ARTICLE
SPECIAL SECTION

Everyday Lives in Peripheral Spaces: A Case of Bengal Borderlands

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This article (part of a special section on South Asian border studies) is an ethnographic study of the daily lives and narratives of borderlands communities in the border districts of Cooch Behar and South Dinajpur along the West-Bengal–Bangladesh border. In order to emphasise the significance of borderland communities' narratives and experiences to our understanding of borders, this paper explores the idea of borders as social spaces that are inherently dynamic. In attempting to understand the idea of borders through everyday lives of people living in borderland communities, this paper highlights tensions and contradictions between hard borders manifested through securitization practices, and the inherently dynamic social spaces that manifest themselves in people's daily lives. Conceptually and thematically, this paper is situated within and seeks to contribute to the discipline of borderland studies.

Key Words: Borders, Social Spaces, Security, Bengal Borderlands, South Asia

Introduction

This paper is a critical reflection on the everyday narratives of identity discourse in context of India–Bangladesh borderlands. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in border districts of Cooch Behar and South Dinajpur in the state of West Bengal, this paper brings out the tensions and contestations between the fluid nature of dynamic social processes and the rigidity of hard national boundaries. Political borders have long been the focal point of academic research dominated by Realist approaches in International Relations (Laine 2015). In Realist ontologies, the State is taken to be the reference point-considering political borders only in their geographical capacity for state (Herz 1957; Gilpin 1981).

However, this security-centric understanding of borders has come to be countered by contemporary scholars of border studies who argue for borders to be viewed in their capacity of being social places, defined by several markers of social identity, such as culture and ethnicity (Schendel 2002; Paasi 2005; Newman 2006). Taking the idea of borders as dynamic social spaces (Paasi 1998), and a realm of contestations between rigid and security centric approaches by state and inherent nature of fluidity of borderland spaces (Konrad 2015), this paper, therefore, brings forth these dynamic exchanges through everyday life experiences and narratives of borderland communities.

The idea of everyday narratives is used here as a crucial site of the dynamic tensions that exist between the social narratives of identity, spaces, and belonging, and the meta nation-state narratives of identity, security, and control over resources in the borderland regions (Misra 2014; Scott 1998). These tensions are central to the disciplinary concerns of borderland studies and are fundamental for understanding the problems of nation-state building and the experiences of communities living in South Asian borderland regions, in particular the Bengal Borderland region.

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Located in the disciplinary debates about fluid social spaces and border making processes in post-colonial South Asia, this paper looks at the ways in which local narratives of identity and fluid social spaces clash with state driven homogeneity building narratives that focus on border management practices and national identity narratives. These state centred narrative are used as tools of controlling the social fluidity that has existed in the peripheral spaces in contradiction to the nation-building processes in post-colonial times (Misra 2014; Krishna 1998). Borderlands represent a zone of tensions between state and society where the notions of identity, loyalty and belonging are fluid (Gellner 2013; Schendel 2005; Sur 2021). Thus, the discourses of national identity become entangled with state securitization and border management practices to legitimize securitization of borderlands and reinforce the homogeneity of nation at the periphery through narratives of homogeneous national identity (Donnan & Wilson 1999; Vaughn-Williams 2012). By looking at narratives and everyday lives of people in borderlands through narrative research, this paper traces out different dimensions of the development of local social narratives and dynamics of its clash with meta-national narratives of identity and nation-building.

This article focuses on everyday life and narratives to understand the dynamics of hard borders imposed by the state, and fluid social life of people. In the Post-colonial people, the state has become central to defining everyday lives of people in borderlands (Chatterjee et al. 2021). However, the agency of the people in negotiating hard and securitized borders cannot be underestimated (Chaturvedi 2000). Therefore, the focus on everyday life and individual narratives of how people in borderlands negotiate, interact, and make sense of hard border resulted in a variety of border management and securitization practices. This paper uses ethnographic methods to understand the everyday lives of people. Everyday lives, in this paper, therefore become a methodological tool to access the ways people make sense of the hard borders.

The paper is organized into five sections. The first two sections begin with the conceptual debates in border studies, focusing primarily on the two central elements of space and territory, as well as how the State instru-mentalizes the boundary-making discourse to reinforce certain binaries that are central to maintaining the state's sovereign character and the perception of a homogenous community. The third section then goes on to explore the idea of nation-building and how the State, through practices of territoriality and othering, attempts to construct a common homogenous narrative of identity, its leap from being a geographical container to a social space marked by a sense of belonging, home to people who live there. This section also contextualizes how these processes and ideas bear upon the lives of people in Bengal Borderlands. The fourth section brings out ideas and narratives from an ethnographic field study to discuss the tensions between security-centric state practices as informed by core-periphery differences, and everyday lives of people living

in two districts: Cooch-Bihar and South Dinajpur in West Bengal. The final section concludes the paper.

I. Spatial Borders and Everyday Lives in Borderlands

This section explicates the critiques of Realist ontologies of borders and sets out how borders get entangled with inherently fluid social spaces as part of the territorial compartmentalization of nation-states. The category of space here is a relevant conceptual tool whereby the dynamics of how borders come into tensions with social processes in borderlands across the world (Massey 1998). Borders, especially in South Asian Region, were drawn in spaces where the boundaries between societies were fluid, resulting in fragmentation despite the commonalities in terms of social identities (Paasi 1998, 73).

