

The Bengal-Bangladesh Borderland: Chronicles from Nadia, Murshidabad and Malda¹

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Introduction

Borderland studies, particularly in the context of South Asia are a fairly recent phenomenon. I can think of three works that have made borderlands, particularly the Bengal-Bangladesh borderland as the focal area of their study in the last one decade. Ranabir Samaddar's *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration From Bangladesh to West Bengal* started a trend that was continued by Willem Van Schendel in his *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. Both these books argue that the border is part of larger zone or the borderland that at once constructs and subverts the nation. Samaddar goes beyond the security and immutable border discourse and problematises the borderland by speaking of flows across the border. He argues that such flows are prompted by historical and social affinities, geographical contiguity and economic imperative. People move when their survival is threatened and rigid borders mean little to the desperate. They question the nation form that challenges their existence. If need be they find illegal ways to tackle any obstacle that stand in their path of moving particularly when that makes the difference between life and death. Thereby Samaddar questions ideas of nation state and national security in present day South Asia when and if it privileges land over the people who inhabit that land. Van Schendel also takes the argument along similar lines by stating that without understanding the borderland it is impossible to understand the nation form that develops in South Asia, the economy that emerges or the ways in which national identities are internalized. Van Schendel challenges the glib assumption that globalization has done away with borders and also questions the penchant of analyzing societies, identities and nations as fixed.

Joya Chatterjee in *Bengal Divided* argues that to understand the boundary formed by partition one needs to dig beyond received histories. She is of the opinion that one needs to look at Hindu communalism for the act of partition rather than at Muslim communalism. The Radcliff line she says was not surgically crafted but evolved through other forms of practices. Accepting Joya's arguments about essentials of historical analysis I have tried to push Samaddar's and Van Schendel's arguments further in my book on *Borders, Histories, Existences: Gender and Beyond* where I have suggested that borderlands are often sites of exclusion/inclusion in the context of South Asia. This is because there the national will to exclude and include is played out. I analyse

¹ I am grateful to Shri Rajat Kanti Sur for helping me with the research for this paper. I am also grateful to Shri Ramen Moitro of Shikarpur and Dr Ananda Bhattacharya of West Bengal State Archives.

how state constructs borders and try to make them static. This stasis is disturbed by bordered existences of whom, women, migrant workers, trafficked bodies, victims of HIV/AIDS are all parts whose survival is carried out within a milieu of endemic violence. The tussle in the borderlands is often on the question of who controls. In this paper I want to address an issue that I have not addressed to this extant previously. I want to look at this notion of flows and how that impacts on notions of security. With every election and every census borders become an issue. The concern remains over undocumented migrants and whether their arrival threatens the nation form? In this essay I will address the notion of increasing violence in the borders, fencing as the most recent marker of such violence and how women and the evolution of their relationship to the border is shaped through the discourses of violence. I hope to portray that from the beginning violence makes the borders exceptional albeit this violence may be a continuation from the colonial times but the processes of state formation has changed the nature of this violence. One of the impact of this recent form of violence is to reduce the entire question of gender to women's trafficking and obliterating all other forms of violence in the process. I return then to the study of the Bengal-Bangladesh borderlands in the three districts of Nadia, Murshidabad and Malda and look at the nature of population movement, violence and its effects on women. Instead of meta-narratives I come back to the question of micro politics and see whether present day flows and concomitant violence have any relation to past histories or not and how it impacts on present histories of women.

The Formation of the Three Districts in the Colonial Times

The district of Nadia was and still is situated in the heart of Bengal Delta held within the arms of Ganges and Bhagirathi in the west and Padma running into the Meghna estuary in the east. Nadia was acquired by the British Company under the Diwani grant of 1765. The Nadia Raj 3,151 sq. miles, corresponding with Nadia Sadar and Ranaghat sub divisions with a very small portion of southern Meherpur, at the time of the Permanent Settlement also included Satsikka and the riparian strip east of the Saraswati. In the post Permanent Settlement period the boundary was changed a number of times. I have taken in consideration only the changes with Jessore and Pabna as they pertain to the final boundary settlement. In 1796 the boundary between Jessore and Nadia was demarcated by the Administrative Convenience Order of 1796. For reasons sited as "thefts and decoities" and by the Administrative Orders dated 17 October 1812 thanas Taki and Suksagar were given from Jessore to Nadia and thana Kotchandpur was transferred to Jessore. From police sources it is well known that a number of gangs were operating in Nadia including the Banke Muchi gang, the Dedar Biswas gang, the Janakinagar gang, the Latif Sardar gang, the Brojo Bagdi gang etc.² In 1816 Sunderbans were placed under a Commissioner. In 1854 the Karimpur subdivision was created including Dewanganj, Hurdi and Meherpur thanas and Jalangi and Newada thanas of Murshidabad. Even today it is one of the most problematic border areas and includes Nasirerpara, which a few years back was the most crime prone of all the sub divisions. Beyond it lies Shikarpur today, which is the poorest subdivision in Nadia. In 1863

² *List of Active Decoit Gangs in Bengal 1930*, Government of Bengal, Bengal Police, Calcutta 1932, pp. 186-204. Procured from Hogolberia Police Station, Shikarpur, Nadia.

Kushtia was transferred from Pabna to Nadia. In 1883 Bongaon subdivision was transferred to Jessore. By 1911 Nadia had a population of 1,617,846 and a land area of 2790 sq. miles.³

Murshidabad was the capital of Bengal under the nawabs. The company acquired it by the Diwani of 1765. Murshidabad included the zamindaris of Fatehsing and Chunakhali with a part of Rajshahi and a small portion of Nadia Raj. According to *Hunters's Statistical Account of Bengal*, the British built barracks there incurring the enormous cost of 302270 pounds by 1767. By an administrative order dated 11 January 1793 the portion of Rajsahi zamindari lying west of the Padma river was transferred to the Murshidabad collectorate. In 1824 Murshidabad acquired the Calcapore village from the Dutch. By the Administrative convenience order of 5 March 1839 thana Palsa was transferred to Birbhum. In 1848 and 1855 the thanas Calcapore and Farakabad were transferred from Bhagalpur. In 1875 district boundaries were rearranged and 39 villages were transferred to Birbhum and 7 to the Santhal Parganas. In 1879 thanas Ramporhat, Nalhatui and Palsa was transferred to Birbhum. By 1911 the population of Murshidabad was 1,372,274 and the area in 1916 was 2143 sq. miles.⁴

The 1765 Diwani of Bengal handed over Malda to the British company. At the time of the Permanent Settlement in included the three districts of Rajsahi, Dinajpur and Purnea. By the Administrative Convenience Order dated 25 August 1825 the thanas Rahanpur and Chappae were judicially transferred from Rajsahi. In 1859 Malda got its own Magistrate and Collector. In 1875 Malda was drastically reorganised with 65 villages joining it from Murshidabad and 237 villages being transferred from Dinajpur. In 1879 Malda was transferred from the judgeship of Dinajpur to that of Rajsahi. By 1911 Malda had a population of 1,004,159 and by 1916 Malda had 1899 sq. miles.⁵

From the beginning then it was obvious that the boundaries of these three districts were never fixed but kept evolving. In fact in this period major changes were planned and implemented for a short time. These changes were in nationalist discourses termed as the partition of Bengal. The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal proposed a scheme for the amalgamation of Assam with the Chittagong and Dacca divisions and the districts of Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur. But compared to Bengal, this new province was still extremely small and so it was decided to transfer the districts of Rajsahi, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Malda and the State of Cooch Behar. "These additions were thought by the Government of India to be justified on the grounds that they would constitute a new province with a population of over 31 millions, while leaving Bengal with a little more than 54 millions; that they would provide a clearly defined western boundary corresponding with well recognised characteristics, both geographical, ethnological, social and linguistics, that they would concentrate in a single province the typical Muhammadan population of Bengal"⁶

Although the scheme was cordially accepted by the Governments of Bengal and Assam it was not popular among the Indian leadership. They inspired the common people to revolt partly by sentiment and partly by fear. The zamindars often inspired their tenants to revolt particularly

³ Monmohan Chakrabatti ed. And revised and updated by Kumud Ranjan Biswas, *A Summary of the Changes in the Jurisdiction of Districts in Bengal 1757-1916* (West Bengal District Gazetteers) pp. 48-49.

