narratives into a spatial narrative to produce a psyche that binds the narrators together. The following chapters aim to establish this claim.

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<sup>109</sup> Clark, R. S. (1977) *Fundamentals of Criminal Justice Research*. New York: Lexington Books. p.34.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2009, p. 15.



## Chapter 1

### Livelihood Practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh Border

#### I. Introduction

This chapter aims to look at some of the aspects of livelihood practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. The specific livelihoods which have been discussed here are directly or indirectly dependent on the border. Some of them are traditional practices (i.e. existing from pre-border days), which have been affected by the creation of the border in 1947. Others have come into existence as a result of the creation of the border. This chapter looks at some of the livelihood practices in the light of their relation to the border.

The chapter proposes to establish that the spatial uniqueness of the borderland affects both traditional and non-traditional livelihood practices to form a larger spatial narrative. This narrative is characterised by the overwhelming presence of the borderland milieu in the responses of both the civilians and border guards.

It also proposes to establish that years of creation of such narratives result in a unique pattern of consciousness among the border people, including the civilians and border guards, which has been termed the *border consciousness*.

Traditional livelihood practices seen along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border have been studied as narratives of general livelihood practices in rural India,<sup>1</sup> rather than practices which have been affected and moulded by the presence of the border. Other practices which have been a result of the border have been mostly studied in the context of their vulnerability<sup>2</sup> and/or illegality.<sup>3</sup> But a closer study of the various aspects of livelihood practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border reveals the complex web of narratives which run through the more visible forms of practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Publications by Pradan ([www.pradan.net](http://www.pradan.net)); Ray, S. (2009) *Handbook of Agriculture in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; Kala, S. and Grimshaw, D.J. (eds.). (2011) *Strengthening Rural Livelihoods: The Impact of Information and Communication Technologies in Asia*. New Delhi: Practical Action Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Banerjee, P. and Basu Ray Chaudhury, A. (eds.). (2011) *Women in Indian Borderlands*. New Delhi: Sage.

<sup>3</sup> Van Schendel, W. and Abraham, I. (2005) *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders, and the Other Side of Globalization*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

## II. Agriculture

The predominant means of livelihood in India is agriculture, which provides for more than 70% of the population. The rural areas of India are dependent almost entirely on agriculture-related livelihoods.<sup>4</sup> Most of the post-1947 migrant peasant communities crossing the West Bengal-Bangladesh border settled along it and took up agriculture as an obvious occupation. While their traditional agricultural skill was one reason for the choice, the topography of extensive farmland along the border<sup>5</sup> was another reason. Most of the original inhabitants of the areas which became the border areas after partition were already pursuing agriculture-related livelihoods.<sup>6</sup> This implied that agriculture-related livelihoods became, and still are, the predominant means of livelihood along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

The predominance of these livelihoods is characteristic of almost all the rural areas of India and Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup> Yet the nature of some of the aspects of these livelihood practices attains a unique feature in the context of their performance along the border. These features make agriculture-related livelihoods along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border different from their non-border version.

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<sup>4</sup> Agriculture in South Asia. *The World Bank*. Available from: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/EXTSAREGTOPAGRI/0,,contentMDK:20273764~menuPK:548214~pagePK:34004173~piPK:34003707~theSitePK:452766,00.html>. [Accessed: 27 July 2013].

<sup>5</sup> Jamwal, N.S. (Jan-Mar 2004) Border management: Dilemma of guarding the India-Bangladesh border. *Strategic Analysis*. 28(1). pp. 5-36.

<sup>6</sup> Chatterji, J. (February 1999) The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52. *Modern Asian Studies*. 33(1). pp. 185-242.

<sup>7</sup> Hossain, M. (1991) *Agriculture in Bangladesh: Performance, Problems and Prospects*. Dhaka: University Press.



Plate 5. Fencing along the South Dinajpur border, West Bengal, 2012.

i. Crisis of the ‘fenced-out’ lands

As mentioned in the introduction, the regulations of the Ground Rules followed by India’s decision to fence its borders left large parts of lands (both residential villages and cultivated land) outside the fence.<sup>8</sup> The issue of being fenced-out has, over the years, been the most persistent crisis for the people living and earning a livelihood on the West Bengal side of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

The farmers require official attestation of the fact that they live and/or cultivate their lands or work as agricultural labourers outside the fence. They receive cards of different colours (farmers get red cards, agricultural labourers get yellow) for the

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<sup>8</sup> PTI (31 January 2010) Indo-Bangla border: Fencing forces thousands in no man's land. *Hindustan Times*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/newdelhi/Indo-Bangla-border-Fencing-forces-thousands-in-no-man-s-land/Article1-503736.aspx>. [Last accessed: 27 July 2013]; Van Schendel, W. (2005) *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem. p.213.

purpose.<sup>9</sup> The attestation needs to be provided by the *Panchayat*<sup>10</sup> head. Submitting the attested documents along with proofs of his identity (mostly voter cards) to the BSF constables at the fence gates every morning constitutes the daily routine of a farmer.<sup>11</sup> The gates are opened for the farmers to access their lands at certain scheduled times of the day.<sup>12</sup> This implies that the farmers' access to fenced-out lands depends on the border regulations and whims of the BSF. 'If only the documents are considered sufficiently valid by the BSF, will they let us pass through the gate. Otherwise they do not accept them, even if it is in order,' says Rashid Hossein while complaining about how the farmers live and work according to the whims of the border guards.<sup>13</sup> The farmers are also required to attest names of other possible male members of the family (son, brother or a male relative) who might need to attend work in the fenced-out lands in the absence of the farmer himself.<sup>14</sup> Women are, most often, not allowed to cross the fence at all, even if they need to take food to the male members working in the fenced-out land.<sup>15</sup>

There are restrictions on the cattle, tools and other agriculture-related products (seeds, fertilisers) which a farmer can carry to his land outside the fence. The type and number/amount of such items also require attestation from the *Panchayat* official and cannot be violated under any means. The BSFs often have the last word in matters of disputes regarding such regulations.<sup>16</sup> 'We have to work in the fields according to their (BSF's) whims. They are creating problems regarding our agricultural tools, fertilisers. They do not let us carry more than 5 kilograms of fertiliser and in these cases, permissions from *Panchayat* members do not

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Asharidoho BSF camp (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>10</sup> *Gram Panchayats* and their counterparts in Bangladesh—the Union *Parishads*, are the local self-government units at the village and small-town levels. They consist of a head (*Pradhan* for *Panchayats*; Chairman for *Parishads*) and elected members from the area, representing a block/village/ward as the case may be. Discussed in the Introduction.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Asharidoho BSF camp (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>12</sup> The timings are as follows: 6-7, 9-10 AM; 1-2, 4-5 PM in a day.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Rashid Hossein, resident of Lalgola (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 8 November 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Asharidoho BSF camp (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Pranabesh, resident and farmer at Ramnagar village (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Staff Reporter (29 March 2012) BSF ebong grambashir bibad Bagdaye. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/29pgn3.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

help’,<sup>17</sup> says Balaram Mahato who cultivates lands outside the fence. The measures are meant for preventing smuggling across the border, explains a BSF official: ‘The tendency to carry more than what is required outside the fence and illegally sell the extra amount to the Bangladeshis on the other side of the fence is rampant among the border population.’<sup>18</sup>

The process of submission of documents at the gate, followed by entrance to the lands, one at a time, delays the farmers’ work schedule. This, specifically, becomes a serious concern in the summer months since farmers have to work late in the afternoons in the scorching heat.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, once past the gate, the farmers cannot come back even if they need to and have to wait for the next opening slot. Incidents of farmers falling sick during work and not being able to access a doctor because they have been fenced out for that while, or even of farmers being hit by hailstorms at work and unable to run to a shelter because of being fenced out, are common.<sup>20</sup>

Negotiating the fence is as hazardous for agricultural labourers as it is for owners of farmlands outside the fence. The latter often employ agricultural labourers to cultivate their lands. The labourers are often not local residents of the border areas and, thus, not accustomed to border regulations. They are apprehensive about submitting their voter cards to the BSF for fear of them being misplaced.<sup>21</sup> Being dependent on the whims of the BSF affects the labourers as well, who are often seen to be engaged in other forms of livelihood practices to support their meagre earnings as agricultural labourers. However, the gate restrictions prohibit them from utilising their time. ‘Even if the labourers finish their work, they have to wait in the field for hours till the gate reopens on the next scheduled time’,<sup>22</sup> says Imtiaz, a farmer cultivating fenced-out land.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Balaram Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Asharidoho BSF camp (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Kuddus Rahman, resident of Jaykrishnapur village, Jalangi (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Animesh, resident and farmer at Bindol (North Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 26 January 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> ‘আসতে দেবী হলে গেট বন্ধ হয়ে যাবে. তখন লেবার ভেতরে বসে থাকছে. আবার ২ ঘন্টা পরে যখন খুলবে তখন বেরোবে. কোম্পানি কমান্ডার তো সারাক্ষণ গেট-এর কাছে থাকে. তাও কেন আসতে দেয় না

For those whose homesteads have been left outside the fence, living by and surviving the border has become a challenge in itself. The scheduled timings for the opening of the fence gates are, in no way, made flexible for them, implying that they also have to abide by the timings like the farmers. Access to schools, colleges, hospitals, relatives, friends and any other basic amenities depends on the opening of the gates at scheduled timings. Registering their names at the BSF checkpoints near the gates is a daily routine for them as well. The villages outside the fence lack every civic amenity, which forces the inhabitants of the fenced-out lands to cross the gate for every little need.<sup>23</sup> Incidents of death, for not being able to cross the gate and access a doctor, are not rare.<sup>24</sup>

The anxiety of being fenced out rings loud in the responses of the people who negotiate the fence every day. ‘There is a feeling of being imprisoned when we are on that side of the fence, when we cannot enter the gates even if we want to. We want the gates to be left open all day so that we can move in and out freely’,<sup>25</sup> says Animesh. Given the confinement of the people outside the fence for about 20 hours every day, such responses make perfect sense and are indications of how the process of double-bordering affected by the fence has affected the perceptions of the farmers, like inside-outside, free-imprisoned.

It is important to keep in mind that this ordeal of negotiating border fences by the farmers is to move within their own state and not across an international border. The construction of the fence has re-defined the spatial perception of what constitutes the border, acting, in a way, as a second border between two territorial locations—the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of the fence. ‘An Indian is devoid of the freedom to move

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l’ (The labourer has to wait outside the gate for hours till the gate opens again. The Company Commander is generally near the gate. But even then he does not allow us to cross the gate as we want to.) Interview with Imtiaz Mondol, resident of Mathurapur village (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Awasthi, A.P., Safaya, C., Sharma, D., Narula, T. and Dey, S. (2010) *Indo-Bangladesh Fence Issue*. Centre for Civil Society. Research Project by CCS Fellows. [Online] Available from: <http://ccsindia.org/nolandsman/>. [Accessed: 3 August 2013].

<sup>24</sup> Saha, P. (15 May 2012) Darja kholeni BSF, mrityu ashustho mohilar. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/15uttar2.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Animesh, resident and farmer at Bindol (North Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 26 January 2012).

around freely at the borders,' is how Narendranath Ghosh expresses his anguish,<sup>26</sup> when explaining the irony of having to prove one's identity when moving around in one's own country in the border areas, let alone crossing the borders. Neil Brenner's idea of a 'scalar structuration'<sup>27</sup> helps us in understanding the re-interpretation of the scales of the border space by civilians as well as border guards, where the creation of the border followed by the construction of the fence has redefined the sense of inclusion-exclusion for the people who negotiate state apparatuses at the border everyday.<sup>28</sup>

The demand for shifting the fence and the BSF outposts to the 'zero point' rings loud in most of the responses. 'The BSF must be posted at the zero point...they must man the actual border',<sup>29</sup> says Samsuddin. The phrase 'actual border' indicates the perceptions of *double-bordering* that the fence has led to.

The theft of crops or attack on farmers by miscreants on the fenced-out lands is a common occurrence along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>30</sup> Once the gates close for the day, the crops on these lands lie unattended and exposed to theft by miscreants from the Bangladesh side.<sup>31</sup> Despite the farmers being witness to such thefts, the BSF constables prohibit them from accessing their lands and stopping the theft. Complaints to the BSF officials regarding such occurrences rarely bear fruit,<sup>32</sup> as they cite reasons of jurisdictional complications in justifying their inactivity. According to the BSF officers, such occurrences are not under their jurisdiction since the theft is by foreign nationals, i.e. Bangladeshis, and that, too, outside the fence

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Narendranath Ghosh, resident of Karimpur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 24 October 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Brenner, N. (2001) The limits to scale? Methodological reflections on scalar structuration. *Progress in Human Geography*. 25(4). p.592.

<sup>28</sup> Scalar structuration as a socio-spatial process includes the convergence of varying, often conflicting scales of spatial perception by the various actors. In the case of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, the various scalar structururations perceived by the civilians and the border guards converge over the space of the border, resulting in a complex pattern or mosaic of spatial identities.

<sup>29</sup> 'বি এস এফ-এর জিরো পয়েন্টে-এ থাকার উচিত... বি এস এফ একচুয়াল সীমালৈ ডিউটি করুক ।'

Interview with Samsuddin Mondol, resident of Nowadpur village, Jalangi (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Staff Reporter (29 March 2012) Petrapole shimantey fer bondho sushonghoto checkpost toirir kaj. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from:

<http://www.anandabazar.com/29pgn2.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>31</sup> Awasthi, Safaya, Sharma, Narula and Dey, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Prasanta Mondol, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

and, hence, outside the realm of their control.<sup>33</sup> Officially, the land between the ‘zero point’ and the border fence is Indian territory, by virtue of being located within the territorial delimitations of the state. But the construction of the fence has virtually turned these lands into no-man’s lands—unguarded by Indian border guards and vulnerable to criminal activities by Bangladeshi miscreants.<sup>34</sup>

Interestingly, responses confirming the decrease in the number of burglaries in homes inside the fence are also not rare. This implies that while the fence safeguards the houses inside the fence from ‘Bangladeshi burglars’, it also exposes the fenced-out lands and homes to the same miscreants.<sup>35</sup> Ambivalent feelings regarding the fence are discernible among the respondents. Kuddus Rahman expresses his concern in the following way: ‘Let there be fencing. We do not have a problem with that. They have to do whatever it takes for the security of India. But our humble request is to let the farmers work in their fields without problem. And BSF is the main obstacle to this end.’<sup>36</sup>

Recorded cases of trespassing have noticeably increased after the fencing. This does not necessarily suggest that the actual number of trespassing incident has increased but only that the presence of the gates now makes the movement of people more visible and easy to locate, unlike the previous unfenced border where unhindered movement across the border often went unnoticed and, hence, unrecorded. The following response from a Bangladeshi interviewee, Md. Zia-ul Haq, explains how the fence has made the border more visible and cross-border movement more traceable than it was previously: ‘There are a large number of Indian convicts in Dinajpur jail in Bangladesh. Most of them are convicted of illegal infiltration. Some of them might have crossed over to the Bangladesh side for agriculture. Some of

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Imtiaz Mondol, resident of Mathurapur village (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>34</sup> ‘ফসল কেঁটে নিয়ে যায়ে বাংলাদেশীরা. এবার পাট হারিয়ে গেছে অনেক লোকের।’ (The Bangladeshi thieves steal our crops from the fenced-out lands. This year a number of farmers have lost their jute in this way.) Interview with Kuddus Rahman, resident of Jaykrishnapur village, Jalangi (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Sabitri Mahato and Imtiaz Mondol, residents of Char Meghna and Mathurapur village, respectively (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 and 22 October 2011 respectively).

<sup>36</sup> ‘কাঁটা তার পরক, তাতে আমাদের আপত্তি নেই. ভারতবর্ষের রক্ষার জন্য যা করে করুক. কিন্তু আমাদের আর্জি এটুকুই যেন চাষীরা মাঠে ঠিক করে চাষ করতে পারে. বি এস এফ সেই ক্ষেত্রেই বাঁধা হয়ে দাঁড়াচ্ছে।’ Interview with Kuddus Rahman, resident of Jaykrishnapur village, Jalangi (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).



them have been caught from their own land in India. From 2005 onwards, the number of Indian convicts in Dinajpur jail has increased. Most of these convicts used to be set free before the fence had been constructed. After the fencing, the number of officially-convicted trespassers has increased. Many of them are Indian farmers who mistakenly cross over to the Bangladeshi side without an official document. Many of them are afraid to go back in fear of being apprehended by the BSF. So they surrender to BGB and are, then, sent back to India through Flag Meetings between the BSF and the BGB'.<sup>37</sup>

The issue of the violation of fencing rules by the BSF has been one of the more important issues regarding fencing.<sup>38</sup> 'The rule of leaving a 150 yards gap between the 'zero point' and the fence is not being observed everywhere. Often the fences are constructed way inside the villages, at a distance of more than 200 yards from the 'zero point'. The fence should at least be moved to its stipulated position. And still after that the land that will be fenced out should be taken over by the government against a compensation to the farmers who lose their land,' says Pranabesh, a farmer with 'fenced out' farmlands.<sup>39</sup>

Demands for exchanging the 'fenced-out' lands in return for compensation from the government are frequent in the responses of the farmers owning lands outside the fence. In some parts of the North-West frontier provinces in India, including provinces like Rajasthan and Punjab, government compensation for fenced-out lands is already in place, where the government pays a fixed amount of Rs. 3,000-4,000 to farmers who have their lands outside the fence, irrespective of the yield. While the government of West Bengal is aware of such a scheme, no definite policy has yet been designed.<sup>40</sup> 'We have requested government officials to look into this possibility of compensation. In spite of assurances, no such policy has been, so far,

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Md. Zia-ul Haq, resident and college lecturer in Dinajpur town (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

<sup>38</sup> PTI (31 January 2010) Indo-Bangla border: Fencing forces thousands in no man's land. *Hindustan Times*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/newdelhi/Indo-Bangla-border-Fencing-forces-thousands-in-no-man-s-land/Article1-503736.aspx>. [Last accessed: 27 July 2013].

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Pranabesh, resident and farmer at Ramnagar village (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Ranjit, resident of Jamalpur village, Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

announced,' says Hirak Kanti Munshi, secretary to the local committee of a political party at Balurghat in South Dinajpur district (West Bengal).<sup>41</sup>

ii. Legal consequences of fencing

The fence violates some of the aspects of the Indian Constitution, specifically aspects of Article 19 and 21. Article 19(1) says that all citizens of India shall have the right (d) to move throughout the territory of India and (e) to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India. The state can only make reasonable restriction of the right in the interest of the general public or for the protection of the interest of any scheduled tribe [Article 19(5)]. The fence violates Article 19(1) of the Constitution by restricting the movement and settlement of people outside it, inspite of the fact that it is neither in public interest nor are the lands outside it, tribal areas (i.e. not officially designated). The issue of security cited by India as a reason for fencing does not hold good for two reasons: one, unless there is a state of emergency, martial law or war, such construction in the name of security is a violation of the fundamental rights of Indian citizens; two, even after the construction of the fence on security grounds, India is unable to prevent or even trace illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators into its territory.

Article 21 of the Indian Constitution ensures the life and personal liberty of its citizens. Yet by preventing them from pursuing livelihoods (and, hence, life), by denying the citizens their access to basic amenities and by illegally confining the citizens outside the fence for 20 hours every day, the latter is a serious violation of some of the basic rights of Indian citizens.

The Right to Property (Article 300-A) is also being violated by depriving the citizens of free access to their property outside the fence, rendering the property valueless, and also by depriving them of any compensation for such forceful devaluation of their property through the construction of the fence.

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Hirak Kanti Munshi, resident of Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012); there have been government-level talks between ministers and the BSF regarding the fence issue, but to no fruitful effect. Staff Reporter (4 November 2009) BSF Pranab Katha: Simanta basi der jonyo udyog. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1091104/4mur4.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

iii. Effect of the border on the nature of cultivation along it

The whole stretch of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border boasts of fertile land fed by a number of rivers, making this belt and almost the whole length of the border zone a highly cultivable territory, with a three-crop record in one year.<sup>42</sup> Apart from the usual food crops such as paddy, wheat, lentils and mustard, and cash crops such as jute, a variety of fruit cultivation is also practiced by the cultivators.

Certain crops that are harmful to the health of the farmers and also have addictive features such as tobacco and poppy<sup>43</sup> are also seen to have increased along the border because they constitute profitable smuggling items.

Poppy: Poppy cultivation is illegal in West Bengal,<sup>44</sup> though that has not stopped cultivators from growing it due to its high profitability. Out of the seven districts in West Bengal where poppy cultivation has been reported, four are border districts—Nadia, Murshidabad, Malda and South Dinajpur (the other three being Bardhaman, Hooghly and Birbhum).<sup>45</sup> According to the police, an organised criminal network is encouraging poppy cultivation by offering greater profit margins to cultivators. As newspaper reports suggest, thousands of acres<sup>46</sup> of poppy plantations have been burned down through government initiatives in January 2011 (January being the time of harvest). In January 2012, about 340 acres were burned down, while another 3,000 acres were still being cultivated illegally.<sup>47</sup> The role of the border becomes clear in the explanation given by a section of the police department with regard to the failure in completely preventing poppy cultivation. According to them, while most of the poppy plantations are traced with the help of satellites, a major portion lying near the border or on the *chars*/enclaves cannot be detected due to satellite restrictions in border areas. Sometimes poppy plantations are also surrounded by other plantations to escape detection. No amount of warning, awareness programmes or legal steps

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with a BSF official at BRC-pur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011); Jamwal, 2004, p.8.

<sup>43</sup> The dried latex of the poppy is called opium—an addictive drug, which again can be chemically processed for making heroin—a stronger narcotic.

<sup>44</sup> In India, only in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan can poppy be cultivated legally, according to the regulations of the Central Bureau of Narcotics.

<sup>45</sup> De Sarkar, S. (1 October 2012) Posto chash rukhtey ebar SMS-e pulishi prochar. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1121001/1raj1.html>. [Last accessed: 27 July 2013].

<sup>46</sup> 640 acres= 1square mile.

<sup>47</sup> De Sarkar, 1 October 2012, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*.

have succeeded in preventing the illegal cultivation of poppy, especially along the border.<sup>48</sup>

Tobacco: The cultivation of tobacco is yet another widespread occurrence along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border despite the harmful effects of tobacco plantation on the cultivators. There are no official restrictions on tobacco plantation, either in India or Bangladesh, to act as a deterrent in this case. But cultivating tobacco has its share of hazards. ‘Green Tobacco Sickness’<sup>49</sup> and lungs problems are some of the hazards associated with it. Tobacco companies around the world encourage its cultivation, especially in developing countries, and the government subsidies add to the problem. Poor farmers fall prey to such inducements. West Bengal is an important area for tobacco cultivation— Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Malda and Murshidabad being the most widely-cultivated districts, apart from other areas, including Nadia.<sup>50</sup> All the five above-mentioned districts happen to be border districts in West Bengal.

Cannabis: Cannabis<sup>51</sup> production has also been on the rise in the border district of Cooch Behar because of high profits<sup>52</sup> and, more importantly, the district’s close proximity to the ‘Siliguri Corridor’<sup>53</sup> that caters to the neighbouring states of Bangladesh, besides Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. The riverbeds or the kitchen gardens of the local inhabitants of Cooch Behar, a border district in West Bengal, are being

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Green Tobacco Sickness is a form of nicotine poisoning. When wet leaves are handled, nicotine from the leaves gets absorbed by the skin and causes nausea, vomiting and dizziness.

<sup>50</sup> Dinjata Jute Tobacco Co. *Indiamart*. Available from: <http://www.indiamart.com/dinhata-jute/profile.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Cannabis is a genus of flowering plant and is grown mostly in Central and South Asia. Though traditionally used for fibre, oil, medicinal purposes and recreational drug, the dried flowers are also widely used to make marijuana—a narcotic, while extracts of cannabis are used for making hashish—yet another narcotic, and hash oil.

<sup>52</sup> 15,000 square feet of cannabis production gives a return of about Rs.5,00,000. Sarkar, D. (15 June 2012) Cultivation of illegal cannabis flourishing in Coochbehar. *The Economic Times*. [Online] Available from: [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-06-15/news/32254673\\_1\\_cannabis-kitchen-garden-coochbehar-district](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-06-15/news/32254673_1_cannabis-kitchen-garden-coochbehar-district). [Last accessed: 27 July 2013].

<sup>53</sup> The Siliguri Corridor or Chicken's Neck has its origin in the partition of India in 1947 and is a narrow stretch of land that connects India's north-eastern provinces to the rest of India, with the countries of Nepal and Bangladesh lying on either side of the corridor. The kingdom of Bhutan lies on the northern side of the corridor. The city of Siliguri in the state of West Bengal is the major city in this area. The city is the central node that connects Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim, the Darjeeling hills, north-east India and the rest of India. Apart from being the hotbed of illegal infiltration, this stretch of land has also become an important corridor for narcotics and weapon trafficking.

used for cannabis production, making Cooch Behar a flourishing cannabis-producing district.<sup>54</sup> The Siliguri Corridor takes care of the merchandising of the product. Despite the police destroying truckloads of cannabis or burning produce in the field, cannabis cultivation continues in full swing, much like poppy cultivation<sup>55</sup>—drawing attention to the territorial importance of the border in the context of the nature of cultivation.

### III. Labourers

#### i. Agricultural labourers

Though working as agricultural labourers is an important source of livelihood along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, it is clearly not sufficient to provide for the entire population living along it. ‘My husband works as a labourer in other people’s jute cultivations where his job is to bring the harvest from the field and then to wash and dry them. The whole job fetches him a meagre sum of Rs.120 a day. Do you think a whole family can survive on that? It is like being a daily-wage worker. There is no income on the days when there is no work,’<sup>56</sup> says Rupali Mahato.

#### ii. Labourers in other parts of the country or abroad

The lack of alternative livelihood opportunities at the border drives the border civilians to other non-border and affluent areas in search of their livelihood, both in India and Bangladesh.<sup>57</sup> ‘We do not have any industry at this border, which is why more than fifty per cent of the population goes abroad as labourers’, says Ranjit.<sup>58</sup> Male civilians are more prone to migration to non-border areas as labourers in

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<sup>54</sup> About 10,000,000 square feet of agricultural land is under cannabis production in Cooch Behar, as of June 2012. Sarkar, 15 June 2012, *The Economic Times*.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> ‘স্বামী অসুস্থ. এমনিতে রোজ কার রোজগার বলতে লেবার খাটে. পাট চাষ করার পর সেটা তুলে আনা, ধওয়া, এসব কাজ করে. ১২০ টাকা পাওয়া যায়. তাতেই গোটা একটা পরিবার চলে? চলে না. দিন মজুরির মত. যেদিন কাজ থাকে না, সেদিন রোজগার নেই ।’ Interview with Rupali Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Hiram Kanti Munshi, resident of Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Ranjit, resident of Jamalpur village, Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

factories.<sup>59</sup> In recent times, MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005)<sup>60</sup> is taking initiatives, through various employment schemes, to hold back people in their own areas and to prevent migration to faraway places as labourers. ‘But through NREGA, at best 50 to 70 people can be employed at a time, but not 500 to 700,’<sup>61</sup> says Animesh. The indication is clear. The West Bengal-Bangladesh border areas are ill-equipped in providing enough livelihood opportunities to their inhabitants.

The other avenues of labour for the border people include working as labourers in brick-kilns and rice-mills, and as porters at the Border Land Ports. Engaging more people, especially young men looking for livelihood opportunities, as labourers in these places might help reduce their engagement in cross-border smuggling activities, feels Hirak Kanti Munshi.<sup>62</sup>

### iii. Brick-kilns

In the southern part of West Bengal, especially in the border district of the North 24 Parganas, more than 400 brick-kilns<sup>63</sup> have mushroomed over the years due to the presence of rivers in the district. West Bengal shares a substantial area of riverine borders with Bangladesh, making the border area suitable for the growth of brick-kilns. The sand deposition left by the rivers on their banks acts as raw materials for the brick-kiln industries<sup>64</sup> and, hence, these kilns develop along the banks of rivers.

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Bina Pramanik, resident of Ramjivanpur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>60</sup> The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is an Indian job guarantee scheme, enacted by legislation on August 25, 2005. The scheme provides a legal guarantee for one hundred days of employment in every financial year to adult members of any rural household willing to do public work-related unskilled manual work at the statutory minimum wage of 120 (US\$2.18) per day in 2009 prices. If they fail to do so, the govt. has to pay the salary to their homes. The law was initially called the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) but was renamed on 2 October 2009.

<sup>61</sup> ‘এন আর ই জি এ চেষ্টা করছে তাদের এখানে ধরে রাখার. কিন্তু তাদের এক একটা প্রকল্পে ৫০-৭০ জন কে খুব বেশি হলে কাজ দিতে পারবে এক এক বারে. ৫০০-৭০০ লোক কে তো আর দেওয়া যাবে না ।’

Interview with Animesh, resident and farmer at Bindol (North Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 26 January 2012).

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Hirak Kanti Munshi, resident of Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>63</sup> Cheruvari, S. (2006) Changing lives in the brick kilns of West Bengal. *Report for UNICEF India*. Available from: [http://www.unicef.org/india/child\\_protection\\_1736.htm](http://www.unicef.org/india/child_protection_1736.htm). [Accessed: 27 July 2013].

<sup>64</sup> Molla, H.R. (2011) Embankment of Lower Ajoy River and its impact on Brick-Kiln Industry in Central Bengal, India. *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences and*

The landless labourers, including a large number of migrant labourers not just from within India but also from Bangladesh (who cross the border to work in these kilns) depend largely on the seasonal occupation that these kilns provide.<sup>65</sup> The labourers from Bangladesh are mostly illegal migrants, who cross the border without passports and start working in these kilns on a seasonal basis. The demand for cheap labour pushes the owners of these kilns to adopt ‘unofficial’ means of employing labourers. The illegal migrant labourers from Bangladesh do not find any official recognition. What they do find is a means of livelihood on a seasonal basis. Most of them go back to Bangladesh once the brick-making season is over. But many of them stay back and eventually mix with the local Bengali population of West Bengal to look for other avenues of livelihood.



*Plate 6.* Brick-kilns along the riverine border, 2012.

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*Humanities*. 2(II). [Online] Available from:  
[http://www.ijrssh.com/webmaster/upload/Oct\\_2012\\_Hasibur%20Rahaman%20Molla.pdf](http://www.ijrssh.com/webmaster/upload/Oct_2012_Hasibur%20Rahaman%20Molla.pdf).  
[Accessed: 27 July 2013].

<sup>65</sup> Cheruvari, 2006.

‘The brick kilns have increased a lot in the last few years. We are extremely dependent on the kilns. The womenfolk also work there,’ says Md. Tafikul Islam.<sup>66</sup> In the absence of big-scale industries in the border areas, brick-kilns provide employment opportunities, even if seasonally, to a large number of people living along the borders. ‘There is nothing like an industry here. We just have the brick-kilns in this area. Otherwise, livelihood here means agriculture’, says Riazul Mondol.<sup>67</sup>

Amidst the lack of employment opportunities and the increasing involvement of border people with illegal means of earning, the brick-kilns have almost become life-savers, as responses from the border civilians indicate. The stretch between Lalgola (Murshidabad) and Basirhat (North 24 Parganas) along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border is especially lined by such brick-kilns, many of them illegal and without official license, given the vast area of riverine borders in this stretch.<sup>68</sup>

Yet the narrative of the brick-kilns has its share of irony as well. While the brick-kilns have provided better livelihood opportunities in the border areas, they have also driven many of their labourers into smuggling practices. The labourers use their income from these brick-kilns in smuggling, informs Kalipada Ghosh, a human-rights activist working with the labourers of the brick-kilns.<sup>69</sup> Border regulations affect the brick-kiln labourers in other ways as well, including the need to present voter cards to the BSF when required, and restrictions on working after 6PM. This implies that the labourers are unable to earn the wage that labourers in non-border brick-kilns make by loading bricks on to trucks in the evening.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Md. Tafikul Islam, resident of Panitor border (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 17 January 2012).

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Riazul Mondol, resident of Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>68</sup> Biswas, G. and Sujauddin (16 January 2013) Abhijoger shasti chhilo boro tikto. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/16mur1.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013]; Biswas, G. and Mukhopadhyay, S. (17 January 2013) Policar najar kintu koda. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/17mur2.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Kalipada Ghosh, resident and human rights activist at Basirhat (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 17 January 2012).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



#### iv. Rice-mills

Rice-mills had once constituted an important source of livelihood for the areas which now constitute the border districts of South Dinajpur (West Bengal) and Dinajpur (Bangladesh). While raw paddy came from the farmlands of Dinajpur, the rice-mills were mostly located in the western part of the district (which, after partition, became a part of West Bengal). The few remaining rice-mills in South Dinajpur (West Bengal) stand testimony to the immense impact that the partition of Bengal in 1947 had on the flourishing economy of the region. The now-decadent rice-mills were once flourishing industries and catalysts in the process of the growth of the districts, which are now the border districts.<sup>71</sup> Gourab Sarkar, a businessman in Hili explains it in the following way: ‘After the partition, the hinterland for these mills was cut off from the mills, having been located on the other side of the border. Many of the rice mills here shifted to the places which produced the raw materials, leaving Hili (the headquarters of South Dinajpur) barren. Increase in the carrying cost of raw Paddy resulted in this shift. The mills, therefore, moved nearer to the hinterland.’<sup>72</sup>

These districts had their heyday during the flourishing of these mills and, eventually, went into decadence after the partition— followed by the closure of the rice-mills. Just as brick-kilns make themselves visible in every narrative of the people of the southern part of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, so do rice-mills in those of the northern part of the border—the difference being in the tone of loss and frustration in the latter, due to the degenerate state of the rice-mills. Both the rice-mill industry and the brick-kiln industry have been affected by the creation of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border in a negative and positive way, respectively. While the brick-kilns are a positive product of the riverine borders, the rice-mills reveal the negative impact that the creation of the border had on some traditional industries. ‘Earlier the mills engaged a lot of people. Now, there are just two of these mills left, which do not suffice for the demand for livelihood of the people of this area. After the

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with Gourab Sarkar, resident of Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.; The ‘other factors’ were part of the demand for territories during partition, the Muslim League had demanded the inclusion of Calcutta urban agglomeration in East Bengal, including the areas where the ‘jute mills, military installations, ordnance factories, railway workshops and lines were located’. The demands were made on the grounds of East Bengal’s ‘economy, internal communication and defence’. Chatterji, J. (February 1999) The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal’s Border Landscape, 1947-52. *Modern Asian Studies*. 33(1). pp.198-199.

partition, the process of giving out licenses for trading in raw materials have become more stringent, and has almost stopped, in order to avoid misuse of the licenses through illegal trading. This has led to the closure of a number of rice mills. As a result, many people are going away to other places for work,’ rues Hirak Kanti Munshi.<sup>73</sup>

The stringency of the border resulted in the downfall of Hili as a commercial hub by increasing the communication hazards between it and Kolkata (the headquarters of West Bengal). ‘The railways could pass through the eastern parts of Bengal which later became Bangladesh, to cut short the travel time between Kolkata and Hili. Partition has increased the travel time between the two, forcing the trains to take a longer route. Most of the major railway services halted at Hili because it was an important destination. Hili was then the most flourishing business centre after Kolkata, since neither Siliguri nor Balurghat had emerged as business towns back then. In Hili alone, there were 15 rice-mills, making Hili not just the most important commercial hub in north Bengal but also the gateway to the north-east—a role that Siliguri now plays,’<sup>74</sup> laments Gourab. There have been renewed efforts in recent times to re-establish railway links via Bangladesh between commercial hubs of the northern part of West Bengal and its major railway stations.<sup>75</sup> These efforts complete the circle of the journey of border narratives, beginning from the disruption and illegalisation of links to their being re-established.

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<sup>73</sup> ‘বর্ডার এলাকাতে মানুষের কিছু নেই. আছে বলতে চালকল শিল্প. এখন ভাঙ্গনের মুখে. আগে প্রচুর মানুষ করত. এখন ২ টো আছে. তাতে এখানকার সব মজুরদের রুটি রুজি হয় না. চালকল বন্ধ হয়ে যাওয়ার কারণ বর্ডার এর ফলে দু দিকের লাইসেন্স সংক্রান্ত রেস্ট্রিকশন. পাচার এর ভয় ও লাইসেন্স দেওয়া বন্ধ করে দিয়েছে বলে প্রচুর চালকল বন্ধ হয়ে গেছে. যে ২ টো চলছে, তাতে কিছু হয় না. প্রচুর লোক বাইরে যাচ্ছে ।’ Interview with Hirak Kanti Munshi, resident of Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Gourab Sarkar, resident of Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012); The humiliation of being searched by Pakistani guards has been cited as reason for the disappointment of those travelling between North and West Bengal via Pakistani territory after partition, besides the hazards of taking circuitous routes, and numerous changes and long waits. Chatterji, 1999, p.230.

<sup>75</sup> Staff Reporter (12 February 2010) Via Bangladesh, Haldibari-Sealdah train chalu r dabi. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1100212/12uttar3.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].



*Plate 7. An unused railway line, disrupted by the creation of the border, 2011.*

#### IV. Land Ports

##### i. *Coolies* in Land Ports

The land ports along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border provide a range of livelihood opportunities to the border population, in both legitimate and illegitimate forms. Hili (West Bengal)-Bangla Hili (Bangladesh) and Petrapole (West Bengal)-Benapole (Bangladesh) form the two most important Land Ports along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, though other check posts also function as ports or are being developed as Land Ports in order to reduce the load on these two existing ones.

One of the important means of involvement for the border people that these ports offer is in the form of labourers. A substantial number of them are required for

loading and unloading the trucks. It is mostly the local population living near the border that works as full-time or part-time *coolies* (labourers) in these ports.<sup>76</sup>

While the Land Ports provide a good livelihood opportunity to the border population, they also have their flip side like all the other livelihood practices along the border. Those along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border are also important sites of smuggling, contrary to the idea that Land Ports ought to be under strict surveillance and, hence, are unfavourable for illegal activities. It is, in fact, under the surveillance mechanisms of the border forces at these ports that illegal practices thrive the most.<sup>77</sup>

The coolies are not just the ones most prone to getting involved in activities like working as carriers for smuggling contraband items across the borders, but also the worst victims of the same by getting addicted to the drugs they smuggle. A number of families are affected by this whereby male members of the families fall prey to drug networks and, eventually, addiction, while working as *coolies* in one of these border ports.<sup>78</sup>

## ii. Traders at the Land Ports

Bangladesh shares about 40 border points with India, including the Land Ports (LP) and Land Customs Stations (LCS), of which less than 15 are active.<sup>79</sup> In terms of legal trading, a wide range of produce—natural and otherwise, moves between the two states of India and Bangladesh through border ports, constituting about 60% of

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<sup>76</sup> Interview with Gourab Sarkar, resident of Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Jumaira, resident of Hili border (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 9 October 2011).

<sup>78</sup> ‘হিলি পোর্ট এ কুলি ছিল স্বামী। কুলি থাকা কালীন স্বামী হেরোইন আসক্ত হয়ে পড়ে। সংসারে খরচ দিত না। বছর ২ এক থেকে সে ধূর হিসেবে কাজ করে। বাচ্চা-সুরুজ (১২) আর ফুরুজ (১০)- এরাও যুক্ত।’ (My husband was a coolie at Hili port. During that time he became addicted to heroin. He stopped contributing money to the family. It’s been two years that he has been working as a dhoor here. My children Shuruj [12] and Furuj [10] are also involved in smuggling.) Interview with Rumela Begum, resident of Hili border area (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

<sup>79</sup> Mirza, T. and Bacani, E. (2013) Addressing Hard and Soft Infrastructure Barriers to Trade in South Asia. *Asian Development Bank South Asia Working Paper Series*. No.16. [Online] Available from: [http://sasec.asia/web/images/sasec/pdf/Addressing\\_Infra\\_Barriers\\_to\\_Trade\\_in\\_SA.pdf](http://sasec.asia/web/images/sasec/pdf/Addressing_Infra_Barriers_to_Trade_in_SA.pdf). [Accessed: 29 July 2013].

the total trade between the two states.<sup>80</sup> The largest trading point between India and Bangladesh is the Land Port (LP) of Benapole-Petrapole between the Jessore district of Bangladesh and the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, respectively. Other important Land Ports, especially between Bangladesh and West Bengal, are Sonamasjid-Mehdipur, Hili-Bangla Hili, Birol-Radhikapur, Banglabandha-Phulbari, Burimari-Chengrabandha and Bhomra-Ghojadanga.<sup>81</sup> The enormity of trade through these Land Ports ensures the involvement of a substantial number of people, including labourers and traders from local areas and other cities/towns,<sup>82</sup> customs officials and a whole array of people in official and non-official capacities.

Both in terms of the variety of traded products as well as infrastructure, Benapole-Petrapole port scores over Hili.<sup>83</sup> This explains the widespread occurrence of illegal cross-border activities in Hili, including bribes paid to border guards.<sup>84</sup>



Plate 8. Truck terminal at Petrapole Border Land Port, 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Staff Reporter (23 March 2013) Govt. to set up 4 new land-ports to facilitate cross-border trade. *The Financial Express*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/index.php?ref=MjBfMDNfMjNfMTNfMV8yXzE2NDE0MA>. [Last accessed: 29 July 2013].

<sup>81</sup> Mirza and Bacani, 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Jumaira, resident of Hili border (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 9 October 2011).

<sup>83</sup> Mirza and Bacani, 2013.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Gourab Sarkar, resident of Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

## V. Currency-exchange counters, restaurants and shops at the Land Ports

### i. Currency-exchange counters

The Land Ports provide other livelihood opportunities as well. The currency-exchange counters, which exchange Bangladeshi Taka for Indian Rupees and vice versa, constitute an important livelihood opportunity in the Land Port areas along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. The counters double-up as tourist agents in arranging for accommodation and travel for tourists who travel to India and Bangladesh through these ports. Mornings are the busiest times for the counters due to restrictions in border areas on any kind of official work late in the evenings.<sup>85</sup>

Subodh Majumdar, who has been working in a currency-exchange counter at the Petrapole border for over a decade now, explains the flip side of the system: ‘There are hardly any checks on the number of people travelling across the border. If someone intends to stay back for some illegal intentions, he/she simply has to destroy his/her passport and that will destroy all proofs of his/her existence. When they enter, they provide an Indian address of the place where they will be staying. But no one checks the validity of the address. Most of them (Bangladeshis) have relatives on this side. They come, put up in their relatives’ place, gradually buy land and property here and settle here for good. They just send back their passports to Bangladesh via someone. The border forces or police do not keep an eye on the people, until they are specifically suspicious about someone, in which case, the matter goes to the court. Otherwise, they (Bangladeshis) eventually obtain voter cards and settle here once and for all’.<sup>86</sup>

### ii. Restaurants

Restaurants<sup>87</sup> form yet another important source of livelihood in and around the border Land Ports along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. The sheer number of

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with Subodh Majumdar, resident and employee at counter at Petrapole border area (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 20 September 2011).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> More like makeshift eating joints (like *Dhabas* in India) serving basic meals of rice, *dal*, vegetable, fish/meat. The service is personal/casual in nature and lacks any of the formality or even the poshness of the restaurants that one comes across in big cities.

such eating joints in and around the ports indicates the prospect of having restaurants in such busy areas. ‘There are less residential houses here and more restaurants and counters. Thousands of people come here every day, where will they have their food? It is these restaurants and counters which make the border so buzzing,’ says Apurba Kumar Biswas, a resident of the Petrapole border area.<sup>88</sup> These restaurants, apart from serving the tourists, traders, labourers and all those who live and work at the border, act as a source of livelihood for hundreds of people as well.

Though these counters or restaurants might seem minor livelihood opportunities compared to the enormity of the large-scale trading that takes place at these ports, they are no less important. In fact, as far as engaging the local population at the border is concerned, they largely score over the big trading businesses. Unlike the traders, the people employed in these counters and restaurants are essentially local people whose lives, over the years, have come to depend on the border.

### iii. Border shops

The ownership of small shops in these port areas also constitutes another border-dependent livelihood option along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. These depend mostly on ‘side-trading’—a co-lateral occurrence from the large assignments of trade that the ports witness everyday. A small part of the trade assignments are channelised into the local shops, which sell these items at lower prices than their actual market prices. The items enter the country legally as part of a larger consignment and then find their way into the small shops dotting the border Land Ports, while the rest of the consignment travels to other parts of the country. The items sold in these shops mostly include cigarettes, spices, small electronic goods, chocolates, juices and snacks. The border guards, as well as the police and customs officials, are aware of their functioning.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> ‘এখানে বসত বাড়ি কম. রেস্টুরান্ট আর কাউন্টার বেশি. কত কোটি লোক আসে, তারা খাবে কোথায়? তাদের জন্যই বর্ডার-টা অত জমজমাট ।’ Interview with Apurba Kumar Biswas, resident of Petrapole border area (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 20 September 2011).

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Hasan-ul, resident of Burimari border area, Patgram (Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh, 6 October 2011).





Plate 9. Petrapole border buzzing with currency-counters, restaurants and shops, 2011.

## VI. Office of the border guards

The office of the border guards, apart from providing livelihood to the border guards themselves, provides livelihood opportunities to the local civilians as well. Some of the local border population, though miniscule in number, are either engaged as assistants in the auctioning of smuggled items or as *purohits* (priest) in the shrines inside the camps (this is specific to the BSF on the West Bengal border since a majority of them have shrines devoted to Hindu gods/goddesses). People engaged in one or the other activity inside the camps often end up playing mediators between the local civilians and the border guards.<sup>90</sup> But their role as mediators depends on the discretion of the border guards, whose general feeling of distrust towards the local population prevents them from mingling with the border civilians.

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<sup>90</sup> Interview with Rashid Hossein, resident of Lagola (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 8 November 2011).



In recent times, BSF has started recruiting local youths from border areas into BSF services, providing yet another livelihood option for the border civilians.<sup>91</sup>



Plate 10. Land Customs Station Office, Patgram, Lalmonirhat, Bangladesh, 2011.

## VII. Fishing

West Bengal and Bangladesh share 200 kilometres of a riverine border,<sup>92</sup> of which Ichamati, Padma and Tista are the most important border rivers. While these rivers as borders, ironically, attains significance more as catalysts for smuggling, they are also important for promoting fishing as a livelihood option for the people on both their

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<sup>91</sup> Staff Reporter (25 March 2013) Daulatpurey tarunder proshikhshan BSFer. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/25mur2.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>92</sup> Jamwal, 2004, p.8.

sides.<sup>93</sup> However, border regulations affect riverine borders as much as they do land borders, influencing the livelihood options of the people along them.<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, the sense of insecurity associated with border life in general also looms large in the responses of the civilians. ‘There is always the fear of being shot by the BSF. If someone moves a bit to the other side of the river during fishing, BSF gets hold of them and beats them up’,<sup>95</sup> says Jahangir, a fisherman in Kalindi river. The borderline, running along the river, is an imaginary line—seen at an equidistant point from either bank. It is, in fact, difficult *not* to violate the borderline when one is in the river since gauging the distance to the bank from the river is far more difficult than it is from the bank. The irony of imagining riverine border has also been expressed by the border guards themselves, besides the fishermen and civilians affected by it.

*Lines Drawn on Water*<sup>96</sup>

*We have here  
Somewhat strange type of border – line,  
Going through the middle of the river*

*Can anyone draw lines on water?  
Can a heart split up into two?*

*The fish, as ever  
Keep going and coming  
Hither & thither  
Even the tortoises can not recognize  
The mid stream border-line*

*I could never make out  
The names of the countries.*

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<sup>93</sup> Interview with Abedin, fisherman at Kaikhali village, Shyamnagar (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 14 February 2012).

<sup>94</sup> ‘বি এস এফ মাছ ধরতে দেয় না সিকিউরিটি-র কারণে. আমাদের গরিব দেশ. মাছ ধরার ওপর জীবিকা নির্ভর করে ।’ (BSF often prohibits us from fishing in these rivers citing to security reasons. We are a poor country and depend heavily on fishing.) Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> ‘এখানে বি এস এফ এর গুলি করার ভয় সবসময়. কেউ যদি মাছ ধরতে গিয়ে একটু ওদিকে চলে যায়, বি এস এফ ধরে নিয়ে গিয়ে মারে ।’ Interview with Jahangir, fisherman and resident of Kabilpur village, Chougachha (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012).

<sup>96</sup> Composed by Nirmal Verma and Manohar Batham, BSF. [Online] Available from: <http://bsf.nic.in/doc/archi/archi17.pdf>.

*From the fish that were caught  
I only know the names  
Of those fishing  
And helplessly watch  
The fish flopping about in anguish.*



*Plate 11. Riverine border, with West Bengal on the far side, 2012.*

## VIII. Livelihoods not directly related to the border

Some of the other livelihood practices seen in the border areas, such as tailoring, *beedi*-making, owning a band-party and so on, though not directly related to the border, are nevertheless affected by it. If nothing else, the general sense of insecurity haunts the people engaged in these livelihoods as much as those in other border-related occupations.

### i. *Beedi*-making

*Beedi* manufacturing is a 20 billion revenue-yielding industry in India that involves more than 10 million organised people and another 30 million people in the unorganised sector. The unorganised workforce in the *beedi* industry includes about

20 million marginal labourers, 6 million farmers, 4 million registered *beedi* rollers and another 1 million involved in plucking *tendu* leaves (the leaves used for making *beedi*). Women constitute 75% of the total workforce, which is almost essentially a rural one.<sup>97</sup>

The areas along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, being essentially rural in character, also see involvement of a substantial number of their people in the *beedi*-making industry. The involvement is especially in the form of an unorganised workforce, including pluckers and rollers. Women constitute the major portion of the workforce, more so because of restrictions and insecurities involved in their movement in border areas.<sup>98</sup> In the northern parts of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, the closure of the rice-mills has triggered the large-scale involvement of local civilians in *beedi*-making<sup>99</sup>. The creation of the border catalysed the closure of the rice-mills which, in turn, encouraged the emergence of *beedi*-making as an important alternative livelihood practice.

## ii. Tailoring

Proximity to a city or an affluent town encourages the emergence of certain livelihood practices. Understandably, certain professions have emerged in those parts of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border which are in close proximity to Kolkata. The district of North 24 Parganas, being the closest border area to Kolkata,<sup>100</sup> has witnessed the emergence of certain livelihood practices, such as tailoring, which depends for its market upon Kolkata. Basirhat is one such border town in this district which has seen the large-scale emergence of the tailoring business in the last couple of decades.<sup>101</sup> This explains the concentration of a huge number of tailoring

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<sup>97</sup> Patel, R.P. (2000) *Submission to WHO's Tobacco Free Initiative on FCTC Framework Convention on Tobacco Control*. All India Bidi Industry Federation. Ahmedabad. [Online] Available from: [http://www.who.int/tobacco/framework/public\\_hearings/F2000196.pdf](http://www.who.int/tobacco/framework/public_hearings/F2000196.pdf). [Accessed: 29 July 2013].

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Hira Kanti Munshi, resident of Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Petrapole is at a distance of about 80 kilometres from Kolkata.

<sup>101</sup> 'এখানে টেলারিং এর কাজ খুব চলে। এখানে বেশ কিছু ছেলে আছে যারা হয়ত এক সময় কলকাতা-এ টেলারিং করত। কাজ শিখে এখন এখানে এসে টেলারিং-এর দোকান খুলেছে। এটা এখানে খুব ইউসুয়াল একটা পেশা। তারা কারখানা খোলে। মাল গুলো কলকাতা যায়ে। ওখানে কোনো একজন ধরা মালিক এর থেকে মাল এনে এখানে সেলাই করে আবার নিয়ে যাই।' (Tailoring is a very commonly practiced livelihood here. Many of the tailors have had their training in Kolkata and now own tailoring shops

shops/factories in and around the border areas of Basirhat. Though these occupations are not directly related to the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, they are integral to narratives of border livelihoods along it.

### iii. Other options

The fluctuating prices of agricultural produce, coupled with restrictions in using the fenced-out lands, compel the border dwellers to look for alternative livelihood options. While some of these alternatives are related to or dependent on the border, others are not. Moreover, the seasonal nature of agriculture also renders the cultivators jobless at certain times, when they look for other options. Running band-parties<sup>102</sup> or even working as domestic helps<sup>103</sup> constitute such alternative means of livelihoods. But the essentially unaffluent nature of the border areas implies that such alternative means of livelihoods often fail to provide sufficient earnings.<sup>104</sup>

## IX. Illegal livelihood practices

The creation of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border in 1947 followed by the deployment of border guards and, finally, the beginning of the construction of the fence in 1986 has affected traditional livelihood practices in these parts. The border has also resulted in the evolution of some livelihood practices never seen before in the areas which now constitute the border. Both kinds of influences of the border on livelihood practices are seen in the legal and illegal practices prevalent, at present, along it. While some of the traditional practices have been illegalised by the creation of the border, some illegal practices have been a result of the creation of the border itself. The emergence of cross-border smuggling practices along it also has its roots in the ‘confused policy’ of India and East Pakistan following the partition, regarding the commodities which could be allowed to move across the border legally. This

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here. It is a very useful profession here. Kolkata serves as both our source for raw materials as well as markets for our products.) Interview with Bilal, resident of Basirhat (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 17 January 2012).

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Nikhil, resident of Mathurapur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Julekha, resident of Raibhat village, Bowladar (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 9 October 2011).

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Nikhil, resident of Mathurapur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

confusion 'created a space for the emergence of smuggling as a thriving enterprise in the border areas, usually with the connivance of the border police'.<sup>105</sup>

The geographical expanse of smuggling practices along the border in terms of the area covered and the range of contraband items crossing it indicate that cross-border smuggling practices are integral to the understanding of not just livelihood practices but the characteristic features of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border in general.

From drugs (like heroin, marijuana, cough syrups, syringes, hormone-stimulating drugs and alcohols) to domestic and household necessities (crops, spices, utensils, cattle and fish), from turtles (even Monitor Lizards)<sup>106</sup> and skeletons<sup>107</sup> to cooking oil, petrol, diesel, metals, from electronic goods (phone sets, calculators) to luxury items (cloths, perfumes, junk jewellery), from fake currency notes and mobile phone SIM cards to newspapers—every conceivable item is being smuggled across the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, despite the patrolling border guards and the surveillance mechanisms at work.<sup>108</sup> This also indicates the awareness and, in some cases, co-operation of the border guards in such practices.

Some points along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border have attained specific strategic importance for cross-border smuggling practices, like Hili (between the South Dinajpur district of West Bengal and Dinajpur district of Bangladesh), Petrapole-Benapole (between North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal and Jessore district of Bangladesh),<sup>109</sup> and areas like Phulbari-Banglabandhu, Changrabandha-Burimari, South Gitaldaha-Mogolhat, Raiganj-Ranipukur, Bagdha-Ansolia,

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<sup>105</sup> Chatterji, 1999, p.234.

<sup>106</sup> Staff Reporter (27 September 2012) *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1120927/jibjagat.html>. [Last accessed: 3 August 2013]. Monitor Lizards (Latin name: *Varamus Monitor*) are often used for vaccine industries for experimentation. They are also consumed in parts of southern India and Malaysia.

<sup>107</sup> Staff Reporter (2 February 2010) 10 ti kankaal uddhar simante. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1100202/2mur5.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013]; Sujauddin and Biswas, G. (5 March 2010) Simante kankaal pachare lagano hochhe kisore der. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1100305/5mur1.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>108</sup> The total number of contraband items seized by the North Bengal Frontier of BSF while being smuggled across the border amounted to 2,80,06,460 (2009), 3,75,91,925 (2010), 4,24,28,407 (2011) and 38,31,393 (January-March 2012), out of which 98% of the seizures (including cattleheads) were of outgoing items, i.e. smuggled from West Bengal to Bangladesh. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (December 2012). 4(14).

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Gourab Sarkar, resident of Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

Krishnanagar-Jadabpur and Bashirhat-Bhomra.<sup>110</sup> Such illegal livelihood practices have, over years of their functioning, not just become characteristic of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border but also an integral part of the economy that runs along it.

i. Drugs

Cough Syrup: The smuggling of drugs, especially the cough syrup called Phensidyl,<sup>111</sup> is the most commonly known practice in this border, besides that of heroin (like Jamtala, Khalidpur in Bongaon)<sup>112</sup> and marijuana.<sup>113</sup> Phensidyl is manufactured by a well-known pharmaceutical company in India from where it is distributed mostly to the northeastern parts of India and West Bengal.<sup>114</sup> ‘In addition, empty Phensidyl bottles are refilled with higher narcotic content, repackaged as “Phensidyl Plus” and smuggled back into Bangladesh,’<sup>115</sup> where they are acquired by addicts at a cheap price (the price for a 100ml bottle of smuggled Phensidyl in Bangladesh amounts to Tk.500<sup>116</sup> and is acquired in India for Rs. 150,<sup>117</sup> though the official market price for a 100ml Phensidyl bottle in India is Rs.75 and Rs.40.78 for a 50ml bottle).<sup>118</sup> Large consignments of Phensidyl bottles have been reportedly seized

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<sup>110</sup> Das, P. (2012) *Drug Trafficking in India: A Case for Border Security*. IDSA Occasional Paper No.24. New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis. pp. 33-34; Changrabandha, Panisala, B S Bari, Oran and Arjun—all located along the Saniajan and Teesta rivers, are some of the more sensitive BOPs of the North Bengal Frontier of BSF in terms of cross-border smuggling. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2012). 4(11).

<sup>111</sup> Phensidyl is a cough linctus, a liquid preparation like syrup which contains glucose in high concentration for better taste. One of its main ingredients includes codeine phosphate—mostly used as a painkiller and cough suppressant. Phensidyl is often used as a recreational narcotic and/or antidepressant, due to the higher proportion of codeine phosphate in it, as compared to other cough syrups. This is why many people in India, Nepal and Bangladesh are addicted to it. The syrup is illegal in Bangladesh but not in India, as a result of which Phensidyl is smuggled from India to Bangladesh. Myanmar is the only other place besides India where Phensidyl is produced.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Ujjal Ghosh, resident of Petrapole border area (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 20 September 2011).

<sup>113</sup> Das, 2012, p.30.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Jain, S. K. (2006) The spurious drug menace and remedy. *Health Administrator*. Vol.XIX(1). p. 33, as quoted in Das, 2012, pp.30-31.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with a BGB official at Goga BGB camp, Agro-Bhulot (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012).

<sup>117</sup> Interview with Bijon, a journalist with a Bengali daily at Jessore town (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012).

<sup>118</sup> Information given by a pharmacist in a pharmaceutical shop in Kolkata, October 2012.

along the India-Bangladesh border and still continue to be seized on a regular basis by the border guards.<sup>119</sup>

Heroin/Hashish: Heroin has been mostly reported as sourced from the ‘Golden Crescent’,<sup>120</sup> through India into Bangladesh.<sup>121</sup> Along the stretch of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, the Benapole-Petrapole, Hili-Bangla Hili and Gede-Darshana borders are the most prone to drug-trafficking.<sup>122</sup> Other informal and small-scale drug-trafficking routes along this stretch include Phulbari-Banglabandhu, Changrabandha-Burimari, South Gitaldaha-Mogolhat, Raiganj-Ranipukur, Bagdha-Ansolia, Krishnanagar-Jadabpur, and Bashirhat-Bhomra.<sup>123</sup> The smuggling of heroin as well as other drugs is executed through conceivable and inconceivable ways, within tool boxes of bullock carts, the folds of women’s sarees, underground canals (built to drain excess rain water) and boats,<sup>124</sup> besides trucks carrying agricultural products, fabrics and, as a journalist in a local newspaper in Dinajpur informed me, even hidden inside the death-beds of corpses taken for cremation or burial.<sup>125</sup> Smuggling through underground canals is difficult to trace since it is easy to mistake the act of smuggling for routine agricultural practices such as draining water from the

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<sup>119</sup> In 2009, BGB seized 58,875 bottles of Phensidyl. Annual Report 2010, the International Narcotics Control Board, No. 27, pg. 90, quoted in Das, 2012, p.31; In the same year, BSF seized 4,18,788 bottles along the India-Bangladesh border. Annual Report 2009, Narcotics Control Bureau, No. 12, pg.30, quoted in Das, 2012, p.31; In 2011 Phensidyl bottles worth over Rs.10,00000 has been seized by the BSF. Kashyap, S.G. (5 December 2011) Smuggling thrives as fencing of Indo-Bangla border delayed. *The Indian Express*. [Online] Available from: [www.indianexpress.com/news/smuggling-thrives-as-fencing-of-indobangla-border-delayed/884123/0](http://www.indianexpress.com/news/smuggling-thrives-as-fencing-of-indobangla-border-delayed/884123/0). [Last accessed: 30 July 2013]; Between July and December 2012, 2,831 Phensidyl bottles have been seized by the North Bengal Frontier of BSF. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (December 2012). 4(14). Between January and March 2013, 15,326 bottles of Phensidyl have been seized by the North Bengal Frontier of BSF. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2013). 5(15).

<sup>120</sup> ‘Golden Crescent’ is the name given to one of Asia’s two principal areas of illicit opium production (the other being the ‘Golden Triangle’), located at the crossroads of Central, South and Western Asia. This space overlaps three nations—Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, whose mountainous peripheries define the crescent, though only Afghanistan and Pakistan produce opium, with Iran being a consumer and trans-shipment route for the smuggled opiates. In 1991, Afghanistan became the world’s primary opium producer. It now produces over 90% of the world’s non-pharmaceutical-grade opium, besides being the world’s largest producer of hashish.

<sup>121</sup> Das, 2012, p.32.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33-34

<sup>124</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Ramnagar BSF camp (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>125</sup> Interview with Bijon, a journalist with a Bengali daily in Dinajpur town (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).



fields by farmers. It is only below the culverts that such acts of smuggling can be traced visibly.<sup>126</sup>

The problem with tackling heroin production has been that the main component of heroin—Acetic Anhydride<sup>127</sup> —is used for making medicinal drugs (eg. Aspirin), besides leather, fabrics and paper, because of which the production of this chemical cannot be banned.<sup>128</sup> Incidences of hashish<sup>129</sup> smuggling inside plastic capsules have been recently reported. Hashish is packed inside capsules that look like ordinary medicine and is smuggled across the border from India (mostly from the border districts of Siliguri and Jalpaiguri in West Bengal) to Bangladesh.<sup>130</sup> Heroin, hashish and marijuana (*ganja*) are also regularly seized by the border guards though the actual amount which is successfully smuggled is much more the amount seized.<sup>131</sup>

‘Both the sides are affected by drug smuggling. But it still persists due to the profit it brings and because the BSF officials are also involved in it,’<sup>132</sup> laments Narendranath Ghosh, a resident of Karimpur. The closure of the border region to the general civilians after 5pm every day helps the smugglers in getting their way. It helps the

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<sup>126</sup> Biswas, G. and Sujauddin (7 January 2013) Sheeter shimantey barchhe pachar. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from:

<http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1130107/7mur1.html>. [Last accessed: 30 July 2013].

<sup>127</sup> Acetic Anhydride is used for the synthesis of heroin by the diacetylation of morphine.

<sup>128</sup> In a recent raid in a Sealdah-bound train in West Bengal, police and customs officials found 350 kilograms of Asetic Anhydride, which, if used for heroin, can produce about 150 kilograms of the same—the price for which would be around Rs. 50, 00,000 in the Indian market. Ghosh, S. (13 October 2012). Train bahonei kanchamal eney romroma heroin-er. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from:

<http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1121013/13raj5.html>. [Last accessed: 30 July 2013].

<sup>129</sup> Hashish, often known as ‘hash’ is a cannabis product and is sold either in a solid or a paste-like form. Traditionally, it has been used as a medicine and recreational drug though currently it is illegal to consume it nearly everywhere in the world. In northern India, hashish is locally known as *charas*. Special varieties of cannabis are particularly cultivated for the production of *ganja* (marijuana) and hashish in West Bengal, Rajasthan and the Himalayas in India.

<sup>130</sup> Ghosh, N. (3 January 2013) Capsuler ondorey chupisharey pachar hochhe hashish. *Anandabazar Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from:

<http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1130103/3desh6.html>. [Last accessed: 30 July 2013].

<sup>131</sup> Between October and December 2012, 62.85 kilograms of *ganja* were seized by the South Bengal Frontier of BSF. *Bagher Garjan* (October-December 2012). 26.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with Narendranath Ghosh, resident of Karimpur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 24 October 2011).

latter as well as the border guards to operate unhindered, without the fear of being exposed,<sup>133</sup> says another border resident.

The BSF, the BGB or the police can rarely lay their hands on the contractors of these trades. It is the carrier, known as *dhoor* in local parlance, who mostly gets caught by the border guards.<sup>134</sup> Carriers are usually local border civilians.<sup>135</sup> Any person capable of carrying any amount of weight, irrespective of gender or age, can earn as a *dhoor*. I was witness to scenes of smuggling on the Bangladesh side of the Hili border (Dinajpur) during one of my field visits, where children ranging from 7/8 years of age to boys in their mid-twenties were running on the roofs of a moving train carrying sacks of Phensidyl bottles and jumping from them onto the other side of the border, the railway line being located within a few yards from it.<sup>136</sup>

The *dhoors* are assigned the 'job' by the manager of the smuggling network, locally known as the 'lineman', who is responsible for maintaining the liaison between the carriers and the border guards.<sup>137</sup> The linemen are often locally-known faces, but are hardly reported to the border guards or the police. Fear of life threats from them is a reason cited by the local civilians, who witness such practices and know the lineman as well.<sup>138</sup> But the more important reason cited by the locals themselves is that of attracting the unwanted attention of the border guards. Since a substantial number of local civilians are directly or indirectly involved in illegal cross-border practices, they are also dependent on the lineman for the smooth operation of these.<sup>139</sup>

Moreover, the border guards are often the direct profiteers of such practices. They depend on the skills of the linemen for the smooth execution of cross-border smuggling. These reasons make the linemen indispensable to both the border

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<sup>133</sup> Interview with Kalipada Ghosh, resident of Panitor village, Basirhat (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 17 January 2012).