The spatial shift in social sciences and international relations came in the context of increasing globalization processes in the Post-Cold war era. Globalization has made cross-border flows of people, goods and ideas easier hence, globalization was argued to be the trigger to the demise of hard borders and, in some cases, even nation-states. Yet, territorial nation-states have been more resilient than it was thought in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union (Paasi 1998, 74-76). To understand the resilience of territorial nation-states, the spatial shift in question has to be situated in an understanding of how space is organized politically (Brenner et al. 2009). This helps explicate why and how controlling spaces, politically and militarily, is crucial to understand how uncontainable social processes and spaces in borderlands come into tension with security-centric border management and security practices of nation-states.

The notion of space has a longstanding geographical influence, possibly owing to the fact that it is the idea of physical space that is arguably most tangible to us, becoming a starting point of discussions on space more often than not (Massey 1998). The very organization of human society is fundamentally spatial in nature (Massey 2005). The organizing pillars of modern state, the notions of territory and sovereignty, stem from the political organization of space and its impact on human behaviour. Edward Soja points out the 'localization' of human activities, that is, such activities occupy an extent of physical space on earth, much like the creation of boundaries that sovereign states engage in (Soja 1971, 3-11). The differences between such physical spaces essentially define human activities and their consequences, space being the focal point. But there are differences between the term 'space' and 'place' (Soja 1971; Harvey 1991).

The difference in meaning and significance, of course, varies across disciplines, shaped by the context it is being used for. For example, Andrew Riggsby (2009) notes that in order to bring forth the distinction that is often drawn between the respective ideas of space and place, there

are two crucial parameters that play a role: the degrees of constructed-ness, and the degrees of extension. That is, while 'space' is taken to be given, the idea of place is taken to be constructed, in terms of experiences or interpretations. While a 'place' is particularly located, the idea of 'space' is more universal and somewhat abstract (Riggsby 2009, 153-160). Caroline Rosenthal argues, "spaces are not significant in and by themselves but are produced as intelligible entities by how we organize them, by the social practices and symbolic ways in which we set them off from other spaces. The city, for instance, only gains significance as a space with distinct characteristics when separated from rural or unsettled" (Rosenthal 2011, 11). Referring to the concept of national iconography, Rosenthal notes that 'nations define themselves spatially against other nations not only through geographic borders, history, and politics, but also through the specific ways they have found to classify and represent spaces' (Ibid). Therefore, space is central to political organization, i.e. territorial nation-states, but it encompasses social, political, and geographical dimensions rather than just the physical manifestations of space outlined in Realist ontologies.

The shift from physical space to social space in context of borders is one marked by representations and imageries (Schendel 2005). Border here becomes a dynamic process, an institution that is to provide to people some sort of identity that can link them back to the idea of 'nation', the identity manifested through social and cultural practices (Schendel 2002; Ghosh 2016). In view of the discussion above, the contemporary border studies scholars focus on borders that have gone from being physical space to social space. This shift from geographical space to social space marks the departure from traditional perspective in the contemporary trends in border research (Vladivostok & Wastl-Walter 2011). David Newman argues that borders are lines. It is the spatial shift in the conceptualization of that allows for the consideration of creation of borderlands, one that Newman argues, "…is an area within which people residing in the same territorial or cultural space may feel a sense of belonging to either one of the two sides, to each of the two sides, or even to a form of hybrid space in which they adopt parts of each culture and/or speak both languages" (Newman 2011, 37).

The tensions between security and border management practices and the everyday lives of people in fluid social spaces, therefore, emerge from the very nature of borders as socially and politically constructed. These tensions, as they are analysed in the next sections, play out in the everyday lives and narratives of people living in borderlands. Looking at borders as processes that are in constant motion rather than rigid lines therefore allows us to explicate and understand these tensions through the examination of the daily lives of people and their interactions with political borders, and the administrative and security apparatuses to manage it (Schendel 2005). Additionally, the very idea that there exist tensions between fluid social spaces and hard borders in borderlands make the concept of 'bordering' crucial (Houtum 2016). To put

it another way, these tensions point towards inherent dynamic nature of borders. As Paasi notes, "Boundaries are both symbols and institutions that simultaneously produce distinctions between social groups and are produced by them. Nevertheless, they not only separate groups and social communities from each other but also mediate contacts between them" (1998, 80). The practice of bordering is one controlled by the state and one aimed at marking differences, distinguishing 'self' from the 'other'. The fluidity of social spaces and dynamic nature of borders make everyday lives of people a crucial site.

II. Territory and Territoriality in Borderlands: Securitization, State, and Everyday Lives

The tensions between hard borders and fluid social spaces can be further located in particular state practices that produce territory. This section contextualizes how a constructed notion of borders as social processes, developed in borderland studies literature, can help us understand the everyday practices of states and institutions namely police, the Border Security Force (BSF), and other agencies with respect to how they regulate and control fluidity of 'social' in borderland regions (Sur 2021). These state practices are often tasked to regulate fluidity and, therefore, they come into conflict with local society. Since they are governed by the dominant ideas and notions of borders as physical, social, and cultural barriers as manifested in Realist ontologies. In realist ontology, the territoriality of state is defined as "in that substratum of statehood where the state unit confronts us, as it were, in its physical, corporeal capacity: as an expanse of territory encircled for its identification and its defense by a "hard shell" of fortifications. In this lies what will be here referred to as the "impermeability," or "impenetrability," or simply the territoriality of the modem state" (Herz 1957). Therefore, the bounded territoriality of the state works as a hard shell of political community is central to Realist ideas of borders.