⁴ Ibid, p. 50

⁵ Ibid, p. 77

⁶ The Gazette of India, (Simla, Saturday, July 22, 1905) in Basudeb Chattopadhyay ed. *Bengal Partitioned* (West Bengal State Archives, Higher Education Department, Government of West Bengal, 2007) p. 5

in Jessore, Khulna, Nadia, Hoogly, Rajsahi, Mymensingh and Pabna.⁷ Soon there was widespread protest against the decision to partition Bengal. In a report on the agitations the Government noted that although agitations were not very severe in Malda there were discontent in the region for having been included in the new province. As for Murshidabad it was said that the agitation was confined to the babu classes though it was agreed that many people took the vow of swadeshi. In Nadia however the anti-partition agitations took serious proportions. In a report it was said that the principal towns and villages of Nadia took up the agitations against the use of foreign goods in earnest. "Pleaders and schoolmasters busied themselves lecturing on the subject. The teachers and boys of several schools raised funds out of which they purchased cigarettes and made bonfires of them. The usual processions of schoolboys and others, bareheaded and barefooted, marched through the principal towns, mourning for the partition of Bengal."⁸ The Goswamis of Santipur and Nawadwip lent weight to these agitations. They used their religious authorities to convince the people to give up the use of foreign sugar, salt and other goods. Soon family priests took up the issue and carried the matter into every home. Even Muslims in Nadia responded to the call against partition. Both Hindus and Muslims tried to supply the people with indigenous dhotis but found it difficult to compete with Manchester cotton. It was from Nadia that report reached the Special Branch that plans is afoot to organise anti-partition protests when the Prince and Princess of Wales came down for their visit. This could be stopped but the partition could not be made viable and was revoked in 1911. Thus experimentation with the borders continued. It would now be essential to look at the flows across the border and to analyse whether the rate of migration to and from these border areas can be termed as a historical trend that was definitive of these borderlands.

In the colonial period higher decadal growth rate was not considered as a threat. In fact lower decadal growth was considered as a marker of the ill health of the population. It was in the decade of 1911 to 1921 that the only time Bengal registered a negative decadal rate because of the influenza and malaria epidemics as is shown by table 1. Arthur Geddes, a famous geographer, concerned by this trend comments in 1931 that Bengal's population was an unhealthy population and so there is not a steady rise in this population. However, even in this situation it was said that one third of Calcutta consisted of people from outside of the province. Therefore migrants were a common presence in this part of the country. Between 1911 and 1931 there is one decade of decrease from the national levels and one decade of increase. "The statistics for 1911-21 showed terrible mortality, and, as was foreseen, those of 1921-31 have compared favourably with them and even with those for the decade before the war. The decade to 1931 may therefore seem to show improvement in health and vitality and hold out promise for the future. Unfortunately we cannot call this a true advance, since unless "reconstruction" is undertaken the coming census of 1941 may belie the apparent recovery shown in 1931. Since the calamities of the war and post-war period of 1914-21 were so great, with their combined economic hardship and epidemics, they carried off many who would normally have lived longer, and whose deaths would only have occurred in 1921-31. Their premature decease before 1921 does not therefore prove the last decade to be more healthy than other periods of peace, but is simply to be accounted for by the

⁷ "The Carlyle Circular" of 10 October 1905 in Basudeb Chattopadhyay ed. *Bengal Partitioned* (West Bengal State Archives, Higher Education Department, Government of West Bengal, 2007) p. 19

⁸ "Report on the Agitation" in Basudeb Chattopadhyay ed. *Bengal Partitioned* (West Bengal State Archives, Higher Education Department, Government of West Bengal, 2007) pp. 75

fact that the war years and those immediately following them were so mortal in their effects; the same is even truer for India as a whole in these two decades. In other words, when the province was suddenly forced to spend itself in deaths in one decade, it paid its debt to Nature ahead of time and was liable for less at the normal time when it came. Yet, unless assets of vitality are being built up meantime, its people are no better off, and the apparent improvement, judged from a fall in the death- rate, is in part illusory.”⁹ However, what is even more important for our purposes is that according to Geddes the density of population and population growth rate is traditionally higher in eastern part of undivided Bengal.¹⁰ After looking at how these districts are administratively constructed it becomes essential to look at the decadal growth rate, percentage variations in population and density of population to understand population movements in these areas. It becomes apparent that the flow of population in Bengal is traditionally from east to west or from areas of excess to areas of lower density.

Population Movement Prior to 1947

There is no data on the decadal growth rate of the population of West Bengal in 1901. However, from 1911 we have the complete data. In 1921 the decadal growth rate was in the negative but from 1931 it is continuously increasing. The decadal growth rate had reduced in 1921 as has already been said because of the famous influenza epidemic. It is clear that for the whole of West Bengal the decadal rate is higher after 1947 than before it. Now let us turn towards the three districts under review.

Table 1: Decadal Variation of Population from 1901-1961

Name		1901-11	1911-21	1921-31	1931-41	1941-51	1951-61
Bengal/W	Total	6.25	- 2.91	8.14	22.9	13.2	32.8
	Rural	5.21	- 4.43	6.98	15.5	8.27	31.8
	Urban	13.70	7.16	15.0	63.6	32.5	35.9
Nadia	T	0.36	-8.26	1.48	16.4	36.1	49.8
	R	0.34	-9.8	0.71	13.8	29.2	49.4
	U	0.52	-0.29	7.51	35.4	78.9	51.5
Murshidabad	T	1.71	-8.99	11.9	19.6	4.61	33.4
	R	1.20	-9.93	12.5	18.8	4.02	32.4
	U	9.98	5.27	4.46	31.2	12.0	44.8
Malda	T	15.72	-1.77	4.99	17.1	11.0	30.3
	R	16.07	-1.69	4.75	16.6	10.4	29.7

⁹ Arthur Geddes, “The Population of Bengal, Its Distribution and Changes: A Contribution to Geographical Method, *The Geographical Journal* Vol 89, No. 9 (April 1937), p.