<sup>134</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident of Ghunapara-Dhumron village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> As witnessed on my visit to the Bangladesh side of Hili border, around the Hili Land Port on 8 October 2011.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Md. Zia-ul Haq, resident and lecturer in college at Dinajpur town (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident of Ghunapara-Dhumron village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>139</sup> Interview with Md. Zia-ul Haq, resident and lecturer in college at Dinajpur town (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

civilians and border guards.<sup>140</sup> This explains the power that they wield in the border areas. ‘Here, the power and influence of the linemen is more than than any political leader or *Panchayat* head. This can happen only in a border area,’ says Gourab Sarkar, a trader at the Hili Land Port.<sup>141</sup> Support from the political parties in power is also a reason for the growing influence and affluence of the linemen, says Kuddus Rahman, chairman of the local committee of the political party in power in West Bengal, hinting towards the misdeeds of the previous government.<sup>142</sup>

The prospect of instant money drives the essentially poor and often unemployed border civilians into such smuggling networks and this trend is the same on both sides of the border.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, the carriers often fall prey to addiction themselves and are unable to avoid drug smuggling jobs out of desperation.<sup>144</sup> The addiction of the carrier ruins him/her in the long run, leaves them incapable of earning a livelihood, eventually ruining the whole family. Subodh Burman was arrested by the BGB during the early hours of dawn near the Mohorapara area in Hili while smuggling 278 bottles of Phensidyl across the border. The bottles were being carried by him to the contractor’s house for which he would have been paid Tk. 350 for each bottle. He was a farmer by occupation and his family consisted of his wife and little daughter.<sup>145</sup> Carriers are often deceived by linemen into being victimised by the border guards and the police, while the former wash their hands off the whole operation.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Interview with Gourab Sarkar, resident and trader at Hili border area (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Kuddus Rahman, resident of Jaykrishnapur village, Jalangi (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>143</sup> *Bagher Garjan* (October-December 2012). 26.

<sup>144</sup> ‘The main reason behind their involvement is making fast money, besides, obviously, the addiction itself. A whole day’s labour earns them Rs.150 whereas a couple of (smuggling) trips earn them Rs.300. Half the people have, thus, moved to other places for work. The remaining earn through smuggling.’ Interview with a BSF official at Shikarpur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>145</sup> As noted in a conversation with the convict and the BGB officials by me at the Bamdebpur BGB Camp at Hili (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 9 October 2011).

<sup>146</sup> Interview with Rashid Hossein, resident of Lalgola (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 8 November 2011).

ii. Illegal human crossings

Illegal human border crossings constitute yet another form of cross-border practice along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, where the *dhoors* help people cross the border illegally, without a passport.<sup>147</sup> Its riverine borders,<sup>148</sup> especially those between Satkhira (Bangladesh) and North 24 Parganas (West Bengal), are prone to illegal human crossings,<sup>149</sup> besides being strategic locations for the smuggling of contraband items as well.<sup>150</sup> The Dinajpur border between West Bengal and Bangladesh is another such point.<sup>151</sup> With increasing surveillance mechanisms along the riverine and unfenced borders, a greater number of such crossings are being operated along the fenced areas, according to the statistics given by the BSF.<sup>152</sup> Hari, an agent helping Bangladeshi people to cross over into West Bengal, informs me that such illegal crossings generally take place at night. 'Here, BSF does not fire,'<sup>153</sup> he assures.

In fact, some policies of the concerned states, especially the ones related to travel tax, encourage these illegal border crossings. The unaffordable rates of travel tax imposed by both India and Bangladesh,<sup>154</sup> coupled with the hazards and expenditure

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<sup>147</sup> Interview with Bibek, resident of Debhata village (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012).

<sup>148</sup> West Bengal shares a riverine border with Bangladesh along the Ichamati and Kalindi rivers. The Mathabhanga River originates from the right bank of the Padma, at Munshiganj in the Kushtia district of Bangladesh. It bifurcates near Majidia in Nadia district in West Bengal (India), creating two rivers, Ichamati and Churni. After traversing a length of 19.5 kilometres in India, the Ichamati enters Bangladesh near Mubarakpur. It flows for 35.5 kilometres in Bangladesh and again enters India at Duttaphulia in Nadia district. It forms the international border between India and Bangladesh for 21 kilometres from Angraill to Kalanchi, and again from Goalpara to the Kalindi-Raimangal outfall into the Bay of Bengal. The Ichamati breaks up into several distributaries below Hingalganj in North 24 Parganas of which Kalindi is a major one, besides Raimangal, Bidya, Jhilla and Jamuna. The Kalindi river forms the riverine border between the North 24 Parganas district in West Bengal and the Satkhira district in Bangladesh.

<sup>149</sup> Interview with a BGB official at New Sripur BGB camp (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012).

<sup>150</sup> *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2012). 4(11).

<sup>151</sup> *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2013). 5(15).

<sup>152</sup> *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (December 2012). 4(14).

<sup>153</sup> "মানুষ পারাপার হয় রাতে, কালিন্দী নদীর ওপর দিয়ে. এখানে বি এস এফ গুলি করে না." Interview with Hari, resident and *dhoor* in Kaikhali village, Shyamnagar (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 14 February 2012).

<sup>154</sup> Momin, S.M. (7 September 2003) Illegal border crossing-Benapole style. *The Independent*.

of obtaining passports, drive the poor local civilians into illegal ways of crossing the border by paying a much smaller amount to the brokers or *dhoors*.

‘Some people also cross the river along with the smuggled cattle,<sup>155</sup> informs a witness. The co-operation of the local population with the illegal border crossers<sup>156</sup> as well as the common language (*Bangla*) of the illegal crossers and the legal residents, are often the reasons for the failure of the border guards or the local police in tracking down this illegal movement.<sup>157</sup>

Illegal or unauthorised border crossing also involves the state personnel, where such officials cross the border illegally to either take stock of situations or probe into an incident or occurrence.<sup>158</sup> ‘We knew that sneaking into Bangladesh will be a risky decision. But we were determined to know what is going on there. People who were coming here told us their tales of plight. That’s why we took the risk,’<sup>159</sup> said an official of the Border Intelligence Corps (BIC), following reports of attacks on Hindu minorities under the Khaleda Zia government across the Bangladesh border in the Satkhira, Kaligunj and Khulna areas of Bangladesh in 2001. These acts of unauthorised border-crossing makes the border guards as much a part of the narrative of contesting the sovereign delimitations of a state as the border civilians, rendering them an integral part of the border culture.

### iii. Cattle

Cattle smuggling (or ‘trade’, as it is called in Bangladesh) across the West Bengal-Bangladesh border is necessarily a one-way occurrence where cattle is procured from provinces like Rajasthan, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in India and smuggled into Bangladesh, mostly through Murshidabad and the North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas districts of

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<sup>155</sup> ‘রাতে কিছু গরু আসে. গরুর পিঠে বসে বা লেজ ধরে সাতরে লোক-ও চলে আসে ।’ (The cattle is smuggled at night. People sit on those cattle or hold on to their tails and cross the river.) Interview with Niru, resident of Durmukhhali village, Shyamnagar (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 14 February 2012).

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Biplab Ganguly (original name), Officer-in-Charge of Murutia Police Station (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>157</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Asharidoho BSF camp, (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>158</sup> Staff Reporter (2 November 2001) Border-cross for influx insight. *The Telegraph*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.telegraphindia.com/archives/archive.html>. [Last accessed: 30 August 2013].

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

West Bengal.<sup>160</sup> The cattle are stocked in herds at strategic locations near the border from where they are made to cross the border with the help of a lineman.

The transportation of cattle within India is in violation of Article 55 of the Transport of Animals Rules, 1978, which prohibits carrying more than 10 adult cattle or 15 calves on broad gauge and more than 4 adult cattle or 6 calves on narrow gauge.<sup>161</sup> The traders carry as many as 300 cattle in each wagon while transporting them from one province to another in India.<sup>162</sup>

The export ban on cattle trade imposed by India is a major factor for the flourishing of its illegal version. While the demand for beef in Bangladesh is not met by its limited supply, India has a cattle surplus due to its low demand for beef.<sup>163</sup> The Rs. 2,000 crore meat industry in Bangladesh keeps the demand for cattle high.<sup>164</sup> The 'official' number of seized cattle indicates the expanse of the trade since it does not point out the actual number of cattle successfully smuggled across the border.<sup>165</sup> The demand-supply imbalance in West Bengal and Bangladesh also explains the increase in cattle smuggling during such festivals as *Eid*. The demand for cattle in Bangladesh increases during *Eid*, especially during *Eid-e-Qurban* or *Eid al-Bakr*<sup>166</sup> when cattle-smugglers in West Bengal make quick money by smuggling cattle into Bangladesh. The volume of trade, in such cases, increases all the more if *Eid* happens to be

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<sup>160</sup> Bhattacharjee, J. (July 2013) India-Bangladesh Border Management: The Challenge of Cattle Smuggling. *Special Report, Observer Research Foundation*. Issue 1. p. 3.

<sup>161</sup> Transport of Animals Rules 1978. Available from: [http://pashudhanharyana.gov.in/html/pdf%20&%20downloads/AH%20Acts/15\\_The%20Transport%20of%20animals%20rules,%201978.pdf](http://pashudhanharyana.gov.in/html/pdf%20&%20downloads/AH%20Acts/15_The%20Transport%20of%20animals%20rules,%201978.pdf). [Accessed: 31 July 2013].

<sup>162</sup> Bhattacharjee, 2013, p.3.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Tiwary, D. (1 December 2012) Legalise cattle smuggling on Bangladesh border: BSF chief. *The Times of India*. [Online] Available from: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-12-01/india/35530471\\_1\\_bsf-men-bangladesh-border-indo-bangla-border](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-12-01/india/35530471_1_bsf-men-bangladesh-border-indo-bangla-border). [Last accessed: 31 July 2013].

<sup>165</sup> In 2010, 1,01,381 were seized and 287 persons arrested for smuggling; In 2011, the numbers were 1,35,291 and 411 respectively; in 2012, the numbers were 1,20,724 and 395 respectively; between January and February 2013, the numbers were 22,627 and 55, respectively. Ministry of Home Affairs, March 2013; Between July and December 2012, 3624 cattles have been seized by the North Bengal Frontier of BSF. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (December 2012). 4(14); Between October 2012 and March 2013, 4048 cattles have been seized by the North Bengal Frontier of BSF. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2013). 5(15).

<sup>166</sup> *Eid al-Bakr* is one of the two *Eid* celebrations of Muslims worldwide, the other being *Eid al-Fitr*. Sacrifice of cattle is integral to the rituals of *Eid al-Bakr* or *Bakrid* and, thus, increases the demand for cattle in Bangladesh, given that it is a Muslim-majority state.

celebrated around festivals like *Durga Puja*<sup>167</sup> in West Bengal (as was the case in 2011 and 2012<sup>168</sup>).<sup>169</sup>

The demand-supply equation ensures that cattle worth between Rs. 500 and Rs.3,000 fetches anything between Rs. 20,000 and Rs. 40,000 in Bangladesh.<sup>170</sup> The cattle trade from India (West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya) to Bangladesh is worth \$500 million annually<sup>171</sup>—an indication of its enormity. Anything between 5,000 and 15,000 cows cross everyday,<sup>172</sup> while other estimates put the range between 20,000 and 25,000, which is worth \$81,000.<sup>173</sup> The profits for cattle smuggling are substantial. The price of a cow worth Rs. 500 in Haryana (India) becomes five times on entering West Bengal. At the West Bengal border, it could become as high as Rs. 5,000,<sup>174</sup> which is then shared by the contractor, carrier, lineman (often they are the same person in the case of cattle smuggling) and the border guards on both sides.<sup>175</sup> The nature of increase in the price of a cow, not just between the two provinces within India but within a single province (from a non-border to a border area), indicates the effect that the border has on such illegal livelihood practices.

The Indian perspective: The flourishing of the cattle trade across the West Bengal-Bangladesh border has its roots in the ban on cattle slaughter and cattle export imposed by India. Article 48 of the Indian Constitution bans the slaughter of cattle on terms of agricultural needs and animal husbandry. Yet with the mechanisation of agriculture following India's independence in 1947, the need for cattle in agriculture decreased. Ban on slaughter and exports resulted in surplus cattle in India. With the

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<sup>167</sup> *Durga Puja* is the largest religious festival of the Bengali Hindus of West Bengal.

<sup>168</sup> In 2011, *Eid al-Bakr* was on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of November, while *Durga Puja* was between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of October. In 2012, *Eid al-Bakr* was on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of October, while *Durga Puja* was between 21<sup>st</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> October.

<sup>169</sup> *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2012). 4(11).

<sup>170</sup> Burman, P. (12 April 2012) Battle of cattle at Indo-Bangla border. *Headlines India*. [Online] Available from: <http://headlinesindia.mapsofindia.com/special-reports/battle-of-cattle-at-indo-bangla-border.html>. [Last accessed: 31 July 2013].

<sup>171</sup> Bhattacharjee, 2013, p.3.

<sup>172</sup> Interview with Alamgir, resident and cattle trader in Putkhali village, Sharsha (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012).

<sup>173</sup> Chowdhury, S.T. (7 February 2012) A border too far for Bangladesh. *Asia Times Online*. [Online] Available from: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/NB07Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/NB07Df01.html). [Last accessed: 31 July 2013].

<sup>174</sup> Bhattacharjee, 2013, p.3.

<sup>175</sup> Interview with Md. Ismail, resident and cattle trader in Matila village, Maheshpur (Jhenaidah district of Bangladesh, 11 February 2012).

creation of Bangladesh in 1971, possibilities of cattle trade opened up between the two states. Cattle export being a sensitive issue in India (due to the religious connotation of cows in Hinduism), none of its successive governments opened official avenues for legal cattle trade, leading to the establishment of an unofficial network across the borders.<sup>176</sup>

The Bangladesh perspective: The legalisation of cattle trade in Bangladesh in 1993 turned a cattle ‘smuggler’ into a cattle ‘trader’ on its border. The payment of Tk. 500 (Rs. 383) as Customs charges to the BGB on the Bangladesh border makes the trade official.<sup>177</sup> Bangladesh also profits from the bone and leather collected from the slaughtered cattle in its leather and ceramic industries, besides its major export of beef.<sup>178</sup> It is, therefore, natural that it does not take any step towards curbing such cross-border practices since cattle trade is directly linked to Bangladesh’s economy and food security.<sup>179</sup> The Bangladesh government as well as the BGB are aware of the profits that Bangladesh reaps from the cross-border cattle trade.<sup>180</sup>

Years of operation have established contractual links between cattle smugglers on both sides.<sup>181</sup> While the creation of the border disrupted or adversely affected traditional ties and livelihood practices in the border areas between West Bengal and Bangladesh, it also created new links. The ‘cross-border’ aspect is common to both the broken (and illegalised) traditional links and the new (illegal) links.

‘Earlier, the Bangladeshis would have to move into the Indian side of the border to bring the cattle. But now, with the help of the BSF, the Indians themselves bring the cattle to a certain point across the border. The BSF officials do not otherwise say anything, except for rare cases of their seizing a couple of cows, to show that they

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<sup>176</sup> Bhattacharjee, 2013, p.5.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> The New Horizon (29 January 2012) *The Endless Blood*. [Online] Available from: <http://horizonspeaks.wordpress.com/2012/01/29/the-endless-blood/>. [Accessed: 31 July 2013]; *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2012). 4(11).

<sup>180</sup> ‘বাংলাদেশের জন্য উপকার বলেই গরু টা বাঁধা দিছি না ।’ (We do not prevent the cattle trade because it helps Bangladesh’s economy.) Interview with a BGB official at Goga BGB camp, Sharsha (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012).

<sup>181</sup> Interview with Asif, resident and cattle trader at Kaikhali village, Shyamnagar (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 14 February 2012).



are doing their job honestly,<sup>182</sup> says Ismail, indicating the role that border guards play in this border trade.



Plate 12. Cattle haat, 2012.

The border markets or *haats* (local term for markets) are located on the corresponding side of the Bangladesh border where the cattle are stocked immediately after crossing it. Traders come from all over Bangladesh, from as far as Sylhet, Cox's Bazar and Teknaf to as near as Satkhira, Khulna and Jessore, to deal in cattle.<sup>183</sup> They come with trucks, load them with their purchases (generally 15-25 cows per truck)<sup>184</sup> and head off to markets where they sell the cattle to other local buyers within Bangladesh. 'The cows are marked according to their assigned serial numbers (depending on the consignment number of the contractor). The locals are

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<sup>182</sup> 'আগে বাংলাদেশীদের ওদিকে ঢুকে নিয়ে আসতে হত. এখন বি এস এফ এর সহযোগিতায় ইন্ডিয়ান রাই দিয়ে যায়. বি এস এফ এমনিতে কিছু বলে না. মাঝে মাঝে এক আধজন কে ধরে দেখানোর জন্য যে তারা কাজ করছে ।' Interview with Md. Ismail, resident and cattle trader in Matila village, Maheshpur (Jhenaidah district of Bangladesh, 11 February 2012).

<sup>183</sup> Interview with Alamgir, resident and cattle trader at Putkhali village, Sharsha (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012).

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

appointed as labourers for loading the cows on to the trucks,<sup>185</sup> says Alamgir, a cattle trader. The cattle trade, thus, creates co-lateral livelihood opportunities for the border civilians, besides their obvious involvement as traders.



Plate 13. Cattle being transported from *haats* in trucks, 2012.

The cattle *haats* act as wholesale markets, supplying the demands of innumerable local shops/markets across Bangladesh, like the *haats* in Matila and Lebutola<sup>186</sup> or Putkhali<sup>187</sup> in Jessore. Each of these wholesale markets witnesses dealings worth thousands of Indian Rupees and Bangladesh Taka each day, adding up to huge transactions for both the states of India and Bangladesh. The auctioning of seized cattle by the BSF contributes towards the cattle trade, since the bidders are mostly smugglers who re-smuggle the cattle at high prices.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Interview with Md. Ismail, resident and trader at Matila village, Maheshpur (Jhenaidah district of Bangladesh, 11 February 2012).

<sup>187</sup> I visited the Putkhali *haat*, Sharsha (Jessore district of Bangladesh) on 15 February 2012 as part of my field visit in Bangladesh.

<sup>188</sup> Bhattacharjee, 2013, p.4.

The relation between the cattle traders and the border guards on both sides is generally dictated by the unstated rules of the trade and is, hence, harmonious, especially on the Bangladesh border. 'Those who smuggle cattle generally do not indulge in smuggling other things, because they share a good rapport with the BGB and, understandably, do not want to ruin that rapport by smuggling other things. Cattle smuggling is not a crime to them (the BGB), while smuggling Phensidyl is, any day, a far more harmful act. That is immoral. Cattle smuggling is as much a part of legal business as is any other legally traded item', says a cattle trader at Kaikhali border, Satkhira (Bangladesh), in explaining the cattle trade network across the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>189</sup> The presence of BSF and BGB camps in front of the cattle *haats* along the border is ample proof of the unstated understanding.<sup>190</sup>

This does not suggest that other contraband items are not smuggled together with cattle or in return for it. Drugs, spices, fake currency notes or even firearms constitute items which are often smuggled along or in return for cattle.<sup>191</sup>

The wholesale cattle *haats* are a thriving economy in themselves, complete with shops catering to every need of the traders. The items sold at the shops range between food, tea,<sup>192</sup> toiletries, clothes, tyres, petrol and any thing that a trader, having travelled from afar for an overnight journey might need. Initially, the local civilians would rent out rooms to these traders, who would reach the market in the evening, stay overnight near the market at one of these guest accommodations, complete their transactions early the next morning, and start on their way back. Recently, some private guest accommodations have been built by the locals and the committee of traders who are in charge of the overall trade operations for

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<sup>189</sup> 'যারা গরু পাচার করে, তারা সাধারণত অন্য কিছু পাচার করে না. তাদের বক্তব্য যে তাদের বি জি বি-র সাথে ভালো সম্পর্ক. বাজে জিনিস পাচার করে এই সদ্ভাব টা নষ্ট করবে কেন? গরু পাচার এদের কাছে অপরাধ নয়. ফেন্সি পাচার কিন্তু ভীষণ অপরাধ. ওটা ইন্সুরাল. গরু পাচার টা বৈধ পাচার এর মধ্যেই পড়ে।' Interview with Asif, resident and cattle trader at Kaikhali village, Shyamnagar (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 14 February 2012).

<sup>190</sup> Interview with Tofazzal, resident and trader at Agro-Bhulot village, Sharsha (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012); Witnessed during my field visit to the cattle *haat* at Kaikhali village, Shyamnagar (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 14 February 2012).

<sup>191</sup> 'ফেন্সি আসে, অস্ত্র আসে. গরুর সাথে এলে আলাদা করে চেকিং হয় না.' (Phensidyl and firearms are smuggled in. If they are smuggled with cattle, then they are spared the checking.) Interview with a BGB official at Goga BGB camp, Sharsha (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012).

<sup>192</sup> As witnessed during my field visit to Matila village, Maheshpur (Jhenaidah district of Bangladesh, 11 February 2012).

accommodating the traders.<sup>193</sup> These *haats* are run by the locals, who look after the various departments of the transactions—complete with an organised committee of members, presidents and secretaries.<sup>194</sup> From *lungis*<sup>195</sup> to toothbrushes, from petrol to tyres, from rice and beef curry to tea and biscuits—cattle markets are a self-sustained economy, thriving along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

‘Everyday the revenue from cattle businesses amounts to about Tk. 50,000,’<sup>196</sup> informs one of the members of the syndicate in-charge of the cattle *haat* at Putkhali. He also reveals that the reason behind the flourishing of cattle trade at particular points along the border is the ‘security’ that those points offer—indicating hassle-free trade. ‘The other borders cannot provide this security,’<sup>197</sup> is how he phrases his concern, unaware of how he redefined the concept of security and illegality by talking about unofficial security for an officially-illegal business. The cattle trade, thus, provides livelihood opportunities to a substantial number of border people, including the civilians and the guards, without a legal recognition, especially from India. The irony is well-expressed in a response from one of the local traders: ‘Tendencies towards other kinds of crimes have diminished significantly because the cattle businesses have improved the over-all economy of the area’<sup>198</sup>—indicating how the spatial specificity of the border creates its own socio-economic narrative, which is often beyond the comprehension or even control of the state.

Instances of violence towards the smugglers by the border guards, especially the BSF on the West Bengal border, are not rare.<sup>199</sup> Cattle trade-related violence is often the result of such situations where the credibility of the BSF is under question or where

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<sup>193</sup> Interview with Alamgir, resident and trader at Putkhali village, Sharsha (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012).

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> The *lungi* is a traditional garment worn around the waist in Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, the Horn of Africa and the southern Arabian Peninsula. It is particularly popular in regions where the heat and humidity create an unpleasant climate for trousers. In Bangladesh, it is the most commonly-worn dress of men, though not normally worn on formal occasions. In India, it is also a common form of dress in certain states, though the custom and practice of wearing *lungis* in India varies from state to state.

<sup>196</sup> Interview with Alamgir, resident and trader at Putkhali village, Sharsha (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012).

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Interview with Javed, resident and trader at Khanjiya village, Debhata (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012).

its general efficiency at the borders is questioned.<sup>200</sup> They also result from disputes over payment between the trader and border guards.

However, such risks do not deter smugglers from trading in cattle. ‘The smugglers are daring and have a don’t-care attitude. Border life has made them daring,’ says a BGB official at Hakimpur in Dinajpur district (Bangladesh).<sup>201</sup> Moreover, restrictions on using lethal weapons by the BSF<sup>202</sup> have catalysed cross-border cattle smuggling like never before.<sup>203</sup> The number of attacks on BSF constables in instances of clashes between them and the cattle smugglers<sup>204</sup> indicate that borders are, indeed, the toughest hurdles for states when it comes to establishing control over its territories.

Frequent skirmishes between the smugglers and border guards followed by violent abuse and the deaths of both have led to considerations of legalisation of the cattle trade.<sup>205</sup> The border guards, especially the higher officials of the BSF, are keen to see the cattle trade legalised through the lifting of the export ban by India in order to curb both smuggling and violence.<sup>206</sup> While the Indian government chooses to ignore the issue of cattle smuggling for fear of hampering bilateral relations with Bangladesh, the BSF, in spite of being the representatives of the state at the borders, cannot help being concerned. The BSF is part of the border culture, which includes cross-border practices as well. This is where the BSF are more ‘border people’ and

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<sup>200</sup> Interview with Rashid Hossein, resident of Lalgola (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 8 November 2011).

<sup>201</sup> Interview with a BGB official at Hakimpur BGB camp (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 9 October 2011).

<sup>202</sup> In an effort to reduce violence along its borders, the government of India decided to arm the BSF with non-lethal weapons in 2009, following requests from BGB chiefs to prevent killings of Bangladeshis by the BSF on the India-Bangladesh border. The BSF, under this regulation, is to use pump-action guns with rubber bullets in the first-fire and challenge-fire rounds. Firing from regular guns would be the last resort. PTI (22 May 2011) BSF to use 'non-lethal' weapons along Indo-Bangla border. *Zeenews.com*. [Online] Available from: [http://zeenews.india.com/news/delhi/bsf-to-use-non-lethal-weapons-along-indo-bangla-border\\_707946.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/delhi/bsf-to-use-non-lethal-weapons-along-indo-bangla-border_707946.html). [Last accessed: 24 July 2013].

<sup>203</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Shikarpur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>204</sup> Tiwary, D. (1 December 2012) Legalise cattle smuggling on Bangladesh border: BSF chief. *The Times of India*. [Online] Available from: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-12-01/india/35530471\\_1\\_bsf-men-bangladesh-border-indo-bangla-border](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-12-01/india/35530471_1_bsf-men-bangladesh-border-indo-bangla-border). [Last accessed: 31 July 2013].

<sup>205</sup> Interview with Gourab Sarkar, resident of Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>206</sup> Tiwary, 1 December 2012, *The Times of India*.

less the state representatives, indicating the fact that the reality of the border and the patterns of border narratives engulf everyone who negotiate the border everyday.

#### iv. Firearms

The smuggling of firearms is not uncommon along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, with the border guards themselves confessing such occurrences.<sup>207</sup> ‘Firearms are mostly smuggled in along with the cattle, especially in the Putkhali border area,’<sup>208</sup> confesses a BGB official at Benapole. The North Dinajpur district is also an important transit for firearm-smuggling networks between West Bengal and Bangladesh, as reports of the seizure of firearms are not rare in the area.<sup>209</sup> In fact, reports hint at an increasing number of firearm smugglers operating in various pockets of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, including the districts of Kushtia, Jhenaidah, Chuadanga, Meherpur, Satkhira and Jessore on the Bangladesh side, and the adjoining districts of Murshidabad, Nadia, North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas on the West Bengal side.<sup>210</sup>

Factories in the border district of Murshidabad in West Bengal have been reported to be manufacturing these arms in villages which are at a distance of about 3 kilometres from the Bangladesh border. The cheap price of firearms (pipe-gun, one-shooter gun, musket rifle and revolver) made in West Bengal (as well as in other parts of India) and their easy availability increases their demand in neighbouring Bangladesh.<sup>211</sup>

Reports confirm the confession of the border guards that firearms are often smuggled in consignments of fruits, eggs, rice, vegetables and other items of daily need, which mostly go unchecked by them. ‘Good relations’ between the border guards and the

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<sup>207</sup> 10 airguns were seized at the Gobrabil Chowki on 9 October 2012 by the ACP Party of the 26 Battalion of the South Bengal Frontier of BSF. On 27 October of the same year, 1 ‘desi’ revolver and two rounds of 315 bore were seized by the 40 battalion of the South Bengal Frontier of BSF at Petrapole. *Bagher Garjan* (October-December 2012). 26.

<sup>208</sup> Interview with a BGB official at Benapole BGB camp (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012).

<sup>209</sup> Staff Reporter (30 May 2012) Agneyastro shoho dhrito. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1120530/30uttar6.html>. [Last accessed: 31 July 2013].

<sup>210</sup> Staff Reporter (11 September 2013) CPM-er shabhapati khuney tapta Hasnabad. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/11pgn2.html>. [Last accessed: 11 September 2013].

<sup>211</sup> Staff Reporter (19 February 2012) Cadres buying smuggled small arms: Intel report. *The Financial Express*. [Online] Available from: [http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/more.php?news\\_id=120706&date=2012-02-19](http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/more.php?news_id=120706&date=2012-02-19). [Last accessed: 31 July 2013].



smugglers is often the reason cited for such exemptions. About 50% of these illegal firearms serve the leaders and cadres of political parties,<sup>212</sup> while the names of the leaders of these parties are also often found on the list of people directly related to firearm smuggling.<sup>213</sup> Reports of increasing deaths by firearms in Bangladesh can be traced back to the availability of smuggled firearms, mostly procured from India, through the West Bengal border.<sup>214</sup>

Buyers also include the terrorist organisations that use these arms to train their members.<sup>215</sup> Some of the arrested cadres confessed to being involved in cross-border cattle trade, while being actively involved in smuggling guns and ammunitions for terrorist groups.<sup>216</sup> Small-arms, locally named as *Belgharia*, *Moyur* and *Chhakka*, are being smuggled into Bangladesh through the southwestern frontier, which shares the border with Murshidabad, Nadia, and the North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas districts of West Bengal, suggest reports.<sup>217</sup> The firearms cost anything 'between Tk.25, 000 to over Tk.0.1 million. Unsuspecting low income people are often used as carriers of the smuggled firearms,'<sup>218</sup> the report says.

v. Fake currency notes

The smuggling of Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN) has increasingly become rampant across the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, especially with the flourishing of cattle trade. Cattle traders are often paid in fake currencies (cattle worth Rs. 4,000 is paid for by Rs. 10,000 worth fake currencies by the Bangladeshi smuggler), which

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Pakistan Defence. (2012) *Arms smuggling, trading trouble*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.defence.pk/forums/bangladesh-defence/90052-arms-smuggling-trading-double.html>. [Accessed: 31 July 2013].

<sup>214</sup> Staff Reporter, 19 February 2012, *The Financial Express*.

<sup>215</sup> Nandi Majumdar, A. (26 August 2009) Bangladesh route for arms smuggling. *India Today* [Online] Available from: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/Bangladesh+route+for+arms+smuggling/1/58592.html>. [Last accessed: 12 September 2013].

<sup>216</sup> Mishra, M. (3 October 2008) Illegal cattle trade funding terror. *The Times of India*. [Online] Available from: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2008-10-03/india/27943404\\_1\\_terror-funding-cattle-trade-india-bangladesh-border](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2008-10-03/india/27943404_1_terror-funding-cattle-trade-india-bangladesh-border). [Last accessed: 31 July 2013]; Mohan, V. (11 April 2013) National Investigation Agency files charge-sheet against three for raising terror fund. *The Times of India*. [Online] Available from: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-04-11/delhi/38462199\\_1\\_high-quality-ficn-fake-indian-currency-notes-malda](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-04-11/delhi/38462199_1_high-quality-ficn-fake-indian-currency-notes-malda). [Last accessed: 31 July 2013].

<sup>217</sup> Staff Reporter, 19 February 2012, *The Financial Express*.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

is then circulated in India.<sup>219</sup> Fake currency notes worth thousands are often reported to be seized from smugglers, while thousands of them are successfully distributed across the states in innumerable markets and shops.<sup>220</sup> Farmers crossing the fence for cultivating their farmlands outside it are often seen to be involved in smuggling fake currencies.<sup>221</sup> Fake currency notes worth Rs.43, 81,000 in 2011 and Rs. 15, 82,000 till August 2012 has reportedly been seized in India.<sup>222</sup> The nexus between FICN, firearms and terrorist organisations is, increasingly, becoming a matter of concern for both India and Bangladesh.<sup>223</sup>

vi. Currency coins

Currency coins (known as *Rejki* in smuggling lingo), adding up to thousands have recently been reported as being smuggled across the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. The process involves procuring currency coins from across West Bengal and smuggling them across the border into Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, these coins are made into metal blades. Local foundaries or ferro-alloy factories along the West Bengal border also melt coins into metal sheets before smuggling them to Bangladesh. Re. 1, Rs. 2 and Rs. 5 coins are mostly used for the purpose. While melting a Re. 1 coin makes about 4 blades, melting Rs. 5 produces anything between 5 and 7 blades— indicating the profits made by the coin smugglers. This explains why drivers of public vehicles, small-scale traders and even women homemakers in

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<sup>219</sup> Bhattacharjee, 2013, p.4.

<sup>220</sup> Staff Reporter (1 October 2012) Goru pacharer haat dhore jaal noter amdani eparey. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1121001/1bdesh1.html>. [Last accessed: 31 July 2013]; FICN worth Rs. 1,00,000 have been seized from Mohangunj on 26 October 2012 by the 130 battalion of the South Bengal Frontier of BSF. *Bagher Garjan* (October-December 2012). 26; FICN worth Rs.9,00,000 have been seized by the BSF on the Malda border on 24 August 2013. Tiwary, D. (25 August 2013) FICN seized. *The Times of India*. [Online] Available from: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/FICN-seized/speednewsbytopic/keyid-881955.cms>. [Last accessed: 7 September 2013]; FICN worth Rs.10,00,000 have been seized by the 125 battalion of BSF in Malda on 3 September 2013. IBNS (4 September 2013) Fake Indian Currency Notes worth Rs 10 lakhs seized by BSF. *NewsWala*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.newswala.com/India-National-News/Fake-Indian-Currency-Notes-worth-Rs-10-lakhs-seized-by-BSF-45911.html>. [Last accessed: 7 September 2013].

<sup>221</sup> Staff Reporter, 1 October 2012, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ghosh, S. and Monata, A.R. (26 January 2010) Jaal note jangi jog astra byabsha, jaal e Hili r school sikshak. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1100126/26raj1.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].



and around Kolkata have been reported to be involved in smuggling coins.<sup>224</sup> Metal smuggling in the form of coins has been the recent addition to the already vast range of cross-border smuggling practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. It has a direct effect on the circulation and unavailability of currency coins in other non-border areas of West Bengal.<sup>225</sup>

vii. Items of daily necessity

Besides the riskier and more expansive trading in drugs, cattle, firearms or fake currencies, the people living along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border survive on smuggling items of daily necessity, from a few litres of petrol/diesel to a few kilograms of spices, vegetables and eggs<sup>226</sup> to a few utensils, electronic items, clothing, tools, audio-visual disks and so on. The Bhomra border in the Satkhira district of Jessore (Bangladesh) is an intriguing study in informal smuggling transactions over the stretch of the unfenced border. Bhomra is a Land Port between Satkhira (Bangladesh) and North 24 Parganas (West Bengal), which is used for trading in vegetables, cement, zip shutters, fish etc. between India and Bangladesh.<sup>227</sup> But that does not stop the local civilian population from indulging in the small-scale smuggling of household items like spices, onion and garlic, apart from Phensidyl.<sup>228</sup> There is a narrow canal flowing along the Bhomra border which acts as a meeting point for women from both sides of the border.<sup>229</sup> These women smuggle in/out items like spices or even cooking ware, in return for a small amount of money. Some of them sell the smuggled spices or vegetables to other households in the village.<sup>230</sup> The seasonal nature of agriculture, coupled with the fluctuating prices of crops, ensures a steady demand for such items.

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<sup>224</sup> Roy, D. (21 August 2012) Blade banate khuchro pachar: bajar jerbar. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1120821/21raj1.html>. [Last accessed: 31 July 2013].

<sup>225</sup> Moitro, S. (22 August 2012) Khuchror akale jerbar Bongaon-e mushkil ashan coupon. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1120822/22pgn2.html>. [Last accessed: 31 July 2013].

<sup>226</sup> Interview with Jasimuddin Mondol, resident of Mathurapur village (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>227</sup> Interview with Bikram, Lakshmidari village, Bhomra (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012).

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> As witnessed during my field visit to Lakshmidari village, Bhomra (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012).

<sup>230</sup> Interview with Bikram, Lakshmidari village, Bhomra (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012).

Newspapers are smuggled across the border despite the availability of both locally-published as well as national newspapers along the whole length of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. Some of the major Indian newspapers are smuggled into Bangladesh for Tk. 20-25 and vice-versa. ‘Money transaction for the newspapers is done through recharge of mobile phones. The smuggler on one side tops up the SIM card of his counterpart on the other side with the amount payable for the smuggled newspapers. This “talktime” in his phone is used by the smuggler to contact his counterpart for further deals involving more newspapers, cattle etc. ensuring that newspaper smuggling is executed with no direct transaction of money,’<sup>231</sup> says Alok Sengupta, resident of Dinhat.

The nature of the smuggled items indicates that cross-border smuggling is not always necessarily linked to global smuggling networks, as some studies on such practices indicate. They show instead that such cross-border practices become rudimentary ways of living and earning for the people living along the border. The border people learn to put the reality of the border to the best of their interest, irrespective of its legal/illegal nature. Over the years, smuggling practices come to be seen as an integral part of livelihood practice along the border.<sup>232</sup>

Parbati Mohanto gives a vivid description of not just the process of cross-border smuggling practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border but also the nature of relations between the smugglers and border guards. ‘This is our job and is like any other job that people do. We don’t think there is anything wrong with it’ begins Parbati, herself a regular smuggler in the Hili border area.<sup>233</sup> ‘We work as *dholai*’<sup>234</sup> for contractors and have to pay the BSF Rs. 150 for every trip that we make across the border. Some of the BSF constables are kind enough not to take any money from us. But some are greedy and do not spare us a rupee....We get Rs.15 for smuggling a single goat. A few days back garlic was in much demand, for which we got Rs.3 per kilogram. We had to pay the BSF Rs.2, which left us with a profit of Re.1. Generally,

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<sup>231</sup> Interview with Alok Sengupta, resident of Dinhat (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 19 March 2012).

<sup>232</sup> ‘বিকল্প কাজ বলতে ২ নম্বরী. এটাই পেশা হিসেবে দেখে এখানে ।’ (Alternative forms of livelihood means smuggling. Here, smuggling is seen as a livelihood in itself.) Interview with Ranjit, resident of Jamalpur village, Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>233</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident and smuggler at Ghunapara-Dhumron village, Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>234</sup> *Dholai*, like *Dhoor* is yet another local term used for carriers.

our Bangladeshi counterpart throws the sacks of items to this side of the border. We carry the sacks in turn to another place. The BSF officials know all about it. They allow us to carry 1-2 quintals at a time and dump them at a safe place, from where these sacks are then distributed to other local markets, like Maburghat, Trimohini, etc. The *Mahajans* (contractors) take half of the total transaction amount. All the people in this village are engaged in this job. This is our profession....If we need to use cycles for carrying the items to and from the border, the *Mahajan* pays Rs. 60 to the border guards and Rs.10 extra to the person who carries them. The border guards allow the cycles to pass at an opportune moment. The higher officials of the BSF might not know about these practices. It is the guards patrolling the border who mostly engage in it. Even they need money. We understand their situation. Sometimes we cook some good food for them because the food in the camp is not good. They buy the meat and we cook it with spices ....When a new battalion comes, they try to be strict about these things. Instances of heated arguments are not rare in those phases. But gradually we develop a rapport with them....In fact we feel sad when the battalions are transferred. They help us do our work by making us aware if the situation at the border is tense or by suggesting safe smuggling routes....The BSF constables keep their share of the money either inside their sticks or their boots, or even in a hole that they dig into the ground from where they collect the money later. Even they have fear of being caught by their seniors. And once a case is filed against them, they have to pay a heavy fine from their salary.’<sup>235</sup> If poverty of the civilians is an important reason for their involvement in such practices, the fee structures of the border guards (both BSF and BGB),<sup>236</sup> in a way, explains their involvement in the practices as well, given the meagre salary that the constables of BSF and BGB get. The constables are also often the only earning members of their families. Earning an extra amount of cash helps them financially as much as it helps the border civilians to support their meagre income from agriculture or other livelihood options (if at all). This makes the border guards an integral part of the everyday survival narratives of the border and no less part of the border culture than the civilians.

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<sup>235</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident and smuggler at Ghunapara-Dhumron village, Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>236</sup> The average monthly salary of a BSF constable is between Rs.8,460 and Rs.9,910, while that of an inspector is between Rs.11,360 and Rs.17,140, depending upon the specific ranking. <http://www.bsf.nic.in/en/structure.html>; the average monthly salary of a BGB constable is Tk.9095. [http://www.bgb.gov.bd/images/career/83\\_Batch\\_Carcula-1.pdf](http://www.bgb.gov.bd/images/career/83_Batch_Carcula-1.pdf).

Whenever the situation at the border becomes tense, smuggling is checked for a while which makes life for these people extremely hard, due to their complete dependence on these practices. 'In those times, we have to resort to whatever we had earlier earned and so have to be careful about our expenditures,'<sup>237</sup> says Parbati. The predominance of the linemen in this particular area is weak compared to other border areas because of the absence of the fence. Linemen, explains Parbati, attain importance in the fenced areas because the need to co-ordinate cross-border movements is higher in them. In unfenced areas such as this village, the transaction takes place directly between the contractors, carriers and the border guards.<sup>238</sup> The vulnerability of the unfenced areas and the villages close to the IB (International Border) on either side in terms of smuggling are also highlighted in the records of the BSF.<sup>239</sup>

A stretch of the border near the Ghunapara-Dhumron village where this interview took place has yet not been fenced. On being asked how this stretch remained unfenced, Parbati explained how the local MLA of the Left Front agreed to arrange for the prevention of fencing in that area after the local people pleaded with him: 'He came and asked us what to do. We said that this is a poor area. If you fence the border, how will we earn a living? So he looked into the matter and prevented fencing. That has been a great help to us.'<sup>240</sup> When she was asked what alternatives the local people had in case the area was fenced someday, she said with a grin: 'If the border is fenced someday, we will find other ways to carry on our work. Do the fenced areas lack smuggling practices? Just as an animal finds its food under any circumstances, even we will do the same. God has given us brain, so I am sure we will find a way. In fact, then the guards at the gates will help us find other ways.'<sup>241</sup> This conversation provides a fair idea about the *modus operandi* of small-scale cross-border smuggling practices involving the civilians and border guards, as well as the nature of involvement of the latter in such practices, especially in the unfenced stretches of the border.

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<sup>237</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident and smuggler at Ghunapara-Dhumron village, Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2012). 4(11).

<sup>240</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident and smuggler at Ghunapara-Dhumron village, Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

The construction of the fence has, in fact, played an important role in the labelling of certain practices as ‘illegal’ in official terms. Even after the creation of the border in 1947, the unhindered movement of people and items between West Bengal and Bangladesh existed without being officially illegalised. The construction of the fence has made such movements visible and, thus, officially illegal.<sup>242</sup>

While the construction of the fence, as a decision of the Indian state, has illegalised these cross-border practices, the border guards are the ones who actually negotiate the fence and the cross-border movements everyday. Their ways of negotiation with these practices gives us an idea that the border guards, inspite of being the representatives of the state, interpret the border and the fence in ways which are acceptable, and often profitable, for them. The essentially poor local civilians along the border are often seen to survive on smuggling things as basic as dry leaves, which earn them a mere Rs. 20-30 a day. The border guards consciously overlook such practices on humanitarian grounds.<sup>243</sup> ‘We spare the poor people,’<sup>244</sup> says a BGB official at Benapole, while talking about how small-scale smuggling forms the only resort for the poor local people along the border.

#### viii. *Chars* and *ghoj* as strategic locations for smuggling

The *chars* and *ghoj*<sup>245</sup> areas along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border have become havens for the transit of contraband items because of their strategic locations. ‘These territories are havens for the smugglers who get the Indian women to bring certain items from the Indian side, collect all the smuggled items in these territories and then

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<sup>242</sup> Interview with Hirak Kanti Munshi, resident of Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>243</sup> ‘গরিব কার্ট কুরানী রা অবাধে বর্ডার এর এপার অপার করে. ২০-৩০ টাকা পায় ওসব বেঁচে. বি এস এফ আটকায়ো না ।’ Interview with Apurba Kumar Biswas, resident of Petrapole border, Bongaon (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 20 September 2011).

<sup>244</sup> Interview with a BGB official at Benapole BGB camp (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012).

<sup>245</sup> A *ghoj* is a piece of land which intrudes into the territory of the neighbouring state and is attached to the parent state by a thin strip of land. The hastily drawn border between India and Bangladesh have resulted in a number of such pockets of land which have been incorporated into one of the states, though it geographically intrudes into the neighbouring territory and is surrounded by the neighbouring territory on its three sides. They are connected to their parent state by a narrow stretch of land, creating a chicken’s neck formation. They are also affected by the changing course of the river like the *chars*.

smuggle the items into the other areas of Bangladesh,<sup>246</sup> says Pradip, a resident of an Indian *ghoj*. *Ghoj* and *chars* are affected by the changing courses of the rivers. Therefore, the livelihoods of the people living on them have also become river-dependant. ‘Earlier we would depend on fishing in the Ichhamati river which used to flow along the *ghoj*. Ever since this part of the Ichhamati has dried up (followed by a change in its course), we have become completely dependant on the Bangladeshis for our food, daily necessities and even education. We have no other resource left than smuggling,’<sup>247</sup> says a resident of an Indian *ghoj* surrounded by Bangladeshi territory on its three sides.



Plate 14. Hand-drawn map showing course of border river, *chars* and BSF outposts, BSF camp, Shikarpur, 2011.

<sup>246</sup> ‘চোরাচালানকারী দের আখড়া. মালগুলো এনে এখানে জড়ো করে. বাংলাদেশী রা ইন্ডিয়ান মহিলাদের দিয়ে ওগুলো আনায়. তারপর ওখান থেকে চালান দেয়. ওরা পুরোপুরি বাংলাদেশী দের ওপর নির্ভরশীল হয়ে পড়েছে- বাজার, খাওয়ার, শিক্ষা সব কিছুর জন্য ।’ Interview with Pradip, resident of an Indian *ghoj* ‘tero ghor’ protruding into Putkhali village, Benapole (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012).

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.





*Plate 15.* Thin strip of land leading to an Indian *ghoj*, with Bangladeshi territories on either side, 2012.



*Plate 16.* India's border fence through which the land indicated above passes, 2012.

ix. Obstacles in curbing smuggling

Responses from the border guards, especially the senior commanders in the camps, do not, however, point to the involvement of the constables as the main reason for their failure to curb cross-border smuggling. Rather, the lack of manpower and the failure of surveillance mechanisms are cited as reasons. According to a BSF official, the distance between the border checkpoints needs to be reduced and searchlights need to be immediately fitted along the fence: ‘Government does not implement it, nor do the smugglers let the implementation take place.’<sup>248</sup> Such responses indicate, yet again, that in spite of being representations of the state at the borders, the border guards become enmeshed in the border culture that eventually affects their perceptions, actions and negotiations with the border civilians and their ways of life. The responses clearly indicate the vulnerable position that the double-role of the border guards thrust them into—one, as the representative of the state and the other, as an integral part of the border culture. Such spontaneous responses bring out their lived experience.

Natural environmental conditions, like foggy days or dark nights, make surveillance more difficult for the patrolling constables.<sup>249</sup> Winters pose a huge threat to the border guards because the available equipment like binocular, SST (searchlights) or night-vision cameras fail to fight the dense fog.<sup>250</sup> The thick cover of clothing which the people don in winter makes it easier for smugglers to hide smuggled goods. The folds of *sarees*<sup>251</sup> worn by women and the jackets worn by men are used for this purpose. Specialised jackets with numerous pockets have lately been seen to be used by smugglers to smuggle Phensidyl and have come to be known as ‘Dyl Jackets’ in

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<sup>248</sup> ‘১০০-২০০ মিটার পড়ে পড়ে পোস্ট. সার্চ লাইট নেই. সরকার লাগিয়ে না. স্মাগলার রাও দেয় না লাগাতে ।’ (The checkpoints are at a distance of 100—200 metres from each other. There are no search lights. Government does not implement it, nor do the smugglers let the implementation take place.) Interview with a BSF official at Shikarpur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>249</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Asharidoho BSF camp (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>250</sup> This also explains the increase in seizures of smuggled goods in the winter months of December, January and February along this border. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2012). 4(11).

<sup>251</sup> *Saree* is a strip of unstitched cloth worn by women, ranging from four to nine yards in length that is draped over the body in various styles, which is native to the Indian subcontinent. It is popular in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Burma, Malaysia, and Singapore. The most common style is for the *saree* to be wrapped around the waist, with one end then draped over the shoulder, baring the midriff.



local jargon.<sup>252</sup> Winters also mean that the water levels of the rivers reduce considerably, making it easier for the smugglers to cross them.<sup>253</sup>

x. Nature and flow of contraband products

The nature and flow of contraband items across the West Bengal-Bangladesh border indicate that the border economy has its own logic and pattern of functioning, and has no necessary connection with the larger economic scenario of either India or Bangladesh. Other than cattle, drugs and fake currencies, most of the smuggled items circulate locally in the border areas. Eggs, spices, dairy products, toiletries, cigarettes, newspapers and SIM cards for mobile phones constitute such items.<sup>254</sup> Most of the items of regular use are manufactured on both sides of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. Thus, the flow of items depends on the demand for a particular variety or quality of an item on a particular side of the border.<sup>255</sup>

The Public Distribution System (PDS) on the West Bengal side of the border also plays an important role in the smuggling of items of daily use. The PDS system in India ensures the distribution of items like sugar, wheat, rice, etc. to villagers at subsidised rates. The PDS shops are generally not located inside the villages, which mean that local salesmen carry the items from the PDS shops or godowns to villages along the border. The salesmen are required to show a chit to the BSF mentioning the quantities of the items carried. While the quantities are required to be specified, there are no specifications on the number of trips that a salesman can make to the border villages. Invariably, the salesmen make a number of trips in a day, selling quantities of items far exceeding the required amount for the population of that

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<sup>252</sup> Biswas, G and Sujauddin (7 January 2013) Sheeter shimante barchhe pachar, hoyerani. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1130107/7mur1.html>. [Last accessed: 1 August 2013].

<sup>253</sup> Biswas and Sujauddin, 7 January 2013, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*.

<sup>254</sup> Interview with Gourab Sarkar, resident and trader at Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012); Interview with Alok Sengupta, resident of Dinhata (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 19 March 2012).

<sup>255</sup> Interview with Subir Biswas, resident and NGO worker at Tiyor (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012); According to BSF records, the outgoing items from West Bengal to Bangladesh include cattle, Phensidyl, fertilisers, medicines and hemp, whereas incoming items mostly include Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN), garlic and readymade garments. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2012). 4(11).

village. The excess amount thus collected is smuggled across the border to Bangladesh at opportune moments, mostly at nights.<sup>256</sup>

Everyday narratives of such cross-border flows give a more comprehensive idea about the state of things than the biased state-centric discourses. The state-centric discourses on cross-border flows tend to ignore what leaves the state, focusing only on what enters it; ignore the role of consumer demands that decide the nature and direction of the flows of contraband items; ignore the perceptions of the local people regarding the legality-illegality of transacting in certain goods or even the illegal nature of certain practices; and ignore the role of the state itself in facilitating such flows and the benefits that these bring to the state.<sup>257</sup> Thus, the everyday survival narratives of the border people are lost in the larger discourses of security and border control of the state in the context of these cross-border smuggling practices.

xi. Gendered aspect of the nature of involvement in smuggling

A careful observation of the nature of smuggling suggests that there are clear categorisations regarding the forms and items of smuggling between men, women and even children. Women are mostly involved in smuggling light-weight items, including Phensidyl, spices, food items or even household items of everyday use.<sup>258</sup> The clothing of the women (mostly *Sarees*) helps them carry these small and light items within their drapes.<sup>259</sup> The lack of women border guards makes it even easier for them to operate.<sup>260</sup> Moreover, instances of sexual favours offered by women or demanded of women by the border guards<sup>261</sup> in a number of instances also indicate

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<sup>256</sup> Jamwal, 2004, pp.26-27.

<sup>257</sup> Van Schendel, W. (2005) *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem. pp.382-383.

<sup>258</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident and smuggler at Ghunapara-Dhumron village, Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>259</sup> Biswas and Sujauddin, 7 January 2013, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*; Interview with Rumela Begum, resident and smuggler at Hili border (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

<sup>260</sup> 'মহিলারা ফেন্সিডিল আনে প্রচুর. মহিলা অফিসার নেই বলে, কেউ এদের চেক করার নেই ।' (Women smuggle a lot of Phensidyl. There are no women guards, so no one to check them.) Interview with Hare Krishna Mondol, village *Panchayat* member of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>261</sup> Discussed in Chapter 4.

the gendered aspect of livelihood practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>262</sup>

Men mostly perform smuggling practices which involve carrying or moving heavy items or acts which involve physical strain, such as running, climbing or crossing high barriers.<sup>263</sup> This does not, however, mean that men are not involved in smuggling light items such as drugs or items of daily use. But practices which demand physical strength almost exclusively involve them. This explains the large-scale involvement of men in cattle smuggling, especially along the riverine borders.<sup>264</sup>

Often, the male members of families are seen to be in charge of ‘managing’ the execution of the smuggling, while the women and children execute the operation. The reasons cited for such *modus operandi* is the sympathy that border guards often show towards women and children.<sup>265</sup> Children are involved in cross-border smuggling practices from a very young age along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. While the items smuggled by them are mostly light weight items such as drugs, fruits and spices, they often assist their mothers or other female members of their families in executing the strenuous part of the operation, like running across the border or getting aboard trains. The Hili border is an example where children aged anything between 7/8 years to their mid-twenties are seen running on the roofs of moving trains, carrying sacks of Phensidyl bottles and jumping from these trains on to the other side of the border.<sup>266</sup> Dropouts from schools are common in the West Bengal-Bangladesh border areas due to the involvement of children in illegal activities from a young age. The prospect of instant earnings drives the children into

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<sup>262</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident of Ghunapara-Dhumron village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>263</sup> Interview with Asif, resident and smuggler at Kaikhali village, Shyamnagar (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 14 February 2012).

<sup>264</sup> Interview with Asif and Hari, residents and smugglers at Kaikhali village, Shyamnagar (Stakhira district of Bangladesh, 14 February 2012).

<sup>265</sup> Interview with a BGB official at Benapole BGB camp (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012).

<sup>266</sup> Witnessed during my field visit to the Hili border (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

such activities. Their guardians, constituted mostly of poor farmers or labourers, are rarely seen to prohibit their children from getting involved in smuggling.<sup>267</sup>

The involvement of the *hijras*<sup>268</sup> in cross-border smuggling in certain parts of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border<sup>269</sup> cannot be overlooked if one has to understand livelihood practices along it. The fact that a substantial number of *hijras* are involved in smuggling<sup>270</sup> clearly suggests that they utilise their unique gendered status to earn a living. They mostly work as *dhoors* in smuggling drugs, while themselves falling prey to addictions most of the time.<sup>271</sup> One round-trip across the border fetches them around Tk. 200, while the sacks may contain drugs worth Tk.50,000 to 60,000.<sup>272</sup> The *hijra* status helps them escape the abuse faced by other male or female smugglers.<sup>273</sup> The fact that they are ‘neither male, nor female’ keeps the border guards at bay as they feel that ‘handling *hijras*’ questions their dignity.<sup>274</sup> Humanitarian grounds are, however, cited as the real reasons by the border guards for allowing the *hijras* to continue smuggling.<sup>275</sup> The prospect for a *hijra* involved in cross-border smuggling in these parts of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border has

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<sup>267</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident of Ghunapara-Dhumron village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>268</sup> In the culture of the Indian sub-continent, *hijras* are regarded as a ‘third gender’; most *hijras* see themselves as ‘neither man nor woman’. They cannot accurately be described as ‘eunuchs’ or ‘hermaphrodites’ or ‘transsexual women’. Most *hijras* were born male or ‘intersex’ (with ambiguous genitalia); many will have undergone a ritual emasculation operation, which includes castration. Some other individuals who identify as *hijras* were born female. Although most *hijras* wear women’s clothing and adopt female mannerisms, they generally do not attempt to pass off as women. Becoming a *hijra* involves a process of initiation into a *hijra* ‘family’, or small group, under a guru ‘teacher’. *UK Border Agency: Bangladesh, 2012*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/policyandlaw/coi/bangladesh/report-0912.pdf?view=Binary>. [Accessed: 24 July 2013].

<sup>269</sup> Discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>270</sup> Interview with Rajib, *hijra* and smuggler at Hili (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

<sup>271</sup> Interview with Sheena Akhtar, *hijra* and smuggler at Hili (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> Interview with Rajib, *hijra* and smuggler at Hili (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

<sup>274</sup> Interview with Sheena Akhtar, *hijra* and resident of Hili (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

<sup>275</sup> Interview with a BGB official at Hili BGB camp, Hili (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011); Interview with Rajib, *hijra* and resident of Hili (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

become highly profitable, which explains men undergoing emasculation operations or even disguising themselves as *hijras* to earn a living.<sup>276</sup>

The involvement of physically disabled people, including children, is also not rare in cross-border smuggling practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. ‘They make use of their disability to carry on the smuggling. They carry light things like marijuana, heroin, etc. But the guards leave them because of their disability,’<sup>277</sup> says a BGB official at Hili, indicating the similarity in attitudes of the border guards towards both the disabled and the *hijra* smugglers. The involvement of around 25 physically disabled people, including men and women, in and around the Hili port area indicates that physical disability, like the *hijra* status, is utilised by the border civilians to earn and survive on the border.

## X. Prospects for formalisation of border markets

The formalisation and legalisation of the already existing border markets along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border have been suggested both by civilians as well as border guards as a measure to curb illegal cross-border practices. This is also an indication of how the creation of the border has affected traditional links, local village markets being one of them,<sup>278</sup> and has created new, mostly illegal ties (cattle smuggling networks, for example). ‘If cattle trading is legalised and these *haats* are officialised, the propensity for smuggling will automatically be checked,’ says Ranjit, the local *Panchayat* head of Jamalpur.<sup>279</sup> Many senior officials among the border guards admit the prospect and necessity for the legalisation of *haats*, especially the cattle *haats*. ‘We all have to think about it seriously. It is not a problem

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<sup>276</sup> Interview with Bijon, resident and journalist with a Bengali daily in Jessore town (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012).

<sup>277</sup> Interview with a BGB official at Hili BGB camp, Hili (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

<sup>278</sup> The border had cut the villages off from their local markets, forcing them to cross it to purchase their ‘personal supplies of salt, cloth and oil and whatever other goods they needed. The local trade on which the region depended was seriously hampered by cutting the town off from its hinterland. Chatterji, 1999, p.228.

<sup>279</sup> Interview with Ranjit, resident and *Panchayat* head of Jamalpur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

that can be solved by policing,’ says a BSF official.<sup>280</sup> In fact, the BSF has been sending proposals for such ‘open *haats*’ along the border to the government of India, confirmed the BSF IG of the Malda frontier.<sup>281</sup> The use of the word ‘open’, interestingly, stands in contradiction to the idea of the border as a closed ‘container’ as envisioned by the state. It also highlights the failure of state policing and regulations in gauging or negotiating the uniqueness of the border, as admitted by the border guards themselves.



*Plate 17.* Informal border market beside border outposts. Indian shopkeeper selling products to Bangladeshi customers, 2011.

Certain areas in the North and South Dinajpur border with Bangladesh’s Dinajpur district, and the Malda border with Bangladesh’s Joypurhat and Naogaon districts,

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<sup>280</sup> Tiwary, D. (1 December 2012) Legalise cattle smuggling on Bangladesh border: BSF chief. *The Times of India*. [Online] Available from: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-12-01/india/35530471\\_1\\_bsf-men-bangladesh-border-indo-bangla-border](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-12-01/india/35530471_1_bsf-men-bangladesh-border-indo-bangla-border). [Last accessed: 1 August 2013].

<sup>281</sup> Staff Reporter (29 December 2012) Chorachalan thekatey shimantey ‘haat’ toiri. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1121229/29uttar3.html>. [Last accessed: 1 August 2013].

have been identified as viable places for border *haats* since these are some of the areas which still remain unfenced. Allowing the people from both sides of the border to trade in these *haats* with valid passports for a specified time is what the BSF suggests. Not only will these *haats* cater to the daily needs of the locals, they will also reduce the life risks of both the smugglers and border guards, besides ‘contributing towards the revenue of both the governments’.<sup>282</sup> Amidst debates on the need and viability of these border *haats*, the government of West Bengal has approved four locations along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border as freetrade zones, where traders from both states can sell their products.<sup>283</sup> The markets will be located ‘on’ the international border, said B.D. Sharma, Additional DG, BSF. ‘Half of the area will be on the Indian side and the remaining in Bangladeshi territory. It will be an enclosed space with gates on either side. All infrastructures such as banks will be set up’, he informed.<sup>284</sup> Bangladesh has also been planning to build Special Economic Zones (SEZs) along its borders with India in order to encourage cross-border trade within the legal framework of the state.<sup>285</sup> Such suggestions indicate the state’s desperate attempt to negotiate its borders within the structures of state machinery (transaction in the *haats* with passports). They also indicate the role that borders play in questioning the state’s role as the container of socio-political relations.

The existing border *haats* are currently havens for the smugglers to negotiate their deals, which can only be prevented if they are regularised and trading in certain items is legalised. ‘A *haat* is organised near the border every Sunday where these smugglers come for making deals. You can easily identify them from their suspicious body-language. Even the BSF knows them,’<sup>286</sup> says a civilian in Balurghat, implying

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<sup>282</sup> Staff Reporter, 29 December 2012, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*.

<sup>283</sup> Times News Network (22 September 2013) Bengal approves 4 border *haats*. *The Times of India*. [Online] Available from: <http://epaper.timesofindia.com/Repository/ml.asp?Ref=VE9JS00vMjAxMy8wOS8yMiNBcjAxNjAz>. [Last accessed: 23 September 2013].

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> Staff Reporter (30 January 2013) E parey baron, o parey udyam, shimantey SEZ. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/30bdesh1.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>286</sup> ‘আগে রাত ১১ টার পর চোরাই হাট চালু হত. এখন কম. পুলিশ আসছে শুনলে এক ঘন্টার মধ্যে পুরো জায়গাটা কলাবাগান চাষবাসে ভর্তি হয়ে যাবে. পুলিশ এসে দেখবে চাষ জমি ।’ (The illegal *haats* begin from 11PM. If they are informed of police raids, they will vacate the place in an hour and

that these *haats* could be put to better use for the civilians if only they were officialised by the state.

I have been witness to such illegal but flourishing border *haats* providing both cattle and other products such as juices, snacks, chocolates and biscuits on my field visits to border areas between North 24 Parganas-Jessore and Burimari-Changrabandha, respectively.<sup>287</sup> In some of the regular border *haats*, the fear of persecution by border guards looms large among the local civilians, simply because of the ‘illegal’ aspect of the whole operation.<sup>288</sup>

The prospect of meeting relatives and friends from across the border is also evident in the responses of the civilians,<sup>289</sup> besides that of being able to trade without fear. The way the existing border *haats* flourish during festivities, such as *Durga Puja* and *Eid*, stands proof of their prospects once properly organised. Many of these *haats* were in existence much before the creation of the border but have lost much of their glory and significance after the partition.<sup>290</sup> The ones which still function are plagued by illegal transactions. Thus, *haats* are a natural culmination of not just the exchange of various products across the border but also of cross-border cultural ties that the border people on both sides share, besides having great potential for contributing towards the economies of both India and Bangladesh. Traditional *haats*, which have been de-legitimised by the state-building agendas of India and Bangladesh, need to be re-legitimised for the people along the border to live and earn without fear.

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make it look like a simple farmland.) Interview with Bijoy Mondol, resident of Shikarpur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>287</sup> Field visits on 12 and 14 February 2012 and 6 October 2011, respectively.

<sup>288</sup> Interview with Jahangir, resident and farmer at Kabilpur village, Chougachha (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012).

<sup>289</sup> Interview with Banchharam Mondol, resident and *ex-Panchayat* head of Mathurapur village (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>290</sup> Staff Reporter (4 October 2012) Utsav-e jomey uthechhey shimanter haat. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1121004/4mur2.html>. [Last accessed: 1 August 2013].



## XI. Conclusion

The partition of Bengal in 1947 did not merely create territorial boundaries but also disrupted traditional ties. The border ‘breached the notions of the moral economy’,<sup>291</sup> of the people by restricting their movements and rupturing traditional socio-economic links. Clearly, defining and establishing complete control of the borders became political compulsions for both India and East Pakistan, and, later, Bangladesh, in order to establish unquestionable sovereignty over their respective territories. The process of the creation of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border has to be understood from two perspectives. On the one hand, borders were cartographically marked by the states (despite territorial disputes over certain parts), border guards and surveillance mechanisms deployed, and, eventually, border fences constructed (by India) to check the porousness of the borders. On the other hand, the partitioned people negotiated the creation of the border in two ways. Traditional links broken by the border were re-established, albeit with an ‘illegal’ tag from the respective states. And new links were established as outcomes of the border itself, most of which were again, illegalised by the states concerned.

The effect of the creation of the border on livelihood practices, as discussed above, might be understood through Van Schendel’s concept of three levels of scales, which he describes in the following ways: *scales-we-almost-lost*, indicating a pre-border web of relations that has weakened but not vanished; *state-scale*, indicating the web of relations that the state created through the creation of the border; and *border-induced scales*, indicating the web of relations created by the border itself.<sup>292</sup> The study of various aspects of livelihood practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border gives us a fair idea about the various patterns of livelihood practices which have been affected and created by it. Disruption of traditional livelihoods, the officially-recognised livelihoods created by the border and the co-lateral (mostly illegal) livelihoods created by it becomes clear in the light of Van Schendel’s framework of scales.

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<sup>291</sup> Guha, R. (1989) Saboteurs in the Forest: Colonialism and Peasant Resistance in the Indian Himalaya. In Colburn, F.D. (ed.) *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. Armonk, London: M.E Sharpe. p.86.

<sup>292</sup> Van Schendel, 2005, p.375.

i. Effects of the border on the role of the states, border guards and civilians

In the context of livelihood practices, a study of the roles of the concerned states, the border guards as representations of the states, and the border civilians reveals a complex pattern of operation. Apart from establishing border Land Ports and a few small-scale (brick-kilns, rice-mills) and cottage industries (*beedi*) along the border, the role of India and Bangladesh in the context of the livelihood practices of their border people has been mostly negative. Regulations and restrictions related to movement along and across the border have affected the lives of civilians in adverse ways. The construction of the fence has been a double jeopardy.

The border guards as representatives of the states were deployed for guarding and protecting the border. Lethal and non-lethal weapons, surveillance mechanisms and border outposts are the more visible forms of enactment of the role of the state's representative by the border guards. The abuse of people violating the regulations of the border by the border guards also forms a visible form of enactment of their duties.

The civilians, affected by the border and often victimised by the border guards, learnt to negotiate their spatial identity, i.e. the identity of the people of the borderland. They modified existing livelihood practices and produced new ones where the border could be put to their best interests. Negotiating regulations related to the crossing of the fence for cultivation or fishing in the riverine borders and resorting to cottage industries are examples of the effect of the border on traditional livelihood practices. The civilians also resorted to new livelihood practices created by the border, including engagement as traders, labourers, counter owners or shopkeepers at border Land Ports, and assisting or serving border guards in camps. But the most significant change brought about by the border in the livelihood practices of the people of these parts was the creation of exchange patterns across the border, considered illegal by the state but of potential to the economic interests of the border civilians. Engaging in illegal cultivation, engaging as illegal workforce (brick-kilns) and engaging in cross-border illegal trade constitute such practices and exchange patterns.