By linking the ideas of space and its centrality to the political organization of space developed in the first part of this section, this paper attempts to bring in two other crucial concepts, namely territory and territoriality, to contextualize how state practices like securitization and administration, and the security apparatus function in borderlands. However, it is not to deny that there are security challenges to maintain order, especially at the peripheries. Rather the emphasis here is on the way these state practices and apparatus work in contradiction to the fluid nature of social spaces in borderlands. This also helps us understand why problems of borderland communities are linked to the tensions and contradictions between hard shell of territoriality manifested in securitization practices and inherently fluid social spaces in borderlands.

In the borderland districts, administrative agencies and the police have exceptions to the rules and regulations. In border districts, the Union Home Ministry gave the Border

Security Force (BSF) jurisdiction over areas lying within 15 kilometres from the international border which allows them policing power beyond the scope of other police and administrative agencies. In October 2021, this range of BSF jurisdiction was expanded to up to 50 kilometres to reflect the increasing securitization of border areas (Tiwary 2021). As a result of these exceptions, border communities in these districts face higher securitization of their daily life.

Borders are the building block of territory (Carter & Goemans 2011; Elden 2013), which, in turn, plays a defining role in bringing about the physical existence of modern sovereign states. According to Robert Sack, territoriality is a spatial strategy employed by modern nation states to exert control over people and the society they constitute; thus, translating essentially into the geographical manifestation of social power (2009). For traditional International Relations scholars, particularly Realists, "the territorial state acts as the geographical 'container' of modern society, that is, the boundaries of the state are also considered to be the boundaries of political and social processes" (Agnew 1994). State borders are to not only limit the sovereignty of the state, but also its subjects, in order to emphasize a binary difference between 'us' and 'them'. Keeping in line with the state-centrism in the discipline of International Relations, territory has primarily been understood not only as one of the central defining traits of the modern nation state but also a self-evident category, leading to noticeable gaps in conceptual clarity (Herz 1957).

This 'territorial instinct' to defend and protect is part and parcel of the territorial state, and has led to what John Agnew calls the 'territorial trap' (1994), a Realist tendency that has dominated the boundary discourse in International Relations. Stuart Elden explores the emergence of territory as a concept and notes that physical territory and the control over it as a variety of spatial dimensions have consistently played a crucial role in the conduct of human affairs even in the early stages of modern society (Elden 2013). While territorial disputes have received attention from scholars with regard to the development of International Relations, such developments have been studied in geographical contexts with territory being assumed as a self-evident term. Elden notes that the historical dimension of the term is neglected when territory is assumed to be a category understood as an outcome of state territoriality (2013).

Territory has been a major instrument employed by modern states to construct the intended image of a homogenous sovereign entity (Agnew 1994; Elden 2013). In this regard, the production of geographical knowledge in different institutional settings and the quality of such knowledges varies from one site to another. Given the impact of globalization as a phenomenon that has propelled the re-conceptualization of boundaries and borders, it is important to note the dependence of globalization upon the accumulation of certain kinds of geographical knowledge and the evolution of geography as a distinctive way of knowing permeates social thought and political practices. The state apparatus itself has become a primary site for the collection and analysis of geographical information. David Harvey observes that geographers, while situating themselves within such frameworks of geographical knowledge production, may unconsciously become tacit agents of state power. The interests of individual states can even lead to the production of specific kinds of geographical knowledge that serves respective national interests. Such an impact of geographical influences in the discussion of territory has also been a major factor in its conceptualization, a factor particularly significant in the context of borderland studies as borderlands became the sites for the production of geographical knowledge (Harvey 2007).

However, whether conceptualized in terms of physical space or the more contemporary social interpretation, borders are still part of the state's strategy of exercising control over its subjects and borders draw their meaning from the way the State instrumentalizes them. The process of bordering is put into practice by the States not only to establish its sovereignty, but also to demarcate its own population from the 'Other'. Borders are constructed and constantly reproduced through conscious social and legal discourses (Tripathi & Chaturvedi 2020). While borders separate one sovereign territory from another, Newman notes, demarcating a boundary is not only about the lines on the map which are then transformed into physical fences and walls that mark a tangible sign of separation. He argues that not only are borders products of social and political discourses, they are also created by those in the position of power who think that they are representing a collective identity (a set of people sharing the same social, political, or cultural marker) and thus these power elites create border to keep out those who do not share the same trait (Newman 2011). These political ontologies of borders, territorial nation-state, and consequent territorial practices reflect in state practices through the administrative and security apparatuses namely, the BSF, the police, and the special security agencies in borderland regions. These organizations use processes of securitization and other border management practices. Security practices and institutions, however, do not exist in a vacuum. Rather they are located within social-cultural and political ideas and practices of where the boundaries between 'self' and 'other' lie. The next section brings out how dominant ideas of national identity and national community come into play in the borderland regions with reference to Bengal Borderlands.