¹⁰ Ibid

	U	3.80	-4.81	14.4	38.0	29.3	44.4
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Source: Census of India 2001

Table 2: Population of Administrative Division of Nadia (Sadar Subdivisions) 1911-1961

Name	1961	1951	1941	1931	1921	1911
Nadia	1713324	1144924	840303	721907	711706	775986
Sadar Sub.div.	1011808	706616	580657	549684	473728	525692
Krishnanagar	219381	161726	97997	85451	84805	93005
Nawadwip	125142	91380	54208	39962	34120	36914
Chapra	110754	77675	70321	62990	59263	64116
Krishnaganj	52034	38696	34102	28846	28492	35752
Nakasipara	119176	81747	66827	56749	52898	56163
Kaliganj	112325	77305	63391	53247	47414	53122
Tehatta	133803	90402	92539	80083	83441	92270
Karimpur	139193	87685	101272	88717	83295	94350

Source: West Bengal District Gazetteers (Nadia), Gazetteer of India, 1965, p. 103

Table 3: Percentage Variation in Population in Nadia (Sadar Subdivision)

Name	1951- 61	1941- 51	1931- 41	1921- 31	1911- 21	1901- 11
Nadia	+ 49.65	+36.3	+ 16.4	+ 1.4	- 8.3	+ 0.4
Sadar Sub.div.	+ 43.2	+ 22.4	+ 18.1	+ 5.6	- 9.7	- 0.6
Krishnanagar	+ 35.6	+ 72.5	+ 20.9	+ 5.7	- 7.6	+ 4.2
Nawadwip	+ 36.95	+ 68.6	+ 35.6	+ 17.1	- 7.6	+ 4.2
Chapra	+ 42.59	+ 10.5	+ 11.6	+ 6.3	- 7.6	+ 4.2
Krishnaganj	+ 34.47	+ 13.5	+ 18.2	+ 1.2	- 20.3	- 5.1
Nakasipara	+ 45.79	+ 22.3	+ 17.8	+ 7.3	- 5.8	- 1.0
Kaliganj	+ 45.30	+ 21.9	+ 19.0	+ 12.3	- 10.7	+ 0.6
Tehatta	+ 48.01	+ 2.3	+ 15.6	- 4.0	- 9.6	- 1.7
Karimpur	+ 58.74	+ 13.4	+ 14.2	+ 6.5	- 11.7	- 6.5

Source: West Bengal District Gazetteers (Nadia), Gazetteer of India, 1965, p. 104

In Nadia the decadal growth has increased steadily from 1921 onwards. In terms of percentage variation in population the Sadar Subdivision jumps from -9.7 in 1921 to + 5.7 in 1931. Perhaps even more outstanding is the increase to + 18.1 by 1941. If on the basis of Geddes' argument we believe that because many of the people who were meant to die between

1921 and 1931 died in the decade between 1911-21 nothing similar happened between 1931 and 1941 as Table 3 clearly shows. Yet the percentage of population increased by leaps and bounces. In the decade between 1931 and 1941 both Krishnanagar and Nawadwip registered a growth of +20.9 and + 35.6 respectively. In Nadia the decadal variation of population remained less than that of Bengal as a whole until 1941 after which it became more than that of Bengal as Table 1 suggests. Percentage variation of population in Nadia was at its highest by 1961 and after that year it steadily declined. Although Krishnanagar and Nawadwip registered highest growth rate in the decade between 1941-51. Karimpur and the other police stations areas registered highest growth rate in the decade between 1951 and 1961. From 1921 until 1947 one sees a steady increase in population of Nadia district although the more dramatic increases happen later. Between 1951 and 1961 the areas of Nakasipara, Kaliganj, Tehatta and Karimpur registers dramatic increases in growth as Table 1 and 2 suggests. But there is another side to this story. While Tehatta and Karimpur are border areas Nakasipara and Kaliganj are not and yet here the increases are equally dramatic which portrays that in migration from other parts of Bengal and Bihar might also result in increase of population of Nadia district. Also Karimpur and Tehatta registered a much lower growth rate between 1941 and 1951. Yet the growth rate of Nadia did not decrease. This shows that not only Bangladesh border other borders might have been active as well. However, it goes without saying that the years between 1951 and 1961 were years of huge increase in flows into West Bengal.

Table 4: Growth of Population by Sex in Murshidabad in Census Years 1901-2001

Year	Total	Index with 1901 base	No. of Males	No. of Females	Sex-Ratio Per 100 men
1901	1322486	100	648343	674143	104
1911	1345073	102	665227	679846	102
1921	1224181	93	610162	614019	101
1931	1370677	104	683483	687194	101
1941	1640530	124	824483	816047	99
1951	1715759	130	869458	846301	97
1961	2290010	173	1160283	1129727	97
1971	2940204	222	1503427	1436777	96
1981	3697552	280	1887426	1810126	96
1991	4740149	358	2439342	2300807	94
2001	5866569	444	3005000	2861569	95

Source: District Statistical Handbook. Murshidabad, 2007, Govt of West Bengal, p. 7

In the case of Murshidabad the decadal growth rate of 1921-31 was more than that of Bengal as a whole as Table 1 shows. What is even more magnificent is that in the decade between 1921 and 1931 the decadal growth rate of the rural areas of Murshidabad grew more than

that of the urban areas. Murshidabad is one such place where the percentage of rural population is much higher than the urban population. In 1901 the rural population numbered 1246578 to an urban population of 75908 only and until 1951 the rural population formed over 90 per cent of the total population. This is particularly interesting because regions facing sudden migrational onslaughts often have a larger growth rate of urban population as migrants often prefer to live in the cities because jobs are easily available there. In the last few decades that percentage reduced to 87.51 per cent of the total population in Murshidabad. There are evidences that there was population movement prior to 1947 but these trends sharpened after 1947. The sex ratio also slowly declined in the colonial period and that trend continued in the post colonial period. But does migration to rural areas in Murshidabad suggests that migrants were following traditional migrational routes? This is a question of some significance for our study. It should be noted here that as the Table 1 suggests immediately in the aftermath of partition both in Nadia and Murshidabad the urban population growth rate increased dramatically. This increase was matched by the increase of urban growth rate between 1991 and 2001.

Table 5: Percentage Variations in Population of Malda District from Decade to Decade, 1901-1951

	1901-51	1921-51	1872-1921	1941-51	1931-41	1921-31	1911-21	1901-11
Malda Dist.	+55.3	+36.3	+52.7	+11.0	+17.2	+5.0	-1.8	+15.7
Sadar Subdivision	+55.3	+36.6	+52.7	+11.0	+17.2	+5.0	-1.8	+15.7
English Bazar	+33.4	+49.2	-5.6	+12.4	+19.9	+10.7	-14.5	+4.6
Kaliachak	+52.6	+43.3	+32.2	+16.4	+18.1	+4.3	-4.2	+11.2
Malda	+26.7	+14.4	+58.5	+10.1	+11.1	-6.5	-4.9	+16.4
Habibpur	+68.6	+52.3	+58.5	+38.0	+6.8	+3.3	-4.9	+16.4
Patna	+67.1	+42.9	+109.2	+12.5	+20.0	+5.8	-4.2	+22.2
Manikchak	+64.3	+40.5	+106.2	+19.8	+14.7	+2.3	-4.2	+22.2
Kharba	+41.9	+24.8	+53.0	-2.5	+23.3	+3.8	-2.3	+16.4
Harishchandrapur	+112.5	+40.8	+82.5	+1.2	+21.0	+15.0	+25.9	+19.9
Gajol	+38.1	+11.2	+74.7	-0.3	+9.5	+1.9	+2.7	+20.9
Bamongola	+59.5	+28.5	+74.7	+10.3	+15.4	+1.0	+2.7	+20.9

Source: Census Handbook, Malda, 1951, Government of West Bengal, p.xvi

Table 6: Balance of Migration from Murshidabad to Maldah. 1891-1921 and 1951

	1891	1901	1921	1951
Balance of Migration from Murshidabad to Malda	-9,318	-7,162	-20,232	+7,597

Source: Ranabir Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation*, p. 172

Notes: +shows excess of immigration over emigration.
-shows excess of emigration over immigration.