All these livelihood practices have become integral to border life in the last six decades of their operation along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. Interestingly, the role of the border guards in the livelihood narratives of this border is seen to have

two aspects. While the more visible aspect is that of the protection of the territorial sanctity of the border by restricting the movement of people and commodities, and increasing surveillance mechanisms,<sup>293</sup> the subtler aspect is the involvement of the border guards themselves in such movements. Their involvement in these practices indicates how state agents are ‘drawn into cross-border politics of scale’.<sup>294</sup> This explains the large-scale involvement of border guards in illegal cross-border livelihood practices in heavily guarded parts of the border like Hili or Petrapole-Benapole. Their uniforms and other visible trappings of territorial discipline do not necessarily match the spatiality of their everyday relations or how they place themselves in the border milieu, as Van Schendel rightly observes.<sup>295</sup> The ‘lure of the border’ makes the border guards susceptible to practices which weaken state territoriality<sup>296</sup> and makes them as much a part of the border milieu as the civilians.

ii. Uniqueness of livelihood practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border

The study of livelihood practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border has, so far, highlighted the effect of border regulations on peasants and migrants, the effect of fencing on movement, and the establishment of global illegal trade networks using the topographical qualities and strategic location of the border in question.<sup>297</sup> Studies have also been done on the clash between statist definitions of ‘legal’ and local perceptions of ‘licit’, resulting in the illegalisation of licit ties.<sup>298</sup> Most of these studies have had the model of the state as the perpetrator and the border civilians as the victims as the index for understanding livelihood practices along the border. This chapter shows that there are many more complex strands of narratives beneath such linear narratives of perpetrator-victim discourses. It also shows that livelihood narratives of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border are not limited to the disruption of

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<sup>293</sup> Fencing the unfenced areas, installation of flood lights, installation of Close Circuit (CC) cameras on the border gates along the fence, deployment of small-size hovercrafts in riverine border areas, and re-adjusting patrolling plans include some of the mechanisms of strengthening surveillance along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2012). 4(11).

<sup>294</sup> Van Schendel, 2005, p.378.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.378-379.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, p.379.

<sup>297</sup> Samaddar, R. (1999) *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*. New Delhi: Sage; Schendel, W. V.(2005) *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem.

<sup>298</sup> Van Schendel and Abraham, 2005.

traditional links followed by the destitution of border civilians, but are also study in the production of new links and the modification of old ones. A one-way linear study shows how pre-existing practices have been illegalised by the state. But the fact that the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, in the last six decades, has also seen the production of illegal practices and networks cannot be overlooked in the study of livelihood practices along it. The fact that such networks have not just been established by global traders but also by the local inhabitants of the border areas makes the study all the more significant.

The use of international borders by global smuggling networks has been a usual occurrence, globally. Nor is it a unique feature of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. Understanding the definitions of legality/illegality by the concerned states and illegal traders, or understanding the *modus operandi* of the international networks has been a much-explored area. This explains the abundance of studies related to drug-trading networks across the various borders of India, including those with Bangladesh.

This chapter highlights the local aspect of the creation of the border rather than the global implications. The effect of the border on the cultivation patterns of farmers, the co-lateral livelihood opportunities created by it like assisting or serving the border guards, the local economies created by Land Ports and cattle trades and the cross-border exchange of items of daily necessity constitute patterns of the localised effect of the border on the people who live along it.

### iii. Border as *thirdspace*

Livelihood practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border are examples of the disruption of hegemonic discourses, as well as indications of gaining alternative access to resources not seen in the other non-border parts of India or Bangladesh. They are also examples of the reproduction of different perspectives of contexts vis-à-vis predominant perspectives. These features are what constitutes any subaltern narrative<sup>299</sup> and, therefore, make livelihood practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border subaltern narratives as well. The chapter establishes the above claim by showing how border civilians evolve ways of gaining access to resources

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<sup>299</sup> Chakravorty, S., Milevska, S. and Barlow, T.E. (2006) *Conversations with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. London: Seagull.

and livelihoods by negotiating and utilising the border—ways which are different from the available or existing ways in the non-border areas. The perspectives of the civilians and border guards regarding their livelihood practices and that of the others question the predominant ideas of legality, licitness, inclusion and exclusion in India and Bangladesh.

An interesting observation about the livelihood practices along the West Bengal border is that the subversive or subaltern nature of the narratives is not a result of an organised or pre-planned effort. They are rather what James Scott phrases as ‘everyday forms of resistance’.<sup>300</sup> The border civilians are well-aware of the various nuances of the economy and the related livelihood possibilities in the border areas. They are also aware of the nature of state presence and governance in the border, what the border regulations are constituted of and most importantly, what practices are deemed to be considered legal or illegal by the states. The various practices that they engage themselves in despite knowledge of the above clearly indicate that border civilians are not always necessarily victims of statehood but beneficiaries of the same as well. Their practices are their efforts ‘to work the system to their maximum advantage or minimum disadvantage, ever testing the limits of the possible’.<sup>301</sup> The practices are not organised and, thus, might not find a significant place in the studies related to this border. But they are, nevertheless, ‘opportunistic and self-indulgent’,<sup>302</sup> indicating that the civilians use the border to their own interest. The lack of a formal organisation in such practices does not, however, imply that there is a lack of co-ordination as well. The various patterns and networks of livelihood practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border clearly point towards a well co-ordinated narrative of survival, which alerts us to the fact that the practices are ‘by no means merely random individual action’.<sup>303</sup>

Yet another significant observation is that the intentions of the practices indicate ‘an accommodation with the structure of domination’.<sup>304</sup> This explains why the livelihood practices are not, in any visible way organised efforts to deny the presence

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<sup>300</sup> Scott, J. C. (1989) Everyday forms of resistance. In Colburn, F.D. (ed.) *Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Armonk, London: M.E. Sharpe.

<sup>301</sup> Colburn, 1989. p.X.

<sup>302</sup> Scott, J. C. (1989) Everyday forms of resistance. In Colburn, 1989, p.21.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

of the state at the borders but simple rudimentary ways of putting the reality of the border to use. Instead of a denial or refusal of the state machinery, the livelihood practices of the civilians operate well within the structure of the same. What, nevertheless, makes the practices unique are the ways in which the civilians re-interpret and redefine the space of the borderland to suit their survival needs and how the border guards, inspite of being representatives of the states, involve themselves in this process of redefining the border. Involvement with the various livelihood practices along the border makes the practices of the border guards more a part of its everyday life than any organised, pre-planned effort to either establish or refuse the presence of the state at the borders.

The border, as a space of separation from the neighbour, as container of its own civilians and as a space for the exercise of unquestionable sovereign power of the state is re-interpreted and, in the process, reproduced by the border people, including the civilians and the border guards. The border, thus, becomes the platform on which the clash of perceptions between the border people and the state is performed, turning the border into the *thirdspace*<sup>305</sup>, i.e. the everyday lived reality of the border people. The border is perceived by the state as a non-fluid space of containment and sovereign power. The border guards, despite being embodied representatives of the state, conceive the border as a space for both establishing control, as well as for personal gains. The border civilians survive the reality of the border through practices and actions that suit their needs. Conflicting perceptions of the border, thus, converge in the borderland making the border the platform for the production of unique narratives.

#### iv. *Border consciousness*

Years of performance of such border narratives crystallise into a pattern of consciousness among everybody who negotiates the border in their daily lives. This consciousness is spatial in character, i.e. tied to the specificity of the borderland, and has been termed here as a border consciousness. This chapter provides a building block, by analysing livelihood practices, towards the establishment of the thesis that various strands of socio-economic and ethno-religious narratives converge in the border to be crystallised into a larger spatial narrative—the narrative of the

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<sup>305</sup> Soja, E. (1996) *Thirdspace*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

borderland, and that years of performance of certain actions and perceptions turn into a pattern of consciousness—the border consciousness. The omnipresence of the border in all the actions and perceptions of the border people constitutes an integral feature of the border consciousness—right from the role of the border fence in issues of cultivation, the role of border regulations in fishing, the role that the border Land Ports play in providing livelihood opportunities, the role of small-scale industries in attracting labourers across the borders to the role that the border plays in creating illegal avenues of livelihood. The words ‘Bangladeshi’ and ‘Indian’ become almost interchangeable when it comes to responses regarding such border narratives, especially livelihood narratives, so that after a point, only the performance of the activity matters and no more the nationality. This highlights the overpowering role that the border plays in the lives of its people—in binding the people on both sides of the borderline with the commonality of their border(ed) status. While the ways of negotiation of the people with their bordered-status differs, the consciousness that they are indeed a ‘border people’,<sup>306</sup>—different from the non-border people on both sides—remains constant. This was, in fact, reflected in the response of an Indian intelligence officer, who was surprised to find ‘no disorder and very little bad feeling among the people of the two dominions’ during his survey of the border villages of 24 Parganas in 1950. He assessed that the self-interest of both the people of India and Pakistan had nipped any possibilities of bad feeling in the bud right in the beginning. ‘They were too busy with their own smuggling of chillies, mustard oil, cloth, black pepper etc...’ he observed.<sup>307</sup>

The study of livelihood practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border serves as a reminder that subalternity is not merely an inert position characterised by a lack of agency within the framework of the state machinery, but a potential consciousness that creates its own subversive narrative despite the omnipresence of the dominant state narratives. Interestingly, ‘no subaltern claims subalternity’.<sup>308</sup> On the contrary, the subaltern makes an attempt to negotiate the vulnerable situation that he finds himself in.<sup>309</sup> The dynamic livelihood narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh

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<sup>306</sup> Martinez, O. J. (1994) *Border People: Life and Society in the US-Mexico Borderlands*. Tuscon: University of Arizona Press.

<sup>307</sup> Report on border affairs dated 20 March 1950. GB IB File No.1238-47 (24 Parganas). Quoted in Chatterji, 1999, pp.235-236.

<sup>308</sup> Chakravorty, Milevska and Barlow, 2006, p.65.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.65-66.

border evolving into a unique border consciousness stands proof of that negotiation. 'Common sense'<sup>310</sup> as a characteristic feature of the subaltern consciousness is best understood in such 'everyday forms' of negotiations; as is the absorption of new ideas and techniques to adapt to new conditions of life.<sup>311</sup> Thus, studying livelihood practices along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border contributes towards our understanding of how such everyday forms of common sense are adapted to suit the survival needs of the people negotiating the bordered conditions of their lives. This chapter, thus, provides one of the building blocks towards the thesis of the evolution of border consciousness by analysing how various patterns of livelihood practices converge and get intertwined at the West Bengal-Bangladesh border in producing a larger spatial consciousness.

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<sup>310</sup> Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. (trs. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith). London: Lawrence and Wishart.pp.325-43.

<sup>311</sup> Chatterjee, P. (1989) Caste and Subaltern Consciousness. In Guha, R. (ed.) *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian history and society*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. p.173.



## Chapter 2

### Narratives of the India-Bangladesh Enclaves

#### I. Introduction

The chapter aims to look at the geographical enclaves along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border in the context of their relation to it. The enclaves are unique geographical territories located on both sides of the border between West Bengal and Bangladesh, and concentrated in two border districts each of West Bengal and Bangladesh. The creation of the enclaves has its origin in the partition of Bengal into East Pakistan and West Bengal in 1947. This chapter aims at a brief background of the creation of the enclaves, followed by their present socio-political status in the context of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

The word 'enclave' as a geopolitical entity first appeared in the diplomatic document of the Treaty of Madrid (1526).<sup>1</sup> An enclave has been defined as an outlying portion of a country entirely or mostly surrounded by the territory of another country.<sup>2</sup> The evolved geopolitical meaning of the word has currently come to mean a portion of a country separated from the mainland and surrounded by a politically alien territory.<sup>3</sup> The term exclave has also come to exist besides the term enclave, with a slight variation in definition. From the point of view of the state in which the pocket of land is located, it is an enclave. From the point of view of the state to which the territory belongs, it is an exclave. A political exclave is defined by G.W.S. Robinson as a part of the territory of one country entirely surrounded by the territory of another country.<sup>4</sup> Given the similarity in their definitions, the terms enclave and exclave are often used interchangeably. Besides standard enclaves, the two other types of enclaves located so far are counter-enclaves and counter-counter-enclaves. A counter-enclave is an enclave within an enclave, i.e. domestic territory lying within the enclave territory of another state. A counter-counter-enclave is an enclave lying

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<sup>1</sup> Sills, D. L. (ed.). (1968) *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. Vol.5. p.61.

<sup>2</sup> Hanks, P. (ed.). (1971) *Encyclopedic World Dictionary*. p.58.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbani, Md. G. (2005-2006) Stateless in South Asia: Living in Bangladesh-India Enclaves. *Theoretical Perspectives: A Journal of Social Sciences and Arts*. 12 & 13. p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, G.W.S. (1959) Exclaves. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 49. pp. 283-295.

within a counter-enclave, i.e. a detached part of the principal enclave lying in the counter-enclave of that enclave.<sup>5</sup>

In general understanding, enclaves may be accessible from the mainland through an alien or foreign territory, by land or sea. However, with increasing political complications and the enhanced stringency of legalities associated with travelling across foreign territories, accessing enclaves by the parent states, however much cordiality the two states might have shared, ceased to be a viable option. With the growth of centralised state systems, territorial contiguity began dominating state sovereignty and national identity. Likewise, enclaves around the world began to be eliminated, through their consolidation into the mainland, throughout the 19th century.<sup>6</sup> As of now, the enclaves along the India-Bangladesh border are the most unique of their kind in the world, both in terms of their geospatiality as well as their political significance.

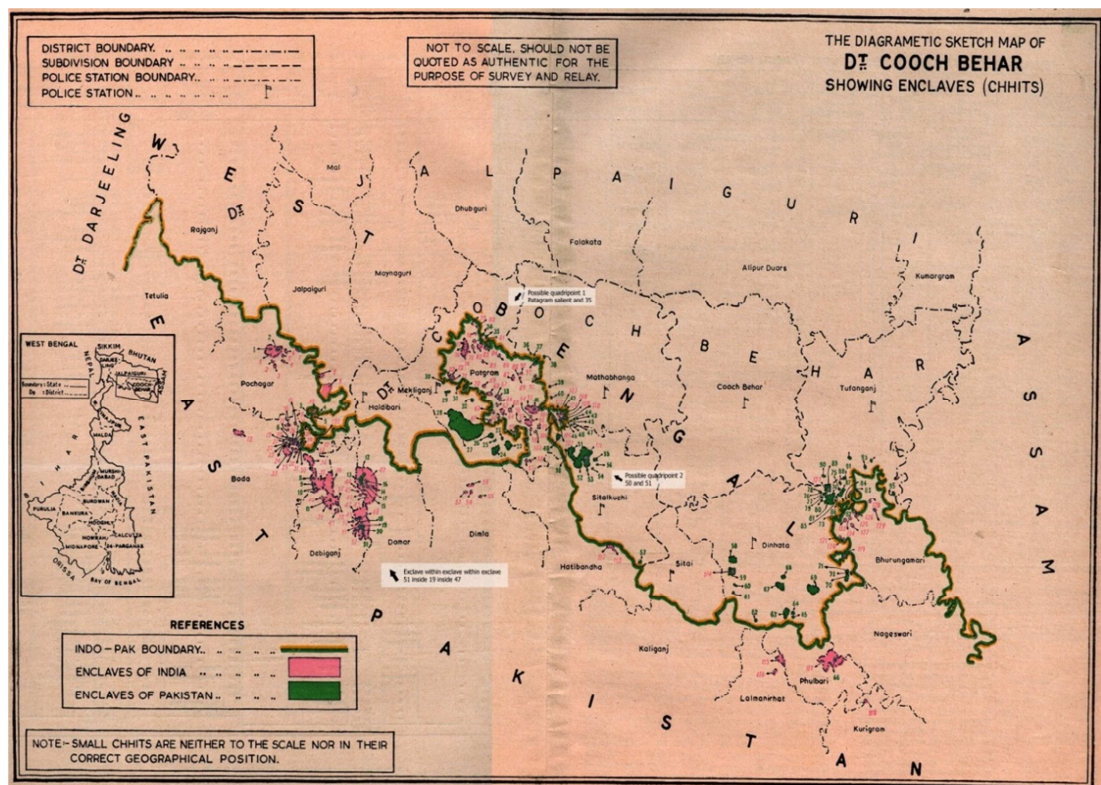


Figure 2. Diagrammatic sketch map of Cooch Behar enclaves (*chhits*). Source: District Map of Cooch Behar, Govt. of India.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## II. India-Bangladesh enclaves: historical background

The Bengali term for the word enclave is *Chhitmahal*—formed of two words *Chhit* (piece, portion or fragment) and *Mahal* (territory or landmass). The birth of the enclaves found in the Indian subcontinent can be traced to the Mughal era (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries), when a lot of such fragments of land belonging to a local chief or landlord would be located at a distance (i.e. not attached to the main piece of his jurisdiction), surrounded by the territories of others. Most of the local rulers or *zamindars*, in order to expand their territorial control, penetrated into neighbouring areas, creating landlocked estates of various sizes under their own control. Even these estates did not necessarily have a territorial continuity and were themselves scattered among neighbouring territories. These pieces of land came to be known as *Chhitmahals* and were mostly located on the eastern fringes of what was then the territorial configuration of the Mughal Empire. Neither the Mughals nor the British rulers could completely consolidate these estates (forming part of the Princely states under their control) scattered throughout the Indian subcontinent.

The origin of the India-Bangladesh enclaves can be traced back to the scattered princely estates held by the Maharaja of Cooch Behar and the *zamindars* of Jalpaiguri, Rangpur and Dinajpur. Myths have it that these Maharajas and *zamindars* often exchanged estates between themselves as part of poker games or even as gifts of honour. Conflicts between the local Mughal rulers and the Cooch Behar royal family also led to the creation of some enclaves. While the Maharaja of Cooch Behar held sovereignty over some of the far away enclaves inside the Mughal jurisdiction, the Mughals did the same within Cooch Behar's jurisdiction. Later British annexations brought the Cooch Behar jurisdiction under its control but did not bring about any fundamental change to the territorial characteristic of the enclaves.

The partitioning of Bengal resulted in renewed confusion regarding the distribution of the enclaves between West Bengal and the newly-formed state of East Pakistan. The Boundary Commission, responsible for deciding the new boundary between the states, based its decisions on ambiguous indices such as 'contiguity' and 'other factors'. The term 'other factors', though vaguely spelt out, became the deciding

factor for the Boundary Commission.<sup>7</sup> Both the Muslim League and the National Congress based their suggestions on the ‘other factors’ and decided on the boundary line. It was this ‘other factor’ reference that was used to include and/or exclude enclaves which otherwise would not have been justified by the territorial ‘contiguity’ factor. The boundary line itself was decided and executed in haste. Moreover, the Boundary Commission based its decision on district maps rather than field surveys,<sup>8</sup> which resulted in the enclaves remaining a part of a district but being located in another state.

The princely states were not immediately partitioned or set free in 1947 following the partition. They were given time to weigh their options between joining India or Pakistan. Accordingly, in 1949, Maharaja Jagadendra Narayan of Cooch Behar merged with India following the ‘Cooch Bihar Merger Agreement’ on 28 August 1949.<sup>9</sup> According to the Agreement, all the territories belonging to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar fell under the sovereignty of India, implying that the enclaves held by Cooch Behar in the *zamindari* of Rangpur and Dinajpur formed part of India, despite being separated from the main jurisdictional area of Cooch Behar.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the enclaves under Rangpur and Dinajpur fell under the sovereignty of Pakistan despite being surrounded on all sides by the territories of Cooch Behar (West Bengal). The geographical characteristics of the enclaves were rendered all the more complex due to the zigzag demarcation of the India-Bangladesh border in the areas which hosted them.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, there was never any confusion about the area and demarcation of the enclaves themselves in India and Bangladesh, despite disagreements about the citizenship status of their inhabitants. The borders between British India and Cooch Behar had been clearly demarcated in 1934 through concrete pillars. Many of these

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<sup>7</sup> Discussed in the Introduction.

<sup>8</sup> Chatterji, J. (1999) The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal’s Border Landscapes, 1947-52. *Modern Asian Studies*. 33(1). pp. 185-242.

<sup>9</sup> Cooch Behar Merger Agreement, 1949. Available from: [http://coochbeharnic.in/htmlfiles/royal\\_history2.html](http://coochbeharnic.in/htmlfiles/royal_history2.html).

<sup>10</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, pp.3-9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

pillars are still in place today, though they look different from the ones marking the India-Bangladesh border that was constructed in 1947.<sup>12</sup>

The districts of Cooch Behar (the areas of Haldibari, Mekhligunj, Mathabhanga, Sitalkuchi, Dinhata and Tufangunj) and Jalpaiguri in the state of West Bengal (India) host the Bangladeshi enclaves, while the Bangladeshi districts of Panchagarh (Panchagarh, Debigunj, Boda), Nilphamari (Dimla), Lalmonirhat (Lalmonirhat, Hatibandha, Patgram) and Kurigram (Kurigram, Bhurungamari, Fulbari) host the Indian enclaves.

At present, there are a total of 162 enclaves in India and Bangladesh, including 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh (covering an area of 17,158 acres) and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India (covering an area of 7,110 acres).<sup>13</sup> The population of the 111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh amounts to 37,550 according to a Census of the enclaves (the first ever) in July 2011, while that in the 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India amounts to 14,310.<sup>14</sup> These figures give a fair idea of the enormity of the crisis, given that more than 51,000 people have been walking the tightrope between citizenship and statelessness for over six decades now.

In 1951, the first attempt at enumerating the population of the enclaves was taken up by the government of Pakistan as part of its Census. But the enumerators were harassed and arrested by the Indian border police when they tried to enter the enclaves and, hence, began the exclusion of the enclave dwellers from all the censuses of both the countries for the next 66 years.<sup>15</sup> The bigger irony, perhaps, is the fact that in the 1961 Census of Pakistan, 82 villages mentioned as ‘uninhabited’ actually constituted the enclaves.<sup>16</sup> The enlisting of the enclaves as uninhabited territories together with the uninhabited status of the deserted villages around

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<sup>12</sup> Van Schendel, W. (February 2002) Stateless in South Asia: The Making of the India-Bangladesh Enclaves. *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 61(1). p. 122.

<sup>13</sup> In 1947, there were 130 Indian enclaves and 95 Pakistani enclaves, which were reduced to 123 Indian and 74 Pakistani enclaves by 1965 through boundary agreements. Further reduction in their numbers to the current figure of 111 Indian enclaves and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves, however, has not been very clearly spelt out. Van Schendel, 2002, p. 118.

<sup>14</sup> Chakrabarty, C. (8 January 2013) Nei desher baromashya. *Ei Samay*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.epaper.eisamay.com/epapermain.aspx?quered=9&eddate=01/08/2013>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>15</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 124.

<sup>16</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, p.29.

(deserted due to river erosion) makes the unrecognised status of the enclaves amply clear.

The partition of Bengal saw the exchange of lands between Hindus and Muslims migrating between India and East Pakistan. Though cases of planned exchange of lands were few compared to the large scale frenzied exodus, official documents testify to such exchanges in a substantial number. Hindus from East Pakistan migrating to West Bengal exchanged their lands with the Muslims of West Bengal who migrated to East Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> Yet the enclave residents hardly had the choice of exchanging their lands with non-enclave lands since that would involve exchange with foreign lands. In order to keep to the jurisdictions of their own states, the enclave inhabitants could exchange lands only with enclave inhabitants from the other side of the border. 'If there is an exchange between *Chhits* and lands of the other state, then the matter will fall under the Foreigner's Act,'<sup>18</sup> informs Phulmoni, an enclave resident.

The trajectory of the enclave inhabitants has been somewhat similar to that of the *Namasudra* and other agricultural castes who were the last to leave their lands and so, the last to arrive in the new states after partition.<sup>19</sup> Essentially peasants by occupation, enclave residents were among the last migrants to leave their original enclaves and migrate to those on the other side of the border. Such migrations continued in phases well into the 1990s. 'Changing our jurisdictional areas, i.e. police stations, was the most that we could do. But, in any case, we had to stick to enclaves in order to be within the larger jurisdiction of our country. Many of our Muslim neighbours here in the enclaves are those who have been inhabitants of these lands for generations, and who did not migrate to East Pakistan even after partition. They are technically Indian citizens by birth (by virtue of being inhabitants of the

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<sup>17</sup> Efforts are still on by the Bangladesh government for the return of Enemy Property to the Hindus who had left behind their property in East Pakistan after partition. Afraad, K. (5 November 2009) Dakhal kora Hindu sampatti ferate ek dhap egolo Bangladesh. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1091105/5bdesh1.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>18</sup> The Foreigner's Act 1946. Available from: <http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/The%20Foreigners%20Act,%201946.pdf>; Interview with Phulmoni, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Bakhalir *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Discussed in Chapter 3.

Indian side of the land for generations), but have been turned into Bangladeshi citizens due to this enclave status,' complains Phulmoni.<sup>20</sup> Much of the enclave population consists of such original inhabitants, who were living in these territories for ages—long before the partition took place. That has not ensured access to the basic facilities of their states for these people. Their politico-territorial status prevents them from accessing the minimum needs of life and livelihood.

Partition and migration, thus, affected the enclave residents in ways different from the non-enclave residents and immigrants. Change of sides did not mean change of nationality for those enclave-residents who migrated, while the nationality of those who did not migrate from their original enclaves changed. This makes the enclave narratives unique not just as a socio-spatial phenomenon but also in partition and citizenship discourses.

The construction of the fence put a complete halt to the interaction between the enclave population and their parent states. The fence made cross-border movement visible like never before and cut off the enclaves from their states. Even till the early 1980s, people could travel to their own states for casting their votes or accessing some basic facilities. With the increased cross-border restrictions on mobility being put into operation between India and Bangladesh, such movements have ceased.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Phulmoni, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Bakhalir *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali Sheikh, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Purba Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).





*Plate 18. Bangladeshi enclave in India, 2012.*

### III. Bilateral Agreements concerning the India-Bangladesh Enclaves

#### i. Nehru-Noon Accord (1958)

The territorial complexity of the enclaves coupled with the possibility of religious tension (between some of the Muslim-majority enclaves and their Hindu-majority neighbouring areas and vice-versa) troubled the prime ministers of both India and Pakistan—Jawaharlal Nehru and Firoz Khan Noon, respectively. Discussions regarding a decision about the enclaves began between the ministries of both countries, complemented by survey initiatives and demarcation talks. The idea of the exchange of enclaves began to appear in the public discourses of both India and Pakistan. Eventually, on September 10, 1958 an agreement was signed between Nehru and Noon for the exchange of enclaves.



The Berubari question<sup>22</sup> formed the main issue of the agreement together with the question of the exchange of enclaves. In fact, there had been talks regarding the separation of the two issues, and of the enclave question to be dealt separately under the Acquired Territories (Merger) Bill, 1960. Despite objections by the West Bengal State Assembly to the separation of the Berubari question and the enclave issue, the Acquired Territories (Merger) Act<sup>23</sup> was finalised in 1960. The Act provided for the ‘Exchange of old Cooch Behar enclaves in Pakistan and Pakistan enclaves in India without claim to compensation for extra area going to Pakistan.’

However, amidst opposition from political parties over both the Berubari issue as well as the enclaves, the Act could not be implemented. In 1971, the Indian Supreme Court’s attempt for a final implementation of the Act was overshadowed by a war crisis (leading to the formation of Bangladesh), stalling the exchange for the time being.

ii. Indira-Mujib Agreement (1974)

The struggle for the independence of East Pakistan followed by the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 renewed optimism among the people of both West Bengal and Bangladesh regarding the enclave issue. India’s co-operation with Bangladesh in its liberation war was largely responsible for this optimism. Accordingly, on May 16, 1974, the Prime Ministers of India and Bangladesh—Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, signed yet another agreement provisioning for the full exchange of the enclaves. Bangladesh dropped its claim over South Berubari in return for the possession of its largest enclave in West Bengal—Dahagram-Angarpota.

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<sup>22</sup> Following the partition of Bengal in 1947, Berubari Union No. 12 (area of 8.75 square miles), situated in Jalpaiguri district and forming a part of the then Rajshahi division, was described as part of West Bengal and allotted to India. But the map annexed to the Radcliffe Award, however, showed Berubari as part of East Bengal. Though the provisions of the Award specifically mentioned that in case of discrepancy between description and map, the description was to prevail. But in 1952, Pakistan alleged that Radcliffe Award provided for the inclusion of Berubari into Pakistan and that it had been wrongly treated as part of West Bengal. Nehru and Noon signed an agreement provisioning for the Berubari Union to be horizontally divided and the lower half given to Pakistan. Political debates over this agreement took the case to the Supreme Court where, ‘on an application made under Art.22b of the Indian Constitution, Justice Sinha issued an injunction on the State of West Bengal and the Union of India restraining them from giving effect to the proposed transfer’.

<sup>23</sup> Acquired Territories (Merger) Act 1960. Available from: <http://www.constitution.org/cons/india/shed01.htm#FIRST SCHEDULE>.

The agreement provided for the lease of land by India for use by Bangladesh (measuring 175x85 metres), as a passage between the Bangladesh mainland and the Dahagram-Angarpota enclave. This passage came to be called the *Tinbigha* Corridor.<sup>24</sup> The agreement was followed by protests by the people of Mekhligunj (the area of Jalpaiguri which ought to host the corridor), which delayed the final implementation of the creation of the corridor. Finally, in 1982, the matter was taken up by H.M. Ershad<sup>25</sup> in Bangladesh and an agreement was signed between Indira Gandhi and Ershad leasing the *Tinbigha* Corridor to Bangladesh. But it was not before 1990 that all the hurdles in the path of the implementation of the agreement could be resolved and a corridor could be built across Indian territory, connecting the Bangladeshi enclave of Dahagram-Angarpota to the mainland of Bangladesh.<sup>26</sup>

iii. Manmohan-Hasina Agreement (2011)

While the *Tinbigha* Agreement signified a breakthrough in India-Bangladesh bilateral relations, it also meant that the larger enclave issue involving more than 160 other enclaves was pushed to the backseat. The *Tinbigha* Corridor overshadowed the situation of the rest of the enclaves, who were, since 1947, in a wretched state.

In 2011, the Prime Ministers of India and Bangladesh— Manmohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina, signed yet another accord providing for the exchange of the enclaves, by which their inhabitants could continue to reside at their present location and be recognised as the citizen of the host country or else they could move to the country of their choice. The agreement is yet to be ratified and implemented.

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<sup>24</sup> *Tin* is both the Bengali and Hindi word for the number 3. A *bigha* is a unit of measurement of area of a land, commonly used in Nepal, Bangladesh and a few states in India, including West Bengal. The size of a *bigha* varies considerably from place to place. In West Bengal as well as Bangladesh (both of which were part of the undivided province of Bengal before the partition of 1947), the *bigha* was standardised under British colonial rule at 1600 square yard or 0.3306 acre, which is often interpreted as being 1/3 acre. *Tinbigha* means 3 *bighas*, i.e. a corridor measuring 3 *bighas* or 1 acre approximately.

<sup>25</sup> H. M. Ershad became the Chief Martial Law Administrator in 1982, following a bloodless coup on 24 March 1982. He finally took over as President of Bangladesh on 11 December 1983 by replacing A. F. M. Ahsanuddin Chowdhury and held the post continuously till 1990.

<sup>26</sup> (Article in Press) Cons, J. (2012) Narrating boundaries: Framing and contesting suffering, community, and belonging in enclaves along the India-Bangladesh border. *Political Geography*. p. 1-10. Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2012.06.004>; *Tinbigha: Agreements and Verdicts*. Available from: [http://coochbehar.nic.in/htmlfiles/tinbigha\\_contd.html](http://coochbehar.nic.in/htmlfiles/tinbigha_contd.html). [Accessed: 10 August 2013].

Bilateral affairs between India and Bangladesh over the enclave question have, in a way, pushed the reality of the existence of enclave dwellers to the backseat, since the reality of the situation never made it to the state-level agreements. Security and economic concerns of the states have been prioritised over the destitution of the people who are the victims of state-building.

In 1948, an agreement had been signed between the East Bengal government and Cooch Behar agreeing to allow the armed forces of both sides across the other's territory in order to enter and leave the enclaves. The district officials, under the agreement, were required to have photograph identity cards. Their visits were also to be preceded by an announcement no less than fifteen days in advance. Police officials were required to be in their uniforms and unarmed. The agreement had also provided for supplying certain goods to the enclaves once a month and the collection of revenue once every six months. The agreement had not provided for the transit of people in and out of the enclaves. While state officials could transfer goods into the enclaves, the produce from the enclaves could not be transferred out, barring the enclave people from participating in the regional economy,<sup>27</sup> forcing them into a virtual economic blockade and criminalising their survival practices. 'If they were to survive, they had to ignore the agreement and face the peril of being defined as smugglers.'<sup>28</sup>

The nature and provisions of the agreements regarding the enclaves from their inception to date stand proof of the fact that the bilateral relations between states have been prioritised over the survival concerns of the people for whom these agreements were meant. The introduction of the passport and visa control systems in 1952 added to the woes. The passport system drove the enclave people into acting more against the law. In the absence of passport offices within the enclaves, the enclave people wanting to obtain a passport had to cross foreign territory illegally to reach their parent state. The parent state would have to allow them to enter without a passport. In case they somehow got through this process and obtained a passport, they had to approach the consulate of the neighbouring state for a visa to return to their enclaves. Once the visa expired, they had to go through the whole process again illegally. The passport and visa system struck the final blow to the citizenship status

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<sup>27</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 124.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

of the enclave people, driving them into infringement of the laws of both India and Bangladesh through every little move they made.<sup>29</sup> With the introduction of the passport system, the collection of revenue from the enclaves by state officials also ceased since the latter now required visas to enter the enclaves.<sup>30</sup>

Given their unique territorial nature and absence of state apparatuses within the enclaves, it is not difficult to imagine what the lives of these enclave-dwellers entail. Law and order is conspicuous by its absence. With no access to the police, border guards or administrative institutions, the enclave people have to deal with any kind of issue—environmental, social, legal, economic or political—by themselves.

The earlier literature on enclaves had mostly looked at them from the perspective of geographical uniqueness, sovereignty, international law and issues of administration.<sup>31</sup> Some recent studies have attempted to look at the various strands of identity formation within the enclaves as well as negotiation between the enclave people and their neighbours,<sup>32</sup> but have not studied them as constitutive parts of border narratives per se. This chapter aims to look at the narratives of the India-Bangladesh enclaves as integral parts of border narratives and as an important strand in the evolution of border consciousness along the border.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>31</sup> Catudal, H.M. (1979) *The Exclave problem of Western Europe*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press; Chatterji, J. (1999) The fashioning of a frontier: The Radcliffe line and Bengal's border landscape. *Modern Asian Studies*. 33. pp. 185-242; Karan, P.P. (1966) The India-Pakistan enclave problem. *The Professional Geographer*. 18. pp. 23-25; Kaur, N. (2002) The nowhere people. *Frontline*. 19; Robinson, G.W.S. (1959) Exclaves. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 49. pp. 283-295; Vinokurov, E. (2007) *A Theory of Enclaves*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books; Whyte, B. (2002) *Waiting for the Esquimo: An Historical and Documentary Study of the Cooch Behar Enclaves of India and Bangladesh*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne; Rabbani, Md. G. (2005-2006) Stateless in South Asia: Living in Bangladesh-India Enclaves. *Theoretical Perspectives: A Journal of Social Sciences and Arts*. 12 & 13. Dhaka: Centre for Alternatives.

<sup>32</sup> Van Schendel, W. (February 2002) Stateless in South Asia: The Making of the India-Bangladesh Enclaves. *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 61(1). pp. 115-147; (Article in Press) Cons, J. (2012) Narrating boundaries: Framing and contesting suffering, community, and belonging in enclaves along the India-Bangladesh border. *Political Geography*. pp. 1-10; Cons, J. (2012) Histories of Belonging(s): Narrating Territory, Possession, and Dispossession at the India-Bangladesh Border. *Modern Asian Studies*. 46(3). pp. 527-558; Jones, R. (2009) Sovereignty and statelessness in the border enclaves of India and Bangladesh. *Political Geography*. 28(6). pp. 373-381; Jones, R. (2010) The border enclaves of India and Bangladesh: The forgotten lands. In Diener, A. and Hagen, J. (eds.) *Borderlines and Borderlands: Political Oddities at the Edge of the Nation-State*. New York: Rowman Littlefield; Shewly, H. J. (2013) Abandoned spaces and bare life in the enclaves of the India-Bangladesh border. *Political Geography*. 32. pp. 23-31.



*Plate 19.* Path to an Indian enclave in Bangladesh, with stark resemblance to its non-enclave surroundings, 2011.

#### IV. Deprivation from access to basic facilities

##### i. Land documents, identity proofs and other basic amenities

The enclave population neither have a formal citizenship status nor any specific document showing their status as enclave inhabitants. ‘Neither do we have birth certificates, nor do we have Polio cards. We are only known as “people” (implying the deprivation from a formal citizenship).’<sup>33</sup> The only document related to land that some of these people might have is an age-old one that shows that the land had been owned or rented out to one of their ancestors for cultivation by the local landowners. These land documents still act as the only continuing connection with their parent

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<sup>33</sup> ‘জন্ম সার্টিফিকেট, পোলিও কার্ড কিছু নেই. আমরা শুধু মানুষ নামে পরিচিত ।’ Interview with Md. Anisur, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

state.<sup>34</sup> Other than this, the enclaves do not officially belong to any police station or district.

While the district that they officially belong to does not recognise them, the district within which they are located cannot recognise them since they are a foreign territory. ‘The way we can claim to belong to a district, a police station, these people cannot claim any of these. They lack an identity and are foreigners in their own lands. They cannot even access the facilities of their own states due to the border fencing. They are practically left without laws or a Constitution unlike us. BSF insists that even if they have to pass over a few yards of the neighbouring state’s land while travelling from their enclaves to their states, they require a passport. We cannot help them in any way even if we want to,’<sup>35</sup> says Nirendranath Burman, resident of a village adjoining a Bangladeshi enclave in India, while responding to questions about the condition of their enclave neighbours.

This also means that the people belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in the enclaves are also without a certificate documenting their caste status.<sup>36</sup> Their unique territorial status has resulted in the absence of even basic facilities which the official citizens of a state enjoy like schools, hospitals, police stations, etc. ‘The only thing we can call our own is this air we breathe,’<sup>37</sup> laments Md. Iqbal Ali.

Taking help from neighbours in terms of fake identities to get admission to a school or hospital in the host state is routine for the enclave dwellers. And this service includes a certain amount of expenditure as well. ‘We have to pay about Tk. 500 each to the Bangladeshi *Union* member of the neighbouring village for fake birth

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<sup>34</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 129.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Nirendranath Burman, deputy-head of *Panchayat* of Kalmati village, Dinhata (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Kamal Debnath, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Shibprasad Mustafi *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

certificates for our children, where the father's name and the name of the village of the child's birth are forged,'<sup>38</sup> says Hafizul.

Though electric poles run through them, the enclaves themselves are deprived of electricity. The electric poles provide electricity to the neighbours on all sides, depriving the enclaves in which they are installed. 'If we try to hook current from the lines, we are threatened. Even if we want to buy electricity from them, they do not co-operate.'<sup>39</sup> This also means that irrigation water needs to be pumped in using diesel-engine machines in the absence of electricity. The lack of electricity implies that the enclave inhabitants have to depend on their neighbours for daily activities such as charging their mobile phones. 'We charge our phones from the houses of our neighbours, since we cannot use the electricity that runs through our *Chhits*,'<sup>40</sup> says Kamal, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave. This has forced many of the enclave people to extend their houses into the neighbouring territories in order to acquire electricity and postal addresses in the host state.<sup>41</sup>

Some of the enclaves have arranged for their own drinking water facility with no help from either state. The kerosene oil, which their neighbours get at a subsidised rate at the ration shops, needs to be procured at a substantial rate for use as lighting purposes in their huts. With no citizenship documents, the enclave dwellers cannot access subsidised rations like their neighbours. 'The moon, sun, rain and air are the only things we get free here. If the Indians could, they probably would have cut off our access to these as well,'<sup>42</sup> complains Md. Iqbal, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India.

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Hafizul, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Dahala-Khagrabari *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Md. Karim Baksh, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Karala *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012); Staff Reporter (10 June 2010) Pares her prastab. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/10uttar4.htm>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Kamal Debnath, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Shibprasad Mustafi *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 135.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

The enclave dwellers have built roads themselves in the absence of any state initiatives to improve the communication system inside them. Temporary bridges have been built in some, using bamboo as their main resource. Almost all the inhabitants of that particular enclave contribute in the construction of the roads or bridges, either by providing bamboo or by providing labour. Senior enclave residents supervise the construction.<sup>43</sup>

ii. Land issues

A lot of people from the surrounding areas have managed to grab land inside the enclaves in the absence of their original owners (who might have migrated elsewhere) or any state administration. They continue to live in their own state, in the vicinity of the enclave but enjoy the possession of the land inside the enclaves—lands for which they do not require to pay revenue. Moreover, in the period following partition, the uncertainty over the future of the enclaves had reduced their land prices.<sup>44</sup> This was another reason behind some of the neighbouring people buying land inside the enclaves in the hope that they would eventually be merged with the host state.<sup>45</sup>

Some of these landowners bring landless people from other areas (mostly victims of displacement due to natural calamities like river erosion) and settle them on their lands in the enclaves as *adhiars*, who then form their own little colonies and start cultivating the land as sharecroppers. The *adhiar* families are provided with a piece of agricultural land and a piece of land for residence by the owner of the land. The yield from these lands is divided equally between the *adhiar* and the landowner. These sharecroppers are often treated as subjects of the landowner, and called *proja* (subject).<sup>46</sup> A new version of socio-economic subjectivity, thus, awaits these *adhiars* once they are settled inside the enclaves by the land owners—though such identities are not recognised by either of the states concerned.

Besides enjoying the yield from an unregistered and untaxed land, people having lands inside the enclaves can also use their own shallow pumps to irrigate their part of the lands, which the enclave inhabitant cannot do. The owners of these enclave

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<sup>43</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, p.42.

<sup>44</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 129.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, pp.37-38.



lands are registered under the BPL (Below Poverty Line)<sup>47</sup> list in their own states since they do not officially own any land in the states of which they are citizens. They cultivate their lands inside the enclaves and reap the benefits to the full, not having to pay any revenue for the produce. ‘We cannot complain for fear of threats, nor does the Indian government do anything about this,’<sup>48</sup> says an enclave resident. This does not imply that the enclave dwellers themselves are happy about their non-revenue status. One of the respondents makes it clear when he says, ‘revenue-paying has been a tradition of this country. Our forefathers paid tax throughout their lives. Why shouldn’t we pay?’<sup>49</sup>

Some of the neighbouring cultivators have come to own hundreds of acres of lands inside the enclaves over the years. ‘The Chatterjees of Dinhata own 600-700 *bighas*<sup>50</sup> of agricultural land here. They bring their own agricultural labourers from outside the enclaves to work on their land. Even when they sell the land, they do it to Indians, but never to us. We are perpetually deprived of every opportunity,’<sup>51</sup> says a visibly infuriated Kamal Debnath, inhabitant of a Bangladeshi enclave in India.

Even if the enclave dwellers try buying land from their neighbours, they often end up being defrauded by the sellers in the absence of documents and also because most of

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<sup>47</sup> Below Poverty Line (BPL) is an economic benchmark and poverty threshold used by the government of India to indicate economic disadvantage, and to identify individuals and households in need of government assistance and aid. It is determined using various parameters which vary from state to state and within states. The present criteria are based on a survey conducted in 2002. Internationally, an income of less than \$1.25 per day per head of purchasing power parity is defined as extreme poverty. Criteria are different for rural and urban areas. In its Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002–2007) survey, BPL for rural areas was based on the degree of deprivation in respect of 13 parameters, with scores from 0-4: landholding, type of house, clothing, food security, sanitation, consumer durables, literacy status, labour force, means of livelihood, status of children, type of indebtedness, reasons for migrations, etc.

<sup>48</sup> ‘ভারতীয় রা এখানে চাষ করে নিয়ে যায়ে. আমরা না পাই কর, না পাই আশ্বাস. ভারতে ওরা হয়ত বি পি এল. এদিকে ছিটে চাষ করে-ছিটে তো কর দিতে হয় না. সুতরাং পুরোই মুনাফা. ভারতে তো ওদের নামে কোনো জমি নেই, তাই বি পি এল. এখানে চাষ করে. আমরা কিছু বললে হুমকি দেয়. এই বিষয় ভারত সরকার কিছু করে না ।’ (Indians cultivate their lands here. We cannot do anything about it. They do not own any land in India, and are so in BPL list. Here they do not have to pay any tax. So for them, it is only profit. If we complain, they threaten us.) Interview with Md. Kamal Hussein, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Karala *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Rabbani, 2005-2006, p.52.

<sup>50</sup> 1 bigha=0.3306 acre

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Kamal Debnath, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Shibprasad Mustafi *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

them are unable to attend the land registry process as it takes place in the nearest local administrative unit of the district under which the enclave lies, across the border. Moreover, the enclave lands have never been included in the land settlement surveys of either state since 1947, which puts these lands and their owners (both fake and real) into complete uncertainty as to the future of their possessions.<sup>52</sup> ‘We cannot register our land holdings either in India or Bangladesh. So we write it down informally. It has no real validity and is susceptible to manipulation in future,’<sup>53</sup> says Bimal, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave. Nor is there any uniformity in the land registration systems of the various enclaves. The land registration documents are without any legal standing and have no validity outside the enclave.

iii. Commercial transactions

Being completely surrounded by the territories of the host state, the enclave people have to depend on their neighbours for commercial transactions, as well as for schools, hospitals, etc. They use the *haats* of their neighbouring locality of the host state for commercial purposes; use the currency of the host state; maintain family and friendship links with the surrounding areas, including marriage ties (which are officially cross-border marriage ties), and often participate in the religious festivals of the neighbours (Hindu enclave residents in Hindu festivals and Muslim residents in mosque congregations).<sup>54</sup>

iv. Adverse position of some neighbouring territories

Due to the enclaves, some areas of the host state are deprived of communication systems and electricity as the enclaves pose a barrier. These areas, bounded by the enclaves, have turned into adverse territories themselves. The kind of infrastructure required to deal with such situations (for example, building a bridge around the enclave) might not always be economically viable. This leaves the people of such areas with little choice but to traverse the enclaves for communicating with other neighbouring villages of their own state—being forced into being ‘trespassers’.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, p.38.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Bimal Burman, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 129.

<sup>55</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, p.62.

v. Schools, hospitals

It is with the fake identity of their neighbours that the children from the enclaves are admitted into neighbouring schools.<sup>56</sup> The issue of having to ‘pose a stranger as my husband in order to get my children admitted to school’ keeps coming up in numerous responses of the women inhabitants of the enclaves.<sup>57</sup> Admission to hospitals operates on a similar use of fake identities.

School education, even after such a hazardous beginning, can only continue till the primary level, after which it is not possible to continue education in a high school since issues of identity are more formalised in them. Official documents, like a voter card, ration card or birth certificates, to which the enclave inhabitants do not have access, are essential for admission into government-run high schools.<sup>58</sup> ‘In the higher classes, they are asked about their whereabouts,’ says Fatima Bibi in context of sending children to neighbouring schools with fake identities.<sup>59</sup>

Some of the enclaves have informal schools, run either by one of their own residents or sometimes volunteered by a person from the neighbouring areas.<sup>60</sup> These schools cannot provide any food or books to its students, unlike primary schools in the neighbouring areas where the students are entitled to free meals and textbooks at the primary level. ‘We cannot even pay any remuneration to the teachers who volunteer to teach in these schools,’<sup>61</sup> laments an enclave inhabitant. The uncertainty of educational degrees, if acquired somehow, leaves the enclave people disinterested in

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012); Staff Reporter (19 June 2013) Mathabhanga lagoya Bangladesher 3 chhitmahaley cholchhe charam arajakata. *Ganashakti*. [Online] Available from: [http://ganashakti.com/bengali/news\\_details.php?newsid=26339](http://ganashakti.com/bengali/news_details.php?newsid=26339). [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Bhabani Burman, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Fatema Bibi, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Karim Baksh, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Karala *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Saif Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Karala *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

pursuing education. With no access to the parent state and no legal access to the employment opportunities of the host state, the enclave people are left with little choice. Using fake documents to acquire government jobs poses the risk of being apprehended on verification (a process that every government job entails).<sup>62</sup>

vi. Marriage, women, sexual violence

Despite efforts and examples of cross-border marriages between the enclave people and their neighbours in the host states, the prospect of marriage is often critical and forever hazardous for them. Finding a bride from the neighbouring areas is often difficult for the male residents of enclaves since that entail a loss of citizenship for the bride. The wife as well as the children are rendered document-less because the husband/father does not possess one.<sup>63</sup> ‘Once one marries into the enclaves, she loses her ration cards and becomes document-less like the rest of the enclave population. All her previously existing documents become invalid on entering the enclave after marriage.’<sup>64</sup>

Women from the enclaves have another version of the crisis of marrying outside the enclaves. Fatima Bibi narrates how her daughter is being harassed by her in-laws for not being able to provide documents. ‘My daughter is unable to obtain Indian citizenship because of lack of documents. Her in-laws are demanding Rs.5000 so that they can arrange for fake documents with that money. We are poor people. Where do we get so much money?’<sup>65</sup> Bhabani Burman and Bimal Burman second Fatima on the plight of the women inhabitants of the enclaves who are married into neighbouring villages.<sup>66</sup> To ensure the acceptance of their daughters into non-enclave families, the enclave residents encourage the marriage ceremony to be held in the

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<sup>62</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, pp.42-43.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Fatema Bibi, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Dalim Bibi, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Batrigach *Chhit* of Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 18 March 2012).

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Fatema Bibi, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Bhabani Burman and Bimal Burman, residents of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

presence of a marriage registrar (or a priest/*kaji*) of the choice of the groom's house, arranged from the neighbouring area.<sup>67</sup>

Incidents of sexual harassment, including rape and molestation by both the neighbouring miscreants as well as the border guards, are not uncommon in the enclaves.<sup>68</sup> Lack of medical facilities within the enclaves result in complications related to childbirth, including miscarriages.<sup>69</sup>

Fatima narrates the irony that though her paternal house is in a village which is currently in the Rangpur district of Bangladesh, her parents could never visit her in her present address in the Bangladeshi enclave of Mashaldanga. The piece of Indian land between the Bangladesh mainland and the enclave prevents them from visiting their daughter. 'Even we cannot attend funerals of our parents for the same reason,'<sup>70</sup> rues Fatima. Movement across the enclaves and the neighbouring areas is all the more restricted for the women of the former, given the belief of the men 'in their (women's) inability to flee from pursuers.'<sup>71</sup> The tragic trajectory of the enclave people rings loud in such responses. This crisis, however, fails to put a complete halt to cross-border marriages between enclave and non-enclave residents. Incidents of women from distant places in the host state marrying into the enclaves do occur, although rarely.<sup>72</sup>

#### vii. Religious aspect

A religious innuendo in the context of fake documents and identities has also been noticed in some of the responses. Md. Iqbal explains that most of the Hindu

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Rebecca Khatun, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Dahala-Khagrabari *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Md. Riazul Islam, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Bewladanga *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Shahid Haq, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Dahagram *Chhit* of Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 6 October 2011).

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Fatema Bibi, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>71</sup> Cons, 2012, p. 546.

<sup>72</sup> Saha, A. (14 February 2013) Premer taney chhitmahalei samsar petechhen Arzu. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1130214/14uttar3.html>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

inhabitants of the enclaves have their Hindu relatives as neighbours, living in the Indian territories around them, and they provide fake documents and identities to Hindus in the enclaves, whereas the Muslim enclave dwellers need to obtain these documents through the payment of a substantial amount of cash.<sup>73</sup> Similar responses are heard from the Hindu residents of Indian enclaves in the Muslim-majority Bangladeshi areas.

Fatema Bibi supports Iqbal's claim that religion often plays a role in the kind of behaviour that the enclave population can expect from their neighbours: 'They behave all the more badly because we are Muslims. All the surrounding villages are Hindu, and all of us inside the *Chhit* are Muslims. If they unleash their cattle on our *Chhits* to graze, we cannot complain, or else they become violent.'<sup>74</sup> Irrespective of religion, the relation between the enclave population and their neighbours, in most cases, is not favourable. 'We have to interact with our neighbours. But if they behave badly, we cannot answer them back. We are always being apologetic, often unnecessarily, simply to ensure that they keep co-operating with us,'<sup>75</sup> says Fatema.

These responses are manifestations of what Willem van Schendel phrases as the clash between citizenship, proxy citizenship and an enclave identity. In the post-partition phase, the states of India and Pakistan 'saw themselves as being in charge of the population living in their own territory, but also of a category of people living in the territory of the other state.'<sup>76</sup> These groups have been termed by Van Schendel as citizens and proxy citizens, respectively. India's proxy citizens were the Hindus living in Pakistan, while Pakistan's proxy citizens were the Muslims living in India.<sup>77</sup> This *transterritorial*<sup>78</sup> aspect of nationality was often related to questions of the loyalty of proxy citizens towards their territorial nation.

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Fatema Bibi, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 127.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

The condition of the enclave people was perhaps the most complicated against the backdrop of such citizenship issues because of the location of their identity at the crossroads of being citizens, proxy citizens and enclave people.<sup>79</sup> Communal outbreaks in the post-partition phases elsewhere in India or Bangladesh affected the enclave people in ways whereby the proxy citizens of the enclaves were unharmed, while the citizens of the other state were made victims of the communal violence. The dilemma in identifying themselves with either the parent state or the host state pushed the enclave people to the brink of vulnerability. Their identification as *citizens* distanced them from their neighbours and relatives outside the enclaves on whom they were economically dependent. The more the enclave people identified themselves as *proxy citizens*, the more they distanced themselves from their co-residents in the enclaves.<sup>80</sup> This drove them to create a third identity for themselves—that of being ‘enclave people’.<sup>81</sup> The undercurrent of citizenship and identity issues can still be felt in the responses of the enclave people like the ones above. Religious issues related to citizenship questions still occupy an important role in the narratives of the enclave people.

The complex pattern of citizenship and proxy citizenship in the enclaves can also be understood from the recent survey of the enclave people regarding their choice of state once the exchange of enclaves was executed. 743 out of the 14,000 Indian enclave residents (constituting 149 families) in Bangladesh expressed their desire to be rehabilitated in India, while none among the 37,000 Bangladeshi enclave residents in India expressed their desire to be rehabilitated in Bangladesh after the exchange. Interestingly, the Bangladeshi enclave residents in India have themselves started preparing for the rehabilitation of those who choose to rehabilitate from the Indian enclaves in Bangladesh instead of waiting for the Indian state or even the West Bengal government to take an action. The Bangladeshi enclave residents in India have also decided to help the Indian enclave residents from Bangladesh with the necessary financial support to start their lives afresh in the Bangladeshi enclaves in

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p 128.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p 132.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p 131.

India. This also indicates the desperation of the enclave residents for the execution of the exchange.<sup>82</sup>

viii. Relation between the enclave residents and the *Panchayat/Union*

Earlier, the *Panchayat/Union* heads of the *Panchayats/Unions* to whom the enclaves officially belonged could come to the enclave for the mediation of disputes or the issuing of certificates. However, with the introduction of the passport/visa system and the enclave issue gaining political momentum in India-Bangladesh bilateral affairs, the border guards stopped allowing the same, depriving the enclave population of their last resort of communication with their parent states.

Interestingly, the *Panchayat/Union* heads of the neighbouring villages of the host state still engage in such co-operation, as and when possible, despite its illegal nature. ‘We do try to help the enclave people in some ways, even though it will be considered officially illegal. We cannot do anything legally, especially for those who do not have a single document. Those having a basic document can still be helped, albeit illegally. In fact, I have arranged for many of their school admissions, livelihood opportunities as labourers outside the enclaves or even arranged for voter cards for many of them—all illegally,’<sup>83</sup> says the Deputy-Head of the village *Panchayat* of an Indian village adjacent to a Bangladeshi enclave, but he also adds that, ‘not all Indian *Panchayats* help the enclave people in the way we are trying to’<sup>84</sup>— indicating the inherent troubled relations between the enclave population and its neighbours.

Some of the Indian neighbours of the Bangladeshi enclaves and vice versa confirm these responses regarding the troubled relationships between the enclave inhabitants and their neighbours. ‘It is true that they do not share a cordial relation with their neighbours. The Indians do abuse the enclave dwellers, though there are exceptions of course. Many of us try to co-operate with them, which is also reflected in the

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<sup>82</sup> Chattopadhyay, A. (3 May 2012) Punarbashaner daye nijerai nichhen mariya chhitmahalbashi. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1120503/3bdesh2.html>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Nirendranath Burman, deputy-head of Kalmati village *Panchayat*, Dinhat (Cooch Behar district of Bangladesh adjacent to Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh, 16 March 2012).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*



relation between many of these enclave dwellers and their neighbouring villages,’ says Md. Ziauddin Miah.<sup>85</sup> Some of the responses, in fact, point towards an ambience of cordiality between the two, especially during times of festivities.<sup>86</sup>

ix. Trespassing and ‘push-backs’

The threat of conviction for trespassing is omnipresent among the enclave people since it is difficult for them to prove their enclave-status if wrongly convicted of illegal infiltration. In case of apprehension, they are either ‘pushed back’ forcefully into their parent state or imprisoned. Being pushed back forcefully into their own state creates yet another hazard for these enclave dwellers since they have set up their own life and livelihood in the enclaves over the years. ‘Once we are forcefully pushed back to Bangladesh, it is almost impossible to come back to the enclave, and especially in the current situation of the fences,’<sup>87</sup> says a Bangladeshi enclave resident in India.

While, on the one hand, the restriction of movement between the enclaves and the parent state is a problem, being forcefully pushed back into their states is no solution either. The idea of ‘being forcefully pushed back’ into their own states forms an interesting but complex narrative in the context of the enclaves. It is, in fact, quite easy for the neighbours to create an issue out of any kind of movement by the enclave population. ‘All they have to do is report to the BSF that we are illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators, and we will immediately be sent to the jail. Earlier it was a 3-month term for such convictions. Currently it has been extended to 2 years and 2 months. There are plans for further extension, for up to 3 years.’<sup>88</sup> The hassles that the ‘push-back’ policy of the border guards create for the enclave people indicates that the more important issue for the latter is their integration into the host states as

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with Md. Ziauddin Miah, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Kismat Batrigach *Chhit* of Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 18 March 2012).

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Suren Burman, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Shibprasad Mustafi *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Saif Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Karala *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Md. Anisur, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

officially recognised citizens rather than access to their parent state.<sup>89</sup> Such issues form a platform for the citizenship demands of the enclave people. Push-backs are not unique to enclave residents but are a common occurrence along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, where civilians are forcefully ‘pushed back’, either into their own state or into the neighbouring state by the border guards, where the victims of push-backs are stranded between legalities pertaining to citizenship of India and Bangladesh.<sup>90</sup>

x. Lack of voting rights

The lack of voting rights of the enclave people prevents them from voicing their problems in either the local *Panchayats*/Unions or to the political parties ‘Our plight never comes up as an agenda with the leaders even during elections. The leaders invest their energy only towards their voters, in the Indian villages around. We are not entitled to vote, so no one cares to talk about us,’<sup>91</sup> laments Bimal, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India.

## V. Livelihood

Livelihood opportunities for the enclave dwellers are few, other than agricultural practices. The partition played havoc with them by separating them from their agricultural fields. Plots of land were scattered not just on either side of the border but also on the same side between the enclaves and their surroundings. The lives of these people deteriorated, as Rabbani puts it aptly, ‘from peasant to sharecropper,

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<sup>89</sup> Staff Reporter (27 August 2013) Bangladesher push-back, durbhogy chhitmahaler jubok. *Ei Samay*. [Online]. Available from: <http://eisamay.indiatimes.com/state/bangladeshs-pushback-chitmahals-youth-is-in-trouble/articleshow/22089807.cms>. [Last accessed: 9 September 2013].

<sup>90</sup> Roy, R. (29 April 2012) Kajolrekha swopno dekhen, uthoney ghurchhey ariful. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1120429/29mur1.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013]; Sayed, S. and Bhattacharya, S. (30 April 2012) Chhele ke ebar schooley bhorti korben Kajolrekha. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/30mur2.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Bimal Burman, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Bakhalir Chhara Chhit of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012); Ray, R. (2 September 2013) Chhitmahal binimoye netara udashin: voter bajarey er daam nei, tai? *Ei Samay*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.epaper.eisamay.com/Details.aspx?id=6126&boxid=4021265>. [Last accessed: 9 September 2013].

tenant to landless and sharecropper to non-cropper.’<sup>92</sup> With the population of the enclaves soaring rapidly in the absence of any government administered Family Planning Programmes,<sup>93</sup> earning a living with the limited availability of resources has been the main crisis of the enclave inhabitants. The economic blockade that the enclaves have been forced into left their people with little option but illegal transactions with their neighbours.

Working as labourers elsewhere in the state or even abroad, which has become a usual occurrence all along the border, is a risky proposition for the enclave population because of the lack of documents. This makes them doubly vulnerable to false allegations of infiltration.<sup>94</sup> ‘We do not have any industries in the enclaves, not even such cottage-industries as *beedi*-making. We are unable to work as labourers in India, since we do not have a union card, unlike the Indian labourers. While they (Indian labourers) can come into the *Chhit* to work as labourers, we cannot do the same outside the *Chhit*,’ complains Iqbal, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India.<sup>95</sup> Experiences of travelling outside the enclaves as labourers have not always been good. The threat of persecution has kept most of the enclave people away from such livelihood opportunities.<sup>96</sup>

The BRAC<sup>97</sup> credit programme offers loans to some of the residents of the Indian enclaves in Bangladesh for supporting their personal economic initiatives or to help meet their harvest shortcomings. Yet the absence of official documents remains a constant impediment with only those residents who obtained membership to BRAC before 1993 being eligible for such credit assistances. With the introduction of the Voter Identity Card in India in 1993, the ambiguous identity of the enclave residents became all the more prominent, making their stateless position visible and rendering

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<sup>92</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, p.34.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p.30.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Bimal Burman, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>97</sup> The BRAC (Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee) is a private commercial bank in Bangladesh, with its headquarters in Dhaka. The bank is partially owned by BRAC, the largest non-government organization in the world, and the International Finance Corporation, the private sector arm of The World Bank Group and ShoreCap International.

them ineligible for assistance from Bangladeshi organisations. A large number of the enclave people are, thus, deprived of the BRAC credit assistance programmes due to the lack of an official identity (Voter Identity Card).<sup>98</sup>

Scarcity of food is an inevitable outcome of the lack of livelihood opportunities and the restriction on movements for the enclave-dwellers. A growing population adds to the crisis. The productivity of the available agricultural lands remains low due to the lack of access to advanced technology by the farmers within the enclaves, including restrictions on using shallow pumps and buying livestock. The restricted amount of economic transactions adds to the crisis.

## VI. Attitude of the border guards towards the enclave people

The attitude of the border guards towards the enclave residents is, not surprisingly, unfavourable. ‘Madhya Mashaldanga is about 2.3 kilometres from the border, while Dakshin Mashaldanga (in Bangladesh) is about 1 kilometre from the border. In between these two territories, there is Indian territory where BSF is posted. If only we did not have that stretch of the territory in between, we could easily travel to Bangladesh. But BSF does not allow us to traverse that path at any cost,’<sup>99</sup> says a resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India.

The border guards take advantage of the undocumented status of the enclave-dwellers. Even if instances of murder or abuse by miscreants from neighbouring areas occur within the enclaves, the border guards or the police do not take them up because of the ‘foreign territory’ status of the enclaves. ‘We ourselves solve such

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with Md. Ghulam, BRAC officer in an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Dahala-Khagrabari *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>99</sup> ‘মধ্য মশাল দাঙ্গা থেকে বর্ডার ২.৩০ কি.মি. দক্ষিণ মশাল দাঙ্গা থেকে হাফ কি এক কি.মি. দূরে. দুদিকে বাংলাদেশের মধ্যে ৮০ হাট ইন্ডিয়ান রাস্তা. ওটা না থাকলেই আমরা বাংলাদেশে যাতায়াত করতে পারতাম. ওখানেই দিঘল্দারি বি এস এফ ক্যাম্প. ওখান দিয়ে যাতায়াত করা একেবারেই নিষেধ ।’ Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

cases, since police would not take up these cases,'<sup>100</sup> complains Hafizul, a resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh.

This encourages both physical and verbal assaults on the enclave-dwellers by neighbouring villagers. Complaints such as 'we cannot speak with as much vigour as the neighbouring Bangladeshis'<sup>101</sup> speaks amply of the sense of crisis that these enclave-dwellers go through.

The border guards' attitude towards the enclave-dwellers is either one of ignorance or of unnecessary threats and abuse. Akbar Alam narrates how the border guards used to take the enclave-dwellers away for no reason at all or for minor reasons and beat them up brutally or imprison them for months. 'These days, the situation is a bit better, though things have not changed too radically,'<sup>102</sup> he says.

That things have not changed radically is proved by what Md. Iqbal Ali Sheikh says. As enclave-dwellers, there are restrictions on their movement as well as on the amount of agricultural goods or food items that they can carry. 'If the amount exceeds a bit, the border guards make us do menial work such as cleaning garbage or even human excrement or else simply put us behind bars for months together,'<sup>103</sup> says Iqbal Ali.

The male-enclave dwellers are also made to work as corvee labourers by the border guards for constructing and/or maintaining the border fences. 'If we do not agree to do it, they threaten us. Undocumented as we are, we always have the fear of being apprehended by the border guards and so, are bound to comply with these kind of demands,' says Iqbal Ali.<sup>104</sup> The border guards often have roads built through the enclaves for their own convenience, which the enclave people are prohibited from

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<sup>100</sup> Interview with Hafizul, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Dahala-Khagrabari *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>101</sup> 'আশেপাশের বাংলাদেশের বাসিন্দা দেব মত দাপটে কথা বলতে পারি না ।' Interview with Momin Rezzak, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Kajaldighi *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Akbar Alam, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Angarpota *Chhit* of Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 6 October 2011).

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali Sheikh, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Purba Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

using.<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, this is another example of illegal border crossings by official actors.<sup>106</sup> Traversing the enclaves makes a border guard as illegal a trespasser as an enclave resident moving out of his/her enclave.

## VII. Platform for miscreants

The theft of cattle, crops and poultry is a regular occurrence inside the enclaves. ‘Theft occurs in the light of the day. We try our best to dissuade them from stealing our stuff, but to no avail. If we persist, then they threaten us, just because we are enclave people,’<sup>107</sup> says an enclave resident.

‘People from the neighbouring areas behave very badly with us. If we talk back, they become violent, use swear words, might even put our homes on fire or might forcefully take away our cattle,’<sup>108</sup> is how Md. Anisur sums up the basic crisis of the enclave population.