III. Between Hard Borders and Fluid Social Spaces: Situating Bengal Borderlands

The fieldwork for this study was conducted in border districts of West Bengal, namely Cooch Behar and South Dinajpur. It emphasizes the similar characteristics between these regions, namely the social-cultural demography and the political history of both West Bengal and Southern Assam along the border with Bangladesh. Therefore, it is appropriate for the purpose of generalization to take

a broader definition of Bengal Borderlands rather than a narrow definition. The creation of Bengal Borderlands is entangled with the socio-cultural and political history of South Asia in the Post-1947 period. Therefore, national identity and border making and unmaking are entangled with each other. As in other parts of the world, borders have played a crucial role in the construction of national identity in Bengal borderlands (Schendel 2002; Penrose 2002). The modern nation-states follow the line of thinking that all individuals should belong to a nation, and all citizens of one such nation should have a national identity in common. Essentially, nationalism is an ideology employed by the State to bring about such a homogeneous identity that people within a certain territory would subscribe to (Anderson 2016). Katherine Verdery (1999), in the context of Europe, provides detailed insights on the concept of nationalism and how it relates to states' conceptions of border. She points out the idea of a nation has become a category, a symbol within the international system of states where it not only defines the relations between a state and its subjects but also the relations between states themselves. A nation is the link between a state and the subjects it governs.

Borders as markers of identity between self and other are central to current conceptualization of nationalism (Penrose 2002, 7-8). Modern national territorialities differ from traditional territorialities in the sense that modern nationalism draws emotional or latent feeling from the territory under its control (Penrose 2002, 7). David Kaplan and Guntram Herb emphasize the impact of geography on the discourse of national identity and argue that "nationalism is an intrinsically geographical doctrine in that it seeks to conjoin a self-identified group of people—a 'nation'—within a sovereign, bounded geographical area-a 'state'" (Kaplan & Herb 2011, 349). Hence, the kind of national identity portrayed at the geographic core of the state differs vastly from the one at the peripheries.

Borderlands represent contradictions and tensions between the nation-state and local society (Gellner 2013). Resolving these contradictions and tensions are at the heart of nation-state building processes in the borderlands. Nation-state building processes involve claims of nation-state transcending local communities or those communities which cut-across social and cultural boundaries (Emerson 1960; Smith 1991). Hence, nation-state and nationalism attempt to fold local communities within themselves through border making and larger national identity reinforced through national identity discourses and the securitization of borders. In fact, it is the securitization of borderlands as national space. National identity discourses legitimize and reinforce the securitization of identity and border management practices to smooth the social fluidity into the larger national identity.

Nationalism also singularly focuses on homogeneity (Krishna 1994; Ghosh 2016). It aims not only at bringing people together but also excludes those subscribing to a different identity other than the national one. However,

such a homogenizing project does not work the same way in the region of South Asia as it does in Europe. Borders in Asia arising out of interstate rivalries were in stark contrast with those of Europe in the sense that, according to the prevalent European scholarship, the Asian region previously lacked the notion of a linear boundary-the states were not bounded by a marked line. Instead, the area controlled by one particular state would slowly pan outwards. That is, states in Asia did not conceptualise boundaries in linear terms, in contrast with how Europe saw it (Iwashita & Boyle 2015).

Borders and identity have a complex relationship. Identity can be defined with reference to geography, society, culture, and other dimensions. International Relations essentially focuses on national identity in understanding borders due to statist bias. However, the concept of identity becomes significant to understand in the context of borderlands because "borders can construct, challenge or even reaffirm national identity" (Kaplan & Herb 2011). Thus, identity is defined within the sovereign territory of the nation-state and territory becomes the central axis through which identity carries meaning. However, given that territory is socially constructed, the relationship between identity and territory remains unstable and dynamic (Ruggie 1993; Forsberg 2003).

Discourses of national identity, the securitization of fluid social spaces in borderlands, and border management practices attempt to construct a stable and fixed idea of the border that demarcates the boundaries between self and other. Kaplan and Herb note that, "without a stable boundary to demarcate a particular nation, national identity cannot really be conceived. Without the presence of a nationalist territorial ideology, national identities must always contend with their geographic manifestations" (Kaplan & Herb 2011).

In the specific case of South Asia, state borders on the other hand, struggle with 'cartographic anxiety' (Krishna 1994). Sankaran Krishna refers to 'cartography' as representational practices with regard to society, culture, and other elements that go beyond the geographical mapping of a state that render meaning to the idea of a 'nation', thus forming a link between the sovereign territory and the people that make it a nation. The struggle between the identity dimensions of a former colony and that of a newly formed state is manifested in aggressive and violent nation-building processes. The boundary lines that are drawn on the physical map, "geo-coding" as it is officially recognized, does not always reconcile with the on the ground reality, often turning borderlands into volatile conflict zones.

In his book 'Seeing Like a State', James Scott notes the modern nation-states' tendency to clearly project where one nation ends and another begins, is an embodiment of high-modernist tragedy (Scott 1999). These arguments clearly portray the statist bias in Realism that perceives nations as spatially contiguous entities, in keeping with

the nationalist imagination. In post-colonial societies, the boundary lines drawn by the colonial rulers are not in sync with the social history or cultural setting of that region. Norms of spatial rationality are overlooked as physical boundaries cut across social markers. Like in the case of the Radcliffe Line in 1947, the boundary divided the region of Bengal on the basis of religion, leaving large numbers of both communities on either side of the boundary which in turn resulted in blurring the notions of inclusion and exclusion. Shankaran Krishna further notes that:

> At the same time, people who live along borders are wont to regard this latest discursive universe of nationality and territoriality as, at a minimum, one more minefield to be navigated safely, or—better—one to be profited from. The encounters between the state and the people along frontiers is suggestive of the contested and tortured production of sovereign identity. Ultimately, cartographic anxiety is a facet of a larger postcolonial anxiety: of a society suspended forever in the space between the "former colony" and "not-yet-nation." This suspended state can be seen in the discursive production of India as a bounded, sovereign entity and the deployment of this in everyday politics and in the country's violent border (1994, 508).