As for Malda a similar pattern can also be observed here. There is a long tradition of both in and out migration from Malda as table 7 suggests. The decadal growth of 1931 to 41 was greater than that between 1941-51 as table 1 shows. In the case of Malda both in migration and out migration is more from contiguous districts. From other districts it is much lesser in the pre 1947 period as can be seen from table 7. The migration of large groups of women may perhaps be due to reasons of marriage. There is no evidence that this might be due to trafficking. Immigration and emigration between Malda and Murshidabad was a common phenomenon as clear from table 6. By 1951 in Malda English Bazar and Habibpur became the primary entry points. They had been the entry points from 1921 onwards showing linkages between pre and post 1947 migration pattern.

Table 7: Migration between Malda and other Districts of Bengal during 1891-1921 and West Bengal in 1951

Year	Immigration							
	From Contiguous		From other Districts		To Contiguous Districts		To other Districts	
	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>
1891	28,247	23,164	3,616	3,204	18,060	15,091	1,478	613
1901	33,995	33,093	14,927	7,428	11,887	12,779	1,224	688
1911	17,000	18,000	3000	1,000	11,000	10,000	1,000	1,000
1921	18,000	17,000	2,000	1,000	11,000	9,000	1,000	1,000
1951	6,626	3,489	3,810	1,363	15,639	7,818	5,207	2,320

Source: Census Handbook, Malda, 1951, Government of West Bengal, p.xiv

Demographic statistics from the three states suggests that population movement in all these three states is a historical reality. Trends also suggest that migrants came not just from eastern part of Bengal but from other parts as well. In the colonial times there remained some popular destinations that remained popular even in the post-colonial period. Also is it surprising that migrants from a region of very high density of population should come to a region of lower

density of population? Particularly when historically they have been following similar routes because the region of lower density of population also had higher rate of economic development.

The Border Areas Post 1947

Map 1 : Map of West Bengal



The Radcliff line divided Bengal into two distinct parts. Map 1 shows the border from the western part. The Nadia border was one of those troubled borders where a tribunal had to be appointed. It was the Bagge tribunal in 1949 that solved the Nadia border problem. Migration continued and increased in the post colonial period into Nadia. From the Nadia Gazetteer we come to know that immigrants “form a sizable population of the district. The number of emigrants is also considerable. To avail of the opportunities for economic gain rural people have flocked to the recently grown towns of the district; besides, a good number of migrants have come over from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) following the partition and have settled in urbanized colonies and urban areas. There are also immigrants from other districts of West Bengal and from other states of India.”¹¹ According to the Census of India 1961, 70122 persons born in other districts of West Bengal migrated into Nadia of whom 26077 were males and 44045 were females. The contiguous Murshidabad and 24-Parganas sent 18300 persons and 16640 persons respectively forming 26.10 and 23.73 per cent of the total number of immigrants. Bardhaman, Calcutta and Hugli sent respectively 9664, 7531 and 4498 respectively forming 13.78, 10.74 and 7.85 percent of the total number of immigrants into the district.

There were also 27252 immigrants from other states of India in the district. The immigrants from East Pakistan numbered as many as 502645 persons. The Census of 1961 recorded 117269 emigrants from the districts to the other districts of the State. Of these 33107, 23572, 17495, 15553, 11008 and 6565 migrated to 24 Parganas, Calcutta, Bardhaman,

¹¹ West Bengal District Gazetteers, Nadia, Gazetteers of India, 1965, Govt. Documents, National Library, p. 78

Murshidabad, Hugli and Howrah districts. The districts that attracted the immigrants were largely industrialized and urbanised. The Census of 1951 enumerated 424656 persons of whom 218712 were males and 205944 as females belonging to the minority community in East Pakistan. They had come to the district between 1946 and 1951.¹²

Map 2: Map of Nadia and the Bangladesh Border



In the map 2 given above the Bengal-Bangladesh border is clearly demarcated through the Nadia district. In another report presented in the *District Handbook Nadia* it was stated that 403804 migrated to the district between 1947 and 1951. Of these 16.76 percent, numbering 67696 settled in urban areas. The migrants mostly came from the ceded portion of Nadia district and other contiguous areas such as Jessore, Faridpur etc. Some also came from Dacca.¹³ Again people coming from East Pakistan followed their predecessors and often settled in areas just across the border. Table 8 gives details of where these people settled when they remained outside the refugee camp. There is another sinister story within these statistics and that deals with women. In 1965 the Gazetteer comments that there is no evidence of trafficking of women in Nadia but by 2001 this becomes rampant.

Table 8: Distribution of Displaced Persons in Nadia District, 1955 (Outside Govt. Camps)

	No. of Families	No. of Members
Nadia District	1,05,841	4,66,608
Sadar Subdivision	50,238	2,16,861

¹² Ibid, p. 79

¹³ A. Mitra Census 1951, *District Handbook Nadia*, Calcutta 1953, p. XXXVII

Krishnanagar P.S.	10,794	47,838
Krishnanagar Town	4,454	22,364
Nabadwip P.S.	9,165	38,927
Nabadwip Town	6,096	26,575
Chapra P.S.	5,642	23,445
Krishnagunj P.S.	5,117	21,015
Nakashipara P.S.	3,386	15,485
Kaliagunj P.S.	1,668	7,781
Tehatta P.S.	5,646	23,115
Karimpur P.S.	8,820	39,225
Ranaghat Sub Division	55,603	2,49,747
Ranaghat P.S.	20,426	93,123
Ranaghat Town	2,154	11,015
Birnagar Town	928	4,426
Chakdaha P.S.	14,681	65,437
Chakdaha Town	4,052	18,735
Haringhata P.S.	2,641	12,473
Hanskhali P.S.	10,799	47,532
Shantipur P.S.	7,056	31,182
Shantipur Town	2,670	12,346

Source: Source: West Bengal District Gazetteers (Nadia), Gazetteer of India, 1965, p. 80

In the Nadia district as table 8 suggests the largest concentration of the migrants were to be found in the urban centres of Ranaghat and Krishnanagar. This brings us back to our previous supposition that migrants prefer settling in the urban centres which even the *District Gazetteer of Nadia*, 1965, underscores. The other important centres were Chakdah, Nawadwip and Karimpur. In Nadia the decadal growth rate kept increasing until 1981, when it was 33.29. This was larger than the decadal growth rate of Bengal that was 23.1. Inter district migrations also continued just as migration from Bangladesh also continued. In the 1971 Census 17328 males and 36160 females from rural areas and 12421 males and 18139 females born in urban areas reported that they were from other districts of West Bengal. Most of these people came from Murshidabad and 24-Parganas. Also a sizeable number also came from Calcutta and Burdwan.¹⁴

Table 9: Decadal Variation of Population from 1961-2001

Name		1961-71	1971-81	1981-91	1991-2001
Bengal/W	Total	26.87	23.1	24.7	17.7
	Rural	26.38	20.3	23.0	16.9
	Urban	28.41	31.7	29.4	19.8
Nadia	T	30.14	33.2	29.9	19.5
	R	29.77	28.2	28.2	21.6