The enclave inhabitants are often jeopardised by the police, border guards and neighbours for events in which they have no involvement whatsoever.<sup>109</sup> Incidents of rape, molestation, theft and murder mostly perpetrated by miscreants from the surrounding areas<sup>110</sup> go unrecorded and, hence, unpunished. A resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh narrates an incident pertaining to 2010: ‘Some Bangladeshi miscreants attempted burglary inside the Indian enclave, when some of them were held by the enclave dwellers and beaten up. As revenge, the rest of their gang

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<sup>105</sup> Interview with Suren Burman, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Shibprasad Mustafi *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

<sup>106</sup> The previous example was that of the BSF crossing the border to take stock of communal violence on the Bangladesh side—discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali Sheikh, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Purba Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

<sup>108</sup> ‘ছিটমহলের সমস্যা- বাইরের লোক মারধর করে, গালিগালাজ করে, জবাব দিলে মারপিট করে, আগুন ধরিয়ে দেয়, গরু লুট করে নিয়ে যায় ।’ Interview with Md. Anisur, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Md. Riazul Islam, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Bewladanga *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

members put fire to 160 of our huts in the enclaves the next day. It has been a year now and there has been no substantial aid coming from either India or Bangladesh other than a few tarpaulins and clothes. We have not been able to rebuild our houses and still live under make-shift enclosures made from burnt tin sheets.’<sup>111</sup>

## VIII. Haven for smugglers

Cattle smugglers often use the enclaves as transits for smuggled cattle. However, the enclave inhabitants rarely engage in such practices themselves for fear of being doubly jeopardised. ‘They take their cattle through the *Chhits*, but we are not involved in these practices because, as it is, we are perpetually threatened by the fear of persecution,’<sup>112</sup> says Bimal Burman, an enclave resident.

Their existential crisis prevents them from inviting any further chances of being harassed. ‘We do have smuggling activities inside the *Chhits*, but we do not have anyone to report these. If we try approaching the *Pradhan*, he says it is our fault. The *Chhit* inhabitants are rarely involved in these activities themselves because we know we do not have any resort if we land up in trouble. We have no other option but to let others carry on such activities using the *Chhit* as a transit because there is no one who will come to our rescue if we are attacked by the smugglers. The BSF never comes to the *Chhits* to enquire about our needs,’ complains Md. Anisur.<sup>113</sup> The smugglers store their smuggled items in the enclaves, using them as transit points before arranging for the final smuggling across the border. ‘Again it is we who are victimised in such instances, and never the actual smugglers involved,’<sup>114</sup> says Ziauddin, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave.

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<sup>111</sup> Interview with Md. Riazul Islam, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Bewladanga *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Bimal Burman, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Md. Anisur, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Md. Ziauddin Miah, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Kismat Batrigach *Chhit* of Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 18 March 2012).

The enclaves are havens for illegal or banned cultivation like that of *ganja* (hemp). As part of a larger drug network, cultivators are provided with seeds and fertilisers by the smugglers' syndicates for cultivating *ganja*,<sup>115</sup> though they are often not aware of the network they are part of or of the ban on such cultivation. The border officials or the police cannot prevent this from happening due to restrictions on entering the enclaves.<sup>116</sup>

While the sense of being disowned is clear in responses such as, 'we live in perpetual fear. We do not have an identity— neither a *Pradhan* nor a state,'<sup>117</sup> a sense of confinement is also evident in responses such as, 'we feel as if we are living in a jail.'<sup>118</sup> The complex territorial status of the enclaves has clearly resulted in a complex perception of belonging and/or exclusion amongst its inhabitants. This complex narrative of belonging is corroborated by the fact that in the case of those enclave dwellers who are convicted for a crime, the final discharge from the jail is often delayed even after the completion of their terms. 'Where will they release us? To which country? Bangladesh does not accept us as its citizens,'<sup>119</sup> says Bimal, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave. It is after much deliberation that they are returned back to their enclaves.

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<sup>115</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, p.56.

<sup>116</sup> Karmakar, K. (8 June 2005) Indian enclaves in 2 districts safe havens for criminals, Large scale hemp cultivation in enclaves in Dinajpur, Panchagarh. *The Daily Star*. [Online] Available from: <http://archive.thedailystar.net/2005/06/08/d50608070178.htm>. [Last accessed: 12 August 2013].

<sup>117</sup> 'এমনিতেই আমরা ভয় থাকি, কোনো পরিচয় নেই, প্রধান বা রাষ্ট্র কিছুর নেই ।' Interview with Md. Anisur, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>118</sup> Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>119</sup> 'অনেক সময় শাস্তির মেয়াদ শেষ হলেও ছাড়ে না. কোথায় ছাড়বে? কোন দেশে. বাংলাদেশ কে বলে তোমাদের লোক. বাংলাদেশ নেই না ।' (Many a times they do not release the convicts even after the completion of their terms. Where will they release us? To which country? Bangladesh does not accept us as its citizens.) Interview with Bimal Burman, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).





*Plate 20. Hut within an enclave, 2011.*

## IX. Counter-enclaves

The condition of the enclave-dwellers becomes all the more blatant when compared to the condition of the people living in a counter-enclave. In the midst of the Bangladeshi enclave of Madhya Mashaldanga within Indian territory, there is an Indian counter-enclave—Nazirhat II *Gram Panchayat*, which, by the incidence of its location, is surrounded by Bangladeshi enclaves on all sides despite being on the Indian side of the border. Its inhabitants need to travel through the Bangladeshi enclaves in order to get to the Indian territories for schools, hospitals, their livelihood, shops, etc. In spite of its unique territorial position, its inhabitants insist that access to basic facilities has not been a problem, as all the people in this enclave

have Indian documents proving their citizenship status like ration cards, voter cards, etc.<sup>120</sup>

Despite sharing a spatial uniqueness with the other enclaves, including illegal crossings over foreign territory,<sup>121</sup> the standard of life in terms of access to fundamental privileges, distinguishes the people of this particular Indian enclave from those of its neighbouring Bangladeshi enclaves. The children go to schools, they have access to hospitals and the women have been married into villages on Indian territories without any hazard. 'My daughters often come for a visit. My sons are engaged in agriculture when they are here. Otherwise, they go to Delhi<sup>122</sup> as labourers for 2 to 5 months,'<sup>123</sup> says Saraswati, resident of the Indian counter-enclave.

Relations with their neighbours from the surrounding Bangladeshi enclaves are just about cordial. 'Though we do not attend their *Eid* festivals, they often come here during our *Durga Puja* festivals,'<sup>124</sup> says Saraswati. Simply by virtue of being located on the 'right side' of the border, the inhabitants of this particular counter-enclave enjoy a better life than those inhabiting the enclaves on the 'wrong side', despite the similarity in their spatial uniqueness. The role of the border becomes undeniably visible in such narratives.

## X. Local administration

Many of the enclaves have formed their own administrative councils within their space, calling these bodies *Chhitmahal Nagarik Samiti* (Enclave Citizens' Committee).<sup>125</sup> Intra-enclave disputes of any kind are, most often, mediated by such councils, in the absence of any legal or administrative machinery of the state within

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<sup>120</sup> Interview with Saraswati Das, resident of an Indian counter-enclave within a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Nazirhat village of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh, 15 March 2012).

<sup>121</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 125.

<sup>122</sup> Delhi is the capital city of India.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with Saraswati Das, resident of an Indian counter-enclave within a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Nazirhat village of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh, 15 March 2012).

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 133.

the enclaves. 'The *Chhits* have their own councils. We select one of our senior members as the head of the council. There is no formal election as such. The entire process is performed verbally,' informs Bimal Burman.<sup>126</sup>

Usually the councils have one chairman and nine members. The area of the enclave council is divided into wards (usually three but dependant on the size of the enclave), each being represented by three members. The larger enclaves might hold an informal election for forming their councils, where local leaders from neighbouring areas might be invited by the enclave-dwellers to supervise the election process. Only the male enclave inhabitants are allowed to vote, keeping the gendered nature of the system intact amidst such deprivation and destitution. The smaller enclaves stick to simpler selection methods.<sup>127</sup>

These councils do not simply have their own heads and members, but also *chowkidars* (village police)<sup>128</sup> and *kerani* (clerks). The enclave residents collect a fund from amongst themselves, which is paid as an honorarium to these people for their service.<sup>129</sup> 'We ourselves try to discipline those enclave inhabitants who create nuisance within the enclaves, though the number of such offenders is very few. In the absence of any legal system, who would want to create a problem anyway?'<sup>130</sup> adds Md. Kamal Hussein, an enclave resident.

The literal translation of the term used by the enclave residents to describe the nature of the local governance (*shamajik bichar*)<sup>131</sup> is 'social justice'—a form, as explained

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<sup>126</sup> Interview with Bimal Burman, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>127</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, p.55.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Md. Riazul Islam, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Bewladanga *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Momin Rezzak, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Kajaldighi *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Md. Kamal Hussein, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Karala *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

<sup>131</sup> 'এখানে টাকা টা সমস্যা নয়. সব চেয়ে বড় সমস্যা হলো নাগরিকত্বের. থানা, পুলিশ কিছু নেই. সামাজিক বিচার আছে. মসজিদ-এ বিচার হয় ।' (The biggest problem here is of citizenship. We do not have police, *thanas*. We have social arbitration/justice. The trials take place at mosques.) Interview with Iqbal Hussein, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Dahala-

by the people themselves, characterised by the absence of a state-recognised judicial institution and existence of a social institution. It is formed and obeyed by the enclave residents. The term *shamajik bichar* might be interpreted as social administration or social arbitration, but the literal translation—social justice—in fact, stresses the abysmal state of justice—social, political and economic, in the enclaves. This explains the negative undertone of the enclave residents when using this term, and is made clear in responses such as: ‘In the absence of a proper legal institution, the miscreants can operate without fear. They know that possibilities of a severe punishment are rare here. Social justice (*shamajik bichar*) is the *most* that we can expect.’<sup>132</sup>



*Plate 21.* Enclave council members, 2011.

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Khagrabari *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>132</sup> Interview with Iqbal Hussein, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Dahala-Khagrabari *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011). (The use of italics is my own and is meant to hint at the limits of such social arbitration as expressed in the tone of speech of the narrator.)

The nature of economic transaction (including land transactions) between the enclave people or between them and their neighbours is also called *shamajik kenabecha*<sup>133</sup> or social transaction by them, given the unofficial nature of the process.<sup>134</sup>

There is a religious connotation to their perception of the local governance as well, reflected in responses such as, ‘Neither do we have citizenship, nor a legal institution. We have social justice, the procedures of which take place at the local mosque.’<sup>135</sup> This does not, however, imply that religion has an overwhelming presence in the narratives of the enclaves but indicates the overpowering nature of the spatial uniqueness of the enclaves themselves that binds their residents together. Arbitrations involving both Hindu and Muslim offenders take place under the auspices of the mosque or a temple inside the enclaves. Hafizul adds that the demand for citizenship for both the Hindus and Muslim residents of the enclaves is equally strong, irrespective of the host state.<sup>136</sup> This aspect points towards the complex pattern of identification with regard to religion that the enclave people are part of.

It is the state of statelessness that binds them together more than religion, just as a ‘bordered status’ binds the border inhabitants together more than their social, political or economic identities. A sense of being wronged by fate, as echoed by many of the border inhabitants (‘it is a sin to be born at the border’)<sup>137</sup> rings large in the responses of the enclave residents as well: ‘We feel ashamed to say that we are born as enclave people,’<sup>138</sup> says Hafizul, an enclave resident.

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<sup>133</sup> ‘জমি কেনা বেচা হয় কিন্তু নিজেদের নিজেদের মধ্যে. কোনো দলিল নেই. সামাজিক কেনাবেচা ।’ (We have land transactions between ourselves without any official document. It’s just social transaction.) Interview with Iqbal Hussein, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Dahala-Khagrabari *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with Iqbal Hussein, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Dahala-Khagrabari *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>136</sup> Interview with Hafizul, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Dahala-Khagrabari *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Hare Krishna Mondol, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>138</sup> ‘জন্ম পরিচয় দিতেও লজ্জা করে, যে আমাদের ছিট-এ জন্ম ।’ Interview with Hafizul, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Dahala-Khagrabari *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

## XI. A ‘State of Exception’

The politics that the complex territoriality of the enclaves give rise to is, in a way, expressed by the response of a BSF officer to one of the enclave residents in a Bangladeshi enclave inside India. Md. Iqbal Ali Sheikh narrates how on being requested by the enclave people to allow them to visit their relatives on the Bangladesh side of the border, the BSF officer retorted, ‘why don’t you fly over to that side?’,<sup>139</sup> indicating the complexities associated with moving out of the enclaves and across the border by land. Such responses not just highlight the territorial implication of the enclaves but also the perceptions of the people regarding the same.

The vulnerable existence of the enclave residents in the context of the absence of state machineries within the enclaves evokes the idea of the ‘bare life’ of the *homo sacer*<sup>140</sup>— a man who may be killed and yet not sacrificed. The pretexts posed by the states, especially India, with regard to the imminent loss of territory and people that the enclave exchange would entail, make the evocation stronger. The states are not ready to sacrifice those people who lack minimum recognition in the first place, even if that means pushing them to the limits of destitution.<sup>141</sup> The inclusion of the enclaves in the juridical framework of the states is, ironically, in the form of their exclusion, and this is what thrusts them into a ‘state of exception’,<sup>142</sup>—a state of ‘being outside, and yet belonging’.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> ‘বাংলাদেশে প্রচুর আত্মীয়-মামার বাড়ি, শশুর বাড়ি সব. যেতে পারি না. বি এস এফ কে বলে বলে “যাও, ওপর দিয়ে উড়ে যাও” ।’ (Bangladesh does not let us enter. We have our relatives there but we cannot visit them. If we approach the BSF, they tell us “why don’t you fly over to that side?”) Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali Sheikh, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Purba Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

<sup>140</sup> Agamben, G. (1995) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. (trs. Daniel Heller-Roazen). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

<sup>141</sup> Ray, R. (2 September 2013) Chhitmahal binimoy netara udashin: voter bajarey er daam nei, tai? *Ei Samay* [Online] Available from: <http://www.epaper.eisamay.com/Details.aspx?id=6126&boxid=4021265>. [Last accessed: 9 September 2013].

<sup>142</sup> Agamben, 1995, p.8.

<sup>143</sup> Agamben, G. (2005) *State of Exception*. (trs. Kevin Attell). Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press. p.35.



‘The rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it’<sup>144</sup> is what aptly describes the legal state of the enclaves. It is this state of exception that has become the rule<sup>145</sup> in the enclaves.

The creation of a ‘fairly formal legal system of their own’<sup>146</sup>, in the form of enclave councils and land registration procedures, testifies to the role that *necessity* plays in the creation of the state of exception. That ‘necessity has no law’ is indeed testified by the situation of the enclaves. The adage can be interpreted in two ways. One is that necessity does not recognise any law. The second is that necessity creates its own law.<sup>147</sup> The enclaves are a study in both. On the one hand, the necessities of the principles of sovereignty and the citizenship issues of India and Bangladesh fail to recognise any law within the enclaves. On the other, the enclave people create their own socio-legal councils meting out basic juridical services out of sheer necessity.

An understanding of the citizenship questions of the enclave people highlights the dilemma between inclusion and membership—incapacity of inclusion into the whole of which it is a member<sup>148</sup> (being detached from the parent state) and failure to become a member of the whole in which it is already included<sup>149</sup> (exclusion from the host state). As sovereign powers, the states decide the (non)value of the people and territory of the enclaves, pushing them into a ‘bare life’—not in the sense of a simple natural life but one exposed to death.<sup>150</sup>

The impression of a ‘bare life’ deprived of the basic rights of citizenship and vulnerable to threats rings clear in the response of Karim Baksh, an enclave resident, when he says: ‘We lead a life like animals here. Even the animals are tracked and recorded by the government, but not us.’<sup>151</sup> In fact, agitation among the enclave inhabitants often reflects an extremist approach, and understandably so. An

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<sup>144</sup> Agamben, 1995, p.18.

<sup>145</sup> Benjamin, W. (2003) On the concept of History (trs. Harry Zohn). In Eiland, H. and Jennings, W. (Eds.) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Vol.4, 1938-1940*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press.

<sup>146</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 129.

<sup>147</sup> Agamben, 2005, 24.

<sup>148</sup> Agamben, 1995, p.25.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p.88; Clad, J.C. (1994) Slowing the Wave. *Foreign Affairs*. 95. pp.139-150.

<sup>151</sup> ‘পশুর মত বাস করি. তাও তাদের সরকার লক্ষ্য রাখে. আমাদের রাখে না ।’ Interview with Karim Baksh, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Karala *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

inhabitant of a Bangladeshi enclave in India retorts that if persistent demands for citizenship are not met by the government, then it will not be a surprise if these enclave-dwellers turn to extremist methods for obtaining the same. 'We are trying to co-operate with the government by wanting to be part of the state,'<sup>152</sup> says Suren Burman, adding that the delay in the decision-making process of the governments of India and Bangladesh simply reflects the ignorance of the leaders concerned, who perceive the enclave crisis merely as a bilateral affair, instead of trying to understand the reality of survival of the enclave people.<sup>153</sup>

The irony is that both India and Bangladesh are party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)<sup>154</sup> and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)<sup>155</sup> under the auspices of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>156</sup> The condition of the enclave people makes a complete farce of such declarations and covenants by depriving them of all those rights which these declarations intend to ensure. In fact, their condition poses a serious challenge to the progress of various development goals, including the

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<sup>152</sup> Interview with Suren Burman, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Shibprasad Mustafi *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is a multilateral treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 16, 1966, and in force from March 23, 1976. It commits its parties to respect the civil and political rights of individuals, including the right to life, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, electoral rights and rights to due process and a fair trial. As of March 2012, the Covenant had 74 signatories and 167 parties, India and Bangladesh being two of them. India became a party to ICCPR on 10 April 1979, while Bangladesh became a party on 6 September 2000.

<sup>155</sup> The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) is a multilateral treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 16 December 1966, and in force from 3 January 1976. It commits its parties to work toward the granting of economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR) to individuals, including labour rights and the right to health, the right to education, and the right to an adequate standard of living. As of October 2012, the Covenant had 160 parties. A further seven countries, including the United States of America, had signed but not yet ratified the Covenant. India became a party to ICESCR on 10 April 1979, while Bangladesh became a party on 5 October 1998.

<sup>156</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a declaration adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948 at Palais de Chaillot, Paris. It consists of 30 articles, which have been elaborated in subsequent international treaties, regional human rights instruments, national constitutions and laws. The International Bill of Human Rights consists of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its two Optional Protocols.



MDGs,<sup>157</sup> such as access to safe drinking water, sanitation, health service, etc.,<sup>158</sup> besides depriving them of the NREGA<sup>159</sup> work opportunities, primary education, *Anganwadi*<sup>160</sup> and such other facilities provided by the host state. Though this applies to the entire stretch of the border between India and Bangladesh, and several other backward areas in India, the geographical specificity of the enclaves makes the situation worse by not just preventing the existing initiatives from reaching the people, but also by preventing the situation of the enclaves from being officially documented.

## XII. Demand for citizenship

Given the complex nature of citizenship issues in the enclaves, the demand for recognition as citizens by the respective host states has been a natural culmination of the trajectory. Such demands make perfect sense when seen in the light of the history of most of these inhabitants, as well as, their dependence on their neighbours. ‘We have always been living here, right through generation. Naturally we want to be Indian citizens,’<sup>161</sup> says Md. Iqbal, a resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Concern for the next generation is the prime factor when it comes to the demand for

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<sup>157</sup> The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight international development goals that were officially established following the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000, following the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration. All 193 United Nations member states and at least 23 international organizations have agreed to achieve these goals by the year 2015. The goals are: 1) Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, 2) Achieving universal primary education, 3) Promoting gender equality and empowering women, 4) Reducing child mortality rates, 5) Improving maternal health, 6) Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, 7) Ensuring environmental sustainability, and 8) Developing a global partnership for development.

<sup>158</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, p.41.

<sup>159</sup> National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (discussed in Chapter 1).

<sup>160</sup> *Anganwadi*, literally meaning ‘courtyard shelter’ was started by the Indian government in 1975 as part of the Integrated Child Development Services programme to combat hunger and malnutrition in children. *Anganwadi* centres also generally provide basic health care facilities in the villages. More than 13,00,000 *Anganwadi* and mini-*Anganwadi* centres are operational throughout India at present, providing supplementary nutrition, non-formal pre-school education, nutrition and health education, immunization, health check-up and referral services.

<sup>161</sup> ‘আমাদের বাপ ঠাকুরদারা এখানেই থেকেছে, আমরাও এখানেই থেকেছি বরাবর. আমরা ভারতের নাগরিকই হতে চাই ।’ Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

citizenship status. 'We are approaching old age. At least our children can have a proper future,'<sup>162</sup> says Fatema Bibi, an enclave resident.



*Plate 22.* Residents of an enclave, 2012.

Apart from the ruins of the pillars marking the border between the host states' territories and the enclaves (the pillars are absent in most of the places), no other distinguishable mark of difference can be pointed out between the two. The similarity in profile of the people of the neighbouring villages and the enclaves renders it impossible for an outsider to distinguish an enclave from non-enclave territory, unless pointed out. It is solely the citizenship issue which keeps the enclave people from leading an unhindered life like their neighbours.

Life at the border has its own share of complexities, including restrictions on movement. The status of the enclave people is doubly jeopardised, being a part of the border population and of the specific territorial status. Official recognition as citizens of the state will, at least, reduce some of the vulnerabilities associated with living

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<sup>162</sup> Interview with Fatema Bibi, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

along the border. ‘We want to be Indian citizens, and nobody here has a different view on this,’<sup>163</sup> is how Md. Iqbal, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India, voices the unanimity of the demand. Hafizul Islam, a resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh, echoes Iqbal’s concern in his demand for an end to statelessness.<sup>164</sup>

An official citizenship status would also mean that the enclave residents could avail of passports, with which they could legally visit their relatives on the other side of the border, without fear of being persecuted. ‘Ever since the fencing, we have not been able to visit our relatives on the other side. We do not even have the required documents for passport,’<sup>165</sup> complains Md. Kamal Hussein. The prospect of the exchange of enclaves has, in fact, already increased the prices of the enclave lands,<sup>166</sup> in contrast to their falling prices a few years ago.

An interesting observation during the interviews was that the responses of some of the interviewees, mostly constituting women who had married into the enclaves, reflected a confused perception of citizenship—an outcome, perhaps, of a cognitive dissonance.<sup>167</sup> Respondents belonging to the post-partition generations (those who were born into the enclaves) as well as women married into these enclaves often lacked a clear perception of the history of the formation of the enclaves, or a clear mental map of their unique geographical position. Their initiation into the movement for citizenship has been externally imposed by their families/husbands. Their responses regarding the demand reflect this imposition. Rebecca Khatun, a resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh, spontaneously replied that she wanted to ‘go to India’, on being asked about her choice of citizenship. After a condemnatory look

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<sup>163</sup> ‘আমরা ভারতের নাগরিক হতে চাই. এবিষয়ে এখানে কেউ দ্বিমত নয় ।’ Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Hafizul, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Dahala-Khagrabari *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>165</sup> Interview with Md. Kamal Hussein, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Karala *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012).

<sup>166</sup> Staff Reporter (24 January 2011) Banchanar asanka bashinda der: Chhitmahal gulitey jomi-r dor ratarati dosh gun. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/24bdesh01.htm>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>167</sup> Festinger, L. (1962) *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

from her husband, she quickly rectified her reply: ‘No, sorry, I mean I want to remain a part of Bangladesh,’<sup>168</sup> she finally said.

11-year old Sabina Akhtar, daughter of the chairman of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh, on being asked about her idea of the citizenship issue, highlighted the hazards faced by the enclave people due to the lack of an officially recognised status. Her reply (which sounded more like a prepared speech than an impromptu response) covered everything from the lack of educational facilities in the enclaves and the deprivation of children vis-à-vis the Bangladeshi children in their neighbouring villages, to how, in spite of having equal potential, the enclave children were not being able to fulfil their dreams of pursuing a career. She clearly pointed out how her dream of becoming a doctor might be shattered if they were not given Bangladeshi citizenship.<sup>169</sup> That this performance of enlightening me on the enclave crisis was rehearsed was clearly visible, with no time wasted in constructing sentences in sequence. It is not hard to realise that such responses from the current generation of the youth and the women married into the enclaves are externally imposed and hence, either lack confidence or spontaneity. They are also indicative of the complex and often confused pattern of perception about issues like citizenship, belonging, inclusion and exclusion over generations of people undergoing the perils of the partition and its aftermath.

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<sup>168</sup> Interview with Rebecca Khatun, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Dahala-Khagrabari *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).

<sup>169</sup> Interview with Sabina Akhtar, resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh (Bewladanga *Chhit* of Cooch Behar district of West Bengal in Panchagarh district of Bangladesh, 5 October 2011).



Figure 3. Location of Tinbigha, Cooch Behar. Source: Cooch Behar District Map, Govt. of India.

### XIII. The *Tinbigha* narrative

The citizenship issue takes a starkly different dimension in two specific Bangladeshi enclaves in India. Dahagram and Angarpota are two Bangladeshi enclaves under the Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh, which are located inside the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. After years of deliberations and government-level talks between India and Bangladesh,<sup>170</sup> a *Tinbigha* (3 *bighas*) Corridor was built over the 1-acre Indian territory, connecting Dahagram with the Bangladesh mainland. Following its inauguration in June 1992, the corridor was initially opened for the residents of Dahagram at every alternate hour in the day, between 6 AM and 6 PM. From 2001 onwards, the corridor began operation continuously between 6AM and 6PM each day. Agitation by the enclave residents was followed by an agreement between the Prime Ministers of India and Bangladesh—Manmohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina, on

<sup>170</sup> Both the Nehru-Noon Agreement (1958) and the Indira-Mujib Accord (1974) provided for the *Tinbigha* Corridor, although its construction had to wait till 1992.



19 October 2011,<sup>171</sup> which provided for the operation of the corridor for 24-hours every day. It is manned by the BSF<sup>172</sup> since it is an Indian territory.

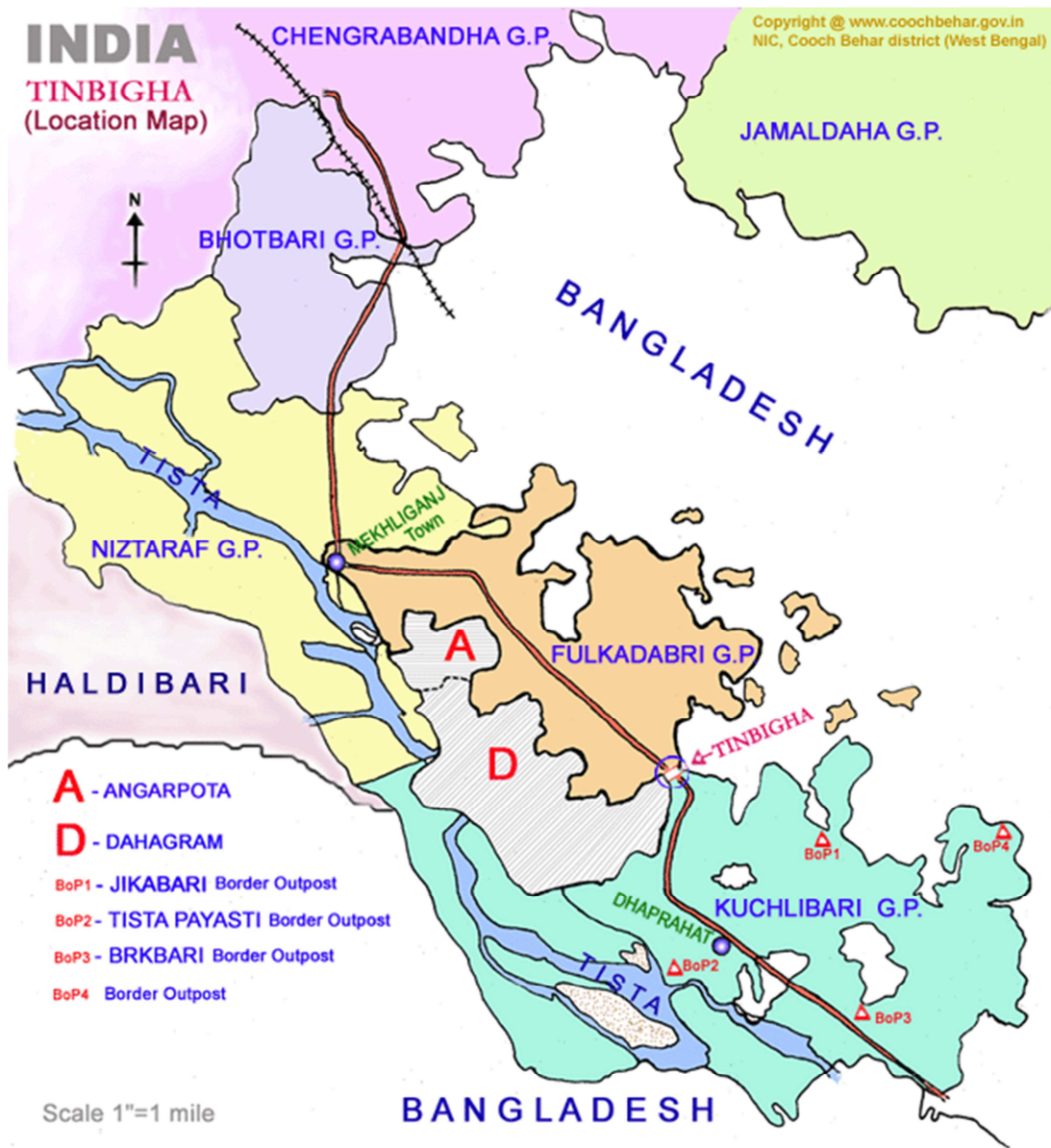


Figure 4. Location map of Tinbigha. Source: Cooch Behar District Map, Govt. of India.

A 24-hour connection with the mainland has been a boon for Dahagram, not just in terms of access to administrative and legal institutions, basic facilities and markets, but of having obtained Bangladeshi citizenship as well. ‘The situation here is much

<sup>171</sup> A protocol was signed between India and Bangladesh on 8 September 2011 to keep the Corridor open for 24 hours, which was followed by the finalisation of the protocol on 19 October 2011.

<sup>172</sup> Cons, 2012, p. 537.

better now, after the corridor has been opened for the whole day. We can bring bricks, cement, sand, etc. for constructing our homes here. My husband works as a van driver plying passengers between Bangladesh and here. We are doing fine as Bangladeshi citizens,'<sup>173</sup> says Jarina Begum of the Angarpota enclave. Old-age stipends, provided by the Dahagram Union Parishad, have improved the lives of the aged people of Dahagram as well.<sup>174</sup>

In the pre-corridor period, the situation of these enclave residents was no different from that of their fellow enclave residents in the other enclaves. This explains why many of the enclave residents had their education in and initial business transactions with their neighbouring Indian villages.<sup>175</sup> All this has changed for the current generation, who now has access to hospitals, schools and markets right inside their enclaves, funded and constructed by the Bangladesh government. 'We now get a good price for our crops, cattle and land,'<sup>176</sup> informs a visibly satisfied Akbar, resident of Angarpota. Relief from the wrongdoings of miscreants and the border guards,<sup>177</sup> as well as the official documentation of land transactions, have been some of the major reasons for the residents of Dahagram to rejoice. Plans for constructing bridges over the *Tinbigha* for the enclave residents are also on the agenda of India and Bangladesh.<sup>178</sup>

As 'recognised' Bangladeshi citizens, these people emphasise their affluence and hence, their wish to 'remain' a part of Bangladesh. In fact, they term their movement to 'remain a part of Bangladesh' as an attempt to 'free Dahagram from India'.<sup>179</sup> A

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<sup>173</sup> Interview with Jarina Begum, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Angarpota *Chhit* of Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 6 October 2011).

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> Interview with Akbar Alam, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Angarpota *Chhit* of Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 6 October 2011).

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*; Cons, 2012, p. 537.

<sup>178</sup> Ghosh, P. (30 May 2010) Delhi-Dhaka joutha udyog: simante noya manchitra toiri hobe, Tinbighaye uralpool- o. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1100530/30desh1.htm>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Akbar Alam, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Angarpota *Chhit* of Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 6 October 2011); Staff Reporter (8 September 2011) Dahagram celebrates while other enclaves unhappy. *The Daily Star*. [Online] Available from:

resident of Dahagram explains the movement in the following way: ‘We want to remain a part of Bangladesh. We want Dahagram to be free from them. But they (Indians who have been affected by the *Tinbigha* Corridor) want to seize Dahagram as their own territory. They have also been complaining about the privileges which we have been provided following the opening of the Corridor. They try their best to hamper the facilities like electricity or free movement. Our forefathers have fought for a free Bangladesh. Why would we want to be a part of India now?’<sup>180</sup> These responses come as a stark contrast to the sort of responses regarding citizenship of the inhabitants of the other enclaves.



Plate 23. Hospital in Dahagram, 2011.

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<http://archive.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=201609>. [Last accessed: 13 August 2013].

<sup>180</sup> Interview with Shahid Haq, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Dahagram *Chhit* of Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 6 October 2011).





Plate 24. Higher Secondary School in Dahagram, 2011.

Dahagram being territorially closer to the Bangladesh mainland has had a different trajectory from the other enclaves right from the beginning of the enclave question in 1947. It has been ‘more important as an idea of territory “saved” from the clutches of a “spatially greedy” Indian state, than as a material geographic reality,’<sup>181</sup> as Jason Cons rightly puts it. In fact, this status of Dahagram was recognised by the state of Bangladesh when the Zia government<sup>182</sup> issued 16 ‘Civil Guns’ to Dahagram in 1977 to be used for defence—signalling an effort to secure Dahagram-Angarpota as part of its national territory.<sup>183</sup> The fact that ‘the guns are spoken of almost reverentially,’<sup>184</sup> by the residents as ‘symbols of belonging’<sup>185</sup> indicates the difference between the narratives of Dahagram and the rest of the enclaves.

<sup>181</sup> Cons, 2012, p. 531.

<sup>182</sup> Ziaur Rahman was the seventh president of Bangladesh, from 1977 to 1981.

<sup>183</sup> Cons, 2012, p. 547.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

Enumerating the residents of Dahagram through a Census conducted by Bangladesh in 1981 was yet another attempt to claim control over Dahagram by Bangladesh.<sup>186</sup> These narratives portray the residents of Dahagram as ‘rights-bearing’ citizens<sup>187</sup> of Bangladesh, in stark contrast to the stateless condition of the residents of the rest of the enclaves.

Claims over territories in the context of the *Tinbigha* Corridor still persist, with the West Bengal government deciding to construct a community centre and rest house in the *Tinbigha* corridor, despite objections from the BGB and in violation of the international border law on the construction of permanent establishments on the 150-yard stretch from the zero point.<sup>188</sup> The BGB has made its objections clear on this decision of West Bengal and has decided to prevent the construction if West Bengal goes ahead with its plans.<sup>189</sup>

Territoriality becomes decisive in the production of these different versions of narratives. While *territorial detachment* decides the responses of the inhabitants of the rest of the enclaves, *territorial attachment* shapes the ideas of belonging among the residents of Dahagram. Narratives of belonging coincide with that of the idea of the nation in such spontaneous responses, redefining notions of spatiality, citizenship and liberty in the process.<sup>190</sup> In fact, narratives from Dahagram add another dimension to the concepts of proxy citizenship. While the movement for ‘freeing’ Dahagram from the clutches of India positioned its Muslim residents ‘as stoic sufferers holding their land in the name of a Muslim Bengali state,’<sup>191</sup> the Hindus of Dahagram actively campaigned ‘to demonstrate that Dahagram’s residents “desired” to be part of India.’<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., p. 549.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., p. 550.

<sup>188</sup> Explained in the Introduction.

<sup>189</sup> District Correspondent (17 April 2013) Violation of boundary law: India to build rest house in border. *Banglanews24.com*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.banglanews24.com/English/detailsnews.php?nssl=784b2f7298d4084fb327911e3bbec42a&nttl=1704201368025>. [Last accessed: 2 September 2013].

<sup>190</sup> Cons, 2012, p. 545.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p. 555.



*Plate 25. Tinbigha Corridor leading to mainland Bangladesh, 2011.*

#### XIV. Organised initiatives

Initiatives of organising the people of the enclaves have been a difficult task, given the scattered nature of the geographical location of the enclaves, as well as restrictions on their activities and movements. However, a Chhitmahal Nagorik Committee (Committee of Enclave People) was formed by some individuals of the Indian enclaves in Bangladesh in a public meeting on 26 January 1972, following the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. The main purpose of the committee was to lodge complaints with government institutions regarding the question of rights and privileges as provided for in the bulletin of the meeting.<sup>193</sup> Other committees were also formed by the migrants, however small in number, from the Indian enclaves to the Indian mainland, who took initiatives to mediate between the enclave residents and the government of India. Yet such initiatives failed to garner any support from

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<sup>193</sup> Rabbani, 2005-2006, p.53.

either the government officials or the political parties.<sup>194</sup> The worsening of the condition of the enclave people stands proof of this neglect.

The Bharat-Bangladesh Enclaves Exchange Coordination Committee (BBEECC) was formed in 1994 by Dipak Sengupta (Dinhata, Cooch Behar district of West Bengal), who's son, Diptiman Sengupta, took over the committee from October 2009. The committee consisted of enclave residents from both Indian and Bangladeshi enclaves. Ever since its inception, the BBEECC has been vehemently pursuing the enclave issue, submitting several memorandums and survey reports to various governmental departments, besides organising regular meetings and demonstrations in favour of the implementation of the Indira-Mujib Treaty. In 2000, the committee met with the Indian Home Minister, Lalkrishna Advani, discussing possible solutions to the problem. So far, the committee has handed over 6 letters to the current Chief Minister of West Bengal (and the Leader of the Opposition in West Bengal State Assembly before 2011), Mamata Banerjee, requesting the rapid execution of the exchange programme,<sup>195</sup> as well as attending to the citizenship issues of some of the enclave residents, especially the children.<sup>196</sup> Inactivity on the part of leaders and government officials forced the members of the committee to organise a hunger strike in March 2012 at Dinhata led by the senior enclave residents. The focus of the demonstration was to draw the attention of the administrative officials and the media towards the enclave question. Unfortunately, the demonstration, in spite of disquieting governmental officials for a while, failed to produce any concrete action towards the fulfilment of the enclave exchange agreement.<sup>197</sup> In fact, as a way of making their case for incorporation stronger, the

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 53-54.

<sup>195</sup> Chakrabarty, C. (8 January 2013) Nei desher baromashya. *Ei Samay*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.epaper.eisamay.com/Details.aspx?id=1954&boxid=23413515>. [Last accessed: 13 August 2013].

<sup>196</sup> Staff Reporter (4 April 2010) Sishu-r nagarikatwa pete mukkhamantrir kachhe committee. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/4uttar7.htm>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>197</sup> Interview with Diptiman Sengupta (original name), Secretary of BBEECC, Dinhata (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 19 March 2012).



enclave residents have started observing and celebrating the national events of the host state like Republic Day, over the last few years.<sup>198</sup>



Plate 26. BBEECC rally demanding exchange of enclaves, 18 March 2012.

Against the backdrop of such a strong movement in favour of the issue of the exchange of enclaves, the situation in them has started improving. The movement, having brought the enclave question to the forefront, has attracted the attention of the media as well as the civil society towards the destitution of its residents. ‘In the last couple of years, incidents of false conviction have reduced due to the on-going movement,’<sup>199</sup> says Md. Iqbal Ali from a Bangladeshi enclave in India.

The ‘Indian’ initiative in the movement (Dipak and Diptiman Sengupta being Indian citizens) has had a positive effect on relations between the inhabitants of the Bangladeshi enclaves within West Bengal. ‘Ever since this movement has gained

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<sup>198</sup> Staff Reporter (26 January 2011) Prajatantra Divas udjapan niye tatparata tungey. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/26uttar4.htm>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>199</sup> Interview with Md. Iqbal Ali, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Madhya Mashaldanga *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

momentum, operation of the Indian miscreants within the enclaves has significantly reduced,<sup>200</sup> says Bimal, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave. The enclave issue has also gained momentum in public debates, due to the initiatives of the committee.<sup>201</sup>

The border guards and local political leaders, as well as administrative authorities, have also been cautious in their interaction with the enclave inhabitants ever since the movement has become stronger. Surveys of the enclaves were done in 2012, enumerating the population and specifying their other geographical details.<sup>202</sup> Bilateral initiatives for the implementation of the exchange have been renewed from 2011, although debates regarding them had never completely ceased in the intervening years. Considerations over the loss of land by India, as is being debated by political parties,<sup>203</sup> as well as issues of citizenship and migration, have been delaying the process.

The irony is that the states are repenting the loss of the territory which they had failed to recognise in the first place. Despite being of no use to them, other than a cartographic claim over the land, the states, especially India (in terms of area, the amount of land to be given up by India to Bangladesh is more), are seen to bring up issues of the loss of land and population.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Interview with Bimal Burman, resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India (Bakhalir Chhara *Chhit* of Kurigram district of Bangladesh in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>201</sup> Kolkata Bureau (8 September 2012) Kolkata Viswavidyalaye chhitmahal niye gol-table. *Banglanews24.com*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.banglanews24.com/detailsnews.php?nssl=8f98db3e1b0af0f45e1dfb508695da0f&nttl=08092012137455>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>202</sup> Bhattashali, A. (20 April 2012) Chhitmahaley nagarikatwa niye shamikhsha. *BBC Bangla*. [Online] Available from: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/bengali/news/2012/04/120420\\_mb\\_eclave\\_nationality.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bengali/news/2012/04/120420_mb_eclave_nationality.shtml). [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>203</sup> Staff Reporter (9 December 2012) Bangladesh shongey shal shimanta chukti niye BJP-r dwarastha Kendra. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1121209/9desh3.html>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>204</sup> Disagreement over the territorial issue of the enclaves between the political parties has prevented the exchange bill from being passed in the Houses of Parliament in India. Parashar, S. (26 July 2013) Dipu Moni to seek BJP support for India-Bangladesh land agreement. *The Times of India*. [Online] Available from: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-07-26/india/40814572\\_1\\_land-boundary-agreement-constitution-amendment-bill-enclaves](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-07-26/india/40814572_1_land-boundary-agreement-constitution-amendment-bill-enclaves). [Last accessed: 13 August 2013]; Staff Correspondent (27 January 2012) No enclave exchange: Mamata now opposing land boundary deal with Dhaka. *The Daily Star*. [Online] Available from:

The most recent and positive outcome of the on-going discussions was the meeting between Salman Khurshid, India's Minister of External Affairs and Bangladesh's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dipu Moni, in Dhaka (Bangladesh's capital) in February 2013,<sup>205</sup> where they agreed upon the urgency of taking a final call on the enclave question, besides other unresolved land issues along the border between India and Bangladesh. The signing of MOUs<sup>206</sup> regarding the border agreement (including the exchange of enclaves) and the exchange of maps showing the demarcation of borders between India and Bangladesh has certainly been a positive step ahead.<sup>207</sup> Bangladesh's Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina's scheduled visit to Delhi in September 2013 is being targeted as the deadline for the final call on the enclave exchange issue.<sup>208</sup> Khurshid is also hopeful of West Bengal's Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee's co-operation in these matters.<sup>209</sup> It is West Bengal that hosts all the Bangladeshi enclaves, as well as the state that Bangladesh shares its maximum border with. Hence, West Bengal will be the deciding factor as far as questions of the loss/gain of territory and people are concerned. In the meantime, the Indian Cabinet has also passed a bill regarding the exchange of enclaves, to be presented and

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<http://archive.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=220097>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>205</sup> Ghoshal, J. (17 February 2013) Shoujanya: Dhaka-e Mamatar dhal holen Khurshid. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1130217/17bdesh2.html>. [Last accessed: 13 August 2013].

<sup>206</sup> Memorandum of Understanding

<sup>207</sup> Staff Reporter (17 February 2013) Chhitmahal jot chharatey shohomot. *Ebela*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.ebela.in/details/4781-14492378.html>. [Last accessed: 13 August 2013].

<sup>208</sup> Ghoshal, J. and Afrad, K. (18 February 2013) Delhi safar-e Hasina, Tista chuktir jot katchhe. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1130218/18bdesh1.html>. [Last accessed: 13 August 2013].

<sup>209</sup> Ghoshal, J. (19 February 2013) Tista niye Mamata-r shongey kotha bolben Khurshid. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1130219/19bdesh1.html>. [Last accessed: 13 August 2013]; Saha, A. (10 June 2012) Chhitmahal binimoy, kendrer udyogey shamil rajyo-o. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1120610/10desh2.html>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

debated in the next session of Parliament.<sup>210</sup> Bangladesh has been keeping its pressure alive on India for the passing of the bill as soon as possible.<sup>211</sup>

However, the Mamata government together with the BJP<sup>212</sup> show no signs of concretising the treaty anytime soon.<sup>213</sup> Against such a backdrop of negligence by the state, the enclave residents have filed a public litigation with the Kolkata High Court, demanding the exchange of enclaves, and the access to health, education and other fundamental rights.<sup>214</sup> Security questions of the enclave residents have been consistently raised by them in the context of the execution of the exchange.<sup>215</sup>

## XV. Conclusion

The India-Bangladesh enclaves have travelled a full circle. From being thrust into statelessness by the imperatives of state-building to leading a bare life, from hoping to be incorporated into the states to an organised movement for the realisation of their demand for citizenship, the narratives of the enclaves reveal the enclave peoples' attempt to 'give to the empirical form of a population the moral attributes of a community.'<sup>216</sup> The journey has, in the process, not just seen the creation of a unique identity of the enclave people but has made them an integral part of the larger

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<sup>210</sup> Gupta, S. (26 March 2013) Consensus emerging on statute change Bill. *The Hindu*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/consensus-emerging-on-statute-change-bill/article4551808.ece>. [Last accessed: 13 August 2013].

<sup>211</sup> Staff Reporter (23 July 2013) Sthal shimanta chukti dhruo rupayaney chap dichhe Dhaka. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1130723/23bdesh4.html>. [Last accessed: 15 August 2013].

<sup>212</sup> Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a right-wing national political party in India.

<sup>213</sup> Staff Reporter (20 August 2013) Mamatar apottitey pesh holo na sthal shimanto bill. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/20desh3.html>. [Last accessed: 3 September 2013].

<sup>214</sup> Staff Reporter (27 August 2013) Nagorikatwer dabitey high court-e 162 chhitmahal. *Ei Samay*. [Online] Available from: <http://eisamay.indiatimes.com/state/demand-for-citizenship-chitmahal-in-HC/articleshow/22089895.cms>. [Last accessed: 3 September 2013];

<sup>215</sup> Chakrabarty, C. (29 August 2013) Nirapatta debey ke: proshno tuley andoloney chhitmahal. *Ei Samay*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.epaper.eisamay.com/Details.aspx?id=6025&boxid=154125890>. [Last accessed: 3 September 2013].

<sup>216</sup> Chatterjee, P. (2004) *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. Delhi: Permanent Black. p.57.



community of border people as well. The perception of themselves as ‘enclave people’<sup>217</sup> stands as an indication of this attribute.

The complex patterns of interactions along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border amongst the border people, including the civilians, border guards and other administrative bodies, combine differing and often conflicting views on the questions of territorial imperatives, citizenship, nationality, religion, caste, gender and economy. The enclaves add yet another dimension to it. The fact that territorial imperatives and border issues have gained significance like never before despite debates in favour of a borderless world and the unhindered flow of commodities and cultural trends, is strongly emphasised by the India-Bangladesh enclave narratives.

The India-Bangladesh border enclaves are geographically unique, ethno-culturally rooted in history and politically vulnerable. Narratives produced in them are not just absent elsewhere in the non-border non-enclave areas of India and Bangladesh, but are absent or seen in very different forms in the other enclaves of the world. This chapter looks at some of these aspects of the India-Bangladesh border enclaves in an effort to understand their uniqueness, the patterns of the complex web of interactions between the enclave people and their neighbours and to highlight the significance of studying these enclaves as an integral part of studying border narratives.

i. Enclaves as *thirdspace*

The India-Bangladesh enclaves are, perhaps, the best studies of the production of the *thirdspace*<sup>218</sup>. Caught at the crossroads of the state-building principles of India and Bangladesh, the establishment of complete control over the borders by these states, and the survival needs of their civilians, the enclaves have become platforms where conflicting perceptions of statehood and the border control of the state and its civilians are played out, creating the lived reality of the *thirdspace*. The livelihood practices of the enclave people, the ethno-religious interactions and activities of the enclave people between themselves and with their neighbours, and the creation of socio-legal bodies for arbitration are visible manifestations of the evolution of a *third identity* of the people as an ‘enclave people’<sup>219</sup> and the evolution of the enclaves into

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<sup>217</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 132.

<sup>218</sup> Soja, E. (1996) *Thirdspace*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

<sup>219</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 132.

the *thirdspace*. The dispute between the West Bengal government, the enclave residents and the state government of India adds to the narrative of the enclaves' transformation into a hotbed of lived reality.

The fact that the enclave narratives are not just outcomes of state-building but also evolve within the hegemonic structure of statehood, much like the border narratives discussed in the preceding chapter, is highlighted by two significant aspects: the movements of the enclave people demanding citizenship, resulting in the recent debates between the enclave residents and the West Bengal government, and the creation of semi-formal legal bodies within the enclaves modelled on the *Panchayats/Unions* in the neighbouring villages of the host state.

The enclave narratives are not limited to their efforts for accommodating themselves within the state structure but, in fact, have a direct effect on one of the more important pillars of statehood in a democratic state, i.e. the elections. The effect is not simply in terms of the conflicting views of political parties regarding the political question of enclave exchange,<sup>220</sup> but also on the results of elections. In the recent *Panchayat* elections in West Bengal (July 2013), the areas surrounding the Bangladesh enclaves in the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal unanimously voted against the Mamata Banerjee-headed Trinomool Congress (TMC) for her failure to execute the exchange of the enclaves with Bangladesh.<sup>221</sup> The enclave exchange issue, by virtue of being a national issue, has to be executed between the central governments of India and Bangladesh. But as the host of the Bangladeshi enclaves, West Bengal plays a very important role in the process of ratification of the treaties and the final execution of the process of exchange. The failure of the TMC to make any progress in the enclave issue affected the people's decision in the *Panchayat* elections, where the Indian villages surrounding the Bangladeshi enclaves made their dissatisfaction known by voting out TMC, despite the latter's victory in most of the other districts of West Bengal. The enclave question affects not just the enclave

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<sup>220</sup> Staff Reporter (3 December 2009) Chhitmahal niye samsad-e Nripen. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1091203/3uttar4.htm>. [Last accessed 15 August 2013].

<sup>221</sup> Das, R. (30 July 2013) Chhitmahaler issue-te Trinomool ke lal card dekhale voter-ra. *Samakal*. [Online] Available from: [http://www.samakal.net/print\\_edition/details.php?news=17&view=archievy=2013&m=07&d=30&action=main&menu\\_type=&option=single&news\\_id=359419&pub\\_no=1484&type](http://www.samakal.net/print_edition/details.php?news=17&view=archievy=2013&m=07&d=30&action=main&menu_type=&option=single&news_id=359419&pub_no=1484&type). [Last accessed: 14 August 2013].

people themselves but those in the surrounding areas, through various legal and illegal interactions (including fake identities, access to local markets and access to basic needs as well as miscreant activities). The results of the *Panchayat* elections are a reflection of this overwhelming effect that the enclaves have on the neighbouring people, as well as a re-emphasis of the fact that enclave narratives, too, express themselves within the framework of statehood.

These narratives also, in a way, contest and redefine the idea of the enclaves as a space of exception. Even within the structure of power of the state (including the power to exclude), the enclave narratives create their own unique ways of negotiating their bare life. Interactions with neighbours and the effect on the electoral decisions of the very state that excludes them are ways of contesting and questioning the sovereign power of the state. In being a space of exception through the exclusionary practices of the state, the enclaves share a similar fate with the *chars* and *ghoj* areas along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

The enclaves also attain a subalternity through their questioning of the role of the state as the container, as do the other border narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. The extension of enclave houses into neighbouring areas, neighbouring areas being affected by accidents in the enclaves like fire, people from neighbouring areas owning land inside the enclaves and the similar profile of the people (culture, language, customs) are some of the more visible examples of the subversive nature of the enclave narratives. In spite of such similarities in nature, the non-enclave border narratives of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border become more visible than the enclave narratives in state discourses and public debates because they directly question the sovereign power of the state at its international borders. The enclaves, on the other hand, being 'contained' within the larger territorial jurisdiction of the states, fail to hit at the roots of the vulnerability of state hegemony. Despite questioning the role of the state as the container (through border crossings between enclaves and their non-enclave surroundings), they fail to threaten the states' sovereignty in ways that the international border does, although they are a result of the creation of the border in the first place.

ii. *Border consciousness*

It is the territorial specificity of the borderland that binds the enclave and non-enclave border people together in creating a spatial consciousness. The construction of spatial consciousness in the enclaves follows a similar trajectory to the non-enclave border areas, not just in the context of the overwhelming presence of the border but also by the fact that it is the spatial specificity of the enclaves that produce this consciousness, much like the specificity of the borderland producing the border consciousness. The creation of the border following the partition of Bengal lies at the genesis of this consciousness and is what acts as the foundation for the subaltern existence of both the enclave and non-enclave border people. This chapter contributes yet another block towards the construction of the thesis of the evolution of a spatial consciousness along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. It establishes the uniqueness of a distinct spatial narrative that has been created and affected by the creation of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. It also highlights the significance of understanding the India-Bangladesh enclave narratives as integral parts of the evolution of border consciousness along this border, besides contributing towards a general understanding of enclaves and borderlands around the world. India-Bangladesh enclave narratives and, in fact, West Bengal-Bangladesh border narratives in general, provide unique examples of ‘miniature societies attempting to survive in the interstices of the modern world state system,’<sup>222</sup> and, thus, call for a careful study.

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<sup>222</sup> Van Schendel, 2002, p. 126.

## Chapter 3

### Ethno-Religious Narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh Border, with Caste as a Specific Index

#### I. Introduction

This chapter aims to look at how spatial marginality affects the interaction between socially marginalised communities of people and the state at the borders. It takes up the issue of caste, especially lower castes, as an index of social marginality and aims to study the interaction between the state and these castes at the geographical borders of the state.

Following the Partition of Bengal in 1947, there began a mass exodus of refugees between the newly-created state of East Pakistan and West Bengal.<sup>1</sup> The initial wave of Hindu refugees who came from East Pakistan to West Bengal was essentially the urban population, a majority of who were professionals. Most of them settled in and around Calcutta and its suburbs with the help of their friends, relatives, caste members and other influential social networks.<sup>2</sup> The exodus continued well into the 1960s, after which there was a break till 1971,<sup>3</sup> when a new wave of refugees

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed understanding of the refugee exodus across the newly-created border between West and East Bengal (and, later, Bangladesh), see Chatterji, J. (1994) *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Chatterji, J. (2007) *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India-1947-1967*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Fraser, B. (2006) *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*. (trs. Sheila Sen Gupta). London: Anthem; Samaddar, R. (1999) *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*. New Delhi: Sage; Van Schendel, W. (2005) *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem.

<sup>2</sup> Chakrabarti, P.K. (1990) *The Marginal Men: The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*. Kalyani, West Bengal: Lumiere Books; Bose, N.K. (1968) *Calcutta: A Social Survey*. Bombay: Lakshmi Publishing House.

<sup>3</sup> The Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) resulted in the birth of Bangladesh through the re-naming of erstwhile East Pakistan. The war was followed by a military coup by Zia-ur-Rahman resulting in the death of Mujibur Rahman (1975). This incident gave rise to widespread riots that made the survival of the existing Hindus in Bangladesh, mostly belonging to the agricultural class, all the more difficult.

migrated into West Bengal from the newly-formed state of Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup> Beginning from the 1950s and especially in the 1970s, the majority of the refugees constituted agricultural communities, unlike the initial phase of urban, mostly middle-class migrants. The agricultural communities were the last ones to leave their lands and migrate to West Bengal since peasant communities are tied to their lands.<sup>5</sup>

Most of these migrants settled along the border between West Bengal and Bangladesh for two reasons. Firstly, the urban areas, including the suburbs, had already been populated by earlier migrants, who found work in the various academic, technical and professional institutions existing in the urban areas.<sup>6</sup> Scarcity of residential land was an obvious outcome. Secondly, the agricultural skills of the peasant migrants could hardly be put to use in the urban areas where there were no cultivable land. The border areas were, and still are, rural areas with cultivable lands. So settling away from urban areas, including border villages, was an obvious decision for these peasant migrants. Most of them happened to belong to the *Namasudra*<sup>7</sup> caste, which is considered to be low in the caste structure of the Hindu Bengali society.

The major concentration of the *Namasudra* settlement in the Bengal province in the pre-partition period was in and around the areas of Khulna, Jessore, Faridpur, Dacca

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<sup>4</sup> Islam, S.S. (1984) The State in Bangladesh under Zia (1975-81). *Asian Survey*. 24(5). pp. 556-573.

<sup>5</sup> Bose, P.K. (ed.). (2000) *Refugees in West Bengal*. Calcutta: Calcutta Research Group.

<sup>6</sup> Bose, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> The caste system in India had its roots in the *varna* system of the Hindu scriptures, where people were assigned their castes in accordance with their jobs or professions. Gradually, the caste system became a hereditary structure from a purely profession-based classification. Those people who were involved mostly in menial occupations were considered the most lowly-held in the caste hierarchy. With the passage of time and the increasing orthodoxy of higher castes, the caste system became rigid and the lowest castes began to be considered as 'Untouchables', whom the higher castes were careful not to come in contact with. The Untouchables constituted a number of lowly-held sub-castes, the *Namasudras* being one of them. The *Namasudras* were largely a hard-working agrarian community known for their agricultural and artisan skills. They were one of the biggest communities in Bengal, mostly concentrated in the eastern side of undivided Bengal (later Bangladesh) with a long tradition of fighting caste-Hindu domination and voicing their concern against various ignominies of the caste system. The migrant population from Bangladesh to West Bengal, post-partition, consisted of a large section of the *Namasudra* population. Their migration continued, actively, till the late twentieth century.

(now Dhaka), Mymensingh and Bakargunj in the eastern side of the province followed by 24 Parganas, Midnapore, Burdwan, Nadia, Pabna, Rajshahi and Rangpur in the middle parts of Bengal. Among these, the *Namasudras* from Jessore, Khulna, Pabna, Rajshahi and Rangpur (which witnessed the creation of the border) migrated to West Bengal on the Indian side of the border after the partition in 1947. They migrated in phases beginning in 1947 till about 1965 and even later, though the number reduced in the later phases. Most of these *Namasudras* crossed the border and settled in and around the border areas along the length of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>8</sup> This explains the concentration of *Namasudra* population in the border districts of 24 Parganas, Nadia, Murshidabad and Dinajpur in West Bengal. The concentration of *Namasudras* and Hindu scheduled castes, in general, on the West Bengal side of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border is made clear from the fact that the families who were left outside the fence<sup>9</sup> on the West Bengal border consisted mostly of Hindu scheduled castes, apart from backward and poor Muslim families, who did not have the means to either migrate to Bangladesh or move inwards into Indian territory away from the border. This implies that the people who settled nearest to the border were mostly the *Namasudras* and Hindu scheduled castes who, due to fencing regulations, were caught in the 150-yards patch of land between the 'zero line' and the fence.<sup>10</sup>

The West Bengal-Bangladesh border, as the geographical markers of the sovereignty of the states of India and Bangladesh, has been witness to intense patrolling, fencing and surveillance mechanisms. The profile of the border people, their lives and livelihood practices and their movement have been a cause of concern for the states. India has been particularly concerned with the issue of migrant people settling along the border, especially because migrants coming into West Bengal after 1964 are liable to be labelled as illegal ones, unlike those before the stipulated deadline who

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Dayamay Dutta, a refugee from Kushtia in Bangladesh residing in Teipur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 24 October 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 1.

<sup>10</sup> Awasthi, A.P., Safaya, C., Sharma, D., Narula, T. and Dey, S. (2010) *Indo-Bangladesh Fence Issue*. Centre for Civil Society. Research Project by CCS Fellows. [Online] Available from: <http://ccsindia.org/nolandsman/>. [Accessed: 3 August 2013].

were given an official refugee status.<sup>11</sup> Thus, migrants settling along the border after 1964 have perturbed the state ever since. In the interaction which followed between the illegal migrants and the state, caste has been seen to play a decisive part, whereby caste statuses of the migrants have decided the kind of treatment they would have from the states, including the border guards and government institutions. The political leaders, the bureaucrats and the legislative bodies have been seen to take the caste factor into consideration while deciding on their agendas with regard to illegal migrants.

This chapter looks at two narratives where the ethno-religious and caste factor of immigrants, settled along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, have played vital roles in the nature of negotiation between them and the state. It also looks at certain aspects of interaction between the border guards and border civilians, and between the border civilians themselves, where ethno-religious and caste factors are latently, but nevertheless strongly, present.

## II. The Marichjhapi Massacre of 1979

### i. The event

Following the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 and the military coup of 1975, West Bengal saw the renewed influx of refugees from Bangladesh, most of who were *Namasudras*. The Congress government of West Bengal<sup>12</sup> was unwilling to accommodate them within West Bengal. Apart from being small in number, these refugees lacked family and caste connections of the previous middle-class refugees, as a result of which they had to depend solely on the government for their survival. On claims of unavailability of vacant lands in West Bengal, the government adopted the policy of dispersing the *Namasudra* refugees to other provinces within India. Another vital reason for these policies was to weaken the strength of the *Namasudra*

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<sup>11</sup> Van Schendel, W. (2005) *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem.

<sup>12</sup> In 1972, Congress party formed the provincial government in West Bengal with Siddhartha Sankar Roy as the Chief Minister. Congress also formed the central government in India during this time with Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister.



movement, which had its roots in the eastern parts of Bengal during the late nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> The scattering of these refugees would not only dismember the *Namasudra* community but also ensure the prevention of the rise of the *Namasudras* in the tri-caste<sup>14</sup> hierarchy of West Bengal electoral politics.<sup>15</sup> Thus, these *Namasudra* refugees were forced to settle in semi-arid, rocky, inhospitable lands called Dandakaranya in the neighbouring regions of West Bengal,<sup>16</sup> with little support from it. Their agricultural skills were of little use in the forest-areas of Dandakaranya. A hostile land coupled with quarrels with the local tribal population made life and livelihood difficult for the refugees.<sup>17</sup> Besides, they were culturally, physically and emotionally removed from the environment that they had left behind in Bangladesh.

When, after independence in 1947, the Congress party formed the government in independent India, as well as the provincial government in West Bengal, the party that formed the opposition to the government in West Bengal was an alliance of Left parties, who jointly called themselves the Left Front. During the first phase of refugee influx from East Pakistan into West Bengal in 1947-'48, the Left Front, as the party-in-opposition, acted as the mouthpiece for the refugees in their fight for squatter colonies in West Bengal against the Congress government in power, thus creating a strong electoral base among the refugees in the post-partition days of 1947.<sup>18</sup> The second wave of refugees in 1975 furthered the possibility of an increase in the Left Front's electoral base. The Left Front leaders took up their cause and

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<sup>13</sup> Bandyopadhyay, S. (1997) *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*. Surrey: Curzon Press.

<sup>14</sup> The three castes which were considered to belong to the uppermost rungs of the Hindu caste hierarchy were the *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors) and *Vaishyas* (merchants). The *Sudras* (the *Namasudras* being a sub-caste within the larger *Sudra* caste) were considered to be the lowest. Though in the Vedic ages, these caste categorisations depended on the kind of jobs that the people associated themselves with, the hierarchy later became hereditary and, hence, rigid. The *Brahmin-Kshatriya-Vaishya*, thus, became the elite tri-caste in the caste hierarchy.

<sup>15</sup> Mallick, R. (February 1999) Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre. *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 58(1). p. 105.

<sup>16</sup> The region known as Dandakaranya comprised parts of Orissa and present-day Chhattisgarh.

<sup>17</sup> Khanna, S.N. (29 June 1978) Dandakaranya Refugees Refuse to Budge. *The Overseas Hindustan Times*.

<sup>18</sup> Chakrabarti, 1990. p.19.

demanded that the Congress government settle them within their ‘native Bengal’<sup>19</sup> rather than scatter them across India on the lands of other people where they were not even entitled to affirmative action programmes since their castes were not recognised as scheduled castes in the provinces in which they were forced to settle. The Leftist opposition played on these grievances to obtain a political base among these *Namasudra* refugees.<sup>20</sup> Left leaders harped on about the utopia of a ‘return to homeland’ that the refugees cherished and lured them to settle in West Bengal,<sup>21</sup> especially in one of the islands in Sundarbans<sup>22</sup> called Marichjhapi.

The Left-backed United Central Refugee Council (UCRC)<sup>23</sup> together with the Udbastu Unnayanshil Samity (UUS)<sup>24</sup> convinced the refugees of a prosperous life and access to unlimited resources on their resettlement on the island. The refugees sold the last of their belongings to make arrangements for their journey back to their ‘own’ land.

By the time the refugees embarked upon their journey to Marichjhapi in around 1977, Bengal had seen one of the most decisive political changes in the post-partition phase—the Left Front’s victory in the election of West Bengal in 1977. Having come to power in West Bengal, the attitude of the Left Front leaders towards the refugees

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<sup>19</sup> The refugees were ‘Bengali’ in their ethnic origin. People of both West Bengal and Bangladesh were of the same ethnic background, that of ‘Bengali’. The partition was done only on the basis of religion, with West Bengal becoming a Hindu-majority province and Bangladesh a Muslim-majority state.

<sup>20</sup> Mallick, 1999, p. 106.

<sup>21</sup> Ram Chatterjee of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), an ally of the Left Front, went to Dandakaranya and asked the refugees to come and resettle in Marichjhapi with the assistance of the Left Front.

<sup>22</sup> Sundarbans is a delta formed by the Hugli River off the Bay of Bengal and houses the world’s largest single block of tidal halophytic mangrove forests. It is home to the Royal Bengal Tiger and several other rare marine and land animal species. It consists of hundreds of islands, separated by narrow creeks and canals. The total area of the Sundarbans, including the water, forest, islands and inhabited cultivated lands, is 40,000 square kilometres of which more than two-thirds is in Bangladesh (since the creation of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border). The rest belongs to West Bengal of which the land area is about 9,630 square kilometres. Marichjhapi is one of the islands in the Sundarbans on the West Bengal side of the border.

<sup>23</sup> The United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) was the council formed within the Left Front specifically for handling refugee resettlement and rehabilitation programmes.