Such insecurities are only further triggered by the nature of borders in South Asia, what Suba Chandran calls 'rigid, porous, simple and open' (Chandran & Rajamohan 2007). He points out that borders in South Asia are often an artificial imposition and a historical anomaly as most of them were created and imposed by the colonial rulers (Chandran & Rajamohan 2007). Managing borders that were products of interest to the previous power-holders has led to a practical dilemma, giving rise to border disputes that still remain unresolved after decades as the states in South Asia struggle with reconciling post-colonial realities with their colonial legacies.

However, it is the relationship of the post-colonial states with its peripheral spaces that remains understudied. James Scott notes how the discourse of state-making processes, encompassing all the aspects from trade to territory to governance, has steadfastly made it a point to not acknowledge the resistance it has faced from peripheral regions, in times both past and present. This claim holds true for nearly all the regions, but particularly in the case of South Asia and Bengal Borderlands. The modern Indian state, both colonial and post-colonial, has dealt with people who are deliberately out of its span of control, a history Scott calls anarchist (Scott 1999).

Whilst looking at state-making in South Asia, one has to take note of the difference between people living in the lowlands as opposed to those living in the hills-or the peripheries (Suan 2009, 269). The peripheral space has long been a point of concern for the core-centric state primarily operating out of the lowlands, given that geographical as well as demographic complexities had made most of the peripheral regions inaccessible. However, the resources that

peripheries had to offer were economically too lucrative to pass on, while it also meant the peripheral regions did not need the core, thus affecting the sovereign nature of the State. The borderlands in Eastern and North-Eastern India had long been excluded out of the 'core' imagination, marked by not only different dimensions of identity but also social, cultural, and economic practices vastly different from those of the lowland people. As Sanghamitra Misra (2014) notes, the colonial exploitation of the region's resources implied a massive change in the political, social, and economic space of the peripheries. She goes on to note how the exclusion of peripheral spaces continues to take place even in post-colonial history.

The different societies and communities living on the Bengal borderland are arbitrarily categorized—or worse, clubbed together—the region becoming only a 'frontier' within the larger spaces of Mughal or Colonial Empire. The historical borders are easily allowed to overlap with the contemporary state borders, reflecting the bias of a core-centric imagination that systematically continues to overlook the periphery. Misra (2014) goes on to point out how the pre-colonial spatial order that had earlier categorized the region that fall outside the Western framework of sovereignty (such as ethnic groups co-existing on the principle of shared sovereignty), continues to be ignored by national historians who are unwilling to look beyond a core-centric national imagination, but also the colonial spatial order that was imposed on the region for the sake of reflecting shared history, an element crucial to the project of nationalism.

Attempts at constructing such a homogenous, singular history have steadfastly ignored how the region's social and ethnic fabric were changed during the colonial period, resulting in several ethnic identity conflicts threatening to disrupt post-colonial India's federal establishment. The Radcliffe line that first separated the two nation-states of India and Pakistan, and then Bangladesh since 1971, has been criticised by scholars working on South Asian borders, and particularly the event of Partition, given its irregularities that completely ignored the spatial realities of the region, but also its strategy of dividing the population based on religion (Chatterji 2002; Banerjee 2018). The influx of immigrants crossing this particular border has always remained a central concern in India's border management policies, but it is particularly crucial in the North-eastern region which is already ethnically distinct from the so-called heartland of India. That demographic changed when settlers were invited over to the region to meet economic demands which, in case of both Assam and Tripura, altered the demographic reality of each area.

It is important to point out that the partition of 1947 and its religious nature particularly affects India's border management policies. Although illegal immigrants remain a concern for the state, there is also a strange burden on India to unofficially accept the Hindu political immigrants while keeping out the Muslim immigrants. While the peripheral spaces dealing with the burden of immigrants

do not make distinct divisions on whom they consider an 'outsider', history has not been particularly kind to Muslim immigrants in India. Other bordering states with Bangladesh, such as West Bengal and Tripura also face a large influx of immigrants with the Indian population becoming particularly hostile towards refugees as they are considered 'outsiders' despite sharing mostly similar ethnic markers. Such phenomena expose certain changes in the binary difference between 'us' versus the 'other' as well as insecurities in the peripheral spaces, even within the larger national narratives. Therefore, national identity, security, and border management practices reflected in practices of administrative and security apparatuses on the border come into tension with the fluid nature of social spaces in Bengal Borderlands. The next section further discusses these dynamics through the everyday lives and narratives of communities in Cooch-Bihar and South Dinajpur along India-Bangladesh border in West Bengal State of India.