¹⁴ District Census Handbook, Nadia, 1971, Directorate of Census Operations, Govt. of West Bengal, p. 222

	U	32.57	53.0	36.2	12.3
Murshidabad	T	28.57	25.4	28.2	23.7
	R	28.40	24.5	26.6	20.9
	U	27.10	39.2	42.8	48.2
Malda	T	31.98	26.0	29.7	24.7
	R	31.89	25.2	26.6	24.4
	U	33.95	42.8	91.9	29.1

Source: Census 2001, Govt. of India

Table 10: Population by Religion, Murshidabad, 1991-2001

Religious Communities	1991 Population	1991 PC	2001 Population	2001 PC
Hindus	1819588	38.39	2107469	35.92
Muslims	2910220	61.40	3735380	63.67
Christians	6832	0.14	13723	0.23
Religion not stated			4638	0.08
Others	3409	0.07	5359	0.10
Total	4740149	100	5866569	100

Source: District Statistical Handbook, Murshidabad, 2007, Govt. of West Bengal

As for Murshidabad the decadal growth was at its highest in 1961. This was because repression of Bengali speaking people was also severe in that decade in East Pakistan. This is true of all the districts. However, there is evidence to suggest that many who came at that time have eventually gone back. Also this was a time of high inter district migration as people were barely getting used to the partition. Also the decadal growth rate of Murshidabad was never as high as Nadia in the post 1947 period. The decadal growth in fact kept declining from time to time. From 28.75 in 1971 the decadal growth rate declined to 25.4 in 1981. From the 1991 figure of 28.2 the decadal growth rate again declined in 2001 to 23.7. It is still higher than the decadal growth rate of the state of West Bengal. Between 1991 and 2001 the Muslim population of Murshidabad increased. But it did not increase alarmingly. In fact in the same period the Christian population more than doubled. Yet often this 2 percent increase in Muslim population is perceived of as a threat. Although the percentage of Hindus declined between 1991 and 2001 in real terms their numbers increased by 287881.¹⁵ One also has to remember that from before 1947 Murshidabad is a Muslim stronghold.

Table 11: Displaced Persons Arriving in Malda By District of Origin, 1946-51

¹⁵ District Statistical Handbook, Murshidabad, 2007, Govt. of West Bengal, p. 16

Dist. of Origin	Number
Kusthia	36
Jessore	322
Khulna	802
Rajsahi	42,532
Dinajpur	2,609
Rangpur	430
Bogura	580
Pabna	3,056
Dhaka	1,344
Mymensingh	864
Bakhargunj	4,309
Tipperah	2,343
Noakhali	310
Chittagong	301
Sylhet	167
	21
Total	60,026

Source: District Census, Malda 1951, Table 1.24, p.79

In Malda the decadal growth rate has declined from 31.98 in 1971 to 24.7 in 2001. The total population of Malda district was 937580 in 1951 increased to 1612657 in 1971 and has become 3290468 in 2001. Malda is still predominantly a rural centre with 92.68 per cent of its population still living in villages. The density of population increased from 706 and 881 from 1991 to 2001. The scheduled caste population of Malda numbered 554165 in 2001. In 1951 the population of Schedule Caste people was over 11 percent and today it is over 15 percent portraying that a large number of lower caste Hindus might have come across the border. The population of Muslims increased from 47.49 percent in 1991 to 49.72 in 2001. Around the same time the Christian population almost doubled from 5118 in 1991 to 8388 in 2001.¹⁶ The highest number of in-migrants in 1951 came from Rajsahi as table 11 suggests not for any sinister reason but because people from Rajsahi and Malda speak the same dialect.

From the migration pattern portrayed above it is my contention that migration between Bangladesh and West Bengal continued on the basis of historical routes established in the colonial period. Also this is not the only form of migration. Inter district migration also exists from within West Bengal and from other parts of India. So there is little reason to treat migrants from Bangladesh as an aberration. Neither are they solely responsible for the increase in density of population of West Bengal. In this respect it is necessary to pay heed to the *Human Development Report of West Bengal, 2004*. This report suggests:

Contrary to some popular perceptions, it is not very likely that recent increases in population density have resulted dominantly from in-migration from neighbouring countries. Out of the nineteen districts (Medinipur has recently been bifurcated) of the State, nine have international borders with Bangladesh. Two such districts – Jalpaiguri and Koch Bihar – show uniformly a declining rate of growth over the decades from 1961-71 to 1991-2001. Nadia, another border

¹⁶ District Statistical Handbook, Malda, 2007, Govt. of West Bengal, p. 13

district, also experienced a sharp decline in growth rate from 3.3 per cent in 1971-81 to only 2.0 per cent in 1991-2001. In the cases of 24 Parganas and Dinajpurs, the increase in growth rates from 1971-81 to 1981-1991 was followed by a sharp decline in 1991-2001. The other two border districts Malda and Murshidabad contributed a little over 12 per cent to the decadal (1981-91) growth of population of West Bengal.

All the border districts together account for 44.5 per cent of the 13.4 million population that were added to 1981 census aggregate to make the State population size stands at 68 million in 1991. On consideration of the contribution of natural growth (that is, excess of births and deaths), which is not insignificant, a major concentration of recent migrants in the border districts does not seem to have occurred. Non-border districts accounted for 55.5 per cent of the total population growth of West Bengal in 1981-91. Given the moderate levels of vital rates, this implies that the reported increase in immigration over the decade was not confined to a few border districts, but has possibly undergone a spatial diffusion to other parts of the state.¹⁷

Perhaps of greater concern to students of security should be the fact that reportedly there were no trafficking routes through Nadia in 1961 today trafficking is seen as rampant in this area. Also from the Active Criminal List of December 2009 of Hogalbaria PS another phenomenon becomes clear that is more than 50 percent of the cases are for violation of Arms Act, and that there are daily sacrifices of Indian citizens to bullets, portraying the ever increasing violence of the border areas. Or even the situation of Indian nationals living in the Char beyond fenced areas as in Char Meghna might be a subject of grave concern. Compared to this migration from Bangladesh or increase in density of population seems like a lesser concern.

Changing Patterns of Violence in the Borderland

Population flows itself does not become a security concern unless it is perceived of as affecting law and order. In the colonial period in the region under review the major law and order preoccupation was with gangs that were responsible for dacoity, burglary and theft. Each district had its list of gangs that operated in that area. In Nadia a famous gang in the early twentieth century was the Latif Sardar's gang. This gang, as we know from police records, consisted of 24 Muslims and 1 Hindu, all from the Ranakhari police station of Mirpur. The field of operation of the gang was not restricted to Mirpur and extended to the jurisdiction of police stations of Krishnanagar, Kushtia and Damurhuda. The gang also worked in Faridpur, Rajshahi and Rangpur. The existence of the gang came to be noticed in 1895 in course of the investigations into the outbreak of dacoities in Mirpur area. Eleven members of the gang including one called Madan Mandal became suspects in seven other dacoities in Rangpur, Faridpur and Rajshahi. Again in the beginning of 1914 there was an outbreak of dacoities in the Kushtia district and the gang members were suspected. One of the members became the Crown's witness and four of the gang members including Latif Sardar were sentenced to seven years rigorous imprisonment. The gang was booked under the Criminal Tribes Act in May 1916. Then again in 1918 Jubbar Mandal, the son in law of Madan Mandal was caught after a series of dacoities and confessed to the guilt, thereby implicating thirty other gang members. Twenty one members of the gang were convicted under section 110 of Cr.PC. in 1919 and several others were convicted under section 395 of IPC. There were a few years of lull after which new members joined the gang and the