<sup>24</sup> Udbastu Unnayanshil Samity (UUS) was the association formed by the refugees led by leaders chosen from amongst themselves.

took a drastic turn. Refugee resettlement policies began to be reviewed. As the Left Front now represented the government, the refugees now became a liability for them and the resettlement issue became a political concern. The enormity of the responsibility of resettling refugees dawned on the Left Front government. This was a burden that it was not ready to shoulder.

The Left Front government, thus, reversed its policy of refugee resettlement within Bengal and adopted the policy of preventing the refugees from reaching Marichjhapi and resettling there. To that end, government forces attempted to stop the refugees on their way to the island. The position of the *Namasudra* refugees was legally in an arguable state because of the government's decision to consider refugees after 1964 as illegal. This made the Left Front government in West Bengal less obligated to the refugees than to their already-existing refugee voters in West Bengal, who had a prior demand on the state's limited resources.<sup>25</sup> The same Left Front which had backed the refugees' cause for return to West Bengal from Dandakaranya now considered the refugees as 'intrusions' on state resources. The government made use of police forces at the station and at posts which the refugees crossed on their way to the island in order to stop them from reaching Marichjhapi.<sup>26</sup>

Some of the refugees, nevertheless, managed to escape police resistance at the various stations and posts, and reached Marichjhapi in phases throughout the year of 1978. By this time, the resistance of the Left Front against refugee resettlement in West Bengal was in full swing. The leaders of the Left Front who were in the forefront in calling the refugees back to West Bengal from Dandakaranya were members of smaller allies of the Left Front, namely the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and hence, lacked a strong presence as far as framing refugee resettlement policies were concerned. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], as the dominant ally, was at the helm of affairs. It was the CPI(M)'s decision to reverse the refugee resettlement policies of West Bengal and, accordingly, not let any more refugees into West Bengal. Thus, the smaller allies of the Left Front despite their best efforts could not do much for the refugees. The refugees, thus, began resettling

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<sup>25</sup> Chatterjee, N. (1992) *Midnight's Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation*. Ph.D. dissertation (Unpublished). Brown University.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

on the island all by themselves with an efficacy that is hard to come by in the history of refugee resettlement in India. The *Namasudras*, over years of constantly encountering the hostile marshy and forest tracts of East Bengal, had emerged as a formidable peasant community.<sup>27</sup> Their resettlement efforts at Marichjhapi were a reflection of this background. Over the following year, by their own efforts, they established a viable fishing industry, salt pans, a health centre and schools—all without a trace of government support<sup>28</sup> and in spite of the uninhabitable environment of the island. The island, inundated with saline water was unfit for large-scale agriculture. That the refugees, at times, had to survive on begging has been testified by the villagers of the neighbouring islands.<sup>29</sup>

In order to dislodge the refugees from Marichjhapi, an economic blockade was started by the West Bengal government in and around the island in January 1979, together with the promulgation of the Forest Preservation Act in order to isolate the refugees economically, cutting off their access to food, water and other basic requirements. The ones who swam to the nearby island to get help were massacred by police forces.<sup>30</sup> When the economic blockade failed to budge the refugees, a violent eviction policy was adopted through the blatant use of firearms between May 14 and May 16, 1979,<sup>31</sup> resulting in the massacre of several refugees. Every trace of the settlement built by them was razed to the ground. People were killed and their bodies thrown into the rivers. This made the exact count of the number of deaths impossible since there was no human settlement downstream to observe the bodies.<sup>32</sup> ‘Hired’ gangs were made to assist the police.<sup>33</sup> Of the approximately 14,000 families who had started on this fateful journey from Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi in West Bengal, about 10,000 returned back to their previous settlement at Dandakaranya in a

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<sup>27</sup> Bandyopadhyay, 1997, p.28.

<sup>28</sup> Mehta, P., Pandey, L.N. and Visharat, M. (1979) ‘Report on Marichjhapi Affairs’. April 18, mimeographed. Mehta, Pandey and Visharat were Members of Parliament appointed by Prime Minister Morarji Desai, despite the objections of the West Bengal government, to visit and investigate Marichjhapi prior to the eviction. As quoted in Mallick, 1999. p.107.

<sup>29</sup> Mallick, 1999, p.108

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.109.

<sup>31</sup> Source: Interview with Indian Administrative (IAS) Secretary of the West Bengal Government, in Mallick, 1999, p. 110.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

state of complete destitution. Many others found themselves in shanties and railway tracks in and around Calcutta and other parts of West Bengal.<sup>34</sup> The rest of the 4,000 families were massacred in their fight against the state. There was a complete denial by the state about any firing having taken place.

Official records fail to throw light on the magnitude of the massacre.<sup>35</sup> But the way the state machinery came down heavily upon the refugees cannot be termed anything less than a massacre, the economic blockade itself having caused a huge amount of harm to the refugees' lives and livelihoods. Press coverage or any other intervention on the part of the citizens was successfully prevented<sup>36</sup> in spite of Marichjhapi being at a distance of a mere 75 kilometres from Kolkata, the headquarters of West Bengal. The CPI(M) congratulated its participant members on their successful operation at Marichjhapi and made their refugee policy reversal explicit stating that 'there was no possibility of giving shelter to these large number of refugees under any circumstances in the State.'<sup>37</sup> The whole episode was pushed to the backseat where it remained largely unheard and unknown for more than two decades.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> The exact number of deaths could never be counted due to the nature of the massacre. Different accounts put it anywhere between 50 and over 1,000, though the official toll was two. Bhattacharya, S. (25 April 2011) Ghost of Marichjhapi returns to haunt. *Hindustan Times*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/specials/Coverage/Assembly-Elections-2011/Ghost-of-Marichjhapi-returns-to-haunt/AssemblyElections2011-DontMiss/SP-Article10-689463.aspx>. [Last accessed: 7 August 2013].

<sup>36</sup> Chatterjee, 1992, p. 312.

<sup>37</sup> Communist Party of India (Marxist). (1982). *Rajnaitik-Sangathanik Report* (Political-Organisational Report) adopted at West Bengal State Conference 14<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session. Calcutta: West Bengal State Committee, from Mallick, 1999, p.111.



*Plate 27.* Settlements at Marichjhapi. Photo courtesy: Tushar Bhattacharya.

ii. Official explanation

The official explanation cited by the government in defence of the massacre and forced eviction of the refugees from Marichjhapi was the violation of the Forest Act<sup>38</sup> by them. In order to make the refugee resettlement at Marichjhapi look like an illegal intrusion, the Bengal government made use of the then-ongoing Tiger Project campaign and declared Marichjhapi a part of the Reserve Forest area. Chief Minister Jyoti Basu declared that the occupation of Marichjhapi was an illegal encroachment on Reserve Forest Land and on the World Wildlife Fund-sponsored Tiger Project. He declared that further attempts by the refugees to settle on the island would force the government to take ‘strong action.’<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, on January 27, 1979, the government prohibited any movement into and out of Marichjhapi under the Forest Act and promulgated Section 144 of the Indian Criminal Penal Code, making it

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<sup>38</sup> Sections 20-27 of Chapter II (Reserve Forest), The Indian Forest Act, 1927, Ministry of Law, Government of India.

<sup>39</sup> Chatterjee, 1992, pp 298-99.

illegal for five or more persons to gather on the island at any given time.<sup>40</sup> An economic blockade was put into place in order to isolate and weaken the refugees at Marichjhapi. Access to food, water and other basic amenities was blocked.<sup>41</sup> The West Bengal government claimed that the refugees were ‘in unauthorised occupation of Marichjhapi which is part of the Sundarbans Government Reserve Forest violating thereby the Forest Act.’<sup>42</sup>

No national political party was ready to take up the cause of the refugees since the *Namasudras* hardly implied a powerful ally in national politics, despite their history of struggle and resistance in the nationalist politics of India before 1947. Though the Scheduled Tribes and Castes Commission of the government of India was obligated to support the refugees’ cause, it did not intervene publicly in the matter.<sup>43</sup> The restrictions imposed on the press by the government of West Bengal made it difficult for the former to publish whatever little news they could gather about the massacre.<sup>44</sup> The economic blockade resulted in a large number of victims of starvation and disease on the island between January and May 1979, even before the start of direct police action in May 1979.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Mallick, 1999, p. 110.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, West Bengal Government. (1979). ‘Problems of Refugees from Dandakaranya to West Bengal.’ Letter from Deputy Secretary to Zonal Director, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. No. 3223-Rehab/DNK-6/79, from Mallick, 1999, p.107.

<sup>43</sup> Sikdar, R. K. (1982) Marichjhapi Massacre. *The Oppressed Indian*. 4(4). pp. 21-23.

<sup>44</sup> Mallick, 1999, p. 108.

<sup>45</sup> Biswas, A. (1982). Why Dandakaranya a Failure, Why Mass Exodus, Where Solution? *The Oppressed Indian*.4(4). pp. 18-20.



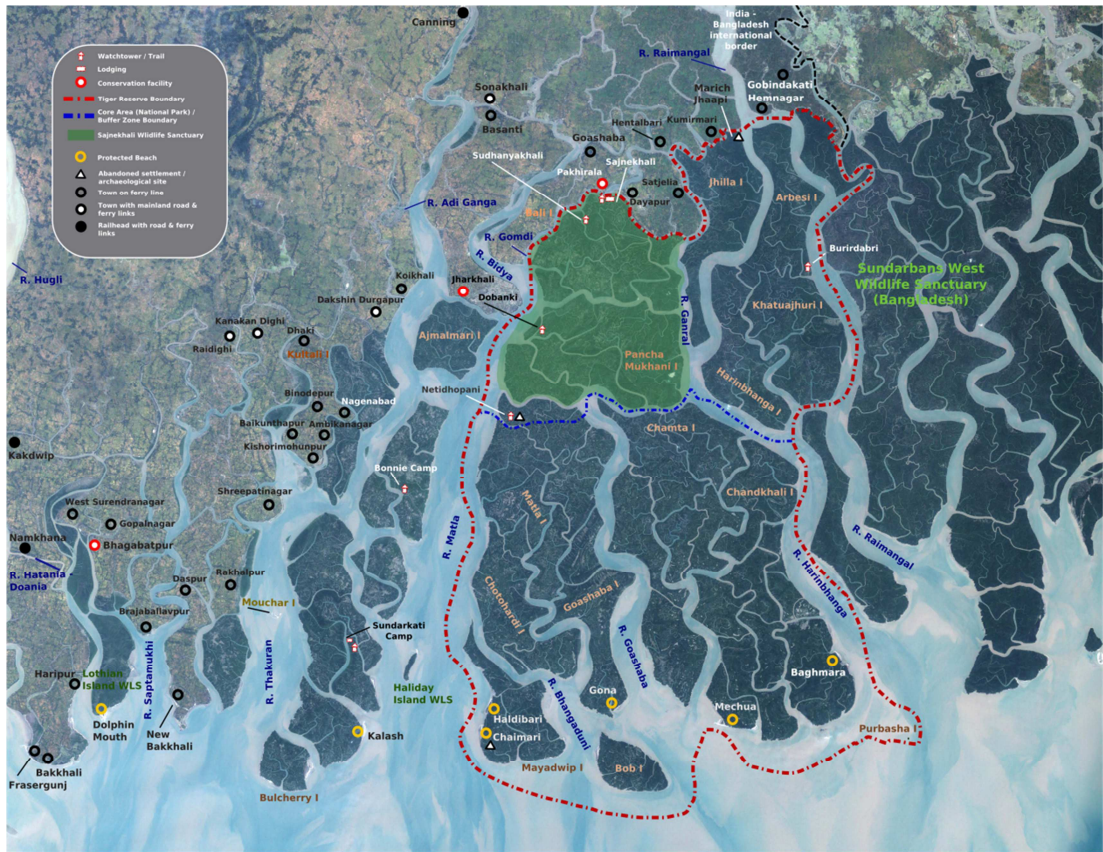


Figure 5. Sundarbans, with location of Marichjhapi. Source: Wikimedia.

Ironically, neither the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) nor any of the other environmental non-governmental organisations made any declaration in support of the government's claim of Marichjhapi being a part of the Reserve Forest area, nor was there any official lobbying on the part of any non-state organisation for the government to undertake such eviction policies.<sup>46</sup> Even after news of the massacre became public, the scale of the evicted population, estimated at 600,000, was found to be unrealistic for the NGOs to provide relief.<sup>47</sup> With no aid coming from the Central government as well, the Left Front government in West Bengal found the forceful eviction of the refugees a far more effective policy than the cumbersome process of finding vacant lands in other parts of the state and rehabilitating them.

<sup>46</sup> Mallick, 1999, p.115.

<sup>47</sup> Fernandes, W., Das, J.C. and Rao, S. (1989) Displacement and Rehabilitation: An estimate of Extent and Prospects. In Fernandes, W. and Ganguly Thukral, E. (eds.) *Development, Displacement and Rehabilitation*. Delhi: Indian Social Institute. p. 78.



The government made use of the ongoing Tiger Project, which had international support and WWF backing. Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman of the Project Tiger steering committee, was widely quoted in support of the urgency of the project. Organisations wanting to highlight the human cost of such projects were wrongly interpreted as being insensitive to ecological concerns. WWF literature which blamed the poor for being the ‘most direct threat to wildlife and wildlands’<sup>48</sup> was widely quoted by the West Bengal government as well. True, there were reports of the refugees cutting trees and selling them to middlemen from surrounding islands. Some of the refugees themselves were quoted as having done the same. The profiteers of this timber business, though, were the leaders who had brought the refugees to the island. Yet these acts, instead of being seen as desperate attempts by the refugees to survive, were seen as intended encroachment. Organisational imperatives necessitated downplaying and ignoring the human cost paid by the poor people for environmental preservation. Loss of lives was accepted as a necessary price to pay for conservation. The refugees tried to draw attention to their own efforts at resettlement without harming the natural resources by citing examples of the twelve settlements that they had, in the meantime, built for themselves, including laid-out roads, drainage channels to prevent water-logging, a school, a dispensary, smithies, a pottery, cigarette workshops, a bakery, several fisheries, boat-building yards, numerous boats, market places and a dyke system to hold back the tide.<sup>49</sup>

The eviction of people ready to risk death, even if unarmed, has always been a difficult task for the state. Such strength and determination, which would, in many instances, be considered heroic, was now seen as ‘anti-state, subversive, and environmentally unfriendly.’<sup>50</sup> In spite of not being directly associated with the eviction, eco-tourism-promoting bodies acted as incentives for these governmental policies. The prospect of developing Marichjhapi as a profitable tourist destination was prioritised over refugee resettlement. The government took efforts to project itself as environmentally sensitive. It could reap future profits as long as the massacre could effectively be prevented from being exposed.<sup>51</sup> The refugees, being

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<sup>48</sup> Chatterjee, P. and Finger, M. (1994) *The Earth Brokers*. London: Routledge. p.70.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 340-41.

<sup>50</sup> Mallick, 1999, p.118.

<sup>51</sup> Montgomery, Sy. (1995). *Spell of the Tiger*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. pp. 27-28.

falsely portrayed as environmentally unfriendly, failed to garner either aid or support for their cause.

The conflict between environmental preservation and people's rights has been, for a long time, at the heart of the trade-offs between human rights and ecological preservation. The laws which secure the Indian state's ownership and control over its forests have always been fraught with an uneasy truce with people's involvement in forest resources. During the latter part of the twentieth century, people's participation in forest conservation was being encouraged, at one level, while an opposing force was also at play. In the draft bills of the Forest Laws from around the late 1970s, 'technologies of control' were being strengthened rather than the scope for 'people's participation'.<sup>52</sup> The misuse of the law in Marichjhapi was another case of this strengthening of control. First, the refugees were lured by the government to leave Dandakaranya and settle on the island. Then, on their arrival, the government announced that the Tiger Project in Sundarbans was under threat from their resettlement on the island. Laws, put to misuse, not just massacred thousands of refugees, but also succeeded in covering up the incident behind the larger concerns of the preservation of natural resources.

A number of academics described the Left Front government as providing 'good governance'.<sup>53</sup> Such applause for governance can only be possible as long as events like Marichjhapi do not come to the forefront. Debates on these massacres are especially important in places like India where judicial institutions are often languid, if not non-functional. Even after the Marichjhapi incident, the government officials of West Bengal, including the Chief Minister, not just made frequent trips to other parts of the world without being questioned about the massacre, but the Left Front also held the West Bengal government for the next 34 years. The incident did not find any mention in academic publications till about the 1990s, more than a decade and a half after the incident. All that was ever debated in the academic circuit was a misleading representation of the incident. As one of the cadres of CPI(M) later rued in an interview: 'After all, when in opposition during the mid-70s, we were the ones

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<sup>52</sup> Pathak, A. (2002) *Law, Strategies, Ideologies: Legislating Forests in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. p.115.

<sup>53</sup> Kohli, A. (1996) Can the Periphery Control the Centre? *Indian Politics at the Crossroads*. *The Washington Quarterly*. 19(4). p. 121.

who cried hoarse for refugee resettlement at Marichjhapi. Unfortunately, everything changed once we came to power.’<sup>54</sup>

This had always been the case, as rightly put by the All Bengal Namasudra Association to the Simon Commission in 1929, much before the Marichjhapi massacre: ‘It has been seen in more than one case that British members of the Indian Civil Service, on account of their living in this country for a long time, and by coming into contact with only a section of the people, are mentally captured by the ideas of those few people who are in the position of social aristocrats.’<sup>55</sup> This statement holds true for not just the case of the *Namasudras* in Bengal but for the state of subaltern representations in India, especially in the late colonial and post-colonial era which, ironically, saw a hue and cry about the representation of the subalterns in Indian historiography.

### iii. Caste factor

The presence of castes and sub-castes within the larger frames of class categorisations has always been an integral part of the Indian social structure. The show of resistance by the *Namasudras*, one of the many Untouchable castes in India, in Marichjhapi highlights one of the strongest yet unpronounced reasons behind the massacre.

Though of a similar ethnic background (Hindu and Bengali), the refugees who came to Marichjhapi were the ones belonging to the most lowly-held castes of the Hindu Bengali society, the *Namasudras*. Their agrarian base coupled with their caste identities made their efforts at resettlement on the island a matter of serious discomfort for the state. Not only were they contesting the state’s role as the sole decider and provider, they were also doing it as a community belonging to the lowest rung of the social ladder. Their resettlement efforts were not simply reversing the state-subject equation; they were challenging the elite-minority equation as well. For the Indian state, *cultural outcastes* have always posed a bigger threat than *cultural outsiders*. The West Bengal government was no different. If ‘the essence of

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<sup>54</sup> Bhattacharya, 25 April 2011, *Hindustan Times*.

<sup>55</sup> Simon Commission. (1929) *Indian Statutory Commission: Selections from Memoranda and Oral Evidence by Non-Officials (Part II)*. Reprinted 1988. Delhi: Swati Publications.

sovereignty remains in the power to exclude,<sup>56</sup> then the Marichjhapi massacre surely was sovereignty in its most powerful form. The massacre was a re-emphasis of the hard reality that the identities of the subjects are never meant to overshadow those allocated to them by the state.

iv. Ethno-religious factor

The issue of ethnicity (Bengali) and religion (Hinduism) also played important roles in the Marichjhapi narrative. When the state announced an economic blockade on the island, there were a few radical groups based in mainland West Bengal who came forward in support of the refugees. However, their motives were related to the creation of an ethnic homeland rather than resettlement of the refugees. Their involvement, therefore, ruined the last hopes for the refugees since it made the government all the more apprehensive about their agenda.

Radical groups known as *Amra Bangali* (We are Bengalis) and *Nikhil Banga Nagarik Sangha* (Bengal Citizen's Group) supported the refugees with an aim to create a *Bangalistan* or *Bangabhumi*— land for the Bengalis. Their goal was the creation of a Bengali territory constituting West Bengal, Tripura, parts of Assam, Meghalaya, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, the Andamans, Nepal and Myanmar, and the whole of 'Swadhin Bangladesh'<sup>57</sup> (Free Bangladesh) at the site of the border between West Bengal and Bangladesh. This land, according to these groups, would be strictly for the ethnic Hindu-Bengalis, as opposed to the Muslim-Bengalis of Bangladesh. These groups, according to intelligence reports, were opposed to the idea of certain Hindu-dominated parts of undivided Bengal being made part of Bangladesh as a result of the partition. Their creation of a Hindu-Bengali territory would be their answer to the hasty partition of Bengal in 1947.<sup>58</sup> Volunteers from these organisations helped the refugees by distributing copies of route maps from Calcutta to Marichjhapi and a rough sketch of the island even before the exodus started in full swing around 1978. Their demand for a 'Hindu homeland' including parts of Bengal and Bangladesh was corroborated by several demonstrations, which they staged in

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<sup>56</sup> Clad, J. C. (1994) *Slowing the Wave*. *Foreign Affairs*. 95, pp. 139-150.

<sup>57</sup> Ray, A. (24 May 2010) *Mystery of Marichjhapi*. [Online] Available from: <http://marichjhapi-mystery.blogspot.co.uk/>. [Last accessed: 5 August 2013].

<sup>58</sup> Ray, A. (17 May 2010) *Bullets and Hunger*. *The Times of India*.

front of the office of the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Kolkata.<sup>59</sup> These groups also formed their own armed wings called *Bangasena* (Bengal Army), volunteers of which were active members of the resistance movement formed by the refugees. Their active involvement in the incident was corroborated later by one of their own volunteers, presently living in the outskirts of Calcutta, to a newspaper.<sup>60</sup> These agendas of a free Bengali homeland based on religious majorities had their roots in one of the factions of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League before partition, when ‘Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim had co-authored a proposal for a united and sovereign Bengal, independent of both India and Pakistan’.<sup>61</sup> Such reflections stand testimony to the fact that the partition was, indeed, a continuous process which expressed itself in various forms years after the boundary line was drawn.

The involvement of such radical groups with demands of a Hindu-Bengali homeland further added to the complication of the identity politics of which the refugees were already victims. The refugees were already being made to pay the price for belonging to the *Namasudra* community in spite of the fact that they were ethnically similar (Bengali) to the existing people of West Bengal. They had no reason to be excluded from settling in West Bengal on the basis of religion since they were Hindus by religion, as well.<sup>62</sup> Just because they belonged to a low caste, the refugees became the victims of state atrocities. The involvement of the radical ethnic groups made the situation all the more complicated. While the refugees were trying to make use of their ethnic and religious similarity with the citizens of West Bengal in claiming their rightful place on the island, the radical groups ruined this possibility by making a political agenda of this ethno-religious issue. The refugees were torn between the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Chatterji, J. (February 1999) The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal’s Border Landscape, 1947-52. *Modern Asian Studies*. 33(1). p.197.

<sup>62</sup> The partition of Bengal was done on the basis of religion. East Pakistan (which, in 1971, became Bangladesh) was carved out of Bengal as a territory for a Muslim-majority population and Bengal was officially shown as a Hindu-majority province. But the population of both Bengal and Bangladesh was historically of the same ethnic background—that of ‘Bengalis’. Thus, religion, and not ethnicity, was the only dividing factor behind the creation of Bangladesh.

politics of identities which was thrust upon them and in which they hardly had a choice.

v. Territorial implication

The border between West Bengal and Bangladesh has always been witness to the overlapping of socio-cultural identities. The premise for the creation of the borders could, in the first place, never accommodate the dynamics of identities (ethnically similar population on either side of the border) which underscored the process. With the passage of time, these identities manifested themselves in far more complex ways than the states were ready for. The Liberation War of 1971 in East Pakistan, resulting in the creation of Bangladesh, redefined the bordering process in subtle yet intense ways. Increasingly, religion as the basis for separation between the two states lost ground, with a mix of religious communities inhabiting both sides of the border. Moreover, the fact that ethnicity and language ('Bengali' or 'Bangla') were the main bases for the formation of Bangladesh further complicated the process of reinforcing the border. With people of identical ethnic backgrounds, identical languages, and shared social and cultural histories on both sides of the border, the physical reinforcement and manifestation of the state's presence at the border gained prime significance. The borderland spaces and the identities of the people dwelling in those spaces became the crucial indices for the enforcement of the state's presence at the border.

For the refugees, settling in Marichjhapi was symbolic of their return to their homeland that they had left behind in Bangladesh, not simply because of the similarity in topographical features but also, and perhaps more importantly, because of the close proximity of Marichjhapi to Bangladesh, across the border. Certainly, Dandakaranya did not evoke such nostalgia. The location of Marichjhapi near the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, therefore, played a latent, but nevertheless strong, role in the exodus of the refugees from Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi.

For the state, having control over the island was not simply about appropriating a space within its bounded territorial limits. It was about controlling the very 'limit' that defined the state. Borders, as symbols of containment for the state, are also the space for the state's unquestionable sovereign control. This made Marichjhapi both a space of strategic importance as well as a space for exercising complete political

control for West Bengal. And the fact that the people occupying the border spaces were simultaneously refugees and *Namasudras* enhanced the intensity of the narrative.

### III. The *Matua* trajectory

The second narrative brings us to recent years, i.e. 2009, the place being Thakurnagar in Bongaon in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal and located very close to the Petrapole-Benapole border Land Port (LP) between the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal and the Jessore district of Bangladesh. The event we are looking at here is that of *Baruni Mela*—a week-long fair organised by the *Matua* community (primarily consisting of *Namasudra* refugees from Bangladesh). The fair, newspaper reports said, was graced by the presence of political figures (MLAs, MPs, as well as candidates for forthcoming elections) paying homage to *Barama*—the religious leader of the 50-million strong *Matua* community in India, at the *Matua* headquarters at Thakurnagar. More than 10 million *Matuas* live in West Bengal alone, indicating a 10-million strong vote bank for any party in West Bengal who succeeds in gaining their support.

Two aspects are similar in the narratives of the Marichjhapi massacre and the *Matua* trajectory, so far expressed through the incident of the *Baruni mela* alone. One is the nature of the people involved, i.e. *Namasudras*, on the one hand, and the state (represented through political figures), on the other. The second is the nature of location of the two incidents, i.e. the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. What has changed, perhaps, in the years following the Marichjhapi massacre (between 1979 and 2009) is the nature of negotiation between outcastes and the state. Studying the change in the pattern of negotiation between the people living (or attempting to live) along the border, and the state, helps in our understanding of spatial narratives created by the reality of the border and the evolution of a *border consciousness*.

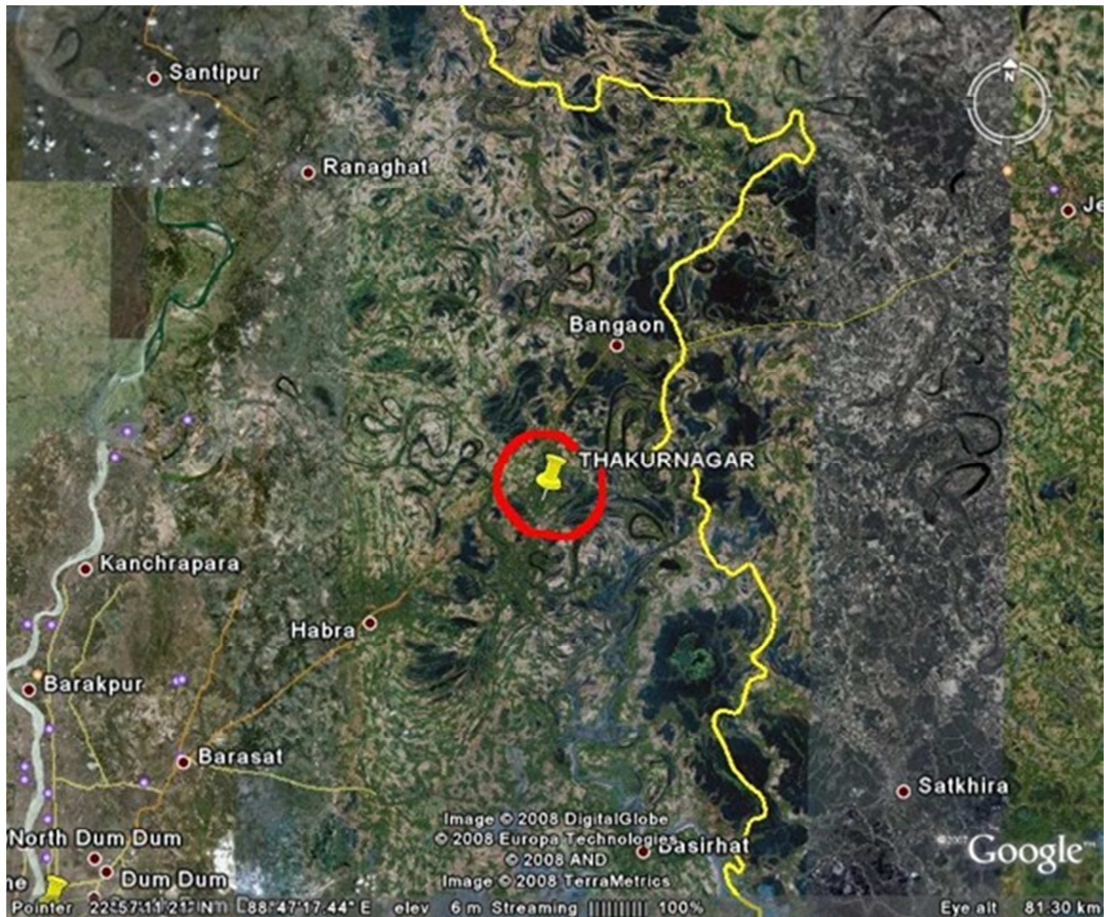


Figure 6. Map showing Thakurnagar (the yellow line indicates the West Bengal-Bangladesh border). Source: Google Maps.

i. Ideology—organised

*Matuas* have their origin in Harichand Thakur who, in the mid-nineteenth century, propounded certain ideas in the Oraikandi village of Faridpur district in then undivided Bengal. Born into a *Vaishnava Namasudra* family (the original surname being *Biswas*),<sup>63</sup> Harichand's ideas spoke essentially in favour of the downtrodden, so-called lower castes of the Bengali society. The *Namasudras* were largely influenced by the *Bhakti* movement of the fifteenth century, which emerged as a deviant stream of philosophy within the *Vaishnava* cult.<sup>64</sup> A section of the followers

<sup>63</sup> Bandyopadhyay, 1997, p.36.

<sup>64</sup> The *Bhakti* movement is a Hindu religious movement in which the main spiritual practice is loving devotion among the *Shaivite* and *Vaishnava* saints. The *Bhakti* movement, having originated in the southern part of India in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, swept through central and



of the *Vaishnava* cult believed in the upliftment of the downtrodden sections of society and, thus, professed an all-inclusive ideological practice. These sects from within the *Vaishnavas* appealed to the low-caste population in India, including the *Namasudras*. The ‘non-formal, equalitarian rural variant’<sup>65</sup> of the *Vaishnava* ideology became popular within the *Namasudra* community and it is from such an ideological background that the founder of the *Matua* sect, Harichand Thakur, came. The influence of the deviant *Bhakti* sects on the *Matua* ideology did not simply give an anti-hierarchy stance to their ideology, but also initiated an alternative ‘discourse of dignity’<sup>66</sup> and tried to create an ‘autonomous social space’ where this discourse could be asserted.<sup>67</sup> The rise of the *Matuas*, as an essentially *Namasudra* community, to a position of power in the electoral politics of West Bengal is reflective of the creation of such a space. In fact, the very nomenclature *Matua* bears signs of an anti-hegemonic stance. The elite Hindu population would ridicule the followers of Harichand’s ideology as *motto* or people drunk with their own spiritual outpourings (*matoyara*). This was a way devised by the upper caste Hindus as well as respectable *Vaishnavas* to distance themselves from the followers of this sect. Harichand used this very ridicule in strengthening the solidarity of the sect and named it *Matua*— a word absent in the elite lexicon.<sup>68</sup> The flag of the *Matuas* (red body with white borders) is symbolic of their philosophy of combining spiritual devotion (*bhakti*) with material action (*karma*). ‘The dictum of *Hate kam mukhe nam* (doing worldly duties while chanting His holy name), as Harichand defined it, became the guiding principle of the *Matua* philosophy of life’,<sup>69</sup> creating the foundation for the later association of the *Matuas* with the electoral politics of Bengal.

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northern India till about the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Over the years, it gradually became associated with a group of teachers or *sants*, who taught that caste, religion or ritual should not come in the way of unadulterated love for god. Though *Shaivites* (worshippers of lord *Shiva*) practiced *Bhaktism* as well, it was the *Vaishnava* (worshippers of lord *Vishnu*) stream of *Bhaktism* that gained an immense following across India.

<sup>65</sup> Bandyopadhyay, 1997, p.31.

<sup>66</sup> Scott, J.C. (1989) *Everyday Forms of Resistance*. In Colburn, F.D. (Ed.). *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.p.26.

<sup>67</sup> Bandyopadhyay, 1997, p.33.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.42.

The *Matuas* were organised into a sect by Harichand's son, Guruchand Thakur, born in 1846. Guruchand 'formalised the doctrine of the sect to suit better the needs of an emerging lower caste peasant community'.<sup>70</sup> He made his objectives clear when he explained that the reason for lack of respect for the *Namasudras*, in spite of the numerical strength of the community, was their lack of power, and that 'it was power alone which could command respect'.<sup>71</sup> The *Namasudras*, as described earlier in the chapter, were essentially an agricultural community, tied to the land economy in Bengal. The trajectories of most of the *Namasudras* of Bengal are similar in that they were the last ones to leave their lands in East Pakistan after partition and, hence, the last ones to arrive in West Bengal as refugees, unlike the elite Hindu professionals. The *Matuas* settled in Thakurnagar off Bongaon in the North 24 Parganas district in West Bengal. Like Marichjhapi, Bongaon is a border municipality and at a distance of 17 kilometres (15 minutes' drive) from Gaighata that houses the headquarters of the *Matuas*. The *Matuas*, like the rest of the *Namasudra* community, migrated to West Bengal in phases, right from 1948 (following the partition) till about 1978 (following the formation of Bangladesh and renewed violence on Hindus). Over the years, the *Matua* community in Thakurnagar has become stronger in number with the coming of new migrant *Namasudras* from Bangladesh. Over 90% of the *Matuas* in West Bengal are, thus, refugees and migrants from East Pakistan/Bangladesh.<sup>72</sup>

The trajectory of promises of a better life and living to these *Matuas* by the political leadership of the time, especially the Left Front, is also similar to that of the *Namasudra* communities who were lured by the Left Front to come and settle in Marichjhapi. The ones who came immediately after the partition till about 1963 attained official refugee status. But the ones who came to West Bengal after 1964 were officially labelled 'illegal migrants', since the then-Congress government in power declared that migrants who came after 1964 would be eligible for government relief and rehabilitation aids only if they settled outside West Bengal in other regions

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.37.

<sup>71</sup> Halder, Mahananda. *Sri Sri Guruchand Charit* (1943), as quoted in Bandyopadhyay, 1997, p.50.

<sup>72</sup> Hindu Samhati. (12 April 2008) *Hindu Samhati's exhibition—Thakurnagar, West Bengal*. [Online] Available from: <http://hindusamhati.blogspot.co.uk/2008/04/hindu-samhati-exhibition-thakurnagar.html>. [Accessed: 6 August 2013].

of India.<sup>73</sup> The peasants, who migrated still later, post-1971, following the Bangladesh Liberation War, were labelled as illegal by every definition.<sup>74</sup> Still, a large number of migrants who migrated after 1964 and well after 1971, preferred to settle in West Bengal, mostly in rural areas, associating themselves with the kind of work that they were doing all their life, i.e. agriculture. The *Matuas* were no exception. Yet the treatment meted out to these two sets of *Namasudra* communities (in Marichjhapi and in Thakurnagar) by the ruling Left Front varied distinctly, despite the similarities in the territorial specificity of the two locations.

This difference can be traced to the time of migration as well as socio-religious issues, apart from the way in which these two communities negotiated their subaltern status. Both were initially seen as potential vote banks by the Left Front leaders. But while the *Namsudras* at Marichjhapi failed to hold on to that negotiating power, the *Matua Namasudras* at Thakurnagar successfully organised themselves into a community who could make or break any political party's career. The sheer number of *Matuas* also became decisive. A 10-million vote bank will bring any political leader of any stature to their doorstep. And so it did. Moreover, Marichjhapi, located in the far southern part of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border in the inaccessible mangroves of the Sundarbans, proved to be a wiser location for atrocities— away from the glare and knowledge of the urban crowd of Kolkata. Thakurnagar in Bongaon is a more strategically located point along the border, with Petrapole in close proximity. News of any kind of atrocities, especially physical, would easily find its way into the newspapers.

Though the *Matuas* did traditionally vote for the Left Front, their grievances against the party simultaneously grew. The issue of unfulfilled promises of infrastructural development in the region coupled with the grievance of being labelled as 'infiltrators' in public parlance, with the encouragement of the West Bengal government, gradually built a strong resistance within the *Matuas* against the Left

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<sup>73</sup> This is why the *Namasudra* refugees were forced to settle in Dandakaranya outside West Bengal.

<sup>74</sup> Van Schendel, 2005, p.212

Front.<sup>75</sup> The turning point was brought about by the then party-in opposition (and now the party in power) in West Bengal, the Trinomool Congress (TMC). The TMC, headed by Mamata Banerjee, was quick to realise the potential of both the location of the concentration of the *Matuas* (i.e. the border area) as well as the numerical strength of the community as far as electoral politics in West Bengal was concerned.<sup>76</sup>

Beginning with charitable grants towards the *Matua* community in the form of donations and land grants, to becoming a member of the *Matua* organisation (*Matua Mahasangha*) herself—Mamata left no stone unturned to ensure complete support from the *Matua* voters.<sup>77</sup> What is interesting, and this is where their narrative differs from the *Namsudras* of Marichjhapi, is how the *Matua Namasudras* negotiated their position and rose to power. Religious conceptualisation of the *Matua* sect played a very important role in this negotiation.

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<sup>75</sup> Mazumdar, J. (20 March 2010) Matua Millions for Mamata. *Open Magazine*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/nation/matua-millions-for-mamata>. [Last accessed: 6 August 2013].

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Jacob, S. (28 April 2011) Political parties woo Matua community. *Business Standard*. [Online] Available from: [http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/political-parties-woo-matua-community-111042800083\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/political-parties-woo-matua-community-111042800083_1.html). [Last accessed: 6 August 2013]; Dasgupta, P. (13 November 2010) Caste not a poll factor in Bengal. But Matuas could swing it for Didi. *Tehelka*. [Online] Available from: [http://archive.tehelka.com/story\\_main47.asp?filename=Ne131110Caste\\_not.asp](http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main47.asp?filename=Ne131110Caste_not.asp). [Last accessed: 6 August 2013].



Plate 28. Matua Dharma Mahamela (religious gathering of the *Matuas*, 2008. Source: Hindu Samhati.

ii. Overlapping of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’

Historically, the trajectories of the *Namasudras* have shown an overlapping of ‘being’ (*jati* or caste) and ‘becoming’ (*varna* or rank— the Hindu hierarchical structure based mainly on profession) — concepts which are otherwise sharply separated from one another in the Hindu ideology. While *jati*, in Hindu philosophy, is considered a real social group,<sup>78</sup> where one can only be born into, *varna* is a conceptual scheme,<sup>79</sup> based largely on a common profession and ‘a common social language’.<sup>80</sup> *Varna* is flexible in nature and one could gain or lose *varna* status. The overlapping of these two concepts in the narratives of caste identities of the lower castes in India shows

<sup>78</sup> Beteille, A. (1992). *Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Srinivas, M.N. Varna and Caste. In Gupta, D. (ed.). (1991) *Social Stratification*. Delhi, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 33.

how these concepts of 'being' and 'becoming' have been 'selectively appropriated'<sup>81</sup> by these castes 'to improve their own position'<sup>82</sup> within the social set-up.

iii. Ethno-religious factor

The *Matuas*, though essentially a caste-based community, organised and projected themselves as a religious sect—as the followers of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur. Manjulkrishna, the vice-president of the *Sangha*, puts it more clearly: 'It is a religion as we have a prophet in Guru Harichand, my great-great-grandfather, whose teachings we follow. But it's more of a movement that seeks to uplift the downtrodden and tells you what an ideal family life should be.'<sup>83</sup> The *Matuas* constructed an 'ideological community'<sup>84</sup> that would submerge the inchoate class distinctions within the group and set it against its Other,<sup>85</sup> i.e. the hegemonic presence of the elite Hindus in the politics of West Bengal. The moment a religious label is tagged onto a community, especially in India, its relation with the state becomes a sensitive issue. Thus, the *Matuas* used religion as a weapon in their negotiation with the state, unlike the *Namasudras* at Marichjhapi whose religious factor could not be used to draw sympathy. In fact, the involvement of radical ethno-religious groups in the Marichjhapi incident worsened their cause. The fact that the religious index has been an importance stance used by the *Matuas* to defend their cause, including the betterment of their community and cross-border ties, becomes clear during the *Matua* festivities at Thakurnagar where exhibitions on Hindu Samhati (Hindu Unity) are put up in the fairgrounds where thousands of *Matuas* gather.<sup>86</sup> The *Matua* community can, apparently, identify with the cause of the exhibition: that of spreading awareness about the atrocities on Hindus by the Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh because they have themselves been subject to the same, especially in the massive Hindu exodus of the years 1947-'48, 1951, 1964, 1971 and 1992 from erstwhile East Pakistan and, later, Bangladesh into West Bengal. 'As a matter of fact, in the anti-Hindu pogrom in Bangladesh in 2001, many of the

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<sup>81</sup> Bandyopadhyay, 1997, p.45.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Dasgupta, 13 November 2010, *Tehelka*.

<sup>84</sup> Freitag, S B. (1989) *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India*. Berkeley, Oxford: University of California Press.

<sup>85</sup> Bandyopadhyay, 1997, p.6.

<sup>86</sup> Hindu Samhati, 12 April 2008.



victims were actually across-the-border relatives and extended family members of the *Matuas* of West Bengal,<sup>87</sup> says one of the organisers of the exhibition.



Plate 29. Mahabaruni Snan (Holy Bath, Baruni Fair), 2008. Source: Hindu Samhati.

#### iv. Legal implication

The time of migration of the *Matua* refugees also favoured their cause. The first influx of these *Namasudra Matuas* as refugees from East Pakistan was in 1948, when Pramatharanjan Thakur, the grandson of Guruchand Thakur, migrated to West Bengal, bought forest lands from a local *zamindar* (landlord) of Gaighata, christened the place as ‘Thakurnagar’, built a small house and started living there from the 13<sup>th</sup> of March 1949.<sup>88</sup> The *Matuas*, thereafter, came in phases and gathered mostly at Thakurnagar, under the auspices of Pramatharanjan’s descendants, apart from other districts in West Bengal such as Howrah, South 24 Parganas, Nadia, Cooch Behar,

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Dasgupta, 13 November 2010, *Tehelka*.

Malda, North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur. Of the eight districts which host the *Matuas*, seven are border districts of West Bengal (except Howrah) — a factor that makes the strategic location of the *Matuas* all the more prominent. Their initial migration in 1948 ensured their official ‘refugee’ status, though with the lapse of time, later migrants came to be labelled ‘infiltrators’. But by the time the issue of illegal migration found ground in electoral agendas in West Bengal, the *Matuas* had already organised themselves into a sect. The *Namasudras* at Marichjhapi came at a time (1977-78) when migration from Bangladesh into West Bengal had already been officially declared as ‘illegal’, which tagged the *Namasudras* as an unwanted intrusion from the very beginning. They could not claim to have any official refugee status, unlike the *Matuas* who could trace their initial migration to an officially recognised migration. The Left Front’s misguided political stance of supporting the *Namasudras*’ cause of settling within West Bengal resulted in the massacre at Marichjhapi. The claim over land was stronger for the *Matuas* since that held by the Thakur family had been ‘bought’ by their ancestor, Pramatharanjan, from the then local *zamindar*, unlike the *Namasudras* at Marichjhapi who did not have any official claim over the space (the island of Marichjhapi) that they had appropriated.

v. Political implication

The *Matua Mahasangha* as an organisation is very well-structured with details of all its members across the country recorded and tracked. Binapani Devi or *Barama*, as she is known amongst followers, is the wife of Pramatharanjan Thakur, the grandson of Guruchand who took the initiative to settle the *Matuas* in Thakurnagar and organise them into a strong community. 96-year old *Barama* is the chief advisor to the *Sangha* and has the last word in any matter involving the *Matuas*, while her two sons hold important administrative positions in the *Sangha*. The TMC realised that obtaining *Barama*’s support could decide the support base from the *Matuas*. Therefore, *Matua* fairs, the construction of temples and gatherings were officiated under the banner of the political party.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Basu, S.P. (5 November 2009) *Matua O Mamata: Sangha ebawng dawler tanaporen. Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1091105/5edit3.htm>. [Last accessed: 6 August 2013].



The Thakurnagar railway station is currently being developed as a ‘model’ one. A stadium and a railway hospital are among the other things promised. The foundation for a college has already been laid. Mamata, despite not being a *Matua* herself, took membership of the *Sangha* and eventually was made its ‘Chief Patron’,<sup>90</sup> an honour conferred on her by none other than *Barama* herself. Not that the Left Front did not try to make amends their faults in dealing with the *Namasudra* community. Left Front leaders have visited *Barama*, promised land grants for building research institutes dedicated to the *Matuas*, and announced awards in the name of Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, the first recipient being *Barama*’s elder son Kapilkrishna Thakur. All this was after the Left Front realised the importance of the *Matua* voters in the preceding Panchayat and Lok Sabha elections (2008 and 2009, respectively) where the *Matua* votes turned against them and in favour of the TMC, resulting in a major loss of the vote bank for the Front. But the Left Front lost in the last round of the game of wooing *Matua* support when *Barama*’s younger son, Manjulkrishna Thakur, was chosen as the TMC’s candidate from the Gaighata constituency of the Bongaon subdivision (which constitutes Thakurnagar) and eventually succeeded in the Assembly Elections (2011), when he was elected as the Minister to the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from his constituency. This made him a *Namasudra* MLA from a border constituency—a major departure from the narrative of the Marichjhapi *Namasudras*. This, though, is not too unusual as far as the connection between the Thakur family and the politics of Bengal is concerned. Manjulkrishna’s father, Pramatharanjan, was also a MLA in the West Bengal Assembly in 1962, and later a Congress MP from Nabadwip (in Nadia district, West Bengal) in 1967.<sup>91</sup> This was the reason cited by the Congress leaders who visited *Barama* in May 2012 to ask for her well-being. When questions of political intentions were raised, the Congress leaders were quick to suggest that this was a courtesy visit to the wife of the late Pramatharanjan Thakur, a Congress MP, and was not driven by political intentions—the irony being that it took some 45 years for them to decide on the importance of a

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<sup>90</sup>Moitro, S. (15 March 2010) Mamata Matuader Chief Patron. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/15pgn1.htm>. [Last accessed: 6 August 2013].

<sup>91</sup> Dasgupta, 13 November 2010, *Tehelka*.

courtesy visit to the *Matua* head. Efforts have not been in vain for the TMC as the results of the *Panchayat* elections in July 2013 suggest.<sup>92</sup>

In fact, the spectre of the Marichjhapi massacre, too, keeps haunting the current political scenario in West Bengal, where the TMC often uses the incident against the Left Front as an electoral agenda. The survivors and witnesses of the Marichjhapi incident also recall the massacre, not just as memories but also through memorials held for those killed on the actual day.<sup>93</sup> Such occurrences indicate that negotiations between the low-caste refugees and/or infiltrators and the state machinery at the borders are an on-going process, which evolve and mature together with the evolution of the border.

vi. Territorial implication

What makes Manjulkrishna's stance as a political figure different from that of his father is the issue of infiltration and citizenship. What needs to be seen is whether this rise to power of a downtrodden caste actually makes a difference to the (ill)legality of their citizenship status. It is here that the specificity of the concentration of the *Matuas* at the border becomes important. Illegal migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal still continues unabated. A majority of migrants, still, settle around the border areas, apart from those who settle in the cities, away from the borders.<sup>94</sup> In fact, there are existences of whole villages constituted of illegal Bangladeshi migrants, who have obtained official documents (ration and voter cards) required to prove themselves as legal residents of West Bengal. 'Most of them are Hindus, primarily SC-s and ST-s',<sup>95</sup> says Riazul.

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<sup>92</sup> West Bengal State Election Commission. Available from: <http://www.wbsec.gov.in/>.

<sup>93</sup> Bhattacharya, 25 April 2011, *Hindustan Times*; Bhadra, K. (1 February 2013) Wound still raw for Marichjhapi survivors. *The Times of India*. [Online] Available from: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-02-01/kolkata/36683701\\_1\\_survivors-boat-narayan](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-02-01/kolkata/36683701_1_survivors-boat-narayan). [Last accessed: 7 August 2013].

<sup>94</sup> Paul, S. (14 January 2011) Illegal immigration: East Bengal in West Bengal. *India Today.in*. [Online] Available from: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/east+bengal+in+west+bengal/1/126587.html>. [Last accessed: 6 August 2013].

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Riazul Mondol, resident and teacher in a primary school at Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

A whole range of livelihoods have emerged, which depend on the existence of the border, including those related to illegal border-crossing.<sup>96</sup> The major portions of those who cross the border belong to the lower rungs of the society, including the *Namasudras*—which, in the process, include refugee *Matuas*.<sup>97</sup> The Left Front ‘simply overlooked the serious problem of continuous migration or infiltration; but began to recognise those people in a sort of clandestine manner by providing the migrants with ration cards at least in some areas’.<sup>98</sup> While this surely increased the vote bank of the Left Front, the issue of infiltration was not effectively solved.

The issue of citizenship has now been tied up with the *Matuas* in a decisive way, since this is an issue that the political parties are not comfortable addressing while the *Matuas* are a community that they cannot afford to ignore. Even Mamata, with her political stance of successfully bringing the *Matuas* into the political fold of West Bengal, remains tight-lipped about the sect’s main grievance: that of the deportation of thousands of its members from West Bengal as alleged infiltrators.<sup>99</sup> While one of the *Matua* heads fulfils the responsibilities of an important political figure in regional politics, the ways of negotiation of cross-border infiltration and citizenship issues by the rest of the community make for an interesting study, especially with Manjulkrishna ensuring ‘a meaningful change to the lives of the downtrodden and the refugees’.<sup>100</sup> The narrative of these *Namasudras*, both in the cases of Marichjhapi and the *Matuas*, is a result of the convergence of their spatial and social identities, as they negotiate between the identities of being infiltrators/illegal migrants and a low-caste community. Such a convergence results in a political narrative, made unique by the specificity of its location at the border.

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<sup>96</sup> Discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Shikarpur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>98</sup> Bandyopadhyay, S. (March 27-April 2 2011) Who Are the *Matuas*? *Frontier: The Citizenship Issue*. 43(37).

<sup>99</sup> Dasgupta, 13 November 2010, *Tehelka*.

<sup>100</sup> Bose, R. (31 March 2011) Why the *Matuas* Matter. *The Hindu*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/why-the-matuas-matter/article1585641.ece>. [Last accessed: 6 August 2013].

vii. Anti-hegemonic aspects in the history of the *Namasudras*

Tendencies of accommodating myths and notions related to higher castes into their own ideology have been integral to the discourse of identity formation of the *Namasudras*. If attempts to trace their genealogy to a Brahmin origin (as has sometimes been done by the *Matuas*)<sup>101</sup> has been one side of this tendency, then entering the realm of electoral politics has been the other. Electoral politics in Bengal has been, almost exclusively, the forte of the elite Hindu castes (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya), as mentioned earlier. Entering the realm of politics in Bengal has been the *Namasudras*' way of 'appropriating symbols of authority and divesting them of their symbolic significance'.<sup>102</sup> The appropriation of political space and divesting it of its elitist exclusivity has been their way of negotiating with the hegemonic order. In fact, it was this anti-hegemonic stance that saw the non-participation of the *Namasudras* in the nationalist movements in India in the early twentieth century, since these were led by high caste Hindu gentry.<sup>103</sup>

A study of the history of the *Namasudras* demonstrates that 'the different constituents of the community had been seeking in different ways to reorientate the relations of power in indigenous society'.<sup>104</sup> This meant that from the very beginning, different streams of negotiation were devised by the community. 'While the *Namasudra* elites desired a share of new economic opportunities and political power, as it was gradually devolved in institutional politics through successive constitutional reforms, the peasantry cared more for community honour and liberation from economic oppression and social discrimination',<sup>105</sup> the common grudge being against the elite Hindu gentry of Bengal. The elite *Namasudras* aimed to secure a place for themselves 'within the wider community, i.e. the nation' (and this was being made possible by 'the constitutional reform of 1935 which compelled all the other nationalist parties to recognise their position');<sup>106</sup> the peasant community having lost their leadership looked for alternative alignments. This pushed their movement into

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<sup>101</sup> Bandyopadhyay, 1997, p.48.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p.49.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p.51.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p.9.

being appropriated by other political streams from 1940s onwards.<sup>107</sup> If the history of the *Matuas* reflects the first strand of the *Namasudra* narrative, the events at Marichjhapi are reflective of the second, i.e. the (mis)appropriation of their movement. The *Namasudra* movement took shape in 1872 in the form of the first organised social protest of the *Namasudras* against their social status in Bakargunj-Faridapur (then parts of united Bengal) and reached its high point during the *Swadeshi* period<sup>108</sup> (1905-11). Thereafter, the movement thinned down upon entering constitutional politics in the 1930s. While a part of the community remained faithful to B. R. Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste Federation,<sup>109</sup> others either joined the Congress, the Hindu Mahasabha against the Muslims,<sup>110</sup> or the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha.<sup>111</sup> The partition dealt the final blow to the movement, dividing the community geographically. Henceforth, their 'caste' identity started overlapping with other relationships<sup>112</sup>—social, political and territorial. In fact, the continued support of the *Namasudra* elites for the Left Front despite the Marichjhapi massacre testifies to the varying aspirations within the community, where the peasant class (the

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> *Swadeshi* Movement (1905-1911) was part of the Indian Independence movement and was an economic strategy against the British based on the principle of *swadeshi* or self-sufficiency. It involved boycotting British products, on the one hand, and developing domestic products and production processes. It was started following the announcement by Lord Curzon to partition Bengal in 1905. The decision of partition was annulled in 1911 following the movement.

<sup>109</sup> Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956) was an Indian jurist, politician, historian and economist. As independent India's first law minister, he was the principal architect of the Constitution of India. A Dalit himself, he campaigned against social discrimination and inspired the Dalit (Untouchables) movement in India.

<sup>110</sup> The Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (All India Hindu Assembly) was a right-wing Hindu nationalist political party in India, founded in 1914 in Amritsar, following the All India Hindu Conference in 1910 in Allahabad. Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Lala Lajpat Rai were among its most prominent leaders. The Mahasabha had tried hard to woo the Scheduled castes, including the *Namasudras* into its fold. The concentration of the *Namasudras* in the Jessore and Faridpur districts of Bengal was, in fact, the prime reason for the Mahasabha's demand for inclusion of these two districts into West Bengal during partition.

<sup>111</sup> The Akhil Bharatiya Kisan Sabha (All India Farmers' Assembly) was the peasants' front of the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI), formed in 1929 to mobilise peasant grievances against the atrocities of *zamindars*, resulting in the peasants' movement in India. The Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha was the provincial branch of the All India Sabha and was led by the Communist Party.

<sup>112</sup> Bandyopadhyay, 1997, pp.9-10.

majority of the *Namasudras* at Marichjhapi being of peasant origin) failed to garner the support of the elite *Namasudras*— political aspirations being the most evident cause. While the territorial specificity of the *Namasudra* settlement in the case of Marichjhapi went against their cause, this was precisely what the *Matuas* took advantage of. Both the events stand proof of the intertwining of caste discourses with spatial narratives, with or without success.

It has often been the aim of the dominant socio-political machinery of the state to appropriate or suppress subversive movements which might pose a challenge to the hegemonic order. The partition and its consequent migration trends made it difficult for the state to appropriate the *Namasudra* movement because of the coupling of the aspect of social marginality with that of territorial marginality. The new identity of being a border people that these *Namasudra* migrants now acquired made it difficult for the hegemonic orders to either completely appropriate or trivialise their presence. The starkness of the difference of ‘dealing with’ the *Namasudra* presence in the border areas between the two major events discussed above, i.e. the Marichjhapi massacre and the politics of the *Matuas*, reflects the dilemma, gradual process of realisation and consequent modification of the policies of the state with regard to its negotiation with the community.

#### IV. Caste narratives elsewhere along the West Bengal-Bangladesh Border

##### i. Caste profile

The border area between West Bengal and Bangladesh abounds in instances of the convergence of social identities with territorial marginalities. While the Marichjhapi event in the Sundarbans and the concentration of *Matuas* in the North 24 Parganas of West Bengal provide the best examples of such a convergence, the whole length of this border is, in fact, marked by the same feature. Migration from East Pakistan and, later, Bangladesh of agricultural communities, mostly *Namasudras*, into India (West Bengal being the most affected for being a border province) ensured *Namasudra* settlements, even if not as community-based concentrations, along the length of the

West Bengal-Bangladesh border. *Namasudras* constitute a large part of that civilian population, especially on the West Bengal side of the border, who negotiate the border and its various apparatuses. The interviewees (without conscious selection) mostly belong to the scheduled or otherwise non-Brahmin castes and scheduled tribes of India. Interestingly, the Muslim respondents often have similar surnames to the Hindu castes,<sup>113</sup> on both sides of the border. These bear hints of their origin (as being one of the castes in undivided Bengal and India, at large), though they may have converted to Islam during the expansion of the religion, mostly under extreme conditions of socio-economic misery brought about by their status of a low-caste within the Hindu religious fold. Narratives of the elite Hindu migrants preferring to settle in the flourishing cities and towns in West Bengal and the agriculture-dependent communities such as the Scheduled Castes (SC)/Scheduled Tribes (ST)/Other Backward Classes (OBC) settling, almost by economic compulsion, in the rural areas, including the borders, holds true not just for Marichjhapi or the *Matuas*, but along the whole length of the border.

Most of the *Namasudras* and Hindu SC/STs living along the border are engaged in agricultural jobs.<sup>114</sup> They are often concentrated in an area with a majority of the people of a neighbourhood sharing the same caste, represented by their surnames, for example, *Mahato*, *Bagdi*, *Mondol*, *Biswas*, *Burman*, *Pal*, *Haldar*, etc. Dinhatata in the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal is an example. Many of the villages under the Dinhatata subdivision are caste-based where the predominance of one or the other castes prevails. *Mahato*, *Bagdi*, *Mondol*, *Biswas* and *Burman* are some of the surnames which one frequently comes across, creating such neighbourhoods as *Burman-para* (neighbourhood), *Mondol-para*, *Bagdi-para*, etc. Nirendranath Burman explains: 'In this village, everybody is *Burman* like Santosh Burman, Kshitish Burman, Khogen Burman, Babu Burman, Ramesh Burman. On that side of the village, the *Malakars* live, who work as gardeners.'<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> The surnames indicate the caste status of Hindus since the caste structure has its origin in profession-related hierarchies, as mentioned earlier.

<sup>114</sup> Discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with Nirendranath Burman, resident and Deputy *Panchayat*-head at Kalmati village, Dinhatata (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

*Oraon* (one of the scheduled tribes) villages are also seen in Purba Bakhalir Chhara Enclave (Bangladeshi Enclave in India), consisting mostly of partition migrants from Rangpur district (Bangladesh). The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 triggered an exodus of migration of people belonging to various Hindu castes, and understandably, most of them related to agricultural jobs, into West Bengal, adding to the population of the various castes along the border. ‘After the Bangladesh War, a lot of Hindus have migrated to this place, like the *Pals* and the *Haldars*,’ says Kuddus Rahman of Jalangi (West Bengal).<sup>116</sup>

Some of the villages in these border areas are found to be inhabited by the Hindu *Mahishya* caste<sup>117</sup>—that has its origin as a cultivator caste. Some of them have later opted for skilled labour. Villages consisting primarily of people belonging to the *Mahishya* caste are frequently found in the border districts of West Bengal. ‘This is predominantly a *Mahishya* village, with a few Brahmin and SC/ST families’, says Jasimuddin Mondol,<sup>118</sup> reiterating a common response among many of the border villages visited during my field visits. ‘There are hardly any SC/ST families here. Most of these people are Hindu *Mahishya*,’ says a respondent from yet another border village in Nadia district.<sup>119</sup> Similar responses confirming the existence of predominantly scheduled caste/tribe villages are also common along many of the border villages along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. ‘In general the number of Hindus is more here. There are mostly SC/ST families here. In fact, ST-s are the

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<sup>116</sup> Interview with Kuddus Rahman, resident and chairman of local committee of a political party at Jaykrishnapur village, Jalangi (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>117</sup> The *Mahishya* caste is said to have its origin from the union of a Kshatriya father and a *Vaishya* mother. Initially, they were considered similar to the *Kaibartta* caste and were categorised as *Jele Kaibartta* (fishermen) and *Hele Kaibartta* (farmer). Gradually, the movement for a separate caste status amongst the *Mahishyas* gained momentum till they were given a separate caste status in the 1921 Census of India. The fact that the *Mahishyas* were the largest Hindu caste in Bengal favoured their cause.

<sup>118</sup> ‘এটা মহেশ্যা-প্রধান গ্রাম. কিছু ব্রাহ্মণ আছে. ২-১ ঘর এস সি/এস টি হবে ।’ Interview with Jasimuddin Mondol, resident and farmer at Mathurapur village (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Imtiaz Mondol, resident and farmer at Mathurapur village (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).



largest in number,' says Dayamay Datta of Teipur, Nadia district.<sup>120</sup> A respondent in Goga (Bangladesh) is more specific in mentioning the population profile when he says, 'There are some Hindus in Goga. Besides that, there are the *Bagdi*, *Kumor*, *Kamar*' (scheduled castes).<sup>121</sup> Goga is a village on the Bangladesh side of the border and shares its border with Gaighata (West Bengal), the headquarters of the *Namasudra Matuas*. This response indicates the similarity between the profile of the communities (*Namasudras*) on both sides of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border and explains the cross-border ties between them.

Some of the respondents of the border villages narrate how they, as a caste-community, were brought by the British administrators from other parts of India and settled in the area that they presently inhabit—that eventually became the border area after the Partition. Prasanta Mondol narrates how his ancestors had been brought over from Nagpur in Bihar to Char Meghna (which they currently inhabit) as labourers in indigo plantations during the second half of the seventeenth century. 'Initially, it was just 2/3 families, which later increased to a whole village,' he says.<sup>122</sup>

The concentration of various scheduled castes and tribes in the areas which now form part of the border between West Bengal and Bangladesh can be largely traced back to colonial administration, like the instance above, where tribal populations often known for their capacity for hard work as well as for their tradition of agricultural engagements were used by British administrators (including indigo planters) as cheap labour in their plantations. While most of the plantations were concentrated in the area which is now the border (districts like Nadia, Murshidabad and 24 Parganas still have ruins of the indigo warehouses beside the rivers which pass through them),

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<sup>120</sup> Interview with Dayamay Dutta, resident and teacher at Teipur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 24 October 2011).

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Imran, resident at Goga village, Sharsha (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012).

<sup>122</sup> 'ঠাকুরদার মুখে শুনেছি আমাদের বাড়ি নাকি আসলে ছিল বিহার এর নাগপুর. ওখান থেকে ব্রিটিশ রা আমাদের নীল চাষ করতে এখানে এনেছিল. তখন ২/৪ ঘর এসেছিল. তার থেকে এতটা হয়েছে ।' (I have heard from my grandfather that we are originally from Nagpur region of Bihar. The British had brought us here as labourers in indigo plantations. Initially, it was just 2/3 families, which later increased to a whole village.) Interview with Prasanta Mondol, resident and farmer at Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

cheap labour, mostly from tribals or low-castes (*Namasudras* in many cases) was sourced from the tribal belts of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. These labourers settled in these areas, initially as bonded labourers and, eventually, post-1947, as cultivators and agricultural labourers, thus constituting a large portion of what became the ‘border population’. Hare Krishna Mondol confirms the migration narrative when he narrates how ‘the British had brought these tribals from Midnapore and the Chhota Nagpur area in Bihar to Char Meghna as labourers in indigo plantations. A Guru by the name of Jadu Pandit from Bihar had once visited this place and confirmed that these tribes were originally a barber caste (*Napit*) and had been forcefully made to engage in agricultural jobs by the British. The Guru also added that they were not as lowly a caste as they eventually ended up being, which made other higher castes look down upon them.’<sup>123</sup>

## ii. Livelihood

The livelihoods of these castes and tribes are still categorised in certain ways. As Md. Tafikul Islam says: ‘There are indigenous population (scheduled castes and tribes) here. Their relation with the other non-tribal population is cordial. These scheduled castes and tribes are mostly engaged as labourers in brick-kilns or other small-scale manufacturing businesses, or work as van-drivers or agricultural labourers. There is a *Das*-locality here and the community mostly works as labourers in brick-kilns and in jute fields, or is engaged as labourers in sand dredging.’<sup>124</sup> Information like the above also suggests that these so-called low-castes rarely ‘own’ land. Land ownership in Hindu society has mostly been held by the elite castes. The lower castes and, over the years, the indigenous population (including the tribes), have been engaged in these lands as labourers. Though some of these castes have gradually prospered and also own land, eventually, it is still the Hindu upper castes who maintain monopoly. The lower the position of the caste in the social ladder, the rarer is their possibility of owning land. Minu Bagdi confirms the trend when she says,

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<sup>123</sup> Interview with Hare Krishna Mondol, resident and member of *Panchayat* at Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>124</sup> ‘আদিবাসী সম্প্রদায় আছে, কম. তাদের সাথে বাকিদের সম্পর্ক ভালো. ভাটায় কাজ করে, ভ্যান চালায়, ব্যবসা করে. দাসেদের পারা আছে, তারা মূলত মুটের কাজ করে. আর বালি কাটার কাজ করে।’ Interview with Md. Tafikul Islam, resident and farmer at Panitor village, Basirhat (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 17 January 2012).