IV. Everyday Narratives of Borderland Communities: Evidences from Cooch-Bihar and South Dinajpur in West Bengal, India

Having established in the previous sections that there are tensions between fluid spaces and hard borders in borderlands, this section examines these dimensions through everyday narratives and lives of people based on field trips in two districts along India-Bangladesh border. India and Bangladesh share the fifth longest land border in the world, spanning along the vast distance of 4096 kilometres. The Indian state of West Bengal shares the longest stretch of 2217 kilometres with the neighbouring state, a complicated history that goes back as far as the event of Partition in 1947. Part of the field study that this paper draws upon* was conducted from 15 January 2017 to 14 February 2017 in the Mekhliganj sub-division of Cooch Behar district that housed 51 Bangladeshi enclaves prior to the historic Land Boundary Agreement in 2015 (Bhattacharya 2015) [**Figure 1**].

The study was based on informal, open-ended interviews as well as personal interactions carried out by the researcher who spoke to almost eighty people, including both the enclave community as well as members of the local community that are officially Indian citizens. India and Bangladesh shared the largest enclave complex in the world, the count reaching almost 162, including the world's only third-order enclave named Dahala Khagrabari that was an Indian enclave encircled by a Bangladeshi village which itself was located in Indian territory, again encircled by Bangladeshi territory. Swapping of the enclaves resulted in Bangladesh gaining a little over 17 thousand acres of

land, whereas India received a little over 7000 acres, a significant loss of territory from a realist perspective (Banerjee, Basu Ray Chaudhury & Guha 2017).

The second part of the field study was conducted in April 2017 in the Balurghat sub-division of South Dinajpur that houses the Hilli border check post on the boundary between India and Bangladesh. The South Dinajpur district was a direct result of the Partition of 1917 as the erstwhile Dinajpur district was bifurcated into West Dinajpur and East Dinajpur. East Dinajpur became a part of Pakistan while West Dinajpur was subsequently divided into North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur. Balurghat in South Dinajpur lies only a few kilometres away from Hilly border post on the India-Bangladesh boundary. The check post is only a strategic point on the map. In reality, the boundary has literally cut through the area, so on both sides of the border, the town continues to be called Hilli, without any specific national reference to either India or Bangladesh. The Hilli border check post in is located on the border between India and Bangladesh and it serves as a strategic point in cross-border trade between India and Bangladesh. Moreover, as with other border districts, South Dinajpur is a security concern given the illegal smuggling of cattle, and agricultural products like cumin
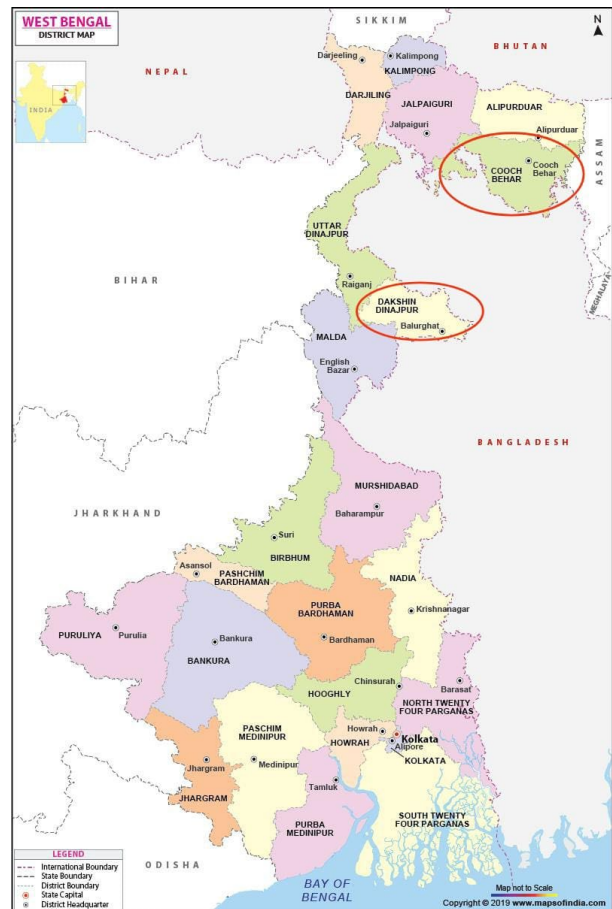

Figure 1. District map of West Bengal, India highlighting districts of South Dinajpur and Cooch Behar.
Source: infoandopinion.com (red ellipses added).

Note

seeds, and some drugs that are banned in Bangladesh, for example, a particular cough syrups (Press Trust of India 2020). There is also a notoriously high trend of sex trafficking which is often carried out through this district and therefore there is a very high surveillance alert all over the area ("Prostitution Corridor on Bangladesh Border: How Human Traffickers Buy Land and Smuggle Women" 2017). During the study in Cooch Behar, the researcher interacted with approximately eighty people who were earlier residents in the Masaldanga enclave, relocated to the enclave resettlement camp in Mekhliganj sub-division of the Cooch Behar district. The spatial characterization of border and its implications reflected itself in how the communities living in the border districts of West Bengal experience it on an everyday basis. In the South Dinajpur border district that runs along almost fifty percent of the boundary between India and Bangladesh, the invisible border continues to cut across families, livelihoods, homes, and properties.

There are almost 70 homes near the Radcliffe line in the whole district of South Dinajpur, which ideally should not be inhabited by any kind of settlements, strategically referred to as no man's yard. But almost three quarters of the district falls into Bangladesh territory, resulting in a scenario where peoples' homes are situated right in the middle of the border. Even the most ordinary livelihood or social practices are in danger of being directly or indirectly facing security threat. This situation has come to mean that peoples' lives here are highly monitored and regulated, disrupting the flow of living and presenting difficult socio-economic conditions.