¹⁷ *West Bengal Human Development Report*, 2004, Development and Planning Department, Govt. of West Bengal, p. 11

gang resurfaced in 1922. A few of these new members were booked under the Criminal Tribes Act in 1923. By 1929 most of the gang were either behind bars or forced to live honestly. However, by then there were other gangs which were by and large active in the Nadia district including the Broja Bagdi's gang, the Tamil Shaikh's gang and others.¹⁸

In Murshidabad district among the gangs the more famous was the Bholla gang composed of Bagdis, Haris and Muchis. Initially the gang had 45 members under the leadership of Bara Suchand Bholla of Saora, police station Burwan and district Murshidabad. The gang's activities were not restricted to Murshidabad but also spread to Birbhum. Nine cases of dacoity were traced to the gang between 1887 and 1903. In three of these cases four members were sentenced between 5 to 7 years of rigorous imprisonment. In December 1903, 15 members of the gang were convicted and sentenced and this stymied much of the gang's activities. Until 1916 not much was heard about this gang. In 1918 the gang was said to have reorganized itself under the leadership of new and younger members after the original leader died. The new gang was composed of over 147 members. Ten cases of dacoity in Burwan, Mayureswar, Labhpur and Nanoor was traced to this gang and some of the members were convicted. In 1921, twenty nine members of the gang were booked under Criminal Tribes Act. Some of the members were booked in 1924 for a dacoity in Mayureswar under section 395 of IPC. By 1926 many more of the gang members were booked under the Criminal Tribes Act and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment. By the end of 1929 only 7 members were booked under the Criminal Tribes Act and the rest were removed. Although in 1930 none of the gang members were convicted of any crimes and no one was heard to have changed their residence but the police record indicated that the gang was still partially active.¹⁹ This was not the only gang in Murshidabad. There were many others such as the Popara – Jugar gang, Mayam Shaikh's gang, Hiru Ghosh's gang, Bhugi Shaikh's gang etc who were all active.

In Malda by 1930 there were sixteen known gangs. Among these gangs there were some like Samir Shaikh's gang, whose membership was mixed in character and about 50 in number. They largely operated in the English Bazar area of Malda. Members of this gang were either suspected or convicted in 16 dacoity cases and 17 theft and burglary cases. Some members were convicted under section 110 of the Cr. PC. This gang was an inter-district gang with connections in Dinajpur. The gang did not have a designated adda and met in local hats and bazaars. Their modus operandi varied from crime to crime and the structure of this gang was fairly fluid. There were other gangs such as Kabatulla Shaikh's gang that had by 1930 expunged much of its membership because of inactivity. Three of its active members were convicted and imprisoned by April 1924 after which the gang became almost defunct. But there were some gangs that were more active than the others such as the Jangli Bind's gang. This gang operated in the Kaliachak area of Malda. Jangli Bind was originally a member of the Pearpur gang. He came out of his organization and organized a group of criminals into an independent gang. The gang assumed a formidable character in 1924 and started committing crimes in Malda and Rajmahal areas. The

¹⁸ *List of Active Decoit Gangs in Bengal 1930*, Government of Bengal, Bengal Police, Calcutta 1932, pp. 188 – 189.

¹⁹ *List of Active Decoit Gangs in Bengal 1930*, Government of Bengal, Bengal Police, Calcutta 1932, pp. 161 – 162.

members were either suspected or convicted in 27 theft and burglary cases and 5 dacoity cases up until 1930.²⁰ This was one among many of the active gangs in the district of Malda.

Apart from concern over gangs there were concerns with the erstwhile seditionists, who are now known as freedom fighters. But law and order concerns changed drastically after partition during the decade of 1951-1960 with increase in population flows. If one looks at IB files during these years one notices the difference. For one thing in the aftermath of partition the police was expected to make fortnightly reports about the border areas. These reports reveal the changing pattern of violence in the borderlands. In one such report from 1950 it was stated:

It is reported by a D.I.O. that one Samuel Haque s/o Late Mabasuddin Mandal of Kusumpur, P.S. Mahespur, Dist. Jessore (Pakistan) and some Muslims of Pakistan have formed an unholy alliance with Sri Jai Gopal Ray PUB Bhajanghat, P.S. Krishnaganj and his brother Hajari Lal Ray for smuggling jute from Pakistan to Indian Union. These Muslim Jute smugglers are suspected of collecting information of this side taking the advantage of their movements to our area over smuggling affair. Samuel Haque was an employee of Ordinance Factory, Cownpur before partition. There is a Pak BOP in Kushumpur. On 27/11/50, Samuel Haque passed his night in the house of PUB Jai Gopal Ray and Hajari Lal Ray of Bhajanghat, P.S. Krishnaganj and contacted them for smuggling jute from Pakistan. On 28.11.50 Hajari Lal Ray met Sri Badri Narayan Chetlangiak a zamindar and a Congressite at Krishnanagar and talked with him over this matter. Jai Gopal Ray is said to be anti police.

(The movements of Jai Gopal Ray and others are being watched. We have got one BOP at Bhajanghat.)

O/C Krishnaganj P.S. reports that on 19.11.50 at about 9:30 hrs. Pak Muslims supported by Pak police took away about 100 heads of cattle from Joynagar field, Krishnaganj after assaulting the cow herds who were tending the cattle.²¹

In post partition days dacoity was no longer an internal problem. It usually meant dacoity by the Pakistani miscreant. A new category of crime appeared on the horizon and that was smuggling. Something that was legitimate even a few years back became illegitimate. The administration responsible for looking after the border constantly strove to control the flow failing which they had to observe it closely. The most problematic seemed those who were neither here nor there or who lived partly in India and partly in Pakistan due to the nature of their employment or lifestyle. These people were considered as either spies or smugglers, as such security threats that needed to be under constant surveillance. Another category of threat related to land and the next letter to the West Bengal police DIG clarifies this. The letter begins by stating that 1859 Hindu evacuees arrived at Bongaon by train and 549 Muslims left for Pakistan by train. The letter then addresses other issues stating:

On receipt of report from Ranaghat BOP on 29.11.50 (evening) to effect that harvest from another part of Ranaghat Mouza borderlands has been removed by Pakistanis. SDPO along with SDO proceeded to Ranaghat to enquire into it on 30.11.50.

On enquiry SDPO and SDO found that about 25 bighas of land of this side of Indo-Pak border which was situated very near Pakistani village of Pokhrail and 2 1/2 miles from BOP has been devastated of the harvest. The surreptitious removal of harvest took place after night fall on 27.11.50. The special force from 1 – 5 from APB detachment at Bongaon had arrived at BOP in

²⁰ *List of Active Decoit Gangs in Bengal 1930*, Government of Bengal, Bengal Police, Calcutta 1932, pp. 119 – 121.