‘this is a tribal village and our main occupation is agriculture. Most of us are agricultural labourers and there are very few land owners’.<sup>125</sup> Apart from informing us that the SC/ST-S are primarily engaged as agricultural labourers or as labourers in factories, Ranjit also added that the SC/ST-s hardly own any land and mainly work as agricultural labourers. In fact, ‘the largest numbers of labourers are sourced from these (SC/ST) communities,’ he says.<sup>126</sup> Md. Riyaz Mondol confirmed this response when he said that ‘the main occupation of the SC/ST is to be engaged as agricultural labourers. They rarely own land.’<sup>127</sup>

In terms of illegal livelihood practices, it is, again, the *Namasudra* refugees along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border who are the most vulnerable. The connections, though not spelt out, are nevertheless clear. Since the caste profile of the migrants settled along this border is predominantly *Namasudra* and tribal, responses like ‘most of the smugglers originate from the refugees who have settled near the border’,<sup>128</sup> indicate an unstated yet clear association between the migrant *Namasudra* refugees and illegal cross-border practices. ‘The main reason why the refugees take to illegal practices is to make money as fast as possible. They have left the last bit of their possessions in Bangladesh and, so, are in urgent need of money. While labour-work fetches them about Rs.150 a day, smuggling fetches them about Rs.300. So smuggling is a better and faster way of earning for these refugees,’<sup>129</sup> says a BSF border guard. These responses are clear indications of the vulnerability of the border people with regard to any sort of tags imposed by the state—the *Namasudra* community constituting the major portion of the former.

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<sup>125</sup> Interview with Minu Bagdi, resident and farmer at Mathurapur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>126</sup> ‘এস সি/এস টি বেশি. লেবার, কৃষি করে. নিজেদের জমি কম তাদের. মূলত লেবার খাটে. লেবার এর বেশিরভাগ ওই কমিউনিটি থেকেই আসে ।’ Interview with Ranjit, resident and head of *Panchayat* at Jamalpur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>127</sup> ‘এস সি/এস টি আছে অল্প. এদের পেশা কৃষি, লেবার. লেবার বেশি, জমির মালিক কম ।’ (The main occupation of the SC/ST communities is cultivation, labourer. In fact the largest numbers of labourers are sourced from these (SC/ST) communities.) Interview with Md. Riyaz Mondol, resident and farmer at Dahapara village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>128</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Shikarpur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

### iii. Festivities

The border areas witness festivals which are exclusive to the various indigenous castes and tribes, apart from the usual Hindu religious festivities, such as *Durga Puja*, *Kali Puja*,<sup>130</sup> etc. *Sarai* is one such festival of the indigenous tribal population (*Adivasi*) held during each full-moon, where a clay idol of a certain deity is made for the purpose of the ritual and the tribal population sings and dances in praise of the deity.<sup>131</sup>

Minu Bagdi informs us that the relation between the tribal population and the *Bangalis* ('Bengalis'—implying the higher Hindu castes) is cordial. 'The *Bangalis* come to our *parab* (festivity) but not during the actual *puja* (ritual). They come to our homes and eat from our hands,' is how the cordiality is defined by Minu, a woman farmer belonging to one of the scheduled castes at Mathurapur village of Hili, the border Land Port between West Bengal and Bangladesh.<sup>132</sup>

Hare Krishna Mondol also explains another such festivity in a village dominated by the *Mahatos*, *Mondols* and *Sardars*: 'They speak *shadri* dialect, practice *sarna* religion and worship the branch of *Pakor* tree. They consume *Hariya* (a locally-brewed alcohol) in every festivity, slaughter poultry and goat during *Goyal puja*.'<sup>133</sup> These people have their origin in Bihar's Chota Nagpur region from where they were brought to Char Meghna by the British planters as labourers in indigo plantations, says Hare Krishna.<sup>134</sup>

Rupali Mahato talks of *Hari Naam Jogya*— a 3-day festival of chanting the praises of the deity, which is a yearly ritual observed by the scheduled castes concentrated in

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<sup>130</sup> *Kali Puja* is one of the more prominent religious festivals of the Hindus of India, and especially the Bengali Hindus of Bengal (West Bengal and Bangladesh), celebrated in praise of the deity *Kali*.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Nikhil Bagdi, resident and agricultural labourer at Mathurapur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>132</sup> 'বাঙালি দের সাথে এমনিতে কোনো অসুবিধা হয় না. আমাদের পরবে বাঙালি-রা আসে খেতে, পুজোর সময় আসে না. আমাদের বাড়িতে আসে, হাতে খায় ।' Interview with Minu Bagdi, resident and agricultural labourer at Mathurapur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>133</sup> Interview with Hare Krishna Mondol, resident and member of *Panchayat* at Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

a village in Char Meghna.<sup>135</sup> Or as Binoy Pramanik of Teipur, Nadia district, says, 'The SCs observe the *Manasa* Puja here.'<sup>136</sup>

The *Tusu* festival in Char Meghna is yet another example of such a tribal festival. It is a month-long celebration by women belonging mostly to the *Kudumi* tribe, who gather every evening over a month at a particular place in the village and sing verses dedicated to a girl named *Tusu*. Myth has it that a girl named *Tusu* belonging to a *Kudumi* tribe in Mayurbhanj (present day Jharkhand district in India and a neighbouring province of West Bengal) was abducted by Muslim invaders sometime in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The *Kudumis* along with the *Santhals* (another tribe) protested against the incident and placed it before the *Nawab* of Bengal. The *Nawab* punished the abductors and returned *Tusu* to her family and tribe. Though *Tusu*, unable to bear the shame of being abducted, ended her life, the spirit of protest has ever since been celebrated by the tribal people through the *Tusu* festival, where hymns dedicated to *Tusu* and her struggle for dignity are sung for a month.<sup>137</sup> Such customs indicate the spirit of resistance among the indigenous people. Apart from confirming the migration paradigm of the tribes from other parts of India to what is now the border area, the *Tusu* festival is also indicative of a tradition of resistance posed by these indigenous populations against elite domination. Be it the *Namasudra* movement against the Hindu elites, the Marichjhapi narrative or the *Matua* narrative vis-à-vis the dominant political structure in West Bengal, challenging the hierarchy has always been their means of making themselves heard.

In many of these border villages, festivals and rituals of the tribal population are the major festivals, if not the only ones. This has largely to do with the high expenditure of the Hindu festivals like *Durga* or *Kali Puja*, unlike tribal festivities which depend more on physical participation (singing, dancing, chanting hymns). Responses confirming the predominance of tribal festivities and the rarity of Hindu festivals have been recorded in many of the border villages. 'In this village, the number of

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<sup>135</sup> Interview with Rupali Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>136</sup> Interview with Binoy Pramanik, resident and farmer at Teipur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 24 October 2011).

<sup>137</sup> Mohanta, B.K. (2011) *Tusu Festival of the Kudumis of Northern Orissa: Origin and Causes*. *Journal of Sociology and Social Anthropology*. 2(1). pp. 23-29.

*Adivasis* is more and it is the *Adivasis* who have most of the big festivities,' says Nikhil Bagdi.<sup>138</sup>

The issue of the collection of funds required for organising Hindu festivals like *Durga Puja* is common in many of these villages, indicating the numerical weakness of the Hindu higher castes in these predominantly tribal border villages. The few Hindu families find it difficult to gather the required funds for organising such festivals. 'We do organise *Durga Puja*, but not everyone readily gives funds. So we have to organise it on a small scale,' laments Parbati Mohanto.<sup>139</sup> In fact, Rupali Mahato, while narrating the *Hari Naam Jogya* ritual, also adds that it is the only major festival held in that area since the Hindus are unable to organise *Durga Puja* due to lack of funds. 'At best they (Hindus) organise *Lakshmi Puja*<sup>140</sup> on a small scale, without a *pandal*,<sup>141</sup> with the limited funds that they are able to collect sometimes,'<sup>142</sup> she says.

In the context of festivities along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, a religious aspect is also noticeable in the interaction between the border civilians and the border guards, apart from the religious aspect of caste-based interactions between the civilians themselves discussed so far. Almost all the BSF camps on the West Bengal border have small temples/shrines of either *Kali* or *Shiva*.<sup>143</sup> Over the years, this has become a usual occurrence in the BSF camps of the West Bengal border. Religious festivals are often celebrated in these small temples within the BSF camps with much grandeur where, in some cases, the civilians are allowed to participate (in terms of distribution of *Prasad*<sup>144</sup> to locals, participation in the rituals, etc.). At one level, this seems a good platform for bonding initiatives on the part of the border guards. At the

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<sup>138</sup> Interview with Nikhil Bagdi, resident and agricultural labourer at Mathurapur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>139</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident of Ghunapara-Dhumron village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>140</sup> *Lakshmi Puja* is another prominent religious festival of the Hindus in India celebrated in praise of the deity *Lakshmi*, goddess of wealth.

<sup>141</sup> *Pandal* is the temporary wooden shelter generally built for housing idols in big Hindu religious festivals.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Rupali Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>143</sup> Both *Kali* and *Shiva* are very prominent Hindu deities.

<sup>144</sup> *Prasad* is the offerings distributed among the devotees after the ritual is over.

same time, the religious allusion is more than overwhelming. As it is, religious symbols, in any form, should be avoided in any official establishment, which includes the defence forces and, thus, the BSF. Moreover, a large portion of the border civilians along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border is Muslim. The threat of persecution that the civilians consistently deal with is further accentuated by the strong presence of the religious overtone amongst the majority of the BSF forces. Muslim religious festivals like *Eid* are celebrated mostly by the locals, and rarely, if ever, by BSF initiatives. The few Muslim officials within the BSF battalions observe their rituals by themselves (for example, observing the *Namaaz*) but rarely are Muslim religious festivals organised by camp officials on a scale like Hindu festivals such as *Kali Puja*.

Religion does not evoke sweet memories for the people of undivided Bengal who saw the worst form of religious fanaticism during the creation of this border. Ever since the partition, religion has been a sensitive issue with the people of both India as well as Bangladesh. The complex nature of the mixed religious population on either side of the border has made the situation all the more complicated. The overwhelming presence of a religious undertone in the camps of the border guards adds to the complexity. In some border areas, such religious festivals in the camps are the only initiatives taken by the border guards to involve the locals, as Kuddus Rahman points out: ‘The BSF does not otherwise talk to us or enquire about our well-being. The only programme that they organise is the *Kali Puja* inside the camp and no other cultural programmes. They enjoy the *Puja* by themselves and do not encourage the entry of local people’,<sup>145</sup> which Nikhil phrases as ‘their (BSF’s) personal *Puja*’,<sup>146</sup> Or as Binoy Pramanik points out more clearly, ‘apart from the Independence Day celebration in the areas, the only other programme that the BSF organise is the *Kali Puja* within the camp premises. They ask the Hindu community

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<sup>145</sup> ‘বি এস এফ আমাদের সাথে এমনিতে কথা বলে না, খোঁজ নেয়না. কোনো অনুষ্ঠান করে না. আর ক্যাম্প এর ভেতর কালী পূজা হয়. নিজেরাই আনন্দ করে. সিভিল লোক ভেতরে যায় না ।’ Interview with Kuddus Rahman, resident and chairman of local committee of a political party at Jaykrishnapur village, Jalangi (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>146</sup> ‘ক্যাম্প এ কালী পূজা হয়. ওদের পার্সোনাল পূজো ।’ (*Kali puja* is held inside the camp. It is their personal puja.) Interview with Nikhil Bagdi, resident and agricultural labourer at Mathurapur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

of the area to participate in the *Puja*.<sup>147</sup> A complex web of patriotism and religious affiliation is, thus, at play in the relations between the border civilians and the border guards along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

iv. Recognition of caste status

Many of the people belonging to scheduled castes and tribes in a number of areas on the border are yet to receive the formal document/certificate from the government of India confirming their caste/tribe status. Complaints regarding the negligence of the government towards these people as reasons behind their marginal existences at the border have been common in the responses. The officials responsible for pursuing the official procedures for the certificates to be formally passed and handed over to the people keep delaying the process. 'Most of us here are ST. We are the indigenous people of this place. But most of us do not have the certificates because one or the other official, who are supposed to sign the papers, is unavailable. If the MLA signs, the BDO (Block Development Officer) delays; if the BDO does it, the *Panchayat Pradhan* does not. This means that we, in Karimpur, are yet to receive our certificates, while the rest of Nadia have got theirs. The certificate would have helped our cause,' complains Sabitri Mahato.<sup>148</sup>

Hare Krishna Mondol is more vehement about this issue when he talks of a movement that has been initiated for pursuing the cause of the issue of certificates to the people of Char Meghna, almost all of whom belong to the scheduled tribes: 'The whole population of this village is ST but are yet to receive their certificates. There is an on-going movement regarding this issue. Everyone else in the other parts of the

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<sup>147</sup> 'স্বাধীনতা দিবস এর দিন অনুষ্ঠান করে. আর ওদের ক্যাম্প এর কালী পূজো তে গ্রামের হিন্দু সম্প্রদায় কে বলে তোমরা এস, ঠাকুরের জন্য গান বাজনা কর ।' Interview with Binoy Pramanik, resident and farmer at Teipur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 24 October 2011).

<sup>148</sup> 'এখানে মূলত এস টি. আমরা এখানকার আদি বাসিন্দা. সবার সার্টিফিকেট নেই, কারণ কারোর না কারোর সহি পাওয়া যাচ্ছে না. এম এল এ দিছে তো বি ডি ও দিছে না. সে দিছে তো প্রধান দিছে না. নদিয়া তে তাই সার্টিফিকেট দেওয়া বন্ধ আছে. করিমপুর এর এদিকে. বাকি নদিয়া হয়ে গেছে. সার্টিফিকেট টা পেলে আরেকটু সুবিধা হত ।' Interview with Sabitri Mahato, resident and ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services) volunteer at Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).



district has got their certificates except for this *char*.<sup>149</sup> In spite of having the required proof of their caste/tribe identity (documents issued by the British administrators or even local *zamindars* to their ancestors with regard to their service as labourers), these indigenous people are unable to get an official recognition of their caste/tribe status from the government of India.

Bijoy Mondol assumes that political complexities are the reasons for this situation where co-ordination between the officials responsible for the processing of these certificates is driven by political compulsions. 'We, still, have not been able to get our certificates, in spite of having all the documents. I have visited the Writer's Building (the administrative office in Kolkata from where the West Bengal government functions) many times, but the SDO (Sub-Divisional Officer) is not co-operating. Now that there has been a change in the ruling party, chances have only reduced,' says a visibly-anxious Bijoy.<sup>150</sup>

Narendranath Ghosh, the MLA from Karimpur, in an effort to explain the situation, points to the confusion in some of the circumstances where the tribes complain of negligence: 'The complaint that official negligence is responsible for delay in issuing the certificates is not entirely true. There is a confusion regarding their caste and tribe status. Sometimes they may apply for a ST certificate while, in reality, they may be SC. There are debates regarding this issue. Judging their status merely from their surnames is not enough. Though their festivities and rituals indicate their tribal status, but the official process requires more verification.'<sup>151</sup>

This delay in providing the certificates to these people is somewhat of a conscious negligence on the part of the government and has largely to do with the issue of illegal infiltration. The issue of illegal migrants crossing the borders from Bangladesh into West Bengal has an impact on the decisions of the officials when it comes to recognition of any kind of identity of the people living along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. Ways of dealing with this crisis vary circumstantially.

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<sup>149</sup> Interview with Hare Krishna Mondol, resident and member of *Panchayat* at Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Bijoy Mondol, resident and member of *Panchayat* at Shikarpur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Narendranath Ghosh, resident and MLA from Karimpur Constituency (Nadia district of West Bengal, 24 October 2011).

Whether it is the violence against the low-castes in Marichjhapi, or the attempt to make use of a politically empowered low-caste organisation (*Matuas*) or whether it is the dilemma and delay in recognising the caste/tribe status of a community, the discomfort of the state regarding the border people has always been manifest in the various interactions between them. If violence and delay in recognition is one part of the trajectory, then issuing fraudulent voter and ration cards to illegal migrants for electoral purposes is another integral part.<sup>152</sup> The tightrope walk between legality and illegality, between being a rightful citizen and an illegal infiltrator, therefore, becomes part of the survival trajectories of the people along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

## V. Conclusion

Along the length of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, the presence of low-castes and tribes among the border civilians is too visible to be denied. Not surprisingly, it is these border civilians who face the vulnerabilities associated with living in the border areas—being labelled as ‘infiltrators’ is an example. The exercise of the sovereign power of the state at the border is manifested through the border guards, fences and surveillance mechanisms. It is the border civilians who negotiate the reality of the state’s presence every day. While this is one aspect of the border narrative, using the border for a better living is another equally undeniable aspect. Various patterns of negotiation between the border civilians and the state have, thus, evolved where the socio-political and ethno-religious identities of the people have been modified and redefined to suit their survival needs. The same people who are at the receiving end of the wielding of the state’s power are also the ones who make use of their social and territorial marginality. The narratives of the border people along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border make a very pertinent study with reference to

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<sup>152</sup> Paul, S. (14 January 2011) Illegal immigration: East Bengal in West Bengal. *India Today.in* [Online] Available from: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/east+bengal+in+west+bengal/1/126587.html>. [Last accessed: 6 August 2013].

this claim. And more so, because it is on this border(ed) space that the border people trade caste and ethno-religious identities simultaneously.

The history of the *Namasudra* movement in Bengal testifies to an interesting feature of this community—that of demonstrating features of caste and ethno-religious consciousness at the same time. Even when the *Namasudras* were striving to create a caste identity for themselves with regard to empowering themselves in the field of electoral politics (non-participation in the nationalist movements being their chosen form of resistance), they were also seen to participate, with much vigour, in class-based movements like the *Tebhaga* movement, under the Communist-dominated Kisan Sabha leadership and the religion-based movements of the Hindu Mahasabha, in and around 1946-‘47.<sup>153</sup> The shift from caste-based alliances to class and religious affiliations, or rather the simultaneous negotiation between caste, class and religious identities of the lower caste communities, is what is still manifested along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. The clash between ethno-religious sensibilities and border realities is an obvious outcome.<sup>154</sup>

i. Effect of the border on caste and ethno-religious aspects

The interaction between the state and its marginal inhabitants has never been easy. The social, religious, gendered or geographical marginality of a people brings it into conflict with statist agendas of appropriation, either through non-recognition of their citizenship status (SC/STs of border villages and enclave residents are examples) or through a forceful appropriation of their identities. The borders, as a state’s territorial delimitation, are spaces where the sovereign power of the state is the most visibly realised and embodied in the border guards, fences and surveillance mechanisms. Therefore, the activities, movements and perceptions of the border people become issues of concern to the state. The identities of the border civilians become decisive in the tactics and policies adopted by the state in securing and sanctifying its borders.

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<sup>153</sup> Bandyopadhyay, 1997, p.243.

<sup>154</sup> Clash between Muslim border civilians and BSF over issues of accessing burial grounds outside the fence is a usual occurrence along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border—a result of border mechanisms disrupting age-old customs. Staff Reporter (10 October 2009) Gorosthaney jetey badha, uttejona. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1091010/10uttar2.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

Ethno-religious and caste identities are some of the aspects which become integral to the narrative of negotiation between the border civilians and the states concerned. The West Bengal-Bangladesh border is an important study in the understanding of the nature of such negotiations.

The creation of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border has had a direct effect on the profile of the border people along it. As a natural culmination of the partition and refugee movement, the *Namasudras* have become the predominant caste along the border. As outcastes, they not just represent the border space but also redefine and re-appropriate it. The Marichjhapi incident, the *Matua* trajectory and the predominance of *Namasudras* in the livelihood practices and festivities along the border are examples of such representation and re-appropriation.

The ethno-religious aspects of the identities of the border people have, since partition, been integral to border narratives, albeit in different intensities, forms and contexts. Religion as a basis for partition had an immediate effect on the partitioned people in terms of their movements across the border to settle in states of their choice. Gradually, the overwhelming reality of surviving the border united the people living along it, across religion or other socio-economic identities. Yet ethno-religious issues and narratives were not completely lost, as is evident from various border narratives. Be it the radicalisation of an event (the involvement of Hindu Bengali radical groups in the Marichjhapi event), be it through empowering a caste-based sect into a political force (the projection of *Matuas* as a religious sect), or be it the nature of festivities along the border (the predominance of tribal festivities over Hindu religious festivals; the presence of Hindu shrines in the camps of the border guards), ethno-religious narratives have existed all along, albeit in a latent form, in the creation of border narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

The uniqueness of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border lies in its uniqueness of concentration of *Namasudra* castes along its entire length and on both its sides. On the Bangladesh side, the aspect of lower caste fails to become visible because of the religious factor, in spite of a major portion of the Bangladeshi border civilians sharing a similar caste (mostly *Namasudra*) with their counterparts across the border. On the Bangladesh border, religious identity takes over caste identity. But on the West Bengal side, caste identities are an unpronounced but overwhelming presence

in the profile of the people. This also explains the pattern of responses from the interviewees in terms of religious or caste identities on the West Bengal border. In instances where Hindu villages are surrounded by Muslim villages on the West Bengal border, the presence of caste identities within them are overshadowed by the religious aspect of their existence. ‘We are surrounded by a Muslim village’<sup>155</sup> is the kind of usual response in such cases. At other times, when two or more predominantly Hindu villages exist side by side, issues of castes appear in the responses (*Das para, Mondol para, Bagdi para, etc.*).<sup>156</sup> Thus, religious and caste identities decide the creation of the ‘Other’ for the border people.

ii. Uniqueness of caste and ethno-religious narratives along the West Bengal Border

Caste and ethno-religious aspects in the negotiation between a state and its people are not unique to the West Bengal border and, in fact, are a widespread occurrence in other parts of India and Bangladesh. Yet the uniqueness of caste and ethno-religious questions along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border is manifested in the effect that this border has on such narratives. It is the reality of the border that moulds and reshapes certain aspects of these narratives to make them spatially unique, by tying them to the specificity of the border milieu. The Marichjhapi event, including the involvement of radical ethno-religious groups, the political empowerment of the *Matuas* using their spatial identity and cross-border ties, and the overwhelming presence of *Namasudra* culture and involvement in the border milieu, are indications of such unique border narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

The caste and ethno-religious profile of the people on both sides of this border also make the narrative unique when compared to the other Indian or Bangladeshi borders. A mix of religious communities, similar ethnic composition, language and culture on both sides of the border not just make this border unique but also, in many ways, weaken the purpose of its existence—as a line of separation and containment. The links, movements and exchange patterns across the border are largely based on such

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<sup>155</sup> Interview with Saraswati Das, resident of Nazirhat village, Dinhata (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 15 March 2012).

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Nirendranath Burman, resident and Deputy-head of *Panchayat* of Kalmati village (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

caste and ethno-religious links and are, perhaps, what contests the unquestionable sovereign power that the states of India and Bangladesh attempt to wield along it.

iii. Border as *thirdspace*

Caste and ethno-religious narratives of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border are some of the better examples of the conflict between the conceived and perceived notions of the border people and the state regarding the border space. Creation of the *thirdspace*<sup>157</sup> finds resonance in caste and ethno-religious narratives—as voices of the ‘subaltern counter-publics’,<sup>158</sup> and offers a logic ‘which goes against the convention of rational either/or choices’.<sup>159</sup> The simultaneous presence of caste and ethno-religious aspects in the border narratives are indications of that logic. The ‘hot margins’ of this *thirdspace*, as exhibited by the dynamics of the caste factor along the border, exhibits a solidarity—whether it is forced by the urgency of the situation (Marichjhapi) or organised as a sectarian force (*Matuas*). The sense of solidarity is as pronounced in the responses of the other border inhabitants across caste, even if they themselves are unaware of this unorganised solidarity. Solidarity over a spatial question and in the practice of subalternity ‘becomes the fundamental language of political action against hegemonic languages’.<sup>160</sup> The Marichjhapi event, the *Matuas* or the caste-based livelihood practices and festivities along the border are such subaltern practices in being alternative ways of gaining access to resources otherwise denied by the state.

Caste and ethno-religious subaltern narratives, like the ones discussed above, also indicate ‘an accommodation with the structure of domination’,<sup>161</sup> much like the livelihood practices and enclave narratives along this border.<sup>162</sup> The narratives are not directly intended towards a refusal or denial of the framework of the state but rather towards accommodating their own survival needs within the dominant

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<sup>157</sup> Soja, E. (1996) *Thirdspace*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

<sup>158</sup> Fraser, N. (1990) Rethinking the Public Sphere: a Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. *Social Text*. 25/26. p.67.

<sup>159</sup> Young, R.J.M (1995) *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*. New York: Routledge. p. 26.

<sup>160</sup> Lionnet, F. (1989) The Politics and Aesthetics of Metissage. In *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press. p. 6.

<sup>161</sup> Scott, 1989, p. 21.

<sup>162</sup> Discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

structures. The striving for recognition as citizens by the Marichjhapi refugees, the engaging in electoral politics of the state by the *Matuas* or the striving to survive within the structures of the state machinery at the borders are indications of such accommodations. What, nevertheless, makes these narratives unique are the ways the civilians re-interpret and redefine the space of the borderland to suit their survival needs. In the process, alternative ideas and techniques of gaining access to resources are reproduced by the border civilians.

iv. *Border consciousness*

Years of production of such subaltern narratives along the border crystallise into a pattern of consciousness among the people living and surviving the border every day—a consciousness that has been termed here as a *border consciousness*. A spatial feature is what constitutes this border consciousness where the reality of the border is recurrent in all the activities, perceptions and negotiations between the border people themselves, and between the border people and the border guards on both sides of the border, although in varying forms.

The border inhabitant ‘is a figure of enormous potential, as her multiplicity allows a new kind of consciousness to emerge’<sup>163</sup> —a consciousness that ‘moves beyond the binary relationships and dichotomies that characterise traditional modes of thought’.<sup>164</sup> The Marichjhapi refugees, the *Matuas* and the various other lower castes trading their border(ed)-status— whether as passive victims or as active perpetrators— subvert the predominant statist definitions of such binaries as centre-periphery, us-them or legal-illegal.

Border consciousness as a form of subaltern consciousness is also characterised by a ‘common sense’,<sup>165</sup> constituted of two, often contradictory, types of consciousness—the one which has been imbibed from the past and the other which is the real ‘lived’ circumstance.<sup>166</sup> This is what makes subaltern consciousness ‘an ambiguous,

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<sup>163</sup> Feghali, Z. (2011) Re-articulating the New Mestiza. *Journal of International Women’s Studies Special Issue*. 12(2). p.61.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>166</sup> Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. (trs. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith). London: Lawrence and Wishart. pp. 325-43.

contradictory and multiform concept'<sup>167</sup>—features which also characterise the border consciousness. The imbibed history of culture (including caste and ethno-religious identities) clash with the lived realities of nation-building (creation of the border) and drive the people to absorb 'new ideas, new techniques, new ways of living, which constantly modifies and enriches common sense by adapting to new conditions of life and work'.<sup>168</sup> Caste and ethno-religious narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border discussed so far are the manifestations of such adaptations.

The Marichjhapi narratives, *Matua* narratives or the concentration of caste-based villages and livelihoods along this border are also examples of micro-level spatial consciousness in themselves, where the concentration of a specific community over a space and the appropriation of the space by the community can be said to have crystallised into a unique spatial psyche or consciousness—manifested through diverse social, political, economic and religious narratives. Yet the spatial uniqueness of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border has engulfed these micro-level spatial consciousness into its fold and has modified the smaller narratives into the larger framework of border consciousness—a spatial consciousness characterised by the overwhelming presence of the border.

This chapter provides yet another building block towards the construction of the thesis that aims to study the evolution of border consciousness manifested through the various strands of border narratives. The chapter analyses how caste and ethno-religious narratives converge at the border to produce the complex fabric of border consciousness and, thus, contributes towards the understanding of the border psyche along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>168</sup> Guha, R. (ed.). (1989) *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian history and society*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. p.173.



## Chapter 4

### Gender Narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh Border

#### I. Introduction

This chapter aims to look at various forms of interaction between the civilian border people and the state personnel, represented by the border guards along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border in the context of gendered practices. The interaction between the male, female and other gendered categories of civilians, and the largely male border guards, throws light on certain gendered aspects, which are both physical and social in nature. These gendered narratives attain a unique nature in the backdrop of their spatial specificity of being border narratives. A few aspects of these gendered narratives have been discussed in the previous chapters. This chapter aims to analyse, in-depth, some more of these gendered border narratives along the stipulated border.

Borderlands between two states are the space where the presence of the latter's sovereign power is most strongly felt. Border fences, border guards and various surveillance mechanisms deployed by the respective states are the visible manifestations of this power machinery.<sup>1</sup> Negotiating these is integral to the daily lives of the people who live and work along the border. Interaction with the border guards are a fundamental aspect of these negotiations, be it in terms of movement (from one border area to another or across the border), pursuing a livelihood or organising and participating in socio-cultural engagements.<sup>2</sup> A close observation of this interaction suggests a clear gendered aspect to it, which, otherwise, may seem a simple civilian vs. state narrative. The nature of interaction between the largely male border guards, on the one hand, and the male civilians, female civilians and transgendered civilians, on the other, depends both on the physical as well as the social aspect of gendered discourses. Likewise, the nature of interaction between these categories of people varies according to the particular gender context at a given

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<sup>1</sup> Donnan, H. and Wilson, T.M. (1999) *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*. Oxford: Berg.

<sup>2</sup> Discussed in Chapters 1, 2 and 3.

time. The overwhelming presence of the spatial specificity of the borderland is hard to miss in the production of the narratives which follow such gendered interactions. Gendered interaction between the state and the civilian is not uncommon in other, non-border parts of India. However, the kind of interaction seen along the said border exhibit certain features which are unique to border areas, and often specific to the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

This chapter proposes to establish that the spatial marginality of the borderland affects social constructs, such as gender, to form a larger spatial narrative. This narrative is characterised by the overwhelming presence of the borderland milieu in the responses of both the civilians and border guards. It also proposes to establish the fact that gendered border narratives contribute towards the shaping of *border consciousness*.

The complex nature of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, in terms of its planning and execution, ethnic and religious composition, economic structure and social set-up, has been studied by scholars.<sup>3</sup> Trying to understand the nexus between the civilian population and the border guards in the light of gender relations has been one of the more common aspects of such studies.<sup>4</sup> An overview of these studies brings out two very visible aspects of gender relations on this border:

- 1) The physical abuse of women civilians by the male border guards.
- 2) The physical violence perpetrated by the border guards on the male civilians.

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<sup>3</sup> Samaddar, R. (1999). *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*. Thousand Oaks, London: Sage; Chatterji, J. (1999) The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52. *Modern Asian Studies*. 33 (1). pp.185-242; Van Schendel, W. (2005). *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem; Jones, R. (2012) Spaces of Refusal: Rethinking Sovereign Power and Resistance at the Border. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 102 (3). pp.685-699.

<sup>4</sup> Banerjee, P. (2010) *Borders, Histories, Existences: Gender and Beyond*. New Delhi: Sage; Banerjee, P. and Basu Ray Chaudhury, A. (eds.). (2011) *Women in Indian Borderlands*. New Delhi: Sage.

While the first aspect has been studied more in terms of sexual violation or gendered abuse, the latter has been seen as acts of human rights violation.<sup>5</sup> While these studies do, in fact, bring out the more blatant features of gender relations on this border, they overlook the finer nuances of such relations. A closer look at the various ways of interaction between the border guards and the civilians brings out the complex nature of gender narratives that the West Bengal-Bangladesh border produces. The condition of women at this border is no different to many other backward areas in India, especially some of the more isolated rural areas.<sup>6</sup> But what makes the lives of women living along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border doubly miserable is the spatial aspect of their existence, i.e. their bordered lives.

## II. Education

The literacy rates of the districts of West Bengal suggest that some of the lowest, as per the Census of India 2011, have been recorded in the border districts,<sup>7</sup> though the overall literacy rates among Indian women has seen a rise in the last decade.<sup>8</sup> The 2001 Census reveals that the literacy rate among rural women in West Bengal, 53.16%, is much below that of rural men (73.13%), urban women (75.74%) and

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<sup>5</sup> Newspaper reports on border violence as well as reports by human rights organisation as *Odhikar* ([www.odhikar.org](http://www.odhikar.org)) and Human Rights Watch ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)) focus on the abuse of male border civilians by the border guards as acts of human rights violation in general, rather than as cases of gendered abuse.

<sup>6</sup> Chakrapani, C. and Kumar, S.V. (eds.). (1994) *Changing Status and Role of Women in Indian Society*. New Delhi: M.D. Publications; Rath, N. (1996) *Women in Rural Society: A Quest for Development*. New Delhi: M.D. Publications; Verma, S.B. (2005) *Status of Women in Modern India*. New Delhi: Deep & Deep.

<sup>7</sup> Census of India 2011, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

<sup>8</sup> In terms of women's education, West Bengal ranks 19th compared to male education where it ranks 22nd, among all the 35 States and Union Territories in India, though a comparison of the percentage of literacy for males and females in West Bengal points to a higher percentage of literate males (82.67) as compared to females (71.16) on a national basis. While this indicates a slightly better condition of female literacy in West Bengal compared to male literacy, it also points to the general lack of literacy among women in India at large. Census of India, 2011, Government of India ([http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data\\_files/india/Final\\_PPT\\_2011\\_chapter6.pdf](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/india/Final_PPT_2011_chapter6.pdf)). p.111.

urban men (86.13%).<sup>9</sup> The border areas of West Bengal constitute a substantial part of these rural areas, apart from the non-border rural ones, and, thus, contribute towards the general backwardness in literacy rates, especially that of women.<sup>10</sup>

Various border regulations laid down by the government of India, including restrictions on movement near the fence, use of the border road by the civilians especially in times of emergency, use of the fence gates, and restrictions on the gathering of more than five persons at a time near the fence after 5PM, coupled with a sense of insecurity brought about by the sensitized ambience of the border, has had a direct effect on the literacy rate of people living along the border. Women are doubly affected—for being border inhabitants and for being women.<sup>11</sup>

Anxiety over the safety of girls associated with travelling along the border areas on their way to educational institutions is an obstacle to education. The lack of higher educational institutions near the border implies that those wanting to pursue higher education have to travel to the nearest towns or cities (the average distance being anything between 12/13 kilometres<sup>12</sup> to 24/25 kilometres<sup>13</sup>) for this purpose. The decreasing rate of education in the higher schools and colleges in the border areas, compared to that of primary education<sup>14</sup> explains how travelling distances in the border areas poses a threat to the people. For women of the border areas, the anxiety is doubled, given the chances of physical/sexual abuse by other male civilians and/or

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<sup>9</sup> Census of India, 2001. [Online] Available from: <http://www.wbhealth.gov.in/old/statistics/LiteracyRate.htm>. [Accessed: 20 July 2013].

<sup>10</sup> The literacy rate of West Bengal is 77.8% as per Census of India 2011 of which the literacy rates for the border districts (in descending order) of West Bengal are the following: North 24 Parganas- 84.95, Darjeeling-79.92, S. 24 Parganas-78.57, Nadia-75.58, Cooch Behar-75.49, South Dinajpur-73.86, Jalpaiguri-73.79, Murshidabad-67.53, Malda-62.71 and North Dinajpur-60.13. Census of India 2011. Available from: [http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/prov\\_data\\_products\\_wb.html](http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/prov_data_products_wb.html).

<sup>11</sup> Banerjee and Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2011, p.35.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Md. Tafikul Islam, resident of Panitor border, Basirhat (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 17 January 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Riazul Mondol, resident of Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>14</sup> In Jamalpur, on the Hili border, the rate of education in primary schools is 60% while that in higher schools is 20%. Interview with Ranjit, resident of Jamalpur, Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

border guards.<sup>15</sup> This explains why most of the girls in these areas are married off right after school and instances of girls pursuing higher education are negligible.<sup>16</sup>

The condition of male education in the border areas seems comparatively better, given the higher number of male border residents travelling to higher education institutions at distant places.<sup>17</sup> But the persistent fear of persecution looms large among the male border civilians in response to my questions regarding travelling to distant places for education. Moreover, the lack of employment opportunities, on the one hand, and the lure of fast income through cross-border illegal practices, on the other, acts as disincentives to education for many of the boys in the border areas.<sup>18</sup>

The recurrent concern among both the male and female respondents regarding restrictions on movement in the border areas clearly indicates the mostly negative role that the border plays in issues of education among them.

### III. Marriage

The usual age of marriage for girls in the border villages is between 13/14<sup>19</sup> (which is below the legal age<sup>20</sup>) and 18/19.<sup>21</sup> Anxiety over abuse by border guards is one of the main reasons why girls are married off at this young age.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> My experience of field studies along the border districts of West Bengal and Bangladesh has also been indicative of the general sense of insecurity among the border people and specific sense of insecurity among women. The fact that a woman travelling around interviewing people in the border areas, unaccompanied by male family members, has warranted often unwanted curiosity and warnings from both the civilians and the border guards. The risk of 'travelling around in the border areas and that, too, as a woman' has been conveyed to me numerous times in the course of my field studies.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident of Dhumron village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Animesh, resident of Bindol village (North Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 26 January 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident of Dhumron village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Minu Bagdi, resident of Mathurapur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012)

<sup>20</sup> The legal age for marriage in India is 18 for females and 21 for males. In 2012, the High Court declared that Muslim women could marry at 15. Additionally, the report declared that, 'In spite of these legal provisions, child marriage is still widely practiced and a marriage

Moreover, girls are not allowed to travel to far-off places by themselves to earn a living, except when they are victims of trafficking. Parents prefer them marrying off to places, preferably away from the border areas, rather than keeping a non-earning family member at home. The demand for dowry<sup>23</sup> by the groom's family from the bride's parents increases automatically if the groom is a resident of a non-border city. Thus, it is often not possible for parents/guardians of girls living in the border areas to marry them away from the border into cities or towns because of the amount of dowry demanded. Those who can afford it try their best to send their daughters off to cities even if that means an expenditure of almost their entire life's savings.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, a common response of the male civilians living along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border with regard to marriage is that it is difficult to get women from non-border areas to marry into a family living in a border village.<sup>25</sup> This has been a pressing issue for male civilians on this border since they are unable to marry girls from non-border areas, even if they themselves earn well and the other customary requirements for arranged marriages are met.<sup>26</sup> Prospective brides realise the difficult life that they will be thrust into after marriage, so they reject the proposal.<sup>27</sup> Incidents

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solemnized in contravention of these provisions is not void even under the new PCMA, 1929, the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 and also under the Muslim Law'. Source: <http://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in/reports/report205.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Riazul Mondol, resident of Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident of Dhumron village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Payment of dowry is now prohibited under the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act in Indian civil law and, subsequently, by Sections 304B and 498a of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Despite anti-dowry laws in India, it is still a common illegal practice.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Sabitri Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011)

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Gokul, resident of Kalmati village (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Though girls who are comfortable with their husband's involvement in illegal livelihood practices do marry into the border areas, the general scenario is bleak.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Gokul, resident of Kalmati village (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

of harassment of guests attending marriages in border areas are common, according to the interviewees.<sup>28</sup>

The West Bengal-Bangladesh border used to be a porous one where civilians on either side could move uninhibitedly before the border fences were constructed (from 1986 onwards).<sup>29</sup> In fact, marriages across the borders, though illegal because of citizenship differences and visa requirements, were common occurrences before the fencing.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes even the border guards would know of these events but would hardly ever interfere, as long as they did not pose security risks. These marriages would have been merely inter-village events before the border was created in 1947.

Such age-old practices die hard, even if international borders emerge abruptly for political reasons. Generations take time to realise the unfeasibility of the age-old practice of inter-village marriage in the context of the sensitivity of border zone. Likewise, the reality of the border between West Bengal and Bangladesh, made visible by the fences, gradually seeped into the lives of the border residents. Eventually, inter-village marriages reduced in number, given the risk associated with cross-border movements across the fences, till they *almost* ceased to exist.<sup>31</sup>

Experiences of organising the marriage ceremonies of the civilians of the Indian *ghoj* shed light on the complications which the fencing has created. The residents of Daulatpur *ghoj*<sup>32</sup> narrate their experiences of organising marriage ceremonies. Most of the girls from this Indian pocket are married to Bangladeshi villages around it. The

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<sup>28</sup> A bus carrying a bride's family and relatives was stopped at a BSF check-post on its way to a border village in Nadia (West Bengal), where it had to remain for the night, and was allowed entry into the village and, subsequently, to the groom's house only the next morning. Interview with Prasanta Mondol, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Sabitri Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011); fencing details—discussed in the Introduction; for further details of sanctioned and completed border fences, see [http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/BM\\_MAN-IN-BANG\(E\).pdf](http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/BM_MAN-IN-BANG(E).pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Bikram, resident of Lakshmidari village, Bhomra (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012).

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Bikram, resident of Lakshmidari village, Bhomra (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012); italics—my own, to highlight the fact that cross-border marriages have not *completely* ceased to exist. They still occur, though illegally.

<sup>32</sup> Belonging to North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal but surrounded on three sides by the Jessore district of Bangladesh.

official complications associated with marrying these Indian girls into Indian villages across the fence result in them preferring to marry into the Bangladeshi villages around them for easy access as well as because of already-existing acquaintances.<sup>33</sup> If a marriage has to be organised across the fence, the BSF officials must be informed beforehand. They then inform their seniors. The senior officials verify the information provided about the groom's or bride's family. Only if they are satisfied do they allow the groom's relatives to come into the pocket.<sup>34</sup> This explains the practice of marrying Indian girls from these pockets into Bangladeshi villages, although the hassle over citizenship status does not end there. These Indian girls, thus married into Bangladeshi villages, have to face the hassles of obtaining Bangladeshi citizenship. The means of obtaining the citizenship is, often, illegal since it involves cross-border marriages and, hence, involves complicated official procedures for obtaining legal citizenship.<sup>35</sup>

The very definition of a cross-border marriage has changed after the construction of the fence. Bijon, a journalist in Jessore (Bangladesh), clearly states that cross-border marriages nowadays only indicate a cross-border smuggling network. Those in search of a foothold on the other side of the border for the purpose of expanding their

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<sup>33</sup> With no border guards' outposts between this Indian *ghoj* and the surrounding Bangladeshi territory, movement between the *ghoj* and Bangladesh is easier than accessing the Indian mainland due to the BSF outpost at its entrance.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Asha, resident of Daulatpur village belonging to North 24 Parganas of West Bengal and located in Chougachha, Jessore district of Bangladesh (16 February 2012). I accessed the *ghoj* from the Bangladesh side of the border, having travelled through the Jessore district to reach this Indian pocket. This means I crossed the border without much fuss from Bangladesh to an Indian village inside the *ghoj*. I was driven from the Jessore town through the surrounding areas of the *ghoj* and we parked our car outside the *ghoj*. I walked inside the *ghoj*, interviewed its residents and was also shown the geographical specificities of the *ghoj* by them. The Indian territory (of which the *ghoj* was a part) could be seen across the farmland, at the entry to which was a BSF outpost. Starting from the outpost, a narrow stretch of land extended towards the *ghoj* till it widened to become the *ghoj* surrounded by Bangladeshi territory (creating a chicken's neck formation). But there was no BSF or BGB outpost on the other side of the *ghoj* where it was surrounded by Bangladeshi territory, which made it possible for me to enter it from the Bangladesh side without any obstacle. The *ghoj* extended into the Bangladeshi territory in such a way that a single courtyard was divided into the Bangladeshi territory, on one side, and the Indian territory, on the other. The two sets of huts facing each other belonged to two different states.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Asha, resident of Daulatpur village belonging to North 24 Parganas of West Bengal (Chougachha, Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012).



smuggling network marry across it. In fact, a groom's prospects are measured in such terms, where living near the border indicates that he is earning well through cross-border smuggling networks.<sup>36</sup>

There are huge mansions near the border areas mostly belonging to those involved in smuggling networks.<sup>37</sup> The fact that a man lives near the border and owns some property indicates that he is economically well-off.<sup>38</sup> It is these men who are prospective grooms for many families. This is especially true of the Land Port of the Petrapole-Benapole border between the Jessore district in Bangladesh and the North 24 Parganas of West Bengal— a border that thrives as much on smuggling networks as it does on legal trading. A feature like 'the boy lives in Benapole' doubles the prospect of the groom instantly, says Bijon with a meaningful smile<sup>39</sup>.

The issue of dowry is closely related to the reality of the border. The Indian custom is that the bride's family gives dowry to the groom's. Yet, as most of the male respondents in the border villages complain, it is often the groom who has to give dowry to the prospective bride's family for them to give their daughters in marriage. This, as the tone of the male respondents suggested, was an embarrassing situation for them. While the responses from the women pertain more to the issue of affordability (brides have to pay huge dowries for convincing non-border dwellers to marry them), the issue of dowry is more a matter of embarrassment and insult rather than affordability, when it comes to the male respondents.<sup>40</sup> The fact that the groom 'fails to' find himself a bride 'even after earning a handsome living' is a matter of serious concern for the men.<sup>41</sup> 'The very word "border" evokes a Bangladesh-like feeling and indicates a distanced existence from the Indian mainland,' is how Bilal, a

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Bijon, resident and journalist with a Bengali daily in the Jessore town (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Ujjal Ghosh, resident of Bongaon (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 20 September 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Bijon, journalist with a Bengali daily in Jessore town, (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Hare Krishna Mondol, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Hossain, A. (19 May 2010) Brides wanted: across the fence. *The Telegraph*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.telegraphindia.com/archives/archive.html>. [Last accessed: 11 September 2013].

prospective groom, phrases it.<sup>42</sup> Some of the male respondents choose to stay with their in-laws (a custom observed by the brides after their marriage in most parts of India) in non-border areas even at the risk of it being labelled ‘unmanly’ behaviour, since their wives cannot be made to stay in the border villages.<sup>43</sup> Finding better livelihood opportunities is also cited as a reason for this step.<sup>44</sup>



*Plate 30.* Women from India and Bangladesh at a border river. India’s border fence is to the left. The bank on the right is Bangladeshi territory, 2012.

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Bilal, resident of Basirhat (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 17 January 2012).

<sup>43</sup> In the Indian culture and marriage custom, it is considered ‘unmanly’ and shameful for men to stay with their in-laws after marriage, other than visits of a few days.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Md. Kamal Hussein, resident of a Bangladeshi Enclave in India (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 17 March 2012); the lack employment opportunities in the border areas have been discussed in Chapter 1.

#### IV. Migration and Trafficking

Almost all the leading newspapers and reports prepared by human rights organisations in West Bengal and Bangladesh report incidents of illegal border-crossings along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>45</sup> The focus of attention in newspaper reports mostly pertains to issues of economy and security for the states concerned. Issues of physical abuse also find mention, especially in the reports of human rights organisations. Yet the reports hardly highlight the gendered nature of such abuse—both for the male and female border crossers.

The partition of Bengal in 1947 was marked by a refugee exodus across the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. Thousands of refugees, both men and women, migrated from one side to the other of the newly-formed West Bengal-East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) border. The gender-specific harassment of refugees by border guards has, since, been integral to the evolution of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>46</sup> What started with the partition and the consequent creation of this border continues unabated and, in fact, in new forms, all along its length even after six decades of the partition.

The reasons for migration have changed over the years. While political turmoil was the main one between 1947 and 1971, the current streams of migrations are mostly a result of the lack of livelihood opportunities in the border crosser's own state and the prospects of better living on the other side of the border.<sup>47</sup> Sadly though, the treatment meted out to illegal women migrants remains the same.<sup>48</sup> For male border

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<sup>45</sup> Between October 2009 and December 2012, at least 85 cases of illegal border crossing (including infiltration, illegal migration, smuggling and trafficking) have been reported in just one Bengali daily, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, printed from Kolkata, West Bengal. These reports are also reported in other national and regional newspapers of India and West Bengal, respectively. Reports of *Odhikar*, a human rights organisation in Bangladesh, also throw extensive light on border crossings along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border ([www.odhikar.org](http://www.odhikar.org)); some forms and aspects of border-crossings have been discussed in the previous chapters.

<sup>46</sup> Menon, R. and Bhasin, K. (1998) *Borders and Boundaries. Women in India's Partition*. New Delhi: Kali for Women; Butalia, U. (1998) *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. New Delhi, London: Penguin; Fraser, B. (2006) *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*. (trs. Sheila Sen Gupta). London: Anthem.

<sup>47</sup> Samaddar, 1999, p.61.

<sup>48</sup> Banerjee, and Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2011, p. 31.

crossers, firing and/or imprisonment is the usual way of control.<sup>49</sup> For women border crossers, physical abuse and harassment is the usual path followed by the border guards.<sup>50</sup>

The physical abuse of male border crossers has lately been seen to attain a gendered nature as well. A number of incidents of forced nudity followed by abusive attacks on their sexual organs by the border guards have been reported in recent years<sup>51</sup>— a trend rarely seen till about 5 years ago, when the physical abuse of male border crossers of such a gendered nature was rare to come across.

The area which now forms the borderland on either side of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border reportedly had no incidents of human trafficking before the partition of India. Since the partition and the creation of the border, the trafficking of women has increased a hundredfold in the last six decades.<sup>52</sup> This clearly establishes the link between the creation of the border and the emergence of the trafficking of women in this area.

Over the years, trafficking has become rampant all along the border region.<sup>53</sup> It has evolved into one of those economies which thrive on the existence of borders and which have largely contributed to India's entry into the watch-list of countries around the world involved in human trafficking.<sup>54</sup> In most cases of trafficking, women are duped or coerced into this trade. Male domination coupled with endemic poverty and land alienation results in the large-scale destabilisation and displacement

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<sup>49</sup> Reports by *Odhikar* and Human Rights Watch, as well as newspaper reports from both West Bengal and Bangladesh throw light on incidents of firing by border guards on border crossers, the majority of whom are male crossers.

<sup>50</sup> Banerjee, and Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2011. p.35.

<sup>51</sup> Staff Reporter (19 January 2012) Pacharkari ke nogno korey prohar, oshontushto mukhyamantri. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1120119/19mur1.html>. [Last accessed: 11 September 2013]; Chowdhury, P. (20 January 2012) Marer chhobi procharey Pak haat-e dekchhe Naya Dilli. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1120120/20mur1.html>. [Last accessed: 22 July 2013].

<sup>52</sup> Hameed, S., Hlatshwayo, S., Tanner, E., Türker, M. and Yang, J. (2010) *Human Trafficking in India: Dynamics, Current Efforts, and Intervention Opportunities for The Asia Foundation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>53</sup> Banerjee and Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2011, p. 31.

<sup>54</sup> Banerjee and Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2011, p. 31.

of women in this region. A direct result is an increase in the trafficking of women across the borders.<sup>55</sup>

Trafficking on this border is almost a one-way flow, i.e. from Bangladesh to India.<sup>56</sup> This largely has to do with India's stronger economy compared to Bangladesh. Women from the Indian side of the border are mostly trafficked internally, i.e. to other provinces of India. While the international flow of trafficking from India is mostly to the Middle East,<sup>57</sup> and rarely to Bangladesh, women from the border areas (and also from some of the more interior parts) of Bangladesh are almost always trafficked to India, both as an entry point to other international destinations of the trade as well as for trafficking within India.<sup>58</sup>

Trafficking being a less risky and more profitable business than drug smuggling has increased alarmingly every year, giving birth to an organised network of traffickers, both at the national and international levels. The network is spreading at great speed, and the border areas between West Bengal and Bangladesh are the most important platforms for this network.<sup>59</sup> The involvement of some of the public representatives and border guards has provided a safe haven for traffickers along this border.<sup>60</sup>

The pimps or *dalals* (in local parlance) allure the women into prospects of better living, luxurious lives and often good marriages, following which they are 'trafficked

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<sup>55</sup> Banerjee and Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2011, p.31.

<sup>56</sup> This trend also helps us to understand the nature and flow of certain commodities (women are commoditized in the process of trafficking) across the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Anti-Trafficking Programs and Promoting Human Rights: A Grassroots Initiative* (2002). Sponsored by Royal Danish Embassy. Jessore: Rights Jessore.

<sup>58</sup> According to reports gathered by one of the biggest human rights organisation in Bangladesh, Rights Jessore, about 7,00,000 to 20,00,000 women and children are being trafficked (mainly to India and also to Pakistan and Middle East) every year—a trade involving 10 to 12 billion Bangladesh Taka (BDT). *Anti-Trafficking Programs*, 2000, p. 18.

<sup>59</sup> Rai, U. (May 2011) Trafficking is big business along the Indo-Bangladesh border.

*Infochange*. [Online] Available from:

<http://infochangeindia.org/livelihoods/features/trafficking-is-big-business-along-the-indo-bangladesh-border.html>. [Last accessed: 22 July 2013].

<sup>60</sup> *Anti-Trafficking Programs*, 2002, p.19.

at a convenient period with the help and assistance of a section of dishonest members of law-enforcing agencies and border guards.’<sup>61</sup>

Ironically, it is often a woman who plays the part of actually pinpointing the target in the village and initiating the process of trafficking, which includes making acquaintance with the target, obtaining her confidence, putting forward future prospects of better living/better marriage, and leading her on to the next level of the trafficking network. In most case studies, the person to have led the victim into the trafficking network has been a woman or a few women, posing as a friend/group of friends. For example, Anima, aged 17 years, was led into a network functioning around the Hili border (between South Dinajpur in West Bengal and Dinajpur in Bangladesh) in December 2011 by a woman who called herself Rina (aged around mid-40s, as guessed by Anima). Rina came to the Mathurapur village in Hili (she was not a local resident of Hili) and after having decided on her target, established friendly relations with Anima. One day, when Anima’s parents (who work as agricultural labourers) were away at work, Rina led Anima to the local railway station from where they travelled to Delhi in India. While in Delhi, Anima was kept in a house with several other girls, mostly older than her, and made to perform domestic work. They were often beaten up for their mistakes. After some days, each of them, including Anima, were sent off to other houses to be employed as domestic helps. Fortunately, Anima did not have to undergo sexual abuse in this case. On the basis of the complaint that her parents had lodged with the police, Anima was rescued and brought back to her home by organisations working against trafficking in Hili.<sup>62</sup>

Nilufer Rahman, a lawyer with the Dinajpur District Court in Bangladesh, narrated the case of a woman who was taken to the Khanpur border area in Dinajpur (Bangladesh), by a man and was made to establish acquaintance with another man on the Indian side of the border with the help of a mobile phone. She was kept in one of the houses in that area, near the border, while the pimp was arranging for her to cross over to the other side at an opportune moment. However, the lady of the house where

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Minu Bagdi, resident of Mathurapur village, Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

she had been kept suspected the plan and informed the police, who then arrested the girl as well as the Bangladeshi pimp. The Indian counterpart could not, however, be apprehended.<sup>63</sup>

Yet another woman, aged 35, was trafficked from a village in Dinajpur (Bangladesh) all the way to Rajasthan (western India). The pimp who took her to the Bangladesh border was a woman, who claimed to have come from Rajasthan to sell clothing accessories. Her Indian counterpart received her at the border and led her to Rajasthan. Even after her rescue and return to her village in Bangladesh, the woman found it difficult to undo her training in the Rajasthani language and customs, which she had acquired during her stay in Rajasthan. She took some time to revive her language (Bengali) and lifestyle after her return.<sup>64</sup>

In a number of cases, the pimps are locally-known faces and well acquainted with the border guards. This is why many of the cross-border trafficking incidents happen in the presence of and, in fact, the co-operation of the border guards. The duty timings of the border guards are also often utilised by the pimps to cross the border. The names and details of the border crossers are noted by a border guard (in cases where the border crossers ‘promise’ to return after a visit to their relatives on the other side). If the duty of the concerned border guard changes, in the meantime, it often becomes difficult for the subsequent guards to verify the details of the crossers who finally come back.<sup>65</sup>

The festival of *Durga Puja* is a time when certain points along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border are opened for the public, mostly Bengali Hindus, from Bangladesh to cross over to the Indian side to attend the festival and then go back. The Hili border at Dinajpur (Bangladesh) is one such site. The details of people crossing over for the festivities are often not properly recorded, given the immense rush that these occasions create. Such occasions, as Ms. Nilufer Rahman points out, are opportune moments for traffickers.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Interview with Nilufer Rahman (original name), lawyer in Dinajpur District Court (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 7 October 2011).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Disabled children are mostly trafficked for organ transplantation or for begging, or even for the sex trade. A huge number of the trafficked Bangladeshi children are serving terms in Indian custody. These children are mostly deceived into this network by a person promising to take them for a day out. They are mostly kidnapped from their schools, especially in border areas like Hili and Jaypurhat, which act as easy transit points for traffickers.<sup>67</sup> Ms. Rahman narrated a case where a group of children had been taken to Rangpur, a Bangladeshi district bordering West Bengal, to be trafficked. The children somehow became suspicious of the pimp's motive and started crying. The pimp, for fear of being suspected by the other passengers on the bus disappeared, leaving the children behind. The driver of the bus took the children to Raniganj from where they were rescued. Some sections of borders are ill-reputed for child trafficking, like the Hili border, which supplies children to the various shipping docks and other places to be used as child labourers and sex workers.<sup>68</sup> In some cases, they are used as sex workers by the border guards themselves, and the children are often physically abused for disobeying the commands of the latter.<sup>69</sup>

Reasons ranging from poverty to preference for a son (thus selling the daughter to a trafficker for a few thousand rupees), displacement due to natural calamities, consumerism (desire for luxury items), unemployment, availability of cheap and bonded labour, false adoption, fraud, coercion, kidnapping and deceitful marriages are some of the more common ones for trafficking.<sup>70</sup> Both men and women are trafficked to be used as camel jockeys (mainly boys), for pornography, organ transplant, sex tourism, begging and drug trafficking, and as domestic child servants and for work in sex parlours and liquor bars,<sup>71</sup> apart from the most usual reason of forced prostitution. In the case of women, physical vulnerability in the form of sexual abuse often becomes the prime concern, whereas being involved with a drug network

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Advocate Dilwar Hussein (original name), Public Prosecutor in Dinajpur High Court (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 7 October 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Binoy Krishna Mullick (original name), General Secretary of Rights Jessore (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 8 February 2012).

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Nilufer Rahman (original name), lawyer in Dinajpur District Court (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 7 October 2011).

<sup>70</sup> *Anti-Trafficking Programs*, 2002, p.22.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*



or being duped into organ transplant is usually a bigger threat for men being trafficked. Deceitful marriages,<sup>72</sup> domestic violence and dire poverty make women more vulnerable to trafficking.<sup>73</sup>

Some of the points along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border have developed as safe and convenient transit points for trafficking, namely the border between South 24 Parganas (West Bengal) and Jessore (Bangladesh), South Dinajpur (West Bengal) and Dinajpur (Bangladesh), and Jalpaiguri (West Bengal) and Panchagarh (Bangladesh).<sup>74</sup> The unauthorised routes in these border areas used as transits for trafficking are locally known as *ghats* (meaning ports). The existence of busy markets and towns is the reason why some places, like the ones mentioned above, become important trafficking sites. The pimps hand over the victim to the next level in the network (i.e. the pimp's counterpart on the other side of the border) as soon as they get hold of the target. One pimp does not hold on to the victim for too long for fear of being traced. Busy towns or markets near the border ensure that the victims easily gets mixed up in the crowd and the pimp can swiftly hand over the trafficked person to his/her client.

The direct relation between trafficking and prostitution is not difficult to establish, given the flourishing of brothels along this West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>75</sup> In a red-light area in Changrabandha, one of the important border points along this border, more than sixty per cent of the women said that they had come from Bangladesh.<sup>76</sup> About twenty per cent of the inmates in Indian brothels at any given point of time come from Bangladesh and Nepal.<sup>77</sup> The actual number is much higher, since not all trafficking cases are reported. The *Bangladesh Manabadhikar Samannya Parishad*, a human rights organisation in Bangladesh, reported, in 2000, that there were 30,000 Bangladeshi women who made up a chunk of the total number of sex workers in

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Advocate Dilwar Hussein (original name), Public Prosecutor in Dinajpur High Court (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 7 October 2011).

<sup>74</sup> *Annual Report 2009*. Jessore: Rights Jessore.

<sup>75</sup> Banerjee and Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2011, p.33.

<sup>76</sup> Banerjee, P, Basu Ray Chaudhury, A. and Bhaduri, A. (2010) Bengal-Bangladesh Border and Women. *Policies and Practices*, No.36. Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group. p.20.

<sup>77</sup> *Anti-Trafficking Programs*, 2002, p.18.

Kolkata, and that 10,000 child sex workers of Bangladeshi origin were found in various brothels in Mumbai and Goa in India.<sup>78</sup> One of the reports by *Sanlaap*<sup>79</sup>—a developmental organisation in West Bengal working in the field of violence against women and children, revealed two very important things. One was that women prostitutes migrate from one red light area to another; and two, that ninety per cent of the red light areas that these women identified as having worked in are located along the Bangladesh border. In Dinbazaar, yet another red light area in West Bengal bordering Bangladesh, many sex workers had mothers coming from Bangladesh.<sup>80</sup> This also suggests the viciousness of the circle of prostitution. These women mostly ended up in these red light areas after being duped or coerced by pimps who survive on cross-border trafficking. Illiteracy increased their vulnerability, while for some, their mothers' entry into these areas automatically pushed them into it, due to the social stigmatisation and discrimination that accompanies prostitution.

The rise in prostitution along the border is also indicative of the general scenario of deprivation in the border regions, in terms of the lack of opportunities for education and livelihood, and this affects women the most. While the male population in this region moves to cities and towns or even abroad in search of a livelihood, the women fall prey to or are forced into prostitution. The added disadvantage for these women prostitutes in the border region is that they are caught between the police, on the one hand, and criminals, on the other. Being located near the border, they are often forced to give shelter to criminals and smugglers who cross the borders illegally and take refuge in the brothels. The police not just harass these women in the process of looking for these criminals, but also demand unpaid sex from them.<sup>81</sup> The involvement of the border guards and the police in this trafficking is widely-known in this region, though not much reporting in the newspaper is noticed in this regard.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> *Project: Linkage, A Situational Analysis on Trafficking and Prostitution in Dinbazaar (Jalpaiguri) and Changrabandha (Cooch Behar)*. A Sanlaap Initiative Report, supported by Gana Unnayan Parshad and Human Development Centre. p.18. Quoted in Banerjee, Basu Ray Chaudhury and Bhaduri, 2010, p.20.

<sup>80</sup> *Anti-Trafficking Programs*, 2002, p.20.

<sup>81</sup> Banerjee, Basu Ray Chaudhury and Bhaduri, 2010, p.52.

<sup>82</sup> Tanya, a girl charged and convicted under the Foreigner's Registration Act 1946, and serving a jail term at a correctional Home for Women in Kolkata, indicated the involvement of border guards-both BSF and BGB-in the process of trafficking. She narrated how the

A large number of sex workers, domestic helps and labourers from Bangladesh are found working in India and elsewhere, illegally, in spite of the existence of regular outposts of border guards.

The 'foreign' tag for the women who end up in prostitution after having crossed the border illegally makes them doubly vulnerable since they are left out of whatever little help or rescue and rehabilitation work that is done by the NGOs or from state initiatives and programmes because of being foreign nationals. All these women are made to cross the borders without proper papers or proofs of citizenship. They end up being stateless, without recourse to any legal resort.<sup>83</sup>

A large number of cases go unrecorded simply because the victim families do not encourage filing a case with the police or it does not fall under the legal definition of trafficking. As long as any sort of physical abuse has not been proven, cases of trafficking are difficult to prove even if the reason for them has clearly been the sex trade. This means that hundreds of women and children are trafficked every year without officially being recognised as such.<sup>84</sup>

Even after being rescued, acceptance into the family and society becomes difficult for the victims.<sup>85</sup> Trafficked victims are re-victimised upon their return by way of social stigma and are often forced to end their lives.<sup>86</sup> Rupali Mahato<sup>87</sup> talked about a festival that is celebrated by women mostly belonging to the Kudumi tribe, who

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*dalal* (pimp), who frequently took her and her family from Bangladesh to Mumbai (India) to work as domestic helps, used to negotiate with the border guards while crossing the border, to ensure that none of the guards stopped them from doing the same. Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> The Ministry of Home Affairs in India has provisions for keeping cases of trafficking of foreign nationals out of the provision of the Foreigner's Act, though the process of having to prove that the movement from Bangladesh to India was involuntary happens to be difficult for trafficked persons. Moreover, the process involves documentary, forensic and material evidence on the part of the trafficked victim to prove her/himself as a victim. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. <http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/AmdmntAdvForeign-030512.pdf>.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Binoy Krishna Mallick (original name), General Secretary of Rights Jessore (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 8 February 2012).

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Nilufer Rahman (original name), lawyer in Dinajpur District Court (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 7 October 2011).

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Subir Biswas, volunteer in a NGO in Tiyor (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Rupali Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

gather every evening over a month at a particular place in the village and sing praises for a girl named Tusu.<sup>88</sup> The mythological story that she narrated was related to the kidnapping of a girl and her return to her society.<sup>89</sup> The story was narrated to point to the fact that social stigmatisation has accompanied elopement and abduction from time immemorial and continues to do so in cases of trafficking.

Ms Rahman, who is also associated with the government-run trafficking cell in Dinajpur (Bangladesh), explained how the prospect of earning quick money and obtaining luxury items in the form of gifts from customers also act as factors, besides the fear of stigmatisation, for victims not wanting to be rescued.<sup>90</sup> Remittances to families happen to be bigger prospects for these victims than being able to return to family life.<sup>91</sup>

Diseases like HIV/AIDS form an integral part of the vicious circle of underdevelopment, poverty, trafficking and prostitution in the border areas. Such diseases follow the same path as the trafficked women and men. Illegal migrant men and women carry the diseases with them across the border and spread them in the places where they settle (the brothels being the organised shelters of such diseases) from where other men and women carry them to other places. Ironically, the border guards form a significant proportion of those infected with HIV/AIDS—an indication of not just their visits to the local border brothels,<sup>92</sup> but also of their awareness of and involvement in the whole process of trafficking.

Some organisations, both government as well as non-government, run shelter homes for trafficked women and children,<sup>93</sup> though most of these NGOs operate from

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<sup>88</sup> Discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Rupali Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Nilufer Rahman (original name), lawyer in Dinajpur District Court (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 7 October 2011).

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Binoy Krishna Mullick (original name), General Secretary of Rights Jessore (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 8 February 2012).

<sup>92</sup> Banerjee, Basu Ray Chaudhury and Bhaduri, 2010, p.50.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Nilufer Rahman (original name), lawyer in Dinajpur District Court (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 7 October 2011).

Dhaka (the capital of Bangladesh) instead of the border areas.<sup>94</sup> The rescued women and children who are not accepted back into family life are supported by these organisations until they find themselves a suitable and legal job or till they decide to marry.<sup>95</sup>

Advocate Dilwar Hussein, Public Prosecutor in the Dinajpur High Court, gives more importance to the lack of manpower in the border camps as reason for such widespread trafficking incidents<sup>96</sup> rather than the nexus between the traffickers and the border guards. The number of police officers serving a judicial area, he says, is also far less than the situation demands.<sup>97</sup> On an average, about 20 cases of trafficking are reported every month.<sup>98</sup> Infrastructural gaps coupled with the BGB's involvement in the trafficking practice act as obstacles for the NGOs, as well as for some of the government-run organisations that are struggling to stop cross-border trafficking practices. He emphasises more on the involvement of the BSF in the trafficking network, rather than the BGB. The BSF, he reminds me, has a better communication system and surveillance mechanism than the BGB.<sup>99</sup> Thus, the involvement of the BSF in trafficking practices is amply clear, given that cross-border movement across the fence and along the border road should ideally be easier for it to track.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with Advocate Dilwar Hussein (original name), Public Prosecutor in Dinajpur High Court (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 7 October 2011).