People in Balurghat have seem to mostly come to terms with the fact that their lives are permanently disrupted by existence of the international boundary (informal interviews with several town residents, March 22, 2017). Most people have their homes so closely located to the Radcliffe line that having two rooms of the house on two different sides of the border is not uncommon. Border here is perceived to the extent of being even invisible, given its historical context and highly porous nature. Residents stated that it is extremely common for them to cross over the boundary and visit the market for grocery shopping on the other side (interview with Sima Das [alias], age 43, March, 2017). 'Crossing' an international boundary for them does not quite hold extraordinary significance since the border was imposed on them. It is extremely crucial to note how the notion of 'crossing' a border differs vastly from the perspective of state and the communities respectively. Residents have complained that the only school in the town had closed down, compelling children to cross over to Bangladeshi territory. The state would consider this movement illegal, but in reality, this movement lacks criminal intent.

The border districts between West Bengal and Bangladesh, due to their highly porous nature, are considered a hub of cross-border drug and sex trafficking. This has resulted in extremely high level of surveillance, disrupting regular life in the area. The BSF guard on duty pointed out that at times approximately 42 kilometres of the Radcliffe Line passes along Hilly Check point, and out of that only about 18 or 19 kilometres are fenced (interview with on-duty BSF patrol guard, March 2017). The unfenced area does not act as any less of a boundary, but the lack of fence makes it difficult to monitor. There were almost 20 homes that had the Zero line through them. This means that not only border shapes the lives here, but even mundane daily routines carried out by the people living here are significantly impacted by the nature and functioning of the border. The residents are required to deposit their identity cards at the gates that run along the Radcliffe line while crossing over to Bangladesh, but given that the gates are only open at certain times, there was an echoing sentiment of frustration and resentment in being bound in their own homes. Most of the residents complained that it is extremely difficult when there is an emergency, and they would have to wait for a senior official to allow them to pass through. Some of the residents confessed to having dual identity cards, issued by both governments for emergency purposes (informal communication with members of local community on condition of confidentiality).

Most of the BSF guards were in agreement that daily life indeed becomes difficult under constant surveillance, and they at times choose to opt for co-existence, allowing some of the known faces to cross over even without an identity card. They stated that in a region as porous as this, it is important to maintain good terms with the local people. The border patrol guards from both sides seemed to happily engage in friendly conversations from time to time. The fluidity of such exchanges between local people, as well as the security forces reflect the idea that borders are no more rigid geographical markers for separation. The boundary between India and Bangladesh is almost over 4000 kilometres long with similar ethnic population on both the sides. The porous nature of Radcliffe Line allows exchanges and movements to take place, and the states cannot enforce overly rigid norms to prevent such exchanges. However, in Cooch Behar at the Tinbigha border post, the high-ranking officials clearly reflected staunch state-centric mentalities where they perceive border strictly in terms of protecting national security and border management is means for them to prevent foreign intrusion into the sovereign territory (open-ended interview with BSF officer-in-charge, March 12, 2017).

The senior government officials at the borderlands receive orders directly from the political and administrative authorities within the central government. The senior government officials at the borderlands strictly follow the security discourse as expressed by the political and bureaucratic sections, and in doing that, they discount the socio-economic motivations or intent of those entering or exiting the territory, making it more difficult for the borderland communities for whom crossing the border is mostly for the purpose of trade and livelihood. Even while the official is aware that not all of them are involved

in illegal activities, they insisted that regulations are uniform for all. On the other hand, the guards in charge of patrolling the border appeared more empathetic towards the common people and their livelihood problems. Most of them maintained that the situation compels most of the locals to adopt illegal means of crossing the border, and the legal boundary indeed overlooked the social and economic practices that have been going on in the region before the boundary was created. They also indicated that regular patrolling guards interact with the locals on a daily basis, and hence their paramount focus is to avoid unnecessary violence and confrontation (conversations with several patrolling guards on both sides of the border, March 2017).

The enclave re-settlement camp in the Mekhliganj subdivision in the Cooch Bihar district of West Bengal houses close to 200 people who are either Indian citizens who chose to have crossed over from Bangladesh or Bangladeshi citizens who chose to stay back in India. Entry in the camp is not allowed without authorized permission from the officials. The residents, when asked about their perception of borders, were of the opinion that the border is something decided upon, and controlled by the political leaders in the interest of the state. In their daily lives, the border only served as a barrier. Their situation was all the more complex given that they were separated from their 'homeland', resulting in estrangement from their families, relatives, and means of livelihood that could have provided them better socio-economic circumstances (informal interviews conducted in the enclave resettlement camp in Mekhliganj, Cooch Behar, February 2017).

Even during the final exchange process, the residents complained that some of them were tactfully held back from joining their choice of country, by means of delaying the distribution of forms or withholding of information. The census survey conducted before the final exchange had also faced a lot of resentment from the residents who were of the opinion that the survey was hastily done and contained incorrect data, in the sense that people who were not present during the survey, even for the day, were not allowed to opt for joining India or Bangladesh as per their choice (interviews with former residents of the Masaldanga enclave, March 2017). Most of the older people considered themselves Bangladeshi, and not Indian. That in turn results in a feeling of abandonment as they confessed how they had never been able to conjure the sense of belonging even after living the better part of their lives in the enclave. The border forced them to stay alienated from their 'homeland' (conversation with seven people aged between 60-65 years, including four males and three females, on condition of confidentiality). The former enclave residents revealed that although they identified themselves as Bengali, as in the ethnic basis of identification.