²¹ IB File No. 1238 A/47 (Nadia), p. 493, "Extract from the weekly report of the Superintendent of Police, Nadia, for the week ending 1.12.50, WB State Archives, 43 Shakespear Sarani (hereafter WBSAIB).

the evening of 27.11.50. The removal had been affected before they reinforced and joined in petrol work.²²

Land was considered as extremely crucial to the formation of the nation state. Claim to land was to be rigorously upheld even at the cost of alienating ones own citizens. The police were looked upon as protectors of the nation. Pakistani police were marked as trouble makers in the official narratives. In this period the Nadia-Kushtia border continued to be tense. This was blamed on the aggressive attitude of the Pakistani authorities in the Indian official narratives. Intermittently shots were exchanged between the police of East and West Bengal. In the Rajshahi-Murshidabad border the trouble seemed to be centered on some digging activities by the Pakistani authorities. From its inception the border was tensed. This tension remained until the first few years of Bangladesh. The next report shows how such tensions continued:

Reports of harassment of our nationals while visiting contiguous Pak villages by the Pak Muslims were also received from Nadia and Cooch Bihar. The tension over forcible occupation of a portion of Fulbari garden road, PS Rajganj Jalpaiguri by the Pak authorities has ceased gradually after our police force took possession of the land claimed by Pak authorities without any assistance. The line of demarcation of the disputed road has been agreed upon by the directors of Land Records and survey of both the states.

The Pak authorities are reported to be not in favour of allowing the Hindus to live in border areas and pressure is therefore being given indirectly through the Ansars to leave the border areas.²³

There were other causes of tension as well. Pakistani authorities behaviour towards the refugees was one such cause. The other related to the occupation of the Chars. In one report it was stated that, "Pak Muslims aided by the Pak police trespassed into our territory at Char Durbarpur PS Lalgola and forcibly took away paddy to Pak territory by assaulting the labourers who were engaged in harvesting."²⁴ The Chars are archetypal no man's land. Claims and counter claims over this were common phenomena. The other causes of concern were incoming flows and the rehabilitation of these refugees. A number of reports discuss meetings and protests by camp inmates of refugee camps. In one such report it was stated that:

On 13.12.53, a meeting (500) organized by the Coopers Camp, Bastuhara Samiti (CPI) was held on the Ranaghat Municipal Ground with Ramendra Narayan Khan in the Chair; the President Shib Shankar Datta (ED-CPI) Sushil Chatterjee (ED-CPI), Gaur Kundu (CPI) and others spoke in the meeting urging the refugees to unite under the banner of the Bastuhara Samiti. They also criticized the mall administration of the camp authority as well as the police action and demanded the removal of the camp administrator, immediate rehabilitation of the refugees in West Bengal and the withdrawal of the cases against the members of the Bastuhara Samiti.²⁵

The 1950s set the tone of what it meant to administer the border land. Even today the main concerns remain with population flow. The fencing is meant to harness that flow. The other area of concern as emerged from the IB files of the 1950s is national security. The fact that remains the main area of concern even today needs hardly any mention. One just need to media reports on the border. In fact there is a new proposal now to install surveillance in border hotels

²² IB File No. 1238 A/47 (Nadia), Memo No. 7491 (5) / 23:50 (Tehatta) "To the WB Police, DIG Central Range, DIGIB, DM 24 Parganas, WBSAIB.

²³ IB File No. 1238 A/47, Memo no. 19082/1238 A – 47 / For, date. 7.5.1951, pp. 809-841, "Fortnightly report on Border incidents in West Bengal during 2nd Half of April 1951." Pp. 809-841. WBSAIB

²⁴ IB File No. 1238 A/47, Memo No. 25522 / 1238 A-47 /For, date- 20.6.1951, p. 867 WBSAIB

²⁵ IB File No. 1355-28, Serial No. NSP XLVI, "Sushil Kr. Chatterjee s/o Upendranath of Basantapur PO Haringhata and Gaori, Krishnanagar, Nadia," No. 55, WBSAIB.

so that one can control population movement from the angle of state security. This is further reinforced by the number of cases brought in the border region under the head of rioting. The table 12 testifies to that fact.

Table 12: Comparison of Types of Offences Committed in Nadia, Murshidabad and Malda

Districts	2002			2004			2006		
	Murder	Dacoity	Riot	Murder	Dacoity	Riot	Murder	Dacoity	Riot
Nadia	99	18	228	98	7	170	101	14	164
Malda	50	3	25	63	12	42	62	10	47
Mrshidabad	127	14	132	99	14	139	77	6	175

Source: Numbers taken from District Statistical Handbooks of Nadia, Murshidabad and Malda, 2007

In both the districts of Nadia and Murshidabad rioting is a more frequent crime than murder and dacoity. In the case of Malda it is more common than dacoity but slightly less than murder. Concerns over rioting reflect the existent concern over national security in the region. Such concerns over security issues create a certain kind of atmosphere where concern over women's security becomes reductive in nature. It is then reducible to concern over trafficking as population movement is marked as the chief concern for the state to address. This obliterates other concerns such as lack of protection of women and their subsequent pauperisation.

Women and Border: A Narrative of Trafficking

Recent newspaper reports from the borders of India and Bangladesh are rife with news of the growing trafficking of women and children in this region. If one looks at the history of the term "trafficking" it can be traced back to "white slave trade". Before the great wars it meant the coercion or transportation of Caucasian women to the colonies to service white male officers. At that point the term did not include indentured labourers from the colonies to the plantations where often they were coerced, cheated and abused. From 1904 there were efforts to stop "white slave trade" leading to the *Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Person and the Exploitation of Others* in 1949. By that time trafficking had come to be associated with transportation of women for "immoral purposes" such as prostitution. Social scientists believe that after the wars "women from developing countries and countries which were experiencing civil and political unrest ... were migrating to the developed world in search of a better future."²⁶ Given the gender inequities in these countries women often entered informal sectors such as prostitution, where labour protection laws are minimal. The international community tried to combat these abuses by humanitarian legislation that addressed concerns of women's vulnerability. The term used to

²⁶ Bandana Pattanaik, "Where Do We Go From Here?" in Susanne Thorbek and Bandana Pattanaik eds., *Transnational Prostitution: Changing Global Patterns* (London/New York, Zed Books, 2002) p. 218.

describe the abuse of women in the process of migration was “trafficking”. Efforts to stop trafficking in the 1980s and 90s went hand in hand with efforts to abolish prostitution. Therefore trafficking and prostitution came to be understood as two parts of the same process. In the context of the region under discussion it is likewise understood and the push factors for women’s trafficking even now remain gender inequities in the country of origin, endemic poverty and political persecution.

A few years back in a newspaper report from the northeast India it was stated that, “India was among the seven Asian nations put by US on its ‘watch list’ of countries involved in human trafficking.”²⁷ This is not isolated news but such statements from the West keep recurring. In the same report it was also stated, “not only India is facing this huge problem but also has become a transit point for prostitution from nearby countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal.”²⁸ India was also marked as the destination for sex tourism from Europe and United States. These reports portray that human trafficking is a thriving proposition and there are a number of routes through which women and children are trafficked into and out of this region. For a while the Assam-Siliguri route was identified as the main trafficking route through which the victims of flesh trade were transported across Northeast India.²⁹ But routes change and when one route is identified traffickers begin using another. Through these routes in the Northeast women from Nepal, Burma, Bangladesh, the Northeast itself and Bengal are seduced, coerced or forced into flesh trade and trafficked. This is both a procurement area and a transit area. Any report on migration in this region would remain incomplete without a stock taking of trafficking that goes on in this region because it leaves enormous consequences not just for the victims but also for the security of the region. Here we are not speaking of state security but security of people who are affected by trafficking.