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Nilufer Rahman (original name), lawyer in Dinajpur District Court (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 7 October 2011).

<sup>96</sup> BGB camps are located every 5-6 kilometres, while there are 5-6 patrols in duty at the border at any given time. This is a negligible number given the vast stretch of border that Bangladesh shares with India. Discussed in the section 'Border guards' in the Introduction.

<sup>97</sup> The police stations have anything between 20 to 30 police officers, including constables and officers-in-charge, for about 20,00,000 people, which is the approximate number of people that each police station serves. Interview with Advocate Dilwar Hussein (original name), Public Prosecutor in Dinajpur High Court (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 7 October 2011).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> The BSF has built a ring road along its borders with Bangladesh and uses advanced technologies for surveillance. There are BSF camps every 2 kilometres along the border road and at least 10-12 constables on duty at any given time.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Advocate Dilwar Hussein (original name), Public Prosecutor in Dinajpur High Court (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 7 October 2011).

Though trafficking is rampant in every part of India and Bangladesh, as reports suggests, the West Bengal-Bangladesh border still remains significant to the understanding of gendered border practices in this context. The fact that most of the trafficked victims found in India originate in Bangladesh and that issues of state sovereignty (in terms of the failure to prevent such trades) and citizenship are involved in cross-border trafficking makes the West Bengal-Bangladesh border specifically significant.

## V. Lands outside the border fence

The border fencing<sup>101</sup> affects women and men border residents in different ways. The attitude of the BSF differs when it comes to issues of crossing the fence for agricultural purposes by men and women.

The issue of fenced-out lands pertains to those border people who have their farmlands outside the fence. Though working in the fenced-out farmlands implies that the farmers are still within the territorial boundaries of India, the presence of the fence 150 yards before the 'zero point' makes these farmers' lives and livelihoods vulnerable to border regulations and the whims of the BSF.

Presenting identity cards (voter cards, in most cases) at the gates which open to the fenced-out farmlands is a regular chore for the farmers.<sup>102</sup> The condition is even more miserable for those whose homes have been fenced out. Presenting voter cards at the gates for travelling to educational institutions, hospitals or the families of relatives and friends constitute their daily routine.<sup>103</sup> For the farmers, this is a long process where the BSF cross-checks the identity cards with the persons using, them as well as the tools and cattle which the farmers carry for farming.<sup>104</sup> There are

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<sup>101</sup> Discussed in the Introduction.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with a BSF official, BRC-pur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Hare Krishna Mondol, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Md. Rashid Haq, farmer and resident of Ramnagar village (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

scheduled times for the BSF to open the gates.<sup>105</sup> The process often delays the farmers' work and becomes a serious concern in the summer months as they prefer tilling their lands in the early hours of the morning to escape the afternoon heat.<sup>106</sup> But the fencing regulations often force them to begin and continue their work till the late hours of the day. Farmers falling prey to heat strokes and dehydration are not uncommon.<sup>107</sup>

In the case of women, the concerns are different and restrictions more stringent. In most of the border posts, they are rarely allowed to go to the other side of the fence. Though there are no official rules regarding this, it is the BSF officials who devise such unofficial rules. The reason they cite is that of women's safety. They fear that if these women are let outside the fence, then there is a possibility of them being harassed by the Bangladeshis.<sup>108</sup> As Bangladesh does not have fencing along its border with India, there is a gap between India's fence and the Bangladesh territorial jurisdiction, called No-Man's Land in official parlance. And since there are no border guards posted at the 'zero point' for either of the states, it means that the Bangladeshi people can actually move right up to India's fencing. The BSF fears that once outside the fencing, the women (as well as the men) are outside its direct jurisdiction and, hence, prone to harassment by the Bangladeshis.<sup>109</sup> 'Women do not go to the other side of the fence. They do not work there. Hence, they do not need to go. We try to make them feel secure,' states a BSF official at one of the border camps.<sup>110</sup> Most of the civilian men also agree on the point of security hazards when it comes to the question of women moving beyond the fence.<sup>111</sup> Some also raise

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<sup>105</sup> Interview with Jasimuddin Mondol, resident of Mathurapur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Kuddus Rahman, resident of Jaykrishna village, Jalangi (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Animesh, resident of Bindol (North Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 26 January 2012).

<sup>108</sup> Interview with a BSF official in BRC-pur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal 22 October 2011).

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> 'মহিলা-রা যায় না. ওরা তো আর ওদিকে কাজ করে না, তাই যাওয়ার দরকার পড়ে না. আমরা চেষ্টা করি ওদের সিকিওর ফিল করানোর।' Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Dhiman Biswas and Prasanta Mondol, residents of Mathurapur and Char Meghna, respectively (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011 and 21 October 2011).

questions of the vulnerability of women in terms of falling prey to smuggling practices once outside the fence. The lack of women BSF constables makes it easier for women to smuggle items, points out one of the former heads of a village *Panchayat* in a border village.<sup>112</sup> However, for women who work hard to earn a living in these impoverished border areas, this unwritten rule often poses a major problem. They complain of being prohibited by the BSF from taking food across the fence to the male members of their families working in the fenced-out farmlands.<sup>113</sup>

Sabitri Mahato of Char Meghna complains: ‘They would not let me go to the other side because I am a woman, whereas they let the men go.’<sup>114</sup> She owns 2 *bighas*<sup>115</sup> of land outside the fence, which she, along with her husband and two children, depend on for their living. The BSF does not let her go to the field along with her husband, which, she emphasises, is quite a problem for people like them (farmers) because ‘here, women work as much as men do. How else would they earn a living?’<sup>116</sup>

The situation is all the more difficult for those women who either do not have a male member at home or have male members who are incapable of farming (due to physical disabilities or medical conditions). These restrictions on women’s movements across the fence act as reminders of their incapability to fend for themselves in the absence of a male member in the family. The border, especially the fence, thus contributes towards the maintenance of gendered hierarchies.

The BSF also prohibits young male members (below 18 years of age) of families to take food to the fenced-out farmlands because they do not possess voter identity cards.<sup>117</sup> Sabitri, at the time of the interview, was considering leasing out her fenced-

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<sup>112</sup> Interview with Banchharam Mondol, ex-*Pradhan* of Mathurapur village *Panchayat* (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Sabitri Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>114</sup> ‘আমি মেয়ে বলে ওদিকে যেতে দেয় না. ছেলেদের যেতে দেয়।’ Interview with Sabitri Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>115</sup> A *bigha* is standardised at 1,600 square yards or 0.3306 acres, which is often interpreted as being 1/3 acre.

<sup>116</sup> ‘আমাদের এখানে মেয়েরা পুরুষ দের মতই খাটে. না খাটলে খাবে কি?’ Interview with Sabitri Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>117</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Asharidoho BSF camp (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011); younger members of the family or women members taking



out land to a Bangladeshi farmer. In that way, she could at least earn, though illegally, from the produce of her land.<sup>118</sup> In fact, this is something that many of the Indian farmers who happen to have their land outside the fence are considering as an option, despite knowing the illegal nature of such an action.<sup>119</sup> Instead of going through the ordeal of getting past the fence every day, having to show one's card at the outpost and working under such restrictions, many of the farmers feel that leasing out the land might be a better option. They, of course, risk either losing their lands or having it become a political issue between the two states, leading to the possibility of greater securitisation of the borders.

The theft of crops by Bangladeshi miscreants from the fenced-out lands is another important reason why farmers with such lands complain and even consider an illegal leasing out.<sup>120</sup> Imtiaz Mondol complains of the BSF's inactivity in helping the civilians prevent such thefts: 'The BSF claims that since the fields from where the crops are stolen are outside the fence, they are outside the jurisdictional area of the BSF.'<sup>121</sup> Officially, the land till the actual borderline or the 'zero point' is Indian territory. The BSF, as India's border security force, has legal powers of surveillance and necessary action till the 'zero point', including the lands outside the fence. But the fence, as the responses and daily chores of the civilians suggest, has redefined binaries such as inside-outside for both the civilians as well as the border guards.

Complaints about the BSF not wanting to help the farmers or residents outside the fence are common.<sup>122</sup> Dayamay Dutta, while confirming these complaints, is also careful to point out that the BSF might not always be in a position to help, given its

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lunch for the farm workers is a very common and widespread rural practice in agrarian communities in rural South Asia.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with Sabitri Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with Banchharam Mondol, resident of Mathurapur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Imtiaz Mondol, resident of Mathurapur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Hirak Kanti Munshi, resident of Mathurapur (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

rigorous duty timings.<sup>123</sup> Such responses are indicative of a sense of fear among the locals regarding the BSF. Interestingly, the act of fencing itself poses no problem for the civilians. It is just the way the border guards manage the gates which is of concern to them.<sup>124</sup> This re-emphasises the role that the border fence plays in creating border narratives.



*Plate 31.* Civilians from beyond the border fence. Photo courtesy: Shib Shankar Chatterjee.

## VI. Physical and verbal abuse

Incidents of physical abuse, including the killing of civilians by border guards, have become characteristic of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. It is replete with such

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<sup>123</sup> Interview with Dayamay Dutta, resident of Teipur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 24 October 2011).

<sup>124</sup> Interview with Kuddus Rahman, resident of Jalangi (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

occurrences.<sup>125</sup> Reports of firing by border guards, mostly the BSF, do not fail to make their presence felt in the newspapers of both West Bengal and Bangladesh, though the official figures released by the BSF shows a much lower number of these incidents than the actual ones.<sup>126</sup> Suspected smugglers and intruders are brutally beaten up and, in many cases, shot dead. Civilians often fall victims to cross-border firing between the BSF and the BGB.<sup>127</sup>

Complaints about bad behaviour and verbal abuse by the border guards are not uncommon among the border people. ‘Treating like dogs’ is the kind of phrase used by some of the civilians for describing the nature of behaviour meted out to them by the BSF.<sup>128</sup> Border restrictions regarding use of the border road by civilians also invite abuse from the BSF.<sup>129</sup> ‘Unnecessary abuse’ has, over the years become a part of the border peoples’ narratives, who negotiate the fence and the border guards on a regular basis.<sup>130</sup> Complaints to police regarding these abuses rarely bear fruit and are, often, met with threats and further abuses.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> More than 35 cases of violence by the BSF in the form of firing or brutal attacks have been reported in a single Bengali daily, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, between October 2009 and February 2013. Other newspapers carry reports as well but *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, as the leading Bengali daily, has been chosen to highlight the frequency of such incidents. Reports of *Odhikar* and the Human Rights Watch also highlight the situation of violence perpetrated by the border guards along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

<sup>126</sup> BSF recorded 32 casualties in 2010 alone. Tiwary, D. (1 December 2012) Legalize cattle smuggling on Bangladesh border: BSF chief. *The Times of India*. [Online] Available from: [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-12-01/india/35530471\\_1\\_bsf-men-bangladesh-border-indo-bangla-border](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-12-01/india/35530471_1_bsf-men-bangladesh-border-indo-bangla-border). [Last accessed: 23 July 2013]. An idea about the actual numbers might be guessed from the reports of human rights organisations.

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Hare Krishna Mondol, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>128</sup> ‘আগে তো কুত্তা মনে করত সাধারণ লোককে. এখন সেটা একটু কম।’ (Earlier they used to treat us like dogs. Now the tendencies to do so have decreased a bit.) Interview with Ranjit, resident of Jamalpur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Md. Rashid Haq, resident of Ramnagar (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Nikhil Bagdi, resident of Mathurapur (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>131</sup> (7 August 2012). INDIA: Threatened with violence for reporting torture to police. *Asian Human Rights Commission*. Available from: <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAU-026-2012>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

Often the border guards shoot a person and leave his body near the fence<sup>132</sup> or hang him in the camp<sup>133</sup>—an act of cautioning others about the extent of power held by them. Examples of false cases filed against civilians by the border guards are not rare. Rashid Haq narrates how one of the BSF constables, in order to fight allegations of his involvement in smuggling practices, shot a smuggler with whom he otherwise had regular smuggling involvements. This act was justified on grounds of self-defence by him.<sup>134</sup>

One border resident, Saiful, whose legs had already been damaged by a polio attack, was wrongly nabbed by the BSF when they found him roaming near the fence and they beat him up after tying his hands with a handcuff and his legs with a rope.<sup>135</sup>

Yet another person, wrongly arrested by the BSF after being brutally beaten, was about to be shot when one officer showed pity and left him to die near the riverine border. Unable to move, he was stuck in the riverine mud for hours till one of the BSF officers tied a pumped-up air pillow round his neck and threw him into the river. The tide brought him back to the Bangladesh side of the river, where he belonged.<sup>136</sup> Physical and verbal assaults of innocent locals of all social and economic standing—from farmers to teachers, to doctors, anybody for that matter, are integral to living near the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, laments Gourab Sarkar.<sup>137</sup>

One way of torturing cross-border cattle smugglers by the BSF especially the ones who use the river to smuggle cattle<sup>138</sup> is of attacking the smuggler while still in the river with the BSF's own patrol boat. The smugglers are hit by the speedboat till they

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<sup>132</sup> Interview with Subodh Majumdar, resident of Bongaon (North 24 Parganas, 20 September 2011).

<sup>133</sup> Staff Reporter (25 March 2010) BSF camp e Bangladeshi r deho. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1100325/25uttar5.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>134</sup> Interview with Rashid Haq, resident of Ramnagar (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>135</sup> Interview with Bibek, resident of Debhata (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012).

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Gourab Sarkar, resident of Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>138</sup> Discussed in Chapter 1.

are badly injured and are forced to surrender.<sup>139</sup> Incidents such as these are often preceded by a clash over the bribe money that the border guards demand from the smugglers.<sup>140</sup>



*Plate 32.* BSF speedboat. Photo courtesy: Shib Shankar Chatterjee.

While citing such responses are not to be seen as attempts to generalise the essentially violent or dishonest nature of the border guards, it is, nevertheless, worth noticing the recurrence of words such as ‘dishonest’ and ‘brutal’ in the description of the border guards by the civilians who negotiate the former everyday—legally or for illegal purposes.

Such incidents of violence are very common in riverine borders, since violation of the borderline by the civilians, especially fishermen, is easier here. Fishermen often

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<sup>139</sup> Interview with Bibek, resident of Debhata (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012).

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

mistakenly cross the ‘imaginary’ borderline in the river and fall prey to brutalities by the border guards.<sup>141</sup>

Children as young as 10-12 years are also not spared from the violence. Zakir Sharif, aged 11, has been a victim of BSF brutalities. In an incident where the BSF had been chasing a group of smugglers, Zakir happened to come across a BSF border guard involved in the chase, quite by chance. While the smugglers escaped, Zakir bore the brunt of the BSF guard’s wrath. His pleas of innocence were met with abusive language. It was the collective plea of the local people which saved Zakir’s life on that fateful day. An innocent child bore the brunt of the BSF’s frustration for its failure to deal with the real culprits.<sup>142</sup> There are incidents of children spending significant parts of their lives in jails for being wrongly accused by the border guards of taking part in suspicious activities near the border.<sup>143</sup>

By far the most brutal incident has been that of a 15-year old girl, Felani Khatun, of the Kurigram border area, Bangladesh. She and her father, Nurul Islam, used to work as a domestic help and a labourer, respectively, in India. Having her marriage fixed for 8 January 2011, Felani and her father were crossing the border fence from the Indian (West Bengal) side on the morning of 7 January 2011 to return to their home in Kurigram, Bangladesh. While Nurul Islam successfully crossed the border with the help of a ladder that he had arranged for crossing the fence, Felani’s dress (*kameez*) got entangled in the barbed wire of the fence. She screamed out in fear, hearing which the BSF constables on duty came there and fired at Felani from point-blank range. Felani, shot and hanging from the fence, pleaded for water but to no avail since none of the witnesses working near the border area dared to help her out of fear of the BSF. She bled to death and remained hanging in the same way for

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<sup>141</sup> Interview with Asha, resident at Chaugachha (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012).

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Pranabesh, resident of Ramnagar (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>143</sup> Interview with Jahan, resident of Koya village, Jivannagar (Chuadanga district of Bangladesh, 11 February 2012).

nearly 5 hours before her body was finally taken away by BSF constables and handed over to the BGB the next day.<sup>144</sup>

Most of the incidents of violence on women by border guards pertain to cases of border-crossing for smuggling or other purposes.<sup>145</sup> In the context of violence, it is mostly the women involved in petty-smuggling on a day-to-day basis who face the *lathi*<sup>146</sup> and sometimes the gun. One of the BGB officials in a BGB camp at the Hili border confesses to the use of the *lathi* as a way of disciplining the women involved in smuggling.<sup>147</sup> He also adds that most of these women smugglers are also sex workers in these border regions and survive on smuggling and/or prostitution for a living.<sup>148</sup>

Illegal border crossers also include those who cross the border for availing of medical services. A number of Bangladeshi people from the border areas cross the border without valid documents. These poor and resource-less people living along the border are an easy catch for the pimps who earn their living by helping them to cross the borders illegally.<sup>149</sup> Incidents of brutalities by the border guards on their being apprehended are, thus, common occurrences among the illegal border crossers. Incidents of rape and abuse of women crossers (even if accompanied by men) indicate the violent nature of the treatment of illegal practices by the BSF.

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<sup>144</sup> (2011) Teenage girl, Felani, killed by the BSF firing at Anantapur border under Kurigram district. *Fact-finding report*. Dhaka: Odhikar; The trial of the convicted BSF official in the Felani Khatun case had been conducted on 20 August 2013 by the General Security Court of Sonari Camp of the BSF Cooch Behar Sector, as per the promise made by the Indian government to Bangladesh regarding justice for the Felani case. Staff Reporter (21 August 2013) Felani hotyar bichar shuru BSF camp'e. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1130821/21uttar3.html>. [Last accessed: 30 August 2013].

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Nikhil Bagdi, a resident of Mathurapur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>146</sup> A *lathi* is a hard wooden stick used by the border guards to ward off infiltrators, smugglers and any person that they might be suspicious of.

<sup>147</sup> 'গার্ড দেৱ মার খায়ে, বাড়ি খায়ে।' (The guards often use *lathis* to control the women.)

Interview with a BGB official at Hili BGB camp (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Interview with Ratan, resident of Debhata village (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012).

On one occasion, a woman accompanying her husband across the border was raped by the BSF and her husband killed for protesting against the act.<sup>150</sup> On another occasion, a woman suspect was strip-searched by the BSF and raped in the presence of her family. Her complaints went unheard.<sup>151</sup> Punishments, if any, for the border guards for such violent actions amount, at best, to a suspension followed by a transfer to a different posting, although promises of 'strict actions' are made by higher officials.<sup>152</sup> The trial of the concerned BSF officials in the Felani Khatun case serves as an example of the weakness in the legal system for punishing accused border guards. Even though the alleged BSF official, Amiyo Ghosh, was tried in the Felani case under Section 304 of the Indian Penal Code (unintentional killing) and Section 146 of the BSF Act,<sup>153</sup> he was acquitted because of the lack of required witnesses who could have proved the accusation. Though human rights organisations have slammed the verdict as a sham and Felani's father has vowed to take the case to the international court of justice, any better outcome seems unlikely in the current scenario.<sup>154</sup> The verdict also highlights the weakness of state-devised border laws in bringing justice to the border dwellers. These laws often fail to address the gap between statist definitions of justice and the realities of border lives.

Border residents clearly state that both women and men are equally abused by the BSF.<sup>155</sup> Minu Bagdi agrees that the BSF guards abuse border civilians irrespective of their sex,<sup>156</sup> although local representatives of political parties and the heads of the

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.; Staff Reporter (8 March 2003) Migrant rape charge on border troops. *The Telegraph*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.telegraphindia.com/archives/archive.html>. [Last accessed: 11 September 2013].

<sup>152</sup> PTI. (19 January 2012) B'desh demands immediate action against BSF personnel. *IBN Live*. [Online] Available from: <http://ibnlive.in.com/generalnewsfeed/news/bdesh-demands-immediate-action-against-bsf-personnel/952929.html>. [Last accessed: 23 July 2013].

<sup>153</sup> BSF Act and Rules (March 2004) Available from: <http://bsf.nic.in/doc/bsfActRules.pdf>. p. 156.

<sup>154</sup> Islam, M.S (8 September 2013) Felani verdict a big disappointment. *The Financial Express*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/index.php?ref=MjBfMDIfMDhfMTNfMV85MI8xODI1OTg=>. [Last accessed: 11 September 2013].

<sup>155</sup> Interview with Amol, resident of Kodalkati (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 11 November 2011).

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Minu Bagdi, resident of Mathurapur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).



local village *Panchayats* in the border areas claim that these trends of abuse by the border guards have decreased considerably in the last few years.<sup>157</sup> Such responses might be understandable in the context of the failure of the political and administrative heads to curb border-related violence.

## VII. Sexual intonation in the treatment of women civilians by border guards

If the physical and verbal abuse of men and women is a common occurrence in the border areas, so are occurrences of border guards demanding sexual favours from women civilians along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. Some women gather the courage to defy the offer. Some are forced to give in, either for fear of persecution or because such favours ensure the smooth operation of cross-border smuggling practices.<sup>158</sup> Male civilians are often helpless in these instances of indecent offers made by the border guards to their women, for fear of persecution.<sup>159</sup> In a conservative patriarchal society like India, this aspect has a deep impact on the male civilians along the border and is integral to the spatial consciousness that is produced in the process. Yet women border civilians are not entirely innocent victims in all cases. Women offering sexual favours to border guards in return for co-operation in smuggling are not entirely unknown along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>160</sup> While cash bribes are the usual trajectory for male smugglers, sexual favours are often an option chosen by the female smugglers for ensuring co-operation from the border guards. However, women border residents belonging to professions not directly related to the border, i.e. not trafficked women, prostitutes or farmers

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<sup>157</sup> Interview with Hiram Kanti Munshi, secretary of the local committee of a political party in Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Minu Bagdi, resident of Mathurapur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>159</sup> 'বি এস এফ অনেক সময় মহিলাদের দিকে খারাপ ভাবে তাকায়ে. কিন্তু আমরা সাধারণ মানুষ আর কি বলব? মার খেয়ে যাব হয়ত।' (The BSF often eye the women in a degrading manner. But as common people, what can we do? Probably we will be beaten if we try to protest.) Interview with Nikhil Bagdi, resident of Mathurapur village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>160</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident of Ghunapara-Dhumron village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

negotiating the fence, but associated with other professions (like teaching, law, medicine, etc.) also do not escape sexual harassment by the border guards.<sup>161</sup>

Women respondents involved in cross-border smuggling practices speak of the 'lenient' or 'sympathetic' attitude of the border guards towards such practices, which is indicative of the gendered nature of interaction between the latter and some women border civilians.<sup>162</sup> The relation between the border guards and these women is more personal in nature, including sexual or even culinary favour (asking the women to cook food for them since the food that they are given in camps is not as good),<sup>163</sup> and is as integral to understanding gendered border narratives as are violent negotiations. Sympathy hardly finds a place in negotiations between the male civilians and the male border guards.

### VIII. *Pradhans* as patriarchs

A visible feature in the border villages is the role of the heads and members of local village governments, i.e. the *Panchayats* in West Bengal and the *Union Parishad* in Bangladesh, as mediators between the civilians and the border guards. The *Panchayat/Union Parishad* heads (*Pradhans*), mostly male, communicate with the border guards on behalf of the civilians living along the border. The *Panchayats* and *Union Parishads* do have elected female members in the council body,<sup>164</sup> but the *Pradhans/Chairmen* are almost always necessarily male. And this is a feature common to almost all the village-level local governments in India and Bangladesh. It is these heads that the civilians resort to in case of an issue or a complaint. The heads, in turn, convey the issue to the border guards.

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<sup>161</sup> Interview with Gourab Sarkar, resident of Hili border (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>162</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident of Ghunapara-Dhumron village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012); Van Schendel, 2005, p.372.

<sup>163</sup> Interview with Parbati Mohanto, resident of Ghunapara-Dhumron village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012); Discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>164</sup> Banerjee, Basu Ray Chaudhury and Bhaduri, 2010, p.51.

The heads are the paternal figures in a village, which is evident from the way the villagers express their reverence as well as their dependence on them. Md. Rashidul Haq admits that the border guards do not encourage direct interaction with the civilians and prefers to interact only with the *Pradhans*.<sup>165</sup> The *Pradhans* are aware of their roles as local patriarchs and, in fact, take pride in it.<sup>166</sup>

The *Pradhan*'s ability to understand the paraphernalia associated with administration, his ability to convey the issues clearly and his ability to understand the limitations of the border guards are posed as reasons by the border guards themselves when explaining their preference for interacting with the former.<sup>167</sup>

But the role of the *Pradhans* as mediators and local patriarchs is limited by the stronger patriarchal position of the border guards. The influence of the *Pradhans* on the border guards is not just non-binding but also largely dependent on the individual attitude of the border guard concerned. Complaints from some of the *Pradhans* regarding the arrogant attitude of the border guards towards them<sup>168</sup> throw light on

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<sup>165</sup> 'আমাদের সাথে কথা বলার চেষ্টা করেনা. মেম্বার প্রধান ছাড়া আমাদের সাথে কথা বলেনা।' (The BSF do not talk to us. They only talk to the members or *Pradhans*.) Interview with Md. Rashidul Haq, resident of Lalgola (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>166</sup> 'আমি যখন মেম্বার ছিলাম, তখন কোনো সমস্যা হলে বি এস এফ এর বড় কৰ্তা-দের সাথে আলোচনা করতাম. কোনটার সমাধান হত, কোনটা হত না. মেম্বার দের কথা তাও শোনে বি এস এফ-রা।' (When I was a member of the *Panchayat*, I would talk to the senior officers of the BSF in case of any problem. Some of the problems would be solved, some not. The BSF still pays heed to members but not general civilians.) Interview with Banchharam Mondol, ex-*Pradhan* of *Panchayat* at Mathurapur village (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>167</sup> Interview with the Company Commander of BRC-pur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>168</sup> 'তারা তখন প্রধান দের কাছে আসে. আমরা হয়ত ওদের নিয়ে ক্যাম্প এ গেলাম, তখন হয়ত সেন্টি বলল সাহেব এখন খেয়ে দেয়ে ঘুমাচ্ছে, বিকেলে ফেরত যেতে. বিকেলে ফেরত গিয়ে দেখলাম সাহেব হয়ত বেরিয়ে গেছেন. এভাবে আমাদের বার বার যাওয়া সমস্যা, কাজটাও পিছিয়ে যায়।' (The common people come to the *Pradhans* with their problems. We take them to the BSF camp. It often happens that the sentry tells us that the Commander is resting at the moment and asks us to go back in the evening. When we go back to the camp in the evening, we see that the Commander is out on some work. We have to go back another day. This way, the work gets delayed.) Interview with Nirendranath Burman, deputy-*Pradhan* of Kalmati village *Panchayat* (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

the relation between the two categories of local patriarchs in the border areas—the *Pradhans* and the border guards.

## IX. Unstated patriarchy

The kind of forced reverence that border guards expect from the civilians indicates the idea of the strong patriarchal position that they imagine themselves to be in. The unstated rule of giving right of way to the vehicles of the border guards and dismounting from one's own vehicles when a vehicle of the border guards passes by indicates the existence of such forced reverence. Fear of persecution and abuse forces the civilians to abide by these unstated rules.<sup>169</sup> 'Why (should we comply with these rules)? Are they kings?' asks an angry Sabitri Mahato, after explaining how such rules have evolved in the border areas, especially after the construction of the fence and the border roads.<sup>170</sup>

Responses like 'go and complain to your father' are common among the border guards in cases of complaints from civilians over such unauthorised but stringent rules.<sup>171</sup> Examples of similar responses from border guards like, 'is this your father's road?' are also narrated by other civilians.<sup>172</sup>

The free use of the civilians' resources without payment<sup>173</sup> is an integral part of the patriarchal undercurrent that runs below the formal and legally sanctioned protector-subject relation between the border guards and the civilians. The local police stations

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<sup>169</sup> Interview with Nirendranath Burman, Deputy-*Pradhan* of Kalmati village *Panchayat*, Dinhat (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

<sup>170</sup> Interview with Sabitri Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>171</sup> 'যা, তোর বাপ কে বল।' Interview with Balaram Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>172</sup> 'তোর বাবার রাস্তা?' Interview with Pranabesh, resident of Ramnagar (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

avoid taking complaints from the civilians, citing jurisdictional formalities as the reason.<sup>174</sup>

Interestingly, even the police and other administrative bodies accept the role of the border guards as the patriarchs in the West Bengal-Bangladesh border areas, as an Officer-in-Charge (OC) at the Murutia Police Station in Nadia district (West Bengal) admits. ‘Locals depend more on the BSF than the administration because the BSF is an armed force,’ he says. When asked why the police, despite being an armed force like the BSF, fails to gain the faith of the locals, he quickly admits that, ‘BSF knows better how to handle the border.’<sup>175</sup>

These responses hint towards a clear prioritisation of the BSF at the West Bengal-Bangladesh border over the regular police mechanisms.<sup>176</sup> In the context of border control, the regular police mechanisms are marginalised. The patriarchal nature of the state in the context of the borderland is, thus, not limited to a theoretical

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.; For issues like hassles over fence crossing or use of the border road, the negotiation between the civilian and the border guards does not need to be reported to the local police stations. But in case of the arrest or apprehension of a border crosser, i.e. in cases where the seized goods need to be reported and auctioned or where arrested persons need to be imprisoned and tried, the matter needs to be reported to the police. The border guards do not possess legal power to imprison a person, though this lack is often misused by them through physical abuse and violence.

<sup>175</sup> ‘বি এস এফ-রা জানে বর্ডার কি করে হ্যান্ডেল করে।’ Interview with Biplab Ganguly (original name), Officer-in-Charge of Murutia Police Station (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>176</sup> West Bengal Police is one of the two police forces of West Bengal, the other being Kolkata Police (whose jurisdiction is specifically the metropolitan city of Kolkata). The Director General of Police heads the West Bengal police and reports to the Home (Police) Department of the Government of India. The jurisdiction of the West Bengal Police includes the eighteen revenue districts of the state (excluding the metropolitan city of Kolkata), as per the Police Act of 1861. The border districts of West Bengal are covered by the two zones of the West Bengal Police—the North Bengal Zone (consisting of Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Cooch Behar, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Malda) and the South Bengal Zone (consisting of Nadia, Murshidabad, North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas). The police stations are responsible for the prevention and detection of crime, maintenance of public order, enforcing law, making security arrangements for government functionaries, legislative bodies, local self-government and public figures.

construct<sup>177</sup> but manifests itself in real visible forms—embodied in the border guards.<sup>178</sup>

## X. Other forms of gendered border narratives

A unique form of gendered border narrative can be witnessed in some parts of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border where a large number of *hijras* are seen to be actively involved in illegal cross-border activities.<sup>179</sup> They involve themselves mostly in smuggling drugs across the border. The Hili border between West Bengal's South Dinajpur district and Bangladesh's Dinajpur district is a case in point.

Fearlessly squatting along the railway tracks running along the Bangladesh border, mostly in an intoxicated state and in very close proximity to the camps of the border guards, they unabashedly talk about their involvement in cross-border smuggling practices. They also mention how their unique gendered status helps them in their work. The fact that they are *hijras* saves them from the physical abuse perpetrated by the border guards on the other 'normal male and female' smugglers. The fact that they are 'neither male nor female' helps them in their work.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Banerjee, P. (2010) *Borders, Histories, Existences: Gender and Beyond*. New Delhi: Sage; Banerjee, P. and Basu Ray Chaudhury, A. (eds.). (2011) *Women in Indian Borderlands*. New Delhi: Sage; Mayer, T. (ed.). (2000) *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*. New York: Routledge; Jerome, R. (ed.). (2001) *Conceptions of Postwar German Masculinity*. Albany: State University of New York Press; Nandy, A. (1983) *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press; Kaplan, C., Alarcon, N. and Moallem, M. (eds.). (1999) *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Reeser, T. W. (2010) *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>178</sup> Some of the poems composed by border guards also point towards a patriarchal aspect through the projection of the BSF as the chief protector of the borders and the all-in-all figures with regard to the service of the nation. A poem named 'Seema Suraksha Bal Mein "G" Duty' (Duty of G in BSF) by P.C. Patnayak, Field G Team, BSF, Area Headquarters, Jalpaiguri, is an example. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (December 2012). 4(14).

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Bijon, journalist with a Bengali daily in Jessore town (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012); Discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>180</sup> 'মহিলা বা পুরুষ না হওয়াটাই সুবিধার. হিজরা হওয়ার কারণে বি এস এফ/বি জি বি ছেড়ে দেয়।' (Not belonging to either of the sexes helps. The BSF and BGB spare us because we are *hijras*.) Interview with Sheena Akhtar, *hijra* and resident of Hili (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

Contradictory factors like ‘dislike’ and ‘sympathy’ come up spontaneously in the narratives of the *hijras* when it comes to explaining why the border guards do not want to mingle with them or even stop them from dealing in illegal activities.<sup>181</sup> Sheena, a *hijra* working in the Hili border area, points to the sheer dislike that the border guards have for the emasculated status of the *hijras*,<sup>182</sup> while Rajib, another *hijra* working in the Hili border area, explains that the border guards are actually sympathetic towards the *hijras* since they lack social support in terms of family and friends. ‘They spare us on humanitarian grounds,’ he quips.<sup>183</sup> This explains why more than 200 *hijras* are involved in cross-border smuggling practices in the Hili port alone.<sup>184</sup>

Such contradictory versions of ‘dislike’ and ‘sympathy’ are further verified through the responses of the border guards regarding the widespread involvement of the *hijras* in illegal activities. The question of dignity is clear in responses like ‘it does not look good if we interact with *hijras*, which is why we generally avoid arresting them. Moreover, their families do not accept them. If we stop them from doing these, how will they survive?’<sup>185</sup> Even the sincerest efforts from the border guards to highlight the humanitarian aspect of the matter fail to hide the disrespectful pity in their tone of speech.

The earning of *hijras* has, over the years, become profitable, especially in and around the Hili border area. Instances of men choosing to undergo the emasculation operation or even of disguising themselves as *hijras* have increased at an alarming

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> ‘হিজরা হওয়ার কারণে বি এস এফ/বি জি বি ছেড়ে দেয়. মানবিক কারণে. বলে, “ফ্যামিলি দেখে না, খাবে কি?”’ (The BSF and BGB spares us because we are *hijras*. They spare us on humanitarian grounds, saying “their family does not look after them, how will they survive?”) Interview with Rajib, *hijra* and resident of Hili (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

<sup>184</sup> Interview with Rajib, *hijra* and resident of Hili (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

<sup>185</sup> ‘আমরা হিজরেদের সাধারণত ধরি না. ভালো দেখায়ে না. তাছাড়া ওদের তো কেউ দেখার নেই. এটা বন্ধ করলে খাবে কি?’ Interview with a BGB official at Hili checkpost (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 8 October 2011).

rate.<sup>186</sup> The lives and livelihood practices of the *hijras* on the West Bengal-Bangladesh border cannot be overlooked if one has to understand gendered border practices—practices which show how gendered identities evolve into a spatial narrative on the margins of the state.

## XI. Women border guards

The border guards, on both sides of the border, are essentially a male force. While the BGB has, so far, no women recruits in any of its battalions,<sup>187</sup> the BSF has only a few women constables in non-combat roles like searching women smugglers and infiltrators.<sup>188</sup> The first batch of women to be recruited in combat roles passed out on 28 July 2012 and moved on to their training phases.<sup>189</sup> Women under and up to the age of 25 may be recruited as direct-entry officers in the rank of Assistant Commandants (ACs), and are eligible to lead their troops along the Pakistan and Bangladesh border.<sup>190</sup>

A male Company Commander of a BSF camp in Nadia (West Bengal) is simultaneously hopeful and apprehensive about the decision to recruit women officers. He says that while they will strengthen the force by their presence, the

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<sup>186</sup> ‘এরকম হয় যে ছেলেরা অপারেশন করিয়ে হিজরা হয়, বা হিজরা সাজে যাতে গার্ড-রা না ধরে।’ (Often men undergo operation to become *hijras*, or dress-up as *hijras* to escape the border guards.) Interview with Bijon, journalist with a Bengali daily in Jessore town (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012).

<sup>187</sup> Interview with Ashabul Hossein, NGO worker and journalist with a Bengali daily in Jessore town (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012).

<sup>188</sup> Staff Reporter (30 November 2009) *The Telegraph*. [Online] Available from: [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1091130/jsp/bengal/story\\_11802257.html](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1091130/jsp/bengal/story_11802257.html). [Last accessed: 11 September 2013]; Banerjee, Basu Ray Chaudhury and Bhaduri, 2010, p.47.

<sup>189</sup> IANS (November 2012) BSF women closer to creating history. *Deccan Herald*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/15920/bsf-women-closer-creating-history.html>. [Last accessed: 24 July 2013].

<sup>190</sup> PTI (8 July 2013) Women officers to be inducted for first time in BSF. *Zeenews.com*. [Online] Available from: [http://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/women-officers-to-be-inducted-for-first-time-in-bsf\\_860549.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/women-officers-to-be-inducted-for-first-time-in-bsf_860549.html). [Last accessed: 24 July 2013].



infrastructural hazards would also be a serious concern,<sup>191</sup> referring to the lack of basic facilities and privacy required for them.

I met two of the six women constables in one of the BSF camps in Murshidabad (West Bengal). They informed me that all six of them originate from other places in West Bengal and are Bengali-speakers<sup>192</sup> unlike the male BSF recruits, most of who come from other parts of India, far away from their postings on the West Bengal border, and are Hindi-speakers. The main job of the female border guards is to frisk the women border crossers, crossing for any purpose.<sup>193</sup> Ironically, women smugglers, some of the witnesses confirm, find it easier to 'deal' with women constables posted at the fence gates rather than male constables, since the former are 'easier to convince' in the matter of letting them cross the border.<sup>194</sup>

## XII. Restriction on the use of lethal weapons by border guards

In an effort to reduce violence along its borders, the government of India decided to arm the BSF with non-lethal weapons in 2009, following requests from BGB chiefs to prevent the killings of Bangladeshis by the BSF on the India-Bangladesh border.<sup>195</sup> The need to abide by the internationally-followed Rules of Engagement (RoE) that calls for maintaining peace at the border 'at any cost' has been the focus of the meetings between the BSF and BGB over the issue of the use of weapons.<sup>196</sup> While the effort of maintaining peace at the borders is a laudable one, responses from the BSF Commanding Officers in the border outposts bring out the undercurrents of such decisions.

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<sup>191</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Shikarpur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>192</sup> Interview with Ganga Ghosh and Bimala Halder, BSF guards at Lalgola (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 11 November 2011).

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Interview with Riazul Mondol, resident of Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>195</sup> PTI (22 May 2011) BSF to use 'non-lethal' weapons along Indo-Bangla border. *Zeenews.com*. [Online] Available from: [http://zeenews.india.com/news/delhi/bsf-to-use-non-lethal-weapons-along-indo-bangla-border\\_707946.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/delhi/bsf-to-use-non-lethal-weapons-along-indo-bangla-border_707946.html). [Last accessed: 24 July 2013].

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

The BSF, under this regulation, is to use pump-action guns with rubber bullets in the first-fire and challenge-fire rounds. Firing from regular guns would be the next step, though the ‘sanctity and security of the Indian border would be the first in any case’.<sup>197</sup>

However, the decision has encouraged more illegal activities across the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. ‘The smugglers used to be more afraid of BSF earlier, but now they are less so,’ says a Company Commander of a BSF camp at Shikarpur in Nadia (West Bengal).<sup>198</sup> Attacks on the BSF by smugglers and other miscreants have increased following the decision<sup>199</sup>— a fact corroborated by the BSF officials themselves.<sup>200</sup> This is, indeed, an irony that plays out all along the length of the border, where the ‘armed’ border guards evoke a sense of security and threat, simultaneously. This dilemma is amply expressed in the responses of the border civilians where, on the one hand, they speak of the violent attributes of the border guards with regard to the use of weapons and, on the other, of their diminishing power with regard to ‘protecting’ the civilians in the context of their use of non-lethal weapons. These ambiguous narratives of protection and violation of human rights are integral to the narratives and consciousness of the border people, including the border guards themselves.

Rupali Mahato admits that there has been an increasing sense of insecurity among the border civilians following the decision. It is the threat of firing from the BSF that keeps the miscreants away and ‘this policy is creating a lot of problems’<sup>201</sup> by making the smugglers more emboldened.<sup>202</sup> Not just the smugglers but the civilians

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> ‘আগে এরা বি এস এফ-কে বেশি ভয় পেত. এখন কম।’ Interview with a BSF official at Shikarpur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>199</sup> ‘এমনকি বাংলাদেশীরা বি এস এফ কে মেরেছে, তাও বি এস এফ গুলি করেনি।’ (Even the Bangladeshi miscreants have attacked the BSF and the BSF has not retaliated back.) Interview with Apurba Kumar Biswas, resident of Petrapole border area, Bongaon (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 20 September 2011).

<sup>200</sup> Tiwary, 1 December 2012, *The Times of India*.

<sup>201</sup> Interview with Rupali Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>202</sup> Tiwary, 2012, *The Times of India*.

wronged by the border guards also sometimes resort to the physical abuse of the guards, as an act of resistance to years of abuse by them.<sup>203</sup>

The possession of weapons and the nature of weapons, in the case of the border guards, produce two parallel strands of narratives on the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. The power to use weapons gives the border guards a chance to exercise patriarchal dominance along the border. It also brings in the issue of the violation of human rights with regard to the abuse of border crossers, and especially those involved in some sort of illegal activity. The restriction on the use of lethal weapons, on the other hand, has a derogatory effect on the border guards' sense of dominance over the civilians. It also brings in the issue of the loss of security for civilians, especially those who are not directly associated with border crossing. The powerful patriarchal presence of the border guards are, interestingly, misused by miscreants in threatening or even robbing civilian households. Miscreants 'dressed as BSF' have been reported to have made its way into civilians' houses and robbed them off.<sup>204</sup> Narratives of patriarchal dominance and symbolic emasculation become integrally linked to the border narratives with reference to gendered interactions between the border guards and the civilians. Plans for observing the joint ceremony of 'lowering of the flags' by the BSF and the BGB in Petrapole-Benapole border (as is currently held between BSF and Pakistan Rangers<sup>205</sup> in Wagah on the India-Pakistan border) can be seen as efforts to restore the powerful patriarchal image of the border guards along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Interview with Kuddus Rahman, resident of Jaykrishnapur village, Jalangi (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>204</sup> Staff Reporter (29 October 2009) BSF r poshake dakati shimanter gram e. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1091029/29south7.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>205</sup> Pakistan Rangers is part of the Paramilitary Forces of Pakistan and is under the direct control of the Ministry of the Interior of the Pakistan Government. One of their main duties is to maintain law and order on Pakistan borders, apart from maintaining security in war zones and assisting the police.

<sup>206</sup> Staff Reporter (13 March 2011) Wagah r kuchkawaj ebar Petrapole eo. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1110313/13desh3.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

### XIII. Mixed reaction of the civilians towards the border guards

An interesting mix of responses from the civilians regarding the border guards makes it difficult to label these interactions as purely those of domination or subjugation. Two categories of civilians are seen to be favourable towards the border guards. The first category is those who have not been directly victimised by the BSF but whose lives and livelihood, nevertheless, depend largely on the efficient patrolling of the border by the border guards.<sup>207</sup> ‘The attitude of the BSF is generally good. They are only bad with bad people (indicating smugglers),’ says Subodh, an employee at a currency-exchange counter at the Petrapole border, North 24 Parganas (West Bengal). People like him feel that it is the efficient border management of the border guards that makes honest ways of lives and livelihoods possible along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>208</sup>

The second category is of those involved, directly or indirectly, in cross-border illegal activities and is largely dependent on the co-operation of the border guards. They, too, feel that the co-operation of the border guards ensures the smooth running of their businesses and livelihoods.<sup>209</sup>

Unfavourable responses regarding the border guards come from those civilians who pursue honest means of livelihood, like farming, but have to deal with the BSF daily<sup>210</sup> and from those associated with professions not directly related to the border, like teachers, doctors, tailors and labourers.<sup>211</sup> This category of people is probably the worst sufferers in terms of being the victims of violent dominance by the border guards, as well as of the nexus of illegality functioning along the border, without being party to it.

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<sup>207</sup> Interview with Subodh Majumdar, resident of Petrapole, Bongaon (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 20 September 2011).

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> Interview with Parbati Mahato, resident of Ghunapara-Dhumron village (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>210</sup> Interview with Balaram Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>211</sup> Interview with Gourab Sarkar, resident of Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012). Also, interview with Minu Bagdi, resident of Mathurapur (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

While the nature of interaction between the BSF and the civilians on the West Bengal side of the border highlights complex narratives of patriarchal domination, co-operation and resistance, that between the BGB and the civilians on the Bangladesh side of the border reveals some more unique features of control and co-operation.

#### XIV. Relations between Bangladeshi border civilians and the BGB: language as a decisive factor

The nature of interaction between the BGB and the Bangladeshi border civilians is symbolic of a pattern of co-operation and complicity that is not seen on the West Bengal side of the border. Vicious forms of hostility and violence are rarely seen on the Bangladesh border, unlike on the West Bengal side.

The BGB is as much a representative of the sovereign power of the state in the Bangladesh border areas as is the BSF on the West Bengal side. But the attitude of the BGB officials patrolling the Bangladesh border is visibly protective, even lenient, towards the Bangladeshi border civilians. More like a guardian, the BGB uses warnings and, at best, admonitions while dealing with civilians involved in unlawful activities. Instances of direct physical abuse or even the use of abusive language are rare.<sup>212</sup>

This is not to suggest that unlawful activities are any less on the Bangladesh side of the border. Nor is physical abuse completely absent here. Residents of Hili narrate how the BGB, though only in rare cases, beats up those caught smuggling drugs or other items across the border. ‘How much more would they tolerate?’ wonders Jumaira—indicating the BGB’s general tendency towards being tolerant and lenient, and reverting to violent means only when situations go out of control.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Interview with Md. Ismail, resident of Matila village (Jhenaidah district of Bangladesh, 11 February 2012).

<sup>213</sup> ‘বি জি বি ধরলে মারে। কত সহ্য করবে?’ (Sometimes the BGB beats up the smugglers. How much more would they tolerate?) Interview with Jumaira, resident of Hili (Dinajpur district of Bangladesh, 9 October 2011).

Language plays a very important role on both sides in the relation between the border guards and the civilians. Most officers of the BSF originate from other parts of India and are mostly Hindi-speakers, while the native language of West Bengal (including its border areas) is *Bangla* (Bengali). This results in an obvious communication gap between the Hindi-speaking border guards and the *Bangla*-speaking local civilians.<sup>214</sup> Most of the civilians on the West Bengal border do not speak or even understand Hindi, while few BSF officials are able to learn *Bangla* during their assignments on the West Bengal border, due to their temporary postings in the region and their transferable service. The BSF finds it difficult to identify itself with the local *Bangla*-speaking civilians and, thus, easier to use abusive language.<sup>215</sup>

There are a few *Bangla*-speaking BSF officers along the West Bengal border. But complaints about them from civilians are, ironically, even more than of the Hindi-speaking officers. These officers avoid using *Bangla* while interacting with civilians.<sup>216</sup> This seems to be a common occurrence on the West Bengal border and can only be explained by the attempt of the BSF to carefully maintain a distance between itself and the civilians.<sup>217</sup>

Sabitri Mahato explains that, often, the Hindi-speaking BSF constables are still easy to interact with (in whatever broken Hindi the locals can manage to speak), compared to the *Bangla*-speaking BSF constables. Preventing the civilians from taking advantage of the language affinity is the reason behind the avoidance of using *Bangla* by the *Bangla*-speaking BSF officers. ‘*Bangla*-speaking BSF officers does

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<sup>214</sup> Though Hindi is the national language of India, it is not the common language for the entire state’s population. Every province in India has its own local language, sub-classified into hundreds of more localised dialects. For West Bengal, the most common language (and of the official ones) is *Bangla*, with its many dialects across various parts of West Bengal. In this matter, West Bengal shares the same language with Bangladesh, where *Bangla* is the official language of the whole state and is the one common language that almost the entire population speaks, though with local variations in dialects.

<sup>215</sup> Interview with Rashid Hussein, resident of Lalgola (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 8 November 2011).

<sup>216</sup> Interview with Apurba Kumar Biswas, resident of Petrapole, Bongaon (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 20 September 2011).

<sup>217</sup> ‘বাঙালি বি এস এফ-রা বাংলা বলে না।’ (The *Bangla*-speaking BSF do not use *Bangla*.)

Interview with Balaram Mahato, resident of Char Meghna (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

not use *Bangla*, they use Hindi, so that we do not ask for any help,' explains Nirendranath Burman.<sup>218</sup> Such complaints indicate the fear among the *Bangla*-speaking BSF officers of being seen as biased towards 'their own people'.

Interestingly, these very *Bangla*-speaking BSF officers, who converse in Hindi at other times, resort to *Bangla* while negotiating with smugglers.<sup>219</sup> Thus, the preference of the border guards for a particular language varies according to the needs of the situation.

Complaints by women civilians often involve the issue of sexual insinuation in the use of language by the BSF. Hatred for the Bengali-people and the *Bangla* language is cited as a reason for the mistreatment of women border civilians.<sup>220</sup> On the other hand, narratives of the BSF in the form of poetry reveal its reverence for Hindi as a mother tongue—as being symbolic of love for the motherland and human empowerment in general.<sup>221</sup>

The need to recruit more co-operative *Bangla*-speaking BSF officers on West Bengal border are felt by civilians across genders and professions. Narendranath Ghosh feels that having *Bangla*-speaking BSF officers on the West Bengal border would help the civilians to better convey their problems to the border guards.<sup>222</sup> Issues of miscommunication over language have failed to gain the required support of the

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<sup>218</sup> 'বাঙালি বি এস এফ-রা বাংলা বলতে চায় না, হিন্দী বলে, পাছে আবার কেউ হেল্প চায়।' (The *Bangla*-speaking BSF do not use *Bangla*. They use Hindi, to prevent any local from asking for help from them.) Interview with Nirendranath Burman, resident of Dinhata (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).

<sup>219</sup> 'বাঙালি বি এস এফ-রা আমাদের সাথে বাংলায় কথা বলে না. হিন্দী বলে. কিন্তু দু'নম্বরী কাজ করার সময় দরকারে ঠিকই বাংলা বলে।' (The *Bangla*-speaking BSFs do not speak to us in *Bangla*. They use Hindi. But when it comes to their involvement in any illegal activity, they do revert to *Bangla* if the situation demands so.) Interview with Hiram Kanti Munshi, resident of Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>220</sup> Banerjee, Basu Ray Chaudhury and Bhaduri, 2010, p.43.

<sup>221</sup> The poem named 'Nari Shakti' composed by Arun Kumar, Commander, South Bengal Frontier, is an example. *Bagher Garjan* (Oct-Dec 2012). 26.

<sup>222</sup> Interview with Narendranath Ghosh, resident of Karimpur (Nadia district of West Bengal, 24 October 2011).

Indian government, though the erstwhile Left Front government in West Bengal had placed this issue before the central government.<sup>223</sup>

Though the BSF officers deny that language differences are an important issue,<sup>224</sup> the responses of the civilians clearly reveal the nature of miscommunication that language creates in their interaction with the border guards. It also re-emphasises the fact that while language plays an important role in preserving cross-border links between the people of West Bengal and Bangladesh, it creates a cultural difference between the West Bengal border civilians and the BSF. This acts as a very important factor when it comes to the issue of how border narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border question the role of the concerned states not simply as the political containers but as the cultural containers as well.

The BGB, on the other hand, can comfortably communicate with the Bangladeshi border civilians by virtue of sharing a common language, i.e. *Bangla*. Language plays an important role in bridging the gap between the BGB and the Bangladeshi civilians. Sharing a common language, interestingly, prevents frequent instances of the use of abusive speech by the BGB.<sup>225</sup>

Civilians on the West Bengal border are often heard speaking favourably of the BGB rather than of the BSF. 'The public would rather take BGB as a friend and consider the BSF as their enemy,' says Nirendranath Burman of Kalmati village in Cooch Behar (West Bengal).<sup>226</sup> This is yet another example of a cross-border cultural link between the West Bengal border civilians and the Bangladesh border guards that questions the role of the state as a cultural container.

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<sup>223</sup> Interview with Rashid Hossein, resident of Lalgola (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 8 November 2011).

<sup>224</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Shikarpur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>225</sup> 'একজন বাঙালি আরেকজন বাঙালির সাথে কেন খারাপ ব্যবহার করবে?' (Why would a Bengali behave badly with another Bengali?) Interview with Lata, resident of Nepar Mor village, Maheshpur (Jhenaidah district of Bangladesh, 11 February 2012).

<sup>226</sup> 'পাবলিক বরং বি জি বি কে বন্ধু মনে করতে পারে, বি এস এফ কে শত্রু ভাবে।' Interview with Nirendranath Burman, resident of Kalmati village, Dinhata (Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 16 March 2012).



The use of *Bangla* by civilians on both sides of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border often poses a challenge to the border guards, especially the Hindi-speaking BSF officers and constables. Distinguishing an illegal infiltrator from a legal resident becomes difficult for the border guards due to the use of a similar language by both.<sup>227</sup> This has forced the Indian government to consider introducing *Bangla* lessons for the BSF in order to ‘improve relations with the locals’.<sup>228</sup> The plan to recruit *Bangla*-speaking local civilians from border areas into the BSF service is yet another step towards resolving the issue of communication gap.<sup>229</sup>

Responses from some of the BGB constables on the general violent attitudes of the BSF throw light on some more factors which, the BGB officers feel, contribute towards the unfavourable relation between the BSF and the civilians. While communication gap is a major factor, alcohol consumption<sup>230</sup> and staying away from their families for too long are other factors that contribute towards the general violent nature of the BSF.<sup>231</sup> BGB officials, the majority of whom are Muslims by religion,<sup>232</sup> consider alcohol consumption within the BSF (a large majority of who are non-Muslims) a reason for its abusive mentality. Some of the civilians on the West Bengal border agree to the fact that alcohol consumption is often a reason behind BSF’s abusive attitude.<sup>233</sup> Talks about the BSF’s military failure on the Indo-Pakistan and Indo-China border followed by the BSF’s recourse to violence on the

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<sup>227</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Asharidoho BSF camp, Lalgola (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 9 November 2011).

<sup>228</sup> The A.D.G. of the BSF Eastern Command, Bansidhar Sharma pointed towards the miscommunication over language as a reason for the failure of the BSF to successfully curb cross-border smuggling practices. Parya, S. (10 August 2013) BSF commanders and constables to be given *Bangla* lessons for improving public relation. *Bartaman*. [Online] Available from: <http://bartamanpatrika.com/archive/2013/august/100813/content/sb.htm>. [Last accessed: 30 August 2013].

<sup>229</sup> Staff Reporter (25 March 2013) Daulatpurey tarunder proshikhshan BSFer. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/25mur2.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>230</sup> Islam regards alcohol as the root of several social problems and misery, including crime, mental illness, despicable behaviour, broken homes, etc. and, thus, prohibits its consumption.

<sup>231</sup> Interview with a BGB official at New Sripur BGB camp, Debhata border (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012).

<sup>232</sup> Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority state.

<sup>233</sup> Interview with Rashid Hossein, resident at Lalgola (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 8 November 2011).

Bangladesh border are common among the Bangladeshi border civilians and the BGB.<sup>234</sup> Such responses indicate the BGB's ideas about the BSF's misguided patriarchal domination. Alcohol consumption (leading to an unstable emotional condition) and the lack of family life (resulting in a social and emotional vacuum) coupled with the failure to exercise domination in other borders are reasons for the BSF's misuse of power along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, feels the BGB.<sup>235</sup> Higher BSF officials also consider alcohol consumption among the constables as a reason for their misuse of power and the miserable conditions that the BSF constables find themselves in.<sup>236</sup>

*It has taken away your means of living*

*Your life shall offer no compensation*

*But force you to your doom each day*

*And anarchy will consume the nation.*<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> 'বি এস এফ যেহেতু চীন বা পাকিস্তান বর্ডার এ বেশি বীরস্ব দেখাতে পারেনা, ওদের যত বীরস্ব বাংলাদেশ বর্ডার এ. ইন্ডিয়া কোনদিন নিজের বর্ডার পলিসি পাল্টাবে না কারণ ওটা ইন্ডিয়ার একটা ভালো দর কষাকষির জায়গা. বাংলাদেশের ৩ দিকেই তো ইন্ডিয়া বর্ডার।' (Just because BSF cannot exercise its power along the Pakistan or China border, it expresses all its prowess along the Bangladesh border. India will never change its border policy with Bangladesh since it is a good negotiation table for India. Bangladesh shares a border with India on its three sides.) Interview with Bijon, journalist with a Bengali daily in Jessore town (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 16 February 2012).

<sup>235</sup> Interview with a BGB officer at New Sripur BGB camp, Debhata border (Satkhira district of Bangladesh, 12 February 2012); even the BGB border guards face the same routine of staying away from their family during their postings in the border areas. But the sheer length of the border areas in India and the comparatively weak manpower of the BSF, forces the BSF border guards to undergo longer phases of posting and separation from their families. Distances between the outposts and their home villages/cities also mean that the BSF border guards take longer time to travel between the two (unlike Bangladesh, where the distance and the travel time between the two are often not much, given the size of the state). This prevents the higher officials of the BSF from accepting leave requests from the BSF border guards.

<sup>236</sup> A number of de-addiction sessions, yoga sessions and seminars are being held in order to help the border guards get rid of such addictions. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika*. (March 2013). 5(15).

<sup>237</sup> A poem by Rakesh Kumar Sharma of 48 Battalion BSF named 'Sharab samaj ko kar rahi kharab' (Alcohol Wearing Out The Society) speaks about how alcohol consumption

Increasing suicidal tendencies among the BSF supports such views.<sup>238</sup> A social and emotional vacuum, coupled with the imposition of restraints on the use of power, has, recently, increased the number of suicide cases in the BSF.<sup>239</sup> Such tendencies also highlight the fact that the border guards are as much under the strain of surviving border life as are the border civilians.

The BGB also has its own narrative of the possession and eventual loss of patriarchal power. While the decision on using non-lethal weapons resulted in narratives of the loss of power for the BSF, the mutiny in the Bangladeshi border forces serves as the BGB's own narrative of loss of power.<sup>240</sup> 'The BGB has become somewhat weak

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becomes an obstacle in the path of 'serving the nation' and how it has ruined lives of the guards. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika*. (December 2012). 4(14). Translation has been done by Tanmayee Banerjee.

<sup>238</sup> Commander Rahul Vatsayan of 93 Battalion, BSF, speaks about 'Jawano mein badi atmahatiya ki prabriti' (Increasing suicidal tendencies among the Jawans) in *Uttar Vang Prahari*, March 2013, where he quotes Rashtrakavi Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's poem on soldiers serving the nation, in order to inspire the BSF border guards to see the brighter side and the bravery associated with 'serving the nation', shedding blood for the nation' and 'protecting the nation's people'. He also cites issues such as separation from family and long duty hours as reasons for the alarming rate of suicides among BSF *jawans*.

<sup>239</sup> Staff Reporter (28 February 2010) BSF jawan atmaghati Bangai. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1100228/28south5.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>240</sup> The paramilitary border force of Bangladesh, since its inception in 1971, was known as the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). BDR has nearly 67,000 soldiers stationed across the country. After Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971, the East Pakistan Rifles was renamed as Bangladesh Rifles. The BDR is under the Home Ministry, but the army plays a major role in staffing, training and directing the force. In Bangladesh, BDR has been considered as a nationalistic force because it had revolted against the Pakistani army during the Liberation War. But it is also a fact that BDR soldiers carried out rebellions in 1972 and 1991. But due to limitation of BDR laws, those responsible for the mutinies could not be punished and thus those incidents failed to discourage BDR members from carrying out future revolts. On 25 February 2009, the BDR faced yet another mutiny during the celebration of the annual BDR week in its headquarters in Pilkhana, Dhaka. The mutiny broke out following a clash between a BDR officer and an army officer, catalysed by complaints of the BDR against the BDR chief. The central armoury of the BDR headquarters was looted. Many army officers, the BDR chief and few civilians were killed in the mutiny. The mutiny spread to other BDR posts around the country. The mutiny was eventually controlled by the army. The mutineers were tried in fast track courts. There has been a major overhaul in the organisation of the BDR, including a renaming. The BDR, henceforth came to be called Border Guards Bangladesh. Restrictions on the access to and use of weapons by

after the mutiny. It has almost become like children, who live at the mercy of others (indicating both the Bangladesh state and the BSF). Gradually, though, it is regaining its old vigour,<sup>241</sup> says a BGB official. He also points out how restrictions on firing back at the BSF, following the mutiny, has dampened the BGB spirits.<sup>242</sup>

For the BGB, the idea of wielding power pertains more to the nature of its interaction with the BSF rather than its own border civilians.<sup>243</sup> For the BSF, the wielding of power relates more to disciplining its own border civilians rather than its interactions with the BGB.<sup>244</sup> This also explains the difference in opinion among the civilians about the border forces on the West Bengal and the Bangladesh border.

## XV. Bonding attempts

Unfavourable responses towards the BSF from the border civilians on the West Bengal border explains the recent attempts made by the BSF to bond with the local people on the border. Cultural events, sports events and educational programmes in some of the border villages along the West Bengal border characterise these efforts.<sup>245</sup> Civic Action Programmes organised by the BSF, including medical check-ups, computer training, canteen facilities, and tourist site-seeing are also part of its efforts in this regard.<sup>246</sup> Border guards also make use of festivals like *Durga* and *Kali Puja*, organised by local clubs, to create a platform for interaction between the border people of both sides—when civilians and border guards from the other side are invited, good wishes and sweets exchanged and fireworks and cultural programmes

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the BGB has also been imposed. Kumar, A. (2009) The BDR Mutiny: Mystery Remains but Democracy Emerges Stronger. *Journal of Defence Studies*. 3(4). pp. 103-117.

<sup>241</sup> 'বি জি বি-র কু-এর পর একটু উইক হয়ে গেছে. ছোট বাচ্চাদের মত. সবার দোয়ায়ে থাকে যেন. এখন আসতে আসতে উঠে দাঁড়াচ্ছে।' Interview with a BGB official at Goga camp, Sharsha (Jessore district of Bangladesh, 15 February 2012).

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Interview with a BSF official at Shikarpur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>245</sup> Interview with Nikhil Bagdi and Hirak Kanti Munshi, residents of Mathurapur and Dinhat (South Dinajpur district and Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, 24 January and 16 March 2012, respectively).

<sup>246</sup> *Bagher Garjan* (October-December 2012). 26.

enjoyed together.<sup>247</sup> Friendly-matches between the BSF and the BGB constitute yet another way of creating platforms for bonding between the border guards and the civilians on both sides.<sup>248</sup> Some of the poems composed by BSF guards, hint towards bonding initiatives by hinting at the pride in being ‘offered a soldier’s hand’.<sup>249</sup>

*And the song is left unheard*

*And the lyre is left untouched*

*Benumbed I watched the events unfold*

*Restless I tended my soul*

*Seeking friendship whenever I offered my hand*

*I am proud and honoured*

*To be offered a soldier’s hand.*

One of the aims of the educational programmes organised by the BSF is to increase awareness among the civilians, especially students in school, about the role of the BSF as the protector and patriarchal figure of the border areas.<sup>250</sup> Attempts to introduce Hindi language courses in local primary schools by the BSF have,

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<sup>247</sup> Ghosh, S. (13 October 2009) Shaktipujoye mela mukhor Changrabandha. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from:

<http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1091013/13uttar3.htm>. [Last accessed 17 September 2013]; Basak, B. (25 October 2009) Chhatpuja Upalakshe Mahananda Nadir Dhare Upche pora Bhir. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1091025/uttarbanga.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>248</sup> Biswas, G. (4 January 2013) Shesh bikeley footballey muchhlo shimanter kanta. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/4mur4.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013]; *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2013). 5(15).

<sup>249</sup> The original poem in Hindi is named *Safarnama* (The Journey), and is composed by Rajeev Vatsaraj, 2<sup>nd</sup>-in Command, 194B Battalion, BSF. *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2012). 4(11). Translated by Tanmayee Banerjee.

<sup>250</sup> Interview with a BSF official in Shikarpur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

nevertheless, not seen much success.<sup>251</sup> What needs to be seen is whether BSF's plans of recruiting local youths from border areas into BSF services have a fruitful outcome of improving the relation.

These bonding efforts have not necessarily been popular with all the BSF officers posted along this border.<sup>252</sup> During some of the cultural events organised by the BSF, especially during religious festivals, there have been attempts of illegal border crossings and smuggling by the border people, as pointed out by the BSF officials themselves.<sup>253</sup> 'We have to control them. Civilians are emotional. They might end up cutting the fences or may climb up the fences in excitement. They are illiterate and, hence, difficult to control,' says a BSF officer in BRC-pur BSF camp in Nadia (West Bengal).<sup>254</sup> The equation of illiteracy with emotional instability and the *need to control* is clearly revealed in such responses. On a number of occasions, planned border fairs have been cancelled by border guards<sup>255</sup> or have been held under strict surveillance.<sup>256</sup> The suspicious nature of the BSF is also clearly revealed in its journals, where one of the challenges of the BSF border guards has been pointed out as 'being suspicious of the people'.<sup>257</sup> The persistence of the threat factor in the bonding attempts is clearly spelt out when even by the drinking water kiosks arranged by the BSF officers during festivals, the identity cards of the civilians are asked to be presented.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Interview with a BSF official in Ashridoho BSF camp (Murshidabad district of West Bengal, 8 November 2011).

<sup>252</sup> Interview with Riazul Mondol, resident of Balurghat (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 24 January 2012).

<sup>253</sup> *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2012). 4(11).

<sup>254</sup> Interview with a BSF official in BRC-pur camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 22 October 2011).

<sup>255</sup> Staff Reporter (14 April 2010) Mela batil. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: (<http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1100414/14uttar10.htm>). [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>256</sup> Staff Reporter (15 April 2010) Milan Melai bhir. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1100415/15sil7.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>257</sup> The word used for surveillance in this context is *shak*, a Hindi term that means suspicion. *Bagher Garjan* (October-December 2012). 26.