The camp residents mostly agreed that without the conscious sponsorship of the state that carries itself through the notion of national identity, a common ethnic identity is not enough to bring people together. Things were even more difficult in enclaves as they defy the regular notions of territoriality, sovereignty, and citizenship. The residents were of the opinion that, even though the community right outside the enclave were not much different in terms of everyday lifestyle nor did they project any sense of hostility or unwillingness to engage with them simply on the account of the enclave dwellers being Bangladeshi on paper, the absent tag of Indian citizenship had always been an invisible barrier, always a reminder that they are foreigners on Indian soil (open-ended interviews conducted with former Masaldanga enclave dwellers, February 2017). However, it is interesting to note that almost a majority of them were of the opinion that the act of simple existence is too difficult for them to actually ponder over where they belong to, or what their identity is. The enclave residents seem to have become a category in themselves, defined not by state or ethnicity but their unique circumstances and the struggle of survival in an age where everything is controlled by the approval of state, which also happened to be the one thing they lack. However, the younger generations appeared divided on the question of identity. They questioned the utility of having an ethnic identity without having a national identity to back it up in practice. Those who had grown up in the enclaves did not seem too keen on being identified as Bangladeshis, although they seemed to be consciously refraining from identifying with the state of India. The younger generation seemed to have accepted the sense of alienation from their home country, and offered sincere acknowledgments for the services and amenities offered by India as the host country (conersation with group of 12 people aged between 23 to 35).

The enclave residents are Bangladeshi citizens confined within the territory of India, and in order to conduct even their basic everyday activities for survival and sustenance, they were constantly under scrutiny. As literature widely acknowledges (Paasi 1998; Ackleson 1999; Tripathi 2015), bordering is a process that is shaped by the activities that go on in the border regions, and state borders often do not leave the space for the long-existent social, cultural, or economic practices to be conducted freely, rendering them 'illegal' (Shewly 2013; Jones 2012). As a result, the enclave residents were compelled to resort to illegal means of cross border movement. Respondents said the Indian villages around the enclave boundaries had allowed them to farm on their lands, or graze cattle, or take up other household jobs in order to earn money since the enclave residents lacked the official documents, such as identification documents, required to apply for jobs on Indian territory.

The camp residents seemed in agreement that the exchange treaty had not resulted in a higher quality of life in the camp and the living conditions are in some ways worse than what they faced earlier. They stated that the ration they receive from the government on a monthly basis is nearly not enough for even two weeks. The residents have

little to no cash, and almost no jobs. The government has not offered them any livelihood options or any vocational training that would enable them to find jobs on their own. The younger residents sneak out of the camp to find jobs that do not require official documentations or educational qualifications, but of course those jobs do not pay much. The residents also protested the governments' decision to move the camp from its current location (Singh 2019).

The Mekhliganj Enclave Settlement Camp is set up just a few metres away from the main road, the local market and the bus stop. However, the Government of India has been contemplating to shift the camp to another location a little more interior. The camp residents told the researcher that, the shift would possibly result in further difficulties for them since they have no means of transportation. Mekhliganj, where the camp is located, is only a small town that has the bare essential facilities. The camp residents have no bicycle/motorcycles for transportation purposes. Shifting to an interior location of what is already a small town would mean that they would have to walk to whatever the destination is, regardless of the distance, even for emergency purposes.

V. Conclusions

The everyday lives and narratives of people in borderlands, therefore, are a critical site to examine and understand how discourses of nationalism, identity, and security, as well as securitization and administrative border management practices, affect the day-to-day lives of people located in fluid social spaces. This paper has made an attempt to understand these tensions through ethnographic studies in two districts in the West Bengal state of India adjoining the India-Bangladesh border. The dominant security and identity discourses reflected in the practices of security and administrative institutions namely, the BSF, the police, and other security agencies, and district administration. This is revealed in how the fluid social space and lives of people situated within such spaces are overlooked or looked at as a security threat. For the people residing in these spaces, it is the question of life and livelihood, and most of the times it is these legitimate intentions that lead them to 'violate' rules while crossing the border. As discussed above, even security and administrative officials do acknowledge at times that most people cross the border and 'violate' rules out of sheer necessity of livelihood. But what is ignored and overlooked is that it is the dominant security and identity discourses that shape security practices within these institutions and processes in border regions, and hence, the empathy and sensitivity to the fluidity of social spaces of borders is disregarded by administrative agencies and security forces.

The rigid security centric policies and administrative rules and institutions that regulate borders, however, cause problems that can be solved if there is sensitivity that is often illusive to states in peripheral regions. While legitimate security threats exist in the form of human,

drug, and cattle trafficking, the security and administrative officials and agencies deal with social processes that are 'normal' for people in the borderland regions. Hence, the tensions between security-centric policies and dynamic social spaces in the borderland emerge. These tensions are a characteristic feature of the daily lives of people living right at the border with their house divided into two national territories, trying to earn a livelihood, without a sense of belonging. It is these aspects of everyday lives that make the quotidian an important site to understand and think about borders. This paper, therefore, has made an attempt to understand how everyday lives of people come into tension with border management by administrative and security agencies.

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