<sup>258</sup> 'অষ্টমীর দিন জল ছত্র করেছিল. সেখানে লেখা ছিল 'পরিচয় পত্র নিয়ে ঘুরবেন।' (The BSF had arranged for drinking water kiosks during *Durga Puja*. They had it written there: "please

## XVI. Conclusion

### i. Forms of control

One of the significant characteristics of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border is the fact that its entire length is densely populated, unlike the borders that India shares with either Pakistan or China.<sup>259</sup> Numerous villages, including farmlands, rivers and lakes, characterise the border. Thus, controlling the West Bengal-Bangladesh border implies controlling not just natural boundaries or deploying armed forces but, more importantly, controlling people. The nature of governance that has been established by India and Bangladesh along this border in the last six decades reveals two levels of operation—the totalising or *en masse*<sup>260</sup> control of the border civilians, and negotiations with individual persons<sup>261</sup> depending on the context and situation. *En masse* control over the border is manifested in various surveillance mechanisms, patrolling by the border guards and even the bonding attempts by the BSF. But it is the pattern of individual control that sheds light on the complexity of governance mentalities. The gendered forms of violence between the male civilians and the male border guards (including both the use of weapons on one another, as well as the sexual abuse of suspected smugglers by the border guards), the interaction between the male border guards and the *hijras*, and the sexual insinuation in the various interactions between the male border guards and the female civilians—are symbolic of such individual patterns of control. While *en masse* control mechanisms reveal the more generally known forms of gendered practices along the border, the individual patterns point towards the least recognised but no less significant gendered border narratives.

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carry your identity proofs with you”.) Interview with Gourab Sarkar, resident of Hili (South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, 25 January 2012).

<sup>259</sup> Interview with a BSF official in Shikarpur BSF camp (Nadia district of West Bengal, 21 October 2011).

<sup>260</sup> Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (trs. Alan Sheridan) London: Penguin. p.137

<sup>261</sup> Foucault, 1977, p.236.

ii. Uniqueness of gender narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh Border

The study of interactions between the border guards and the civilians on the West Bengal-Bangladesh border in existing literature has, so far, highlighted the state as the oppressor, the border civilians as the victims, and the border area as merely a periphery where all sorts of marginalisation and victimisation occurs. The interaction between the women civilians and male border guards has been the only index for the study of gendered narratives along this border. This chapter shows that there are many more complex strands of narratives beneath such linear narratives of perpetrator-victim discourses. It also shows that gendered border narratives on the West Bengal-Bangladesh border are not limited to male perpetrator-female victim binaries but played out in all sorts of gendered combinations across varied levels of social standing. The variation in the gendered aspect in the relation between the male border guards and the male civilians on both sides of the border, between the male border guards and *hijras*, between the male border guards and female civilians on the West Bengal border, between the male border guards on both sides of the border, and the role of women pimps in women's trafficking—reveal the complex web of gendered relations operating along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, apart from confirming some of the more generally studied aspects of the border in question, like the general condition of women civilians along it and the general abusive tendency of the BSF towards border civilians. Gender narratives are not unique to borderlands. They are witnessed in varying forms and nature in non-border areas as well. But the specificity of a borderland moulds gendered narratives in a way so as to give them a spatial dimension. The West Bengal-Bangladesh border, likewise, adds new dimensions to gendered narratives seen elsewhere in the non-border parts of both India and Bangladesh.

iii. Border as *thirdspace*

Any narrative that acts as a disruption of the predominantly hegemonic discourse is a subaltern narrative in nature. Evolving alternative ways of gaining access to resources and a different perspective of the context in question are manifestations of



subaltern narratives.<sup>262</sup> This chapter concludes that the gendered border narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border are also subaltern narratives, like the other forms of border narratives discussed in the previous chapters. The civilians evolve ways of gaining access to resources and livelihoods by negotiating and utilising the border—ways which are different from the available ones in the non-border areas. The perspectives of the border guards and the civilians regarding the gendered locations of themselves and of each other also question the men-women and perpetrator-victim dichotomies of gender relations in India and Bangladesh.

In the process of redefining gendered ideas in the context of the border, the border people redefine the very space of the borderland. While the states produce a certain version of their borderlands (as spaces of separation from the neighbour, as container of their own civilians and as the space for the exercise of unquestionable sovereign control), the border people, including the civilians and the border guards reproduce the space through questioning and redefining the state's version. The space of the borderland becomes the platform for the clash between the *perceived and conceived*<sup>263</sup> notions of the borderland by the states and by the border people—making the border the *thirdspace*<sup>264</sup> of lived reality. The reproduction of the border as the *thirdspace* is characterised by the ways it is utilised by both the border civilians and the border guards. The state perceives the border as a space of non-fluidity, containment and sovereign power. The border guards, despite being the embodied representations of the state, conceive the border as a space both for establishing a patriarchal presence and for personal gains. The border civilians survive the reality of the border, both by being victimised at times and by utilising the border to the best of their needs at other times. Conflicting perceptions of the border, thus, converge in the borderland making the border the platform for unique narratives. Subalternity, in the context of this border is, thus, not an urban-rural or poor-middle class divide but more a re-interpretation and reproduction of the border space. A spatial dimension engulfs the smaller socio-cultural subaltern narratives to be crystallised into a larger border narrative.

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<sup>262</sup> Chakravorty, S., Milevska, S. and Barlow, T.E. (2006) *Conversations with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. London: Seagull.

<sup>263</sup> Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>264</sup> Soja, E. (1996) *Thirdspace*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

iv. *Border consciousness*

Years of production of such border narratives crystallise into a pattern of consciousness among everybody who negotiates the border in their daily lives. This thesis aims to study the evolution of border consciousness manifested through the various strands of border narratives. This chapter provides the final block towards the construction of the thesis by studying gender as one of the four strands of narratives which converge at the border to produce the border consciousness. Border consciousness is characterised by the omnipresence of the border in all sorts of gendered practices—right from questions of women’s literacy, issues of dowry related to the marriage of both men and women, trafficking and prostitution, negotiating border guards for cultivating fenced-out lands, issues of violence and abuse, interactions between the local heads and border guards, and interactions between the border guards and *hijras* to interactions between the border guards on both sides of the border. Border consciousness is, thus, produced by the simultaneous convergence of smaller narratives, such as the ones mentioned above, and the crystallisation of those narratives into a larger spatial consciousness. The spatial character of border narratives across caste, class, gender, ethnicity and religion, and characterised by a re-interpretation of the border space, is what makes these narratives subaltern as against non-border narratives. Studying gendered border narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border helps in our understanding of not just the evolution of border narratives as a subaltern narrative but also the production of a border consciousness at large.

## Conclusion

‘Borderlanders hardly think of themselves as living in the margin. The borderland is the centre of their world’<sup>1</sup>— says Willem van Schendel in the conclusion of his seminal work on the Bengal borderland. This expression aptly defines the basic premise of the preceding chapters where border narratives along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border have been used as evidences to highlight, yet again, the overwhelming presence and centrality of the border in the lives of the border people. Border narratives have also been used as evidences to highlight the production of a *border consciousness* which results from years of negotiating this overwhelming reality of the borderland by the people living on both sides of the border.

Borders as delimitations of the sovereign powers of the state have evolved historically—from the flexible porous nature of the feudatories of middle age-Europe through their role as marked demarcations of nations following the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), to their later *avatars* as delimitations of the sovereign powers of modern-day state systems. The nature of the study of borders has, likewise, evolved from political to geographical and, eventually, sociological, ethnographical and economical discourses. Each border around the world has a unique story to tell. The stories contribute in their own ways towards the larger discourse on borders, offering new perspectives to understand their uniqueness.

The preceding chapters have looked at some of the unique aspects of one of the most interesting and complex international borders in the world—the border between West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh. The research had set out to:

- Look at the evolution of border narratives as a spatial phenomenon.
- Examine how certain social, cultural, political and economic narratives are modified by the spatial specificity of the border to crystallise into a spatial narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> Van Schendel, W. (2005) *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem. p.363.

- Understand if such everyday border narratives are subaltern in nature, i.e. if they question predominant statist definitions of notions like inclusion, exclusion, legal, illegal, citizenship, rights, etc.
- Understand if such years of production of border narratives transform into a spatial consciousness, which has been termed here as a *border consciousness*.

The overarching theme of the evolution of border narratives and the creation of a *border consciousness* have been discussed as sub-themes related to the narratives of livelihood, enclaves, caste and gender, as witnessed along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. The aim of the chapters has been to knit the four above-mentioned themes into the larger theme of border narratives and to show how these narratives are affected by the reality of surviving the border. The people living along the border, including a wide range of civilians across gender, caste, professions and religion, including the border guards as well, were interviewed in order to capture the essence of border narratives, expressed through their everyday negotiations and interactions. The preceding chapters have shown:

- How livelihood, enclave, caste and gender narratives are ‘territorialised’, reproduced and affected by the reality of surviving the border. These narratives can rightly be considered as evidences of border narratives because of their spatial uniqueness (i.e. such narratives are not seen in non-border areas) and also because of the overwhelming presence of the border in the responses of the narrators which have been considered here.
- How the border narratives acquire a subalternity through the production of alternate access to resources, and by questioning predominant statist notions. R.D. Sack has rightly observed that the content of a territory can be manipulated and its character designed simply by controlling access to it through boundary restrictions.<sup>2</sup> While the above quotation very aptly describes the role of the state at the border, the alternate access which the civilians themselves design reveals the subaltern nature of the border narratives produced through

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<sup>2</sup> Sack, R.D. (March 1983) Human territoriality: a theory. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 73(1). p. 59.

everyday interactions between the state, the civilians and the border guards. Experience-based narratives, as expressions of the agency of the narrator,<sup>3</sup> indeed reflect the patterns of re-interpretation of the agency of the border people. The cynicism that the border people have developed over the years towards the official ideologues of their respective states are manifested in their attitude—an attitude that the states are inclined to regard as subversive.<sup>4</sup> The narratives discussed in the preceding chapters provide ample evidence of the attitude of the border people as well as the state’s perception of these narratives as subversive.

- How the border narratives crystallise into a spatial consciousness, expressed through the recurrence of the reality of the border in the responses, where every day practices and negotiations are produced, decided, and affected by the border.

## I. Experience-centred narratives

Human action and experience, according to Paul Ricoeur, always has a narrative structure.<sup>5</sup> Thus, experience-centred everyday forms of narratives have been chosen as the basis of analysis because they bring out the spontaneous and real nature of the experiences of the people rather than secondary materials, most of which look at such narratives from a statist perspective, consider such narratives as mere security issues of the state or highlight certain specific crises of the border like smuggling or trafficking as an issue of border management. The ‘small stories’<sup>6</sup> of border life ‘may concern unfolding, anticipated, imaginary, habitual and indefinite events and states, as well as past, singular “events”’; they may also involve repeated content or themes

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<sup>3</sup> Andrews, M., Squire, C., and Tamboukou, M. (eds.). (2009) *Doing Narrative Research*. London: Sage. p.7.

<sup>4</sup> Chatterji, J. (February 1999) The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal’s Border Landscape, 1947-52. *Modern Asian Studies*. 33(1). p.236.

<sup>5</sup> Ricoeur, P. (1991) Life in quest of narrative. In Wood, D. (ed.). *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*. London: Routledge. pp.28-9.

<sup>6</sup> Bamberg, M. (2006) Stories: Big or small. Why do we care? *Narrative Inquiry*. 16(1). pp. 139-47; Freeman, M. (2006) Life on ‘holiday’? In defence of big stories. *Narrative Inquiry*. 16(1). pp. 131-138; Georgakopoulou, A. (2007) *Small stories, Interaction and Identities*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

spread out across interviews or other data.’<sup>7</sup> But they are the narratives which reveal the ‘naturally-occurring’ stories and the natural language of expression.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, they pay ‘attention to the “social” in its most microsocial versions, as well as in its wider, cultural variants’.<sup>9</sup> Experience becomes part of consciousness,<sup>10</sup> especially over a long period of time. Hence, such experience-centred narratives have been used as evidences in the study of the *border consciousness* along the stipulated border.

## II. Role of language

Language plays a significant role in the study of these narratives<sup>11</sup> (discussed in Chapter 4). Responses of the border guards as well as civilians on both sides of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, both in terms of their expression and language, have been integral to the border narratives and thrown light on how the border people see themselves in the larger scenario of border life.

## III. Cognition

Cognitive behavioural patterns of the border people along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, including their own perceptions of inclusion-exclusion, here-there, inside-outside, us-them, ideas about the limits of their movements (enclaves) and settlements (Marichjhapi), also have a significant role to play in the evolution of *border consciousness* along this border. Such cognitive maps and ideas of the border people cut across a wide range of socio-cultural, political, economic and territorial narratives, while also pointing towards the undeniable role of the reality of the border in their lives. My own experiences during field studies opened my eyes to the cognitive (dis)orientation of the borderland when I ended up confusing which side of the border I was on at a particular time, given my continuous movement across it

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<sup>7</sup> Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2009, p.8.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp.8-9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Squire, C. (2009) From experience-centred to socioculturally-oriented approaches to narrative. In Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2009, p.48.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.9.

over a period of six months.<sup>12</sup> This experience was, in fact, a strong hint towards the kind of cognitive disorientations that the border people, negotiating the border over years, might have to deal with.

Neil Brenner's (2001) idea of scalar structuration helps in explaining such cognitive patterns of perception and negotiation. It, in fact, helps in the understanding of the convergence of varying and conflicting spatial perceptions of the state, the border guards and the border civilians along the space of the border. That 'processes of scalar structuration are constituted and continually reworked through everyday social routines and struggles'<sup>13</sup> are amply proved by the everyday border narratives produced along the said border by the border people. Cognitive disorientation or scalar structuration becomes all the more strongly visible in 'partitioned geography',<sup>14</sup> as is the case with the West Bengal-Bangladesh borderland where politics of scale comes into play in the societal structuration processes—involving a web of ethnic, religious, social, political and economic ties across the border. Enclave narratives, as outcomes of a partitioned geography, constitute a fine example of such scalar structuration and cognitive disorientation along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

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<sup>12</sup> During my field studies, I would often be asked by interviewees, onlookers and any curious passer-by about my identity and background, like family, marital status, etc. In one such incident in the South Dinajpur district of West Bengal, I, along with three more persons (locals showing me around) was asked by a BSF constable about our identities. After hearing about the details of the other three (in which cities/towns in India their parents and husbands lived, etc.), the BSF constable asked me where I was from, to which I answered 'Kolkata'. After asking about my marital status, he asked me where my husband lived to which I promptly answered: India (instead of specifying the city). The answer was spontaneous and left me wondering why exactly I had said that. The other three companions as well as the BSF official were by then laughing and thinking that this was my way of withholding details of my family. They thought, as they said later, that the answer meant, 'he lives somewhere in India...how does it matter? But I realised that the answer was a spontaneous outcome of my cognitive disorientation. For a moment, I thought I was on the Bangladesh side of the border and, thus, replied India instead of mentioning the name of the specific city, which is what I do on the West Bengal side.

<sup>13</sup> Brenner, N. (2001) The Limits to Scale? Methodological Reflections on Scalar Structuration. *Progress in Human Geography*. 25(4). p.604.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, N. (1993) Homeless/global: scaling places. In Bird, J., Curtis, B., Putnam, T., Robertson, G. and Tickner, T. (eds.). *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*. New York: Routledge. pp.87-119.

#### IV. Narrator and listener

The convergence of the divergent emotional, cognitive and social life of the narrator and the listener (me) has often been difficult in the process of understanding and interpreting the narratives. Moreover, certain parts of the narratives, especially the ones to do with anxieties, desires, etc., almost always ‘remain outside the narrative’,<sup>15</sup> no matter how rigorous the process of recording and analysing the narratives are. ‘The factual details of “lived life” obtain an emotional aspect in the “told story”, which constitutes the underlying emotional experience that the narrator goes through in negotiating the lived experiences.’<sup>16</sup> These emotions cannot be expressed clearly by the teller nor can the listener do complete justice to such expressions. Yet in spite of these drawbacks, experience-centred everyday narratives have been the primary foundation of this research for understanding the evolution of border narratives over a period of time and their crystallisation into a spatial consciousness.

#### V. Time

The choice of experience-centred everyday narratives as support for my arguments has also to do with the aim of the research to capture this evolution of border narratives beginning from the partition and the creation of the border in 1947. The period following the partition has been crucial in the transformation of cultural identities of the Bengali people into a border people and in crystallising their narratives into a *border consciousness*. The everyday narratives almost always capture the essence of time. Corinne Squire, Molly Andrews and Maria Tamboukou have aptly observed: ‘Time, psychically processed, is thought to make us into subjects through its articulation in narrative. Transformation is also assumed to be integral to narrative, in the story itself, in the lives of those telling it; even in researchers’ own understandings of it.’<sup>17</sup> This explains the choice of such small

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<sup>15</sup> C. Squire, M. Andrews, M. Tamboukou (2009) What is narrative research. In Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2009, p.10.

<sup>16</sup> Squire, C. (2009) From experience-centred to socioculturally-oriented approaches to narrative. *Ibid.*, p.52.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11; Ricoeur, P. (1984) *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



stories as the basis for the study of the reproduction of border space and the evolution of *border consciousness* over a long period of time of about six decades.

## VI. Life-cycle approach

The 'life-cycle' approach of borders suggested by Willem van Schendel and Michiel Baud<sup>18</sup> provides important tools for understanding the evolution process of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border from its genesis to its present form, which, in the process, provides tools for understanding the evolution of *border consciousness*. The six stages of evolution of the border suggested by them are embryonic, infant, adolescent, adult, declining and defunct. The characteristic features laid out for each of them help us in understanding the stage that the various parts of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border is in, as well as highlighting its overall 'coming of age'.<sup>19</sup> The changing form and nature of the border at various phases of its evolution affect the patterns of negotiation practiced by the border people. The negotiation between the state, the border guards and the border civilians change according to the quite/harmonious, unruly, half-unruly or rebellious nature of the borderland, depending on the phase of life-cycle that the border is in.<sup>20</sup> This, in turn, affects the psyche of the people which, over a certain period of time, crystallises into a consciousness tied to the reality of the border.

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<sup>18</sup> Van Schendel, W. and Baud, M. (1997) Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands. *Journal of World History*. 8(2). pp. 223-225.

<sup>19</sup> Embryonic: Clear borderlines are yet not distinguishable but where two or more frontiers tend to close into, and sometimes clash with each other; Infant: Exists just after the borderline has been drawn. Pre-existing social and economic networks are still visible, and people on both sides are still connected by kinship links. National identities are still vague. Possible disappearance of the border still looms large among the borderlanders; Adolescent: The border is an undeniable reality, though its genesis is still recent. Many people remember the period before it existed. Economic and social relations are beginning to be confined by the existence of the new border but old networks have not yet disintegrated and form powerful cross-border linkages; Adult: Social networks now implicitly accept and follow the contours of the border. Cross-border relations are increasingly viewed as problematic. New cross-border networks such as smuggling are based on the acceptance of the border. The border has become an unquestionable reality in the lives of the borderlanders; Declining: Emergence of new supra-border networks are no longer seen as a threat to the state. The border gradually withers away, either peacefully or sometimes through violent contestations; Defunct: Border is abolished and physical barriers between the two sides are removed. Border-induced networks are gradually replaced by new ones. Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 227-229.

Unquestionable acceptance of the reality of the border by the people who live in the borderland<sup>21</sup> is an important feature of the adult phase of border evolution and is what constitutes the fundamental nature of the *border consciousness* along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>22</sup> This is not to suggest that the border affects its people uniformly. While it strengthens some, it disempowers others.<sup>23</sup> The preceding chapters have highlighted the vast range of effects that the border has on the people living along its length. But it is the undeniable presence and the indubitable effect of the border on the people that forms the crux of the *border consciousness*.

## VII. Border identity

The unique spatiality of the borderland produce a new identity for the people who live along the border—that of the ‘border people’—an identity that is produced by a modification of their other primary identities, such as their ethnic, religious, gendered or economic identities. The location of the border modifies these identities to produce an overwhelmingly spatial identity—that of the border people. While responses bring out the presence of other identities throughout the narrative, they also reveal how the border affects such identities to transform their nature into a spatial category of identity. The production of the identity of the ‘enclave people’ is integral to the creation of the identity of the ‘border people’. The narratives of the border guards speak amply of their inclusion into this spatial identity. Border issues affect the lives of both the border civilians and border guards equally.<sup>24</sup> In fact, some

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.224.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Brunhes and Camille Vallaux have named such borders ‘dead’ borders because of their unchanging nature over a substantial period of time. The focus, for Brunhes and Vallaux, has been on the unchanging, stagnant nature of the border. But the idea of unquestionable acceptance of the border in the minds of the borderlanders has been used in the context of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border more with regard to the overwhelming spatial reality of the border in the lives of the border people and less with regard to its form and nature. Thus, contrary to the idea of Brunhes and Vallaux, the border is very much a ‘lived experience’ of the border people along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, rather than being dead. Brunhes, J. and Vallaux, C. (1921) *La géographie de l’histoire*. Paris. Quoted in Van Schendel and Baud, 1997, p.224.

<sup>23</sup> Van Schendel, W. (2005) *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem. p.378.

<sup>24</sup> River erosion is a usual occurrence in the West Bengal-Bangladesh border rivers, which affects the lives of both the civilians as well as the border guards. In recent river erosion incidences in river Padma, houses of border civilians and border outposts of the BSF border guards have been washed away. The civilians and the border guards were in equal need of

of the narratives of the border guards do not just reveal their perception of themselves as a border people, but also reveal the nature of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border as a space of meeting of the states, rather than a space of clear demarcation of the sovereign delimitations of the concerned states, i.e. India and Bangladesh.

*My twelve hundred and ten brothers*<sup>25</sup>

*We have no name, but numbers  
Just like milestones  
Here and there  
We are called border pillars  
We have a few children  
They are called subsidiary pillars  
Training pillars at crossroads  
Pillar riverines upon rivers and streams  
A duty to call by various names  
We are born of parents, born of two states  
Together, they provide for us  
We look the same  
Our structure, weight, measure, all the same  
We stand straight, on attention  
We are born of partition  
It is a wonder  
None fights for us here*

The fact that India and Bangladesh have started realising that both the states need to come together at the border in order to reform and maintain the border rivers<sup>26</sup> is also indicative of the border's role as the meeting space of the states, despite the states' efforts to project the borders as a line of separation. It is the border that also brings

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relief and support from the state. Staff Reporter (20 August 2013) Farakka bhanganey mukh feralo shech daptar. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/20mur4.html>. [Last accessed: 16 September 2013]; Staff Reporter (22 August 2013) Padma bhanganey trosto shimantabashi. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/22mur3.html>. [Last accessed: 16 September 2013].

<sup>25</sup> The author of the original Hindi poem, 'Mere baraso dus bhai', is Deputy Commander Onkar Nath, 104 Battalion, BSF. Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika (March 2013). 5(15). It has been translated to English by Tanmayee Banerjee.

<sup>26</sup> Moitra, S. (10 March 2010) Holo jautha samiksha, sighrai suru hochhe Ichhamati samskaar. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1100310/10jibjagat1.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013];

together people from both the sides of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border in celebrating *Bangla* as Mother Language or in assuring support and co-operation for anti-fundamentalist movements.<sup>27</sup> Narratives such as these contribute towards the thesis of the creation of border narratives and their crystallisation into a *border consciousness*, especially in the view that the border people on both sides are called forward by their states in the mission to restore border landscapes, including rivers.<sup>28</sup> The reference to the border guards as ‘border man’<sup>29</sup> by the border guards themselves also speaks amply about their identification more as border people than as representatives of the state. Seeing themselves as the ‘border man’ is the common aspect of both the civilians and the guards. The fact that BSF has been planning to recruit local youths from border areas into BSF services<sup>30</sup> also indicate that border people trade between everyday survival practices and state machineries. Recruitment of local civilians into BSF services adds a new dimension to border narratives. Narratives from both sides of the border fit into the larger scheme of border narratives, binding the civilians and the border guards on both sides of the border into a common border milieu, often distinctly different in nature from the non-border people on both sides.

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<sup>27</sup> Moitra, S. (4 March 2013) Shahbag andoloney achhi, barta dilo epar bangla. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/4pgn1.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>28</sup> Staff Reporter (11 March 2010) Hritajaubana Ichhamati r dai bartai par r bashinda der uporeo. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1100311/11jibjagat1.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>29</sup> Chief Commander Omendra Singh of 151 Battalion writes about the ‘Challenges of Border Man’ in the BSF journal *Bagher Garjan*, South Bengal Frontier, BSF (October-December 2012). p. 6, where he points out the duties of the ‘border man’ (BSF) along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border and also the challenges that he faces along the said border, including tackling smugglers and dealing with fence issues, as well as negotiating with non-cooperative civilians.

<sup>30</sup> Staff Reporter (25 March 2013) Daulatpurey tarunder proshikhshan BSFer. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/25mur2.html>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

## VIII. Identification/disidentification

There is often a ‘tendency to confuse the sharing of a culture with the sharing of an identity’.<sup>31</sup> The inhabitants of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border highlight this notion very clearly. Although the inhabitants on both sides of the border share a similar culture with the non-border or mainland inhabitants (Bengalis), the border-status of the border inhabitants gives them a different identity with which the non-border inhabitants often do not identify. They are, as Homi K. Bhabha puts it, ‘estranged unto themselves—in the act of being articulated into a collective body’,<sup>32</sup> resulting in a collective mentality, a unique existence. It is the border inhabitants on both sides of the border who share the same culture (Bengalis) as well as the same identity (that of being border people)—which renders them similar to one another across the border (identifications)<sup>33</sup> and different from their respective countrymen (disidentification).<sup>34</sup> Disidentification is more a process of ‘distancing oneself from a certain identifying character’ and less of an ‘opposite of the process of identification’.<sup>35</sup> Disidentification, as Jose Esteban Munoz suggests, is a ‘strategy of resistance against dominant paradigms of identity’<sup>36</sup>— not in the form of a counter-stance but rather as a positive action,<sup>37</sup> enabling one to understand this unique mentality as something not limited to traditional binaries.<sup>38</sup> Border mentality and the border culture of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border is, thus, much more than a mere reaction to state-centric narratives; it is a discourse in itself, often spontaneous in origin and as important in understanding the nuances of state-building as are the state-centric narratives. While still being attached to history, border culture evolves its own politics of resistance, as Suzanne Bost very aptly puts it. This (border

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<sup>31</sup> Vila, P. (ed.). (2005) *Border Identifications: Narratives of Religion, Gender, and Class on the U.S. Mexico Border*. In Earle, D., Campbell, H. and Peterson, J. (eds.). *Inter-America Series*. Austin: University of Texas Press. p.4.

<sup>32</sup> Bhabha, H. (2007) *The Location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge. p.33.

<sup>33</sup> Feghali, Z. (2011) Re-articulating the New Mestiza. *Journal of International Women’s Studies*. Special Issue. 12(2). pp. 61-74.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*; For a detailed understanding of Munoz’s idea, see Munoz, J.E. (1999) *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Cultural Studies of the Americas, Volume 2. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>38</sup> Feghali, 2011, p.72.

culture) ‘transcends its potentially tragic origins and enables resistance to hegemony, a critique of imperialism, and powerful reinterpretations of self and culture’.<sup>39</sup>

Moving beyond its origin in the partition, the border culture along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border does, indeed, re-interpret traditional notions of socio-cultural, political and economic identifications and disidentifications. The border creates an invisible but nevertheless strong bordering between the border and non-border people on both its sides. Because of its spatial uniqueness, life and living strategies of the border and non-border people differ vastly. Nor are the non-border people much aware of the ways of life of the border people. This creates a distinct difference in mentalities and ways of thinking between them. ‘The very word “border” evokes a Bangladesh-like feeling and indicates a distanced existence from the Indian mainland’,<sup>40</sup> is how a border civilian on the West Bengal side expresses this angst. For the non-border people, there is always a (stereotypical) sense of mystery and criminality associated with the border, which often varies in nature from the real experiences of the border people.

The idea of identification/disidentification questions and contests the purpose of the border as set out by the state by revealing the socio-spatial distance between the border and non-border people within a single bounded territory while questioning, at the same time, the role of the state as both the political and ‘social container’.<sup>41</sup>

In the specific context of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, such identifications/disidentifications acquire an altogether unique dimension given the complex web of social relations on both sides of the border and the territorial predicaments of the states concerned. Evidences for the complex nature of such socio-cultural identifications along this border have been provided in Chapter 2 (enclave narratives) and Chapter 3 (ethno-religious and caste narratives). The illegal use of Bangladeshi telecommunication networks on the West Bengal side of the

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<sup>39</sup> Bost, S. (2003). *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850-2000*. Athens, London: University of Georgia Press. p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Bilal, farmer and resident at Basirhat (North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, 17 January 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Taylor, P. F. (2003) The State as Container: Territoriality in the Modern World-System. In Brenner, N., Jessop, B., Jones, M. and Macleod, G. (2003) *State/Space: A Reader*. Malden, Oxford: Blackwell. p.107.

border due to the unavailability or poor service of Indian networks,<sup>42</sup> as well as for cross-border links,<sup>43</sup> provides an interesting example of how the border people question the purpose of the border and, hence, the sovereign presence of the state at its delimitations. It also points towards a disidentification from the non-border people (non-border people do not have easy alternate access to networks of neighbouring states) as well as towards a subaltern narrative of gaining access to resources which are available to non-border people (availability of a choice of networks) but denied by the state at its peripheries.

The idea of the centrality of the border in the life of the borderlanders, as propounded by Van Schendel,<sup>44</sup> also finds resonance in the identification of the border people on both sides and their virtual disidentification from the non-border people for whom the borderland symbolises a marginal space. Cognitive behavioural patterns of the border people, yet again, become decisive in such identification/disidentification narratives along this border.

## IX. Contribution to knowledge

My research contributes to the existing understanding about borderlands, in general, and the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, more specifically, by:

- Re-emphasising the significance of understanding the territorial predicaments of a state against the backdrop of a globalised world. Border narratives indicate that in spite of increasing cross-border global transactions, the territorial delimitations of states do not lose their importance in any way. Right from the premises of partition to the recurrence of the border in current narratives, territorial predicaments act as the foundation. In fact, visible and active cross-border interactions along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border hint at

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<sup>42</sup> Rakshit, R. (17 April 2010) Simante BSNL sangket mele na, bhorsha Bangladesh. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1100417/17desh6.htm>. [Last accessed: 17 September 2013].

<sup>43</sup> Use of Bangladeshi SIM by border civilians on the West Bengal side and vice versa is a common occurrence along this border.

<sup>44</sup> Van Schendel, 2005, p.363.

the territorial predicaments of the borderland, rather than hinting at the blurring of borders. Studies such as this, as Joachim Blatter argues, 'offer useful insights into contemporary processes of state spatial restructuring and the changing operations of borders, boundaries, and territories in global capitalism.'<sup>45</sup>

- Showing that in an age of increased championing for borderlessness and globalisation, the border still holds its place as the most important factor in questions of state sovereignty. It shows how borders and border narratives are still the linking factors between states. It reflects how through the process of being meeting spaces for people with similar experiences from both sides, borders question the sovereignty of the state, question its role as the 'bordered power container'<sup>46</sup> and its 'ability to contain social relations'.<sup>47</sup> Border narratives, as seen along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, reveal the changing nature of the border from being the 'front lines' of sovereign states to socioeconomic 'contact zones' for neighbouring societies.<sup>48</sup> And it does this not through refusal or even through active resistance but through everyday survival practices. This is what makes it difficult for the state to either gauge or discipline such practices.
- Contesting the dominant understanding of the roles of the state machinery and the people. The roles of the state as the active user and the people as the passive victims are put to test by the perceptions and negotiations of the border people. Ways of *surviving the border* and *surviving on the border*, which the border people innovate upon, question the prevailing understanding of the roles of the state and its people. The role of the border guards adds a significant dimension to the interpretation of the border as a *thirdspace* of lived reality. The

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<sup>45</sup> Brenner, Jessop, Jones and Macleod, 2003, p.14.

<sup>46</sup> Giddens, A. (1985) *The Nation-State and Violence*. Cambridge: Polity. pp.49-53

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50.

<sup>48</sup> Ratti, R. (1993) Spatial and Economic Effects of Frontiers: Overview of Traditional and New Approaches and Theories of Border Area Development. In Ratti, R. and Reichman, S. (eds.). *Theory and Practice of Trans-border Cooperation*. Basel: Helbig and Lichtenhahn. pp. 23-54.



inviolable nature of the borders<sup>49</sup> is violated by the sheer re-interpretation and reproduction of the border space by the border people. Narratives of the border guards in the scheme of reproduction of the border space hint towards their location within the border milieu rather than simply locating them as parts of the state machinery or as detached from the survival narratives of border civilians.

- Suggesting new indices for a better understanding of borderland culture. It stresses on the need to take 'border psyche' into consideration in studies of borderlands. Instead of merely looking at borders as issues of bilateral affairs between states and as delimitations of the state's sovereignty, it calls for an observation of how border people use their common sense in strategizing their everyday survival needs. Such an understanding might be useful for states in envisioning their governmentalities<sup>50</sup> while framing the regulations and policies for administering their borderlands. The designs of the state and the demand of the so-called mainland people for securing the borders and making them impermeable need to consider the 'everyday transnationality'<sup>51</sup> of the lives of the border people. Borderlanders, as Van Schendel puts it, are active partners in the re-territorialisation of states<sup>52</sup> and, hence, as important as any other part of the state as factors in the narratives of state-building.

The sheer range of media coverage of border issues in West Bengal and Bangladesh hints at the ways states choose to address or ignore their borders. Border questions are state concerns for both India and Bangladesh. This means that any decisions regarding the borders need to be ratified and passed by the parliaments of the states. Moreover, the border guards of both India and Bangladesh are centrally deployed paramilitary forces. Bangladesh does not have a provincial governance structure, unlike India which has a central government and separate state (provincial)

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<sup>49</sup> Taylor, P. F. (2003) The State as Container: Territoriality in the Modern World-System. In Brenner, Jessop, Jones and Macleod, 2003, pp.105-106.

<sup>50</sup> Burchell, G., Gordon, C. and Miller, P. (eds.). (1991) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>51</sup> Van Schendel, 2005, p.379.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.385.

governments in its twenty-eight<sup>53</sup> odd states. The central government in Bangladesh addresses situations in any of its borders, be it with India or Myanmar. However, India prioritises its borders according to the sensitivity associated with them, which thus makes the Pakistan and China borders more important strategic concerns than the Bangladesh one. The Bangladesh border has become concern of the provincial governments of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura over the years. The central government in India concerns itself with the Bangladesh border only when it becomes a national issue related to security, terrorism, etc. The recent debates over the enclave exchange bill or the recurrent ones about the use of the Bangladesh border for terrorist activities by fundamentalists are examples. It is no wonder that border issues of the India-Bangladesh border are far more frequently addressed in the Bangladesh national and regional media than in the Indian media, especially the national media. Regional media is seen to report Bangladesh border issues in West Bengal, Assam and other Indian provinces with which Bangladesh shares a border. But the national media hardly reports Bangladesh border issues unless it is of national importance. Thus, while border disputes between West Bengal and Bangladesh affect the electoral agendas of the central government of Bangladesh, they only affect the electoral agendas of the provincial government of West Bengal in India.<sup>54</sup> It also explains the lack of interest and awareness among the common people in India about the India-Bangladesh border (especially the non-border inhabitants of the Indian state) than those in Bangladesh, irrespective of their

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<sup>53</sup> On 30 July 2013, the ruling Congress party resolved to request the Central Government to make steps in accordance with the Constitution of India to form a separate state of Telengana (which will be the 29<sup>th</sup> state of the Republic of India)—an elaborate process to be completed in 122 days or at least four months. The proposal is still to be approved by the Parliament and the President of India before the new state is officially formed.

<sup>54</sup> Staff Reporter (20 July 2013) Dhruvo shimanto chukti cheye chap Dhakar. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/20bdesh1.html>. [Last accessed: 5 September 2013]; Staff Reporter (23 July 2013) Sholshimanto chukti dhruvo rupayoney chap dichhey Dhaka. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/23bdesh4.html>. [Last accessed: 5 September 2013]; Roy, R. (21 July 2013) Padma jagchhe: Flood shelter-I lokhhyo vote-er Nirmal Char-er. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/archive/1130721/21mur1.html>. [Last accessed: 5 September 2013]; Roy, R. (22 July 2013) Vote-e nei, tobu Char Meghna tei mon porey Mohishkundar. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.anandabazar.com/22mur2.html>. [Last accessed: 5 September 2013]; Das, R. (30 July 2013) Chhitmahaler issue te Trinomool ke lal card dekhale voter-ra. *Samakal*. [Online] Available from: [http://www.samakal.net/print\\_edition/details.php?news=17&view=archievy&y=2013&m=07&d=30&action=main&menu\\_type=&option=single&news\\_id=359419&pub\\_no=1484&type=](http://www.samakal.net/print_edition/details.php?news=17&view=archievy&y=2013&m=07&d=30&action=main&menu_type=&option=single&news_id=359419&pub_no=1484&type=). [Last accessed: 5 September 2013].

residence near or far away from it. This perhaps is the most visible evidence of the kind of disidentification between the border and the non-border people discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

## X. Significance of the research

My research, thus, contributes towards a better understanding of border lives and border culture, especially in a complex border such as the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. It contributes towards border studies, as being primarily empirically constructed narratives based on experiences, rather than seeing the borders as mere political delimitations of a state. It also enhances the understanding of unique spatial identities in the context of borders and helps to identify certain aspects of these identities that are not seen in other spatial contexts. The pattern of ‘scalar structuration’<sup>55</sup> produced by the border people constitutes an integral part of the study of such spatial identities, since it is the border where the national scale of a bounded landscape (fences, surveillance mechanisms, customs offices, intelligence services, passport systems) encounters the geographical imaginations of borderlanders.<sup>56</sup> It is, thus, the border that sees its people moving between the national and state-defined rhetoric of citizenship, inclusion, the portrayal of patriotism (in the form of claims for citizenship, territorial inclusion, hoisting of flags, concerning oneself with security questions of the state) and everyday local narratives of survival along it. The negotiations between the civilians and the border guards provide still more interesting narratives of the encounters. The mosaic of scalar structuration and spatial narratives produced in the process of these encounters ‘may crystallise into scalar fixes’,<sup>57</sup> thus reflecting the production of a spatial consciousness. The encounters create geographies of ‘inclusion/exclusion and domination/subordination which empowers some actors, alliances and organisations at the expense of others, according to criteria such as class, gender, race/ethnicity and nationality’.<sup>58</sup> The preceding chapters highlight certain aspects of such encounters.

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<sup>55</sup> Brenner, N. (2001) The Limits to Scale? Methodological Reflections on Scalar Structuration. *Progress in Human Geography*. 25(4). pp. 591-614.

<sup>56</sup> Van Schendel, 2005, p.369.

<sup>57</sup> Brenner, 2001, p.606.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.608.

Instead of being considered merely as a transition zone, or even a crush zone between centres of sovereign territorial power, borders need to be considered in their own right.<sup>59</sup> The smaller stories of the borders need to be considered as the missing links between the grand narratives of state building, transnational linkages and globalisation discourses— or *statism*<sup>60</sup>, as Ranajit Guha phrases it. Through their complexity, these smaller narratives question the statist discourses and are, thus, often ‘drowned in the noise of statist commands’.<sup>61</sup> The everyday small stories of border lives not just form the missing links between statist discourses, but also ‘provide us with valuable clues as to the magnitude and limitations of the most powerful mental construction of the present-day world, the nation-state’.<sup>62</sup> These significant missing links, thus, call for careful exploration and patient understanding. The preceding chapters have been an attempt to that end.

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<sup>59</sup> Van Schendel, 2005, p.366.

<sup>60</sup> Guha, R. (1996). The Small Voice of History. In Amin, S. and Chakrabarty, D. (eds.). *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. p.1.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>62</sup> Van Schendel and Baud, 1997, p.242.

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## Appendix 1

### Sample Questionnaire

The interviews have been semi-structured in nature. Beginning with the following questions, the rest of the interviews have been left to follow their own course, depending on the issues and the socio-cultural, gender and economic profile of the interviewees. Questions to the Bengali-speaking participants have been asked in Bengali by myself. English has been used when interviewing non Bengali-speaking border guards.

#### General questions for all the participants

- Your name (will be anonymised in the text, unless otherwise specified)
- Your age
- Your profession
- Information on the rest of your family members
- Your views on daily life at the borders
- Ways in which the presence of the borders affect your social and cultural activities
- How do you perceive the people on the other side of the border?
- Does your belonging to a particular caste, class, gender or religion has any direct influence on you being an inhabitant at the border?
- How does the border affect your livelihood or how much are you dependent on the existence of the borders for your livelihood?
- Are you aware of any cross-border smuggling activities in this area?
- If yes, what is your view on that?
- What is your view on the decision to fence the entire stretch of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border? How has it effected your live and livelihood?
- Do the border guards interact with the local population? If so, in what ways?
- What are the customs, rituals, festivals which you observe and celebrate? Does the presence of the border affect these observation/celebration in any way?

- Do you have myths, stories, anecdotes and recollections regarding the people on the other side of the border which are prevalent among the local population?
- What have you heard from your elders and older members of your community about life before and after partition?
- How has the partition and the border affected your local customs and festivals?

Specific questions for the border guards (besides the above-mentioned ones)

- Which region do you belong to?
- Do you understand the language of the local people?
- What is your view on the decision to fence the entire stretch of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border? How has it affected the local people as well as your duties?
- Do you interact with the local people? If so, in what ways?
- Do you, in any way, collaborate with the local NGOs towards improving the conditions of the local people, in terms of the basic health and sanitation, education, food and water supplies?
- What are the indices you use to differentiate the people on either side of the border, given that they dress similarly, speak the same language and observe similar customs, rituals and celebrate similar festivities on either side?



## Appendix 2

### Brief description of interviewees

(The names of all the interviewees have been anonymised, unless specified otherwise, to protect their identity)

Sl. No	Name	M /F	Description	Date of Interview	Place of Interview	Language	Transcription availability
1	Subodh Majumdar	M	Resident of a border town on the West Bengal side. Employed in a currency-counter in the border land port area. Serves visitors travelling between India and Bangladesh	20 September 2011	Petrapole border, North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
2	Ujjal Ghosh	M	Resident of a border town on the West Bengal side. Runs an X-Ray centre. Volunteer in the local branch office of a civil and human rights organisation—‘APDR’. Aware of the profile of the local border population	20 September 2011	Petrapole border, North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
3	Apurba Kumar Biswas	M	Untrained medical practitioner in a border town on the West Bengal side. Treats local border people, including migrant labours from Bangladesh. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste	20 September 2011	Petrapole border, North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
4	Prasanta Mondol	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side.	21 October 2011	Char Meghna, Hogolberia, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes

			Cultivates land situated in a <i>char</i> Belongs to a Scheduled Caste				
5	Sabitri Mahato	F	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Volunteer in Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in the local branch office. Owns land outside the fence. Belongs to a Scheduled Tribe	21 October 2011	Char Meghna, Hogolberia, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
6	Rupali Mahato	F	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Belongs to a Scheduled Tribe	21 October 2011	Char Meghna, Hogolberia, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
7	Balaram Mahato	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Farmer with fenced-out farmland. Victim of abuse by Bangladeshi miscreants from outside the fence. Belongs to a Scheduled Tribe	21 October 2011	Char Meghna, Hogolberia, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
8	Hare Krishna Mondol	M	Original resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Member of the local <i>Panchayat</i> for the last 15 years. Aware of the local population profile. Victim of abuse by BSF. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste	21 October 2011	Char Meghna, Hogolberia, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
9	Nabendu Biswas	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side.	21 October 2011	Shikarpur, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes

			Agricultural labourer. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste				
10	Name withheld	M	BSF official in a BSF camp on the West Bengal side. Experienced in apprehending smugglers and seizing smuggled items	21 October 2011	Shikarpur BSF camp, Nadia district, West Bengal	Mix of English and Bengali	Yes
11	Name withheld	M	BSF official in a BSF camp on the West Bengal side. Experienced in apprehending smugglers and seizing smuggled items	21 October 2011	Shikarpur BSF camp, Nadia district, West Bengal	Mix of English and Bengali	Yes
12	Name withheld	M	BSF official in a BSFcamp on the West Bengal side. Experienced in apprehending smugglers and seizing smuggled items	21 October 2011	Shikarpur BSF camp, Nadia district, West Bengal	Mix of English and Bengali	Yes
13	Bijoy Mondol	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Member of the local village <i>Panchayat</i> . Witness to interaction between the locals and the border guards. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste	21 October 2011	Shikarpur, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
14	Jasimuddin Mondol	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Owns farmland outside the fence. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste	22 October 2011	Mathurapur village, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
15	Imtiaz Mondol	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Owns farmland outside the	22 October 2011	Mathurapur village, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes

			fence. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste				
16	Dhiman Biswas	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Owns farmland outside the fence. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste	22 October 2011	Mathurapur village, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
17	Banchharam Mondol	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Ex- <i>Pradhan</i> of <i>Panchayat</i> . Mediates between local border people and BSF officials. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste	22 October 2011	Mathurapur village, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
18	Jamuna Saha	F	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Owns farmland outside the fence	22 October 2011	Mathurapur village, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
19	Kuddus Rahman	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Chairman of the local committee of a political party. Lives in an unfenced border area which is marked by several <i>chars</i> along the border river of Padma	22 October 2011	Jaykrishnapur village, Jalangi, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
20	Samsuddin Mondol	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Owns farmland outside the fence. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste	22 October 2011	Nowadpur village, Jalangi, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
21	Name withheld	M	BSF official in a BSF camp on the West Bengal side. Experienced in	22 October 2011	BRC-pur camp, Murutia, Nadia district, West Bengal	Mix of English and Bengali	Yes

			apprehending smugglers and seizing smuggled items				
22	Biplab Ganguly (Original name)	M	Officer-in-Charge of a Police Station in a border area on the West Bengal side. Experienced in handling cases of border smuggling and illegal infiltration	22 October 2011	Murutia Police Station, Nadia district, West Bengal	Mix of English and Bengali	Yes
23	Dayamay Dutta	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Refugee from Kushtia, Bangladesh. Teacher in a local primary school. Mediates between BSF and local people in emergency situations like illness of a local villager, etc.	24 October 2011	Teipur, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
24	Binoy Pramanik	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Cultivates farmland outside the fence	24 October 2011	Teipur, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
25	Narendranath Ghosh	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Minister of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from a constituency. Mediates between the locals, the BSF, the NGOs and the human rights organisations	24 October 2011	Karimpur, Nadia district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
26	Rashid Hossein	M	Resident of a border village on the West	8 November 2011	Lalgola, Murshidabad district, West	Bengali	Yes

			Bengal side. Father was a refugee from Rajshahi, Bangladesh. Assists the BSF in auctioning the seized items in return for a nominal payment		Bengal		
27	Name withheld	M	BSF official in a BSF camp on the West Bengal side. Newly posted in the region and in the process of getting acquainted with the local language and the local people	8 November 2011	Asharidoho BSF camp, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	English	Yes
28	Mithun	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Victim of BSF abuse	9 November 2011	Ramnagar village, Lalgola, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
29	Md. Rashid Haq	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Cultivates farmland outside fence. Victim of BSF abuse	9 November 2011	Ramnagar village, Lalgola, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
30	Pranabesh	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Cultivates farmland outside fence. Affected by fence restrictions	9 November 2011	Ramnagar village, Lalgola, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
31	Nasiruddin	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Affected by fence restrictions	9 November 2011	Ramnagar village, Lalgola, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
32	Name withheld	M	Official in the Intelligence Department (ID) of BSF on the West Bengal	9 November 2011	Asharidoho BSF camp, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes

			side. Aware of the local population profile				
33	Name withheld	M	BSF official in a BSF camp on the West Bengal side. Experienced in the hazards of border patrolling	9 November 2011	Asharidoho BSF camp, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
34	Name withheld	M	BSF official in a BSF camp on the West Bengal side. Experienced in handling smugglers. Aware of various types of smuggling practices	9 November 2011	Ramnagar BSF camp, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	English	Yes
35	Amol	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Farmer. Victim of BSF abuse	11 November 2011	Kodalkati, Lalgola, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
36	Ganga Ghosh	F	BSF constable in a BSF camp on the West Bengal side	11 November 2011	Lalgola, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
37	Bimala Haldar	F	BSF constable in a BSF camp on the West Bengal side	11 November 2011	Lalgola, Murshidabad district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
38	Subir Chandra Sil	M	Original resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Witness to cross-border smuggling	4 October 2011	Maheshpur village, Mohanpur-Kumarganj, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
39	Nirmal	M	Original resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Aware of smuggling practices	4 October 2011	Maheshpur village, Mohanpur-Kumarganj, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
40	Hafizul	M	Original resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh	5 October 2011	Dahala-Khagrabari enclave belonging to Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and	Bengali	Yes

					lying within Panchagarh district of Bangladesh		
41	Iqbal Hussein	M	Original resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh	5 October 2011	Dahala-Khagrabari enclave belonging to Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and lying within Panchagarh district of Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
42	Rebecca Khatun	F	Resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh. Has been a resident for the last 15 years	5 October 2011	Dahala-Khagrabari enclave belonging to Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and lying within Panchagarh district of Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
43	Md. Ghulam	M	Field Officer of the Credit programme of Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC), working in an Indian enclave in Bangladesh. Responsible for deciding the eligibility of the people for micro-credit	5 October 2011	Dahala-Khagrabari enclave belonging to Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and lying within Panchagarh district of Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
44	Momin Rezzak	M	Jute farmer in an Indian enclave in Bangladesh. Cultivates jute inside an Indian enclave and sells the product in the neighbouring Bangladeshi market	5 October 2011	Kajaldighi enclave belonging to Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and lying within Panchagarh district of Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
45	Md. Riazul Islam	M	Resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh. Chairman of Bewladanga Enclave Union.	5 October 2011	Bewladanga enclave belonging to Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and	Bengali	Yes



			Mediates inter or intra-enclave disputes		lying within Panchagarh district of Bangladesh		
46	Sufiya Rahman	F	Resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh. Witness to sexual abuse on women of the enclaves	5 October 2011	Bewladanga enclave belonging to Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and lying within Panchagarh district of Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
47	Sajidul Islam	M	Resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh	5 October 2011	Kajaldighi enclave belonging to Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and lying within Panchagarh district of Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
48	Sabina Akhtar	F	Resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh. Daughter of the enclave Chairman. Student in a neighbouring Bangladeshi school	5 October 2011	Bewladanga enclave belonging to Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and lying within Panchagarh district of Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
49	Hasan Rahman	M	Resident of an Indian enclave in Bangladesh. Migrant from Bangladesh	5 October 2011	Garati enclave belonging to Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and lying within Panchagarh district of Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
50	Shakil Ali	M	Resident of a Bangladeshi territory located beside an Indian enclave in Bangladesh. Victim of violence by miscreants. Owns land inside the enclave	5 October 2011	Garati enclave belonging to Cooch Behar district of West Bengal and lying within Panchagarh district of Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
51	Jarina Begum	F	Resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India, which has been connected to the	6 October 2011	Angarpota enclave belonging to Lalmonirhat district of	Bengali	Yes

			mainland by the <i>Tinbigha</i> Corridor. Has been living in the enclave for the last 16 years. Husband works as a van-driver		Bangladesh lying in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal		
52	Akbar Alam	M	Resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India, which has been connected to the mainland by the <i>Tinbigha</i> Corridor. Farmer	6 October 2011	Angarpota enclave belonging to Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh lying in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
53	Rabiul Islam	M	Resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India, which has been connected to the mainland by the <i>Tinbigha</i> Corridor. Farmer	6 October 2011	Angarpota enclave belonging to Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh lying in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
54	Shahid Haq	M	Resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India, which has been connected to the mainland by the <i>Tinbigha</i> Corridor. Farmer	6 October 2011	Dahagram enclave belonging to Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh lying in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
55	Name withheld	M	BGB Customs official on the Bangladesh side. Handles seized smuggled items	6 October 2011	Burimari-Changrabandha border checkpost, Patgram, Lalmonirhat district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
56	Hasan-ul	M	Resident of a border checkpost area on the Bangladesh side. Witness to interaction between border guards and the locals	6 October 2011	Burimari-Changrabandha border checkpost, Patgram, Lalmonirhat district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
57	Jewel	M	Resident in a border checkpost area on the Bangladesh side. Drives	6 October 2011	Burimari-Changrabandha border checkpost, Patgram, Lalmonirhat	Bengali	Yes

			van. Witness to interaction between border guards and the locals		district, Bangladesh		
58	Advocate Dilwar Hussein (Original Name)	M	Resident of a border town on the Bangladesh side. Public Prosecutor in Dinajpur High Court. Experienced in handling cases of cross-border human trafficking	7 October 2011	Dinajpur town, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Mix of Bengali and English	Yes
59	Nilufer Rahman (Original name)	F	Resident of a border town on the Bangladesh side. Lawyer in Dinajpur District Court. Works in the human trafficking cell of the Law Association, Dinajpur. Has been handling trafficking cases since 1997	7 October 2011	Dinajpur town, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
60	Md. Zia-ul Haq	M	Resident of a border town on the Bangladesh side. Lecturer in the district government college. Extensive research regarding foreign convicts held in jails and 'push-back policy' of border guards	8 October 2011	Dinajpur town, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Mix of Bengali and English	Yes
61	Sheena Akhtar	<i>Hijra</i>	Smuggler operating in a border port area on the Bangladesh side	8 October 2011	Hili border Land Port, Hili, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
62	Rajib	<i>Hijra</i>	Smuggler operating in a border port area on the Bangladesh side	8 October 2011	Hili border Land Port, Hili, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
63	Name withheld	M	BGB official in a border checkpoint on	8 October 2011	Hili BGB camp, Hili Land Port, Hili,	Bengali	Yes

			the Bangladesh side. Experienced in apprehending smuggled items		Dinajpur district, Bangladesh		
64	Rumela Begum	F	Smuggler in a border Land Port area on the Bangladesh side. Victim of drug smuggling	8 October 2011	Hili border Land Port, Hili, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
65	Monojit Burman	M	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Cross-border drug smuggler	9 October 2011	Hakimpur, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
66	Name Withheld	M	BGB official in a border checkpoint on the Bangladesh side. Experienced in apprehending smuggled items	9 October 2011	Hakimpur BGB camp, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
67	Jumaira	F	Resident of a border Land Port area on the Bangladesh side for the last 30 years. Witness to cross-border smuggling and victim of BSF abuse	9 October 2011	Hili, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
68	Fakruddin	M	Original resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side	9 October 2011	Raibhat village, Bowladar, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
69	Abdul Mondol	M	Original resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste	9 October 2011	Haripukur village, South Dinajpur district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
70	Julekha	F	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side	9 October 2011	Raibhat village, Bowladar, Dinajpur district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
71	Bilal	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Student. Has family farmland outside the	17 January 2012	Basirhat, North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes

			fence				
72	Md. Tafikul Islam	M	Original resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Cultivates farmland outside the fence	17 January 2012	Panitor border, Basirhat, North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
73	Kalipada Ghosh	M	Resident of a border town on the West Bengal side. Volunteer in the local branch office of a human rights organisation—APDR. Involved in the movement for the betterment of wages and working conditions of the labourers in the brick-kilns in the border areas	17 January 2012	Panitor village, Basirhat, North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
74	Name withheld	M	BSF official on patrolling duty at the border on the West Bengal side. Responsible for checking identities of people crossing the border gate	17 January 2012	Panitor village, Basirhat, North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal	Hindi	Yes
75	Riazul Mondol	M	Original resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Teacher in a local Primary School. Affected by border regulations. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste	24 January 2012	Balurghat, South Dinajpur district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
76	Bina Pramanik	F	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Cook in the mid-day meal programme of the local	24 January 2012	Ramjivanpur village, South Dinajpur district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes

			primary school. Husband works as a mechanic in a border land port				
77	Ranjit	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Head of the local village <i>Panchayat</i> . Owns farmland outside the fence Mediates between the local people and the BSF	24 January 2012	Jamalpur village, Hili, South Dinajpur district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
78	Minu Bagdi	F	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Agricultural labourer who, along with her husband, works in fields outside the fence. Belongs to a Scheduled Tribe	24 January 2012	Mathurapur village, Hili, South Dinajpur district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
79	Nikhil Bagdi	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Agricultural labourer in agricultural seasons. Runs a 'band party' at other times. Affected by BSF violence. Witness to cross-border smuggling. Belongs to a Scheduled Tribe	24 January 2012	Mathurapur village, Hili, South Dinajpur district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
80	Hirak Kanti Munshi	M	Original resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Secretary of the local committee of a political party. Witness to cross-border smuggling practices. Mediates	24 January 2012	Balurghat, South Dinajpur district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes

			between the local people and the BSF. Actively involved in issues of betterment of wage and working conditions of the labourers in the brick-kilns of the border areas				
81	Subir Biswas	M	Resident of a border town on the West Bengal side. NGO worker. Works with people affected by border regulations, fencing and trafficking	25 January 2012	Tiyor, South Dinajpur district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
82	Md. Riyaz Mondol	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Cultivates farmland outside the fence. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste	25 January 2012	Dahapara village, South Dinajpur district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
83	Parbati Mohanto	F	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Cross-border smuggler. Belongs to a Scheduled Caste	25 January 2012	Ghunapara-Dhumron village, South Dinajpur district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
84	Gourab Sarkar	M	Original resident of a border Land Port area on the West Bengal side. Owns an export-firm. Affected by both local smugglers and BSF abuse	25 January 2012	Hili border, South Dinajpur district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
85	Animesh	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Cultivates farmland	26 January 2012	Bindol, North Dinajpur district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes

			outside fence. Victim of theft of crops by Bangladeshi miscreants				
86	Md. Anisur	M	Original inhabitant of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Victim of abuse by miscreants from neighbouring villages	15 March 2012	Madhya Mashaldanga enclave belonging to Kurigram district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
87	Md. Iqbal Ali	M	Original inhabitant of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Involved in the movement for enclave exchange between India and Bangladesh	15 March 2012	Madhya Mashaldanga enclave belonging to Kurigram district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
88	Fatema Bibi	F	Resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Victim of abuse by miscreants from neighbouring areas	15 March 2012	Madhya Mashaldanga enclave belonging to Kurigram district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
89	Saraswati Das	F	Resident of an Indian counter-enclave within a Bangladeshi enclave in India	15 March 2012	Nazirhat village, Dinhata, Cooch Behar district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
90	Bhabani Burman	F	Resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Farmer	15 March 2012	Bakhalir Chhara enclave belonging to Kurigram district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
91	Bimal Burman	M	Original resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Involved in the movement for enclave	15 March 2012	Bakhalir Chhara enclave belonging to Kurigram district of Bangladesh and lying within	Bengali	Yes



			exchange between India and Bangladesh		Cooch Behar district of West Bengal		
92	Krishna Chandra Roy	M	Original resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Involved in the movement for enclave exchange between India and Bangladesh	15 March 2012	Bakhalir Chhara enclave belonging to Kurigram district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
93	Phulmoni	F	Resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Witness to smuggling activities across the enclaves	16 March 2012	Bakhalir enclave belonging to Kurigram district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
94	Nirendranath Burman	M	Deputy-Head of <i>Panchayat</i> of an Indian village located beside a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Helps enclave residents unofficially	16 March 2012	Kalmati Village, Dinahata, Cooch Behar district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
95	Gokul	M	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side. Farmer. Victim of BSF violence	16 March 2012	Kalmati Village, Dinahata, Cooch Behar district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
96	Md. Iqbal Ali Sheikh	M	Resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Victim of BSF violence	16 March 2012	Purba Bakhalir Chhara enclave belonging to Kurigram district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
97	Md. Kamal Hussein	M	Original inhabitant of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Farmer. Victim of abuse by the neighbours	17 March 2012	Karala enclave belonging to Kurigram district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
98	Md. Karim Baksh	M	Resident in a Bangladeshi enclave in India.	17 March 2012	Karala enclave belonging to Kurigram	Bengali	Yes

			Farmer. Victim of abuse by the neighbours		district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal		
99	Saif Ali	M	Original resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Farmer. Victim of abuse by neighbours and BSF	17 March 2012	Karala enclave belonging to Kurigram district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
100	Md. Anisur Miah	M	Resident of an Indian village located beside a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Witness to abuse of the enclave residents by his fellow villagers	17 March 2012	Dinhata, Cooch Behar district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
101	Kamal Debnath	M	Original resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Farmer	17 March 2012	Shibprasad Mustafi enclave belonging to Kurigram district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
102	Suren Burman	M	Original resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Farmer. Victim of violence by miscreants from neighbouring areas. Involved in the movement for enclave exchange between India and Bangladesh	17 March 2012	Shibprasad Mustafi enclave belonging to Kurigram district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
103	Md. Ziauddin Miah	M	Original resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Farmer	18 March 2012	Kismat Batrigach enclave belonging to Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali	Yes

					Bengal		
104	Dalim Bibi	F	Resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India for the last 35 years	18 March 2012	Batrigach enclave belonging to Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali (with a hint of local dialect)	Yes
105	Momina Bibi	F	Resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India	18 March 2012	Batrigach enclave belonging to Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali (with a hint of local dialect)	Yes
106	Palashbani Daba	F	Resident of a Bangladeshi enclave in India. Belongs to a Scheduled Tribe	18 March 2012	Batrigach enclave belonging to Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh and lying within Cooch Behar district of West Bengal	Bengali (with a hint of local dialect)	Yes
107	Diptiman Sengupta (Original name)	M	Resident of a border town on the West Bengal side. Secretary of BBEECC—working towards the execution of enclave exchange between India and Bangladesh	19 March 2012	Dinhata town, Dinhata, Cooch Behar district, West Bengal	Bengali	Yes
108	Binoy Krishna Mullick (Original name)	M	Resident of a border town on the Bangladesh side. General Secretary and Executive Director of a human rights organisation—'Rights Jessore', which works mainly in human trafficking	8 February 2012	Jessore town, Jessore district, Bangladesh	Mixed—Bengali and English	Yes
109	Purnima	F	Resident of a border village on the	9 February 2012	Pragpur village, Daulatpur, Kushtia district,	Bengali	Yes

			Bangladesh side. Victim of violence by miscreants from the West Bengal side of the border. Husband is a farmer		Bangladesh		
110	Kohinoor	F	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Witness to cross-border smuggling	9 February 2012	Dharmadah village, Daulatpur, Kushtia district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
111	Sharifuddin	M	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Witness to cross-border smuggling	9 February 2012	Ramkrishnapur village, Daulatpur, Kushtia district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
112	Md. Ismail	M	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Involved in cross-border smuggling of drugs and cattle. Witness to BSF's involvement in illegal practices	11 February 2012	Matila village, Maheshpur, Jhenaidah district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
113	Humayun	M	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Cross-border cattle smuggler	11 February 2012	Samanta village, Maheshpur, Jhenaidah district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
114	Lata	F	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Witness to cross-border smuggling	11 February 2012	Nepar Mor village, Maheshpur, Jhenaidah district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
115	Jahan	F	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Witness to cross-border smuggling	11 February 2012	Koya village, Jivannagar, Chuadanga district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
116	Bani	F	Resident of a border village on the West Bengal side	11 February 2012	Baghadanga village, Maheshpur, Jhenaidah district,	Bengali	Yes

					Bangladesh		
117	Bikram	M	Resident of a border Land Port on the Bangladesh side. Witness to cross-border interactions between local inhabitants	12 February 2012	Lakshmidari village, Bhomra border, Satkhira district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
118	Bibek	M	Resident of a riverine border village on the Bangladesh side. Witness to BSF violence	12 February 2012	Debhata village, Satkhira district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
119	Ratan	M	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Cross-border cattle smuggler. Victim of BSF violence	12 February 2012	Debhata village, Satkhira district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
120	Javed	M	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Cross-border cattle smuggler. Victim of BSF violence	12 February 2012	Khanjiya village, Debhata, Satkhira district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
121	Name withheld	M	BGB official posted at a BGB camp on the Bangladesh side	12 February 2012	New Sripur BGB camp, Debhata, Satkhira district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
122	Abedin	M	Resident of a riverine border village on the Bangladesh side. Witness to cross-border smuggling and BSF violence	14 February 2012	Kaikhali village, Shyamnagar, Satkhira district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
123	Hari	M	Resident of a riverine border village on the Bangladesh side. Works as agent for cattle smuggling and illegal infiltration	14 February 2012	Kaikhali village, Shyamnagar, Satkhira district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
124	Asif	M	Resident of a riverine border village on the	14 February 2012	Kaikhali village, Shyamnagar,	Bengali	Yes

			Bangladesh side. Cross-border cattle smuggler		Satkhira district, Bangladesh		
125	Niru	F	Resident of a riverine border village on the Bangladesh side. Witness to cross border smuggling	14 February 2012	Durmukhhali village, Shyamnagar, Satkhira district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
126	Aurangzeb	M	Resident of a riverine border village on the Bangladesh side. Witness to cross border smuggling	14 February 2012	Shibpur village, Kaligunj, Satkhira district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
127	Name withheld	M	BGB official in a BGB camp on the Bangladesh side. Apprehends smugglers and seizes smuggled items	15 February 2012	Goga BGB camp, Agro-Bhulot, Sharsha, Jessore district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
128	Tofazzal	M	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Cross-border cattle smuggler	15 February 2012	Agro-Bhulot village, Sharsha, Jessore district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
129	Name withheld	M	BGB official in a BGB camp on the Bangladesh side. Apprehends smugglers and seizes smuggled items	15 February 2012	Goga BGB camp, Agro-Bhulot, Sharsha, Jessore district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
130	Imran	M	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Cross-border drug smuggler	15 February 2012	Goga village, Sharsha, Jessore district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
131	Alamgir	M	Resident of a border village on the Bangladesh side. Trader in the local cattle market	15 February 2012	Putkhali village, Sharsha, Jessore district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
132	Name withheld	M	BGB official in a border Land Port on the Bangladesh side. Witness to	15 February 2012	Benapole BGB camp, Benapole Land Port, Jessore district,	Bengali	Yes

			cross border smuggling practices		Bangladesh		
133	Asha	F	Resident of an Indian <i>ghoj</i> in Bangladesh. Affected by regulations and restrictions of movement	16 February 2012	Daulatpur village, Chougachha, Jessore district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
134	Jahangir	M	Resident of an Indian <i>ghoj</i> in Bangladesh. Farmer. Affected by regulations and restrictions of movement	16 February 2012	Kabilpur village, Chougachha, Jessore district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
135	Bijon	M	Journalist with a local daily in a border town on the Bangladesh side. Reports extensively on the India-Bangladesh border	16 February 2012	Jessore town, Jessore district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
136	Pradip		Resident in an Indian <i>ghoj</i> in Bangladesh. Affected by regulations and restrictions of movement. Affected by the use of the <i>ghoj</i> as a transit by the smugglers	16 February 2012	'Tero ghor' Indian <i>ghoj</i> , Putkhali, Jessore district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes
137	Ashabul Hossein	M	NGO worker and journalist with a Bengali daily	16 February 2012	Jessore town, Jessore district, Bangladesh	Bengali	Yes