To find out why this whole region is vulnerable to traffickers one needs to realize that this is a region of endemic poverty, social imbalance and political violence particularly against vulnerable groups of whom women form a large part. Each part of this region is undergoing certain social and political turmoil where more and more women are getting marginalized. In Bangladesh for example effects of globalisation, growth of fundamentalism, modernization policies such as building of dams etc. have all contributed to violence against ethnic and religious minorities, and against women. Of course minority women are in a double bind. They are attacked both as minorities and as women. The fundamentalists who have increased their control in the political arena strive to maintain a predominantly male-dominant status quo. This strategy puts both minorities and women in general in the receiving end. Religion has come to be used by fundamentalist groups as one of the primary means by which male-dominant values and existing gender-oppressive ideology are imposed and perpetuated. According to Meghna Guhathakurta, “it was advantageous therefore for the fundamentalists to target women who step outside the bounds of social norms since they represented a potential threat to the male-dominant status quo.”³⁰ To compound all of these developments there is endemic poverty and land alienation of poorer

²⁷ “Human trafficking cases in Meghalaya draw US attention,” *Shillong Times*, 16 June 2004.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ “Assam, Siliguri main trafficking routes in NE,” *Shillong Times*, 5 June 2004.

³⁰ Meghna Guhathakurta and Suraiya Begum, “Bangladesh: Displaced and Dispossessed,” in Paula Banerjee, Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury and Samir Das eds., *Internal Displacement in South Asia* (New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2005)

groups of people in *chars* (enclaves). Such developments have led to widespread control and destabilization of women in the region leading to their displacement. A fall-out of this is an increase of trafficking of women and children across the border.

To these another cause can be added that directly affects the scenario of trafficking of women from Bangladesh. A number of recent governments have embarked on a policy of brothel eviction. One of the biggest brothels in Bangladesh is in Tanbazar in Narayanganj. This brothel started during the colonial period. Later, many internally displaced women gathered in the area and were dependent on this brothel for their livelihood. In July 1999 sex-workers from this brothel was evicted by the government and sent to vagabond centers where there are evidences that they were severely mistreated. Other than brothels the government has also embarked on a policy of slum eviction.³¹ In my visit to Bangladesh in 2004 I have had lengthy discussions with women directly affected by these evictions.³² A number of women have tried to resist these developments. But many have not been able to survive such attacks and joined the ranks of the displaced. These women are particularly vulnerable to traffickers. Although any definite data as to how many women are trafficked is almost impossible to gather because of the nature of the problem but the number of brothels in the border areas prove that this is a thriving proposition.

Women from Bangladesh are largely trafficked to India. From India they might then be taken to Pakistan or the Middle East. In a research by *Sanlaap* in two red light areas of West Bengal it was revealed that most of these women migrate from one place to another. Ninety percent of the red light areas that they have identified as places that they have worked in are situated in the states that border Bangladesh. Most of these are either in the Northeast or in West Bengal. In one particular red light area named Changrabandha about Sixty-six percent women said that they have come from Bangladesh. In Dinbazar many of the sex workers have said that their mothers came from Bangladesh. The report clearly states, “The rate of trafficking in Changrabandha is remarkably higher than Dinbazar. The red-light area of Changrabandha is adjacent to Bangladesh border and women are trafficked through this border like any other commodity.”³³ Most of the women in sex work were illiterates. Many of these women entered prostitution when they were younger than eighteen years of age. Most of these women came from families of wage earners and cultivators or their mothers were sex workers as well. The mothers who are themselves sex workers find no alternative except letting their daughters take up the same profession because as children’s of sex workers they are stigmatised and discriminated. They are deprived of education or even a social environment with any promise or hope. The socio-economic profiles of sex workers of at least Dinbazaar and Changrabandha portray that these women and children did not have too many options to take up other professions.

Even while in the profession their lives are never secure. Basically there are three to four modes of operation. They can work independently, or on contract basis or even under a madam. Women in the third category had to give up all their earnings to the madam, and they were given room, food and some other necessities in lieu of their payments. Even on contract basis they give half of their payments to madams. The best of them earn about Rs. 5000 per month. This takes

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Discussions organized by Research Institute of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 25 November 2004.

³³ *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 (unpublished) p. 18.

care of their necessities and their children. Some of them even send money home. Their insecurity is portrayed by the fact that they are trafficked often from one centre to another. These women are at the mercy of both criminal and police. Being near the border often they are forced to give shelter to criminals from either Bangladesh or India. Also the police use them for sex without any payment. They often cater to truckers crossing zero point and to attract them they take to the roads.³⁴

There are cases where women who are brought from Bangladesh to the metropolitan towns in India face tremendous brutality. One such case is that of Hamida, a young Bangladeshi girl, who was brought to India at the age of ten. She “suffered a series of brutal rapes at the hands of the man who brought her to New Delhi, along with some of his friends who were Delhi policemen... Only one of the accused men has served jail time.”³⁵ That this is a region of extreme insecurity for men and women crossing the border has been dramatically portrayed by the case of one Jayanti Bala Das of Bangladesh.³⁶ In January of 2003 five Bangladeshi nationals, of whom two were minor children crossed the Indo-Bangladesh border and entered India. The Border Security Force (BSF) arrested them from a Baro Bridge across the Ichhamati River. The area in which the incident took place is under the jurisdiction of the Basirhat police station in the North 24 Parganas. The Bangladeshi nationals including one Jayanti Bala Das were all taken to the Soladana BSF camp at around 5 pm. On the same night (10 January 2003) one BSF personnel allegedly raped Jayanti Bala. Thereafter these “infiltrators” were put in a small boat with holes and efforts were made to push them back. Allegedly when the boatman refused to go he was threatened on the point of gun. The boat capsized in the middle of the river and only Jayanti Bala and her one-year-old son could save themselves. On 13 January the villagers of Bagundi, who had given her shelter, handed her over to the police of Basirhat. She was charged under section 14 of the Foreigners Act. On 21 January a dead body was found in the Brickkiln Canal in South Basirhat. The man was identified as Jayanti’s husband Basudev. When a case was lodged against five BSF personnel the BSF men were unwilling to hand over their personnel to the Basirhat police. Although the BSF disagreed that Jayanti was raped but the officer in-charge of this case stated that initial examinations proved that she was molested.³⁷ On 27 January the SDJM of Basirhat issued warrants against five BSF men. In July Jayanti was handed over to the Sromojibi Mahila Samity for safe custody and on 15 September 2003 a writ petition was filed on her behalf. The cases are still pending.³⁸

Jayanti’s case reflects the situation of women who are trying to cross the border. Their status of being a foreign born woman increases their vulnerability. No one is willing to shoulder any responsibility for these women. The state that they leave is glad to get rid of them and the state that they enter finds them unwanted. This has been proved last year when in February 213 gypsy snake charmers who have always led a life of seasonal mobility crossing borders at certain times of the year were stopped in zero point in Satgachi in Cooch Behar. They had to remain

³⁴ Ibid, 25.

³⁵ Upala Devi Banerjee, “Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of the Girl Child: The Indian Scenario,” *Migrant Labour and Trafficking of Women: Workshop Report* (Nepal, National Network Against Gril Trafficking, 1999) p. 64.

³⁶ The case is registered in the Basirhat police station on 13 January 2003, under section 376 (B)/280 of the Indian Penal Code.

³⁷ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 14 January 2003.

³⁸ “News From The Indo-Bangladesh Border,” *Refugee Watch 19* (August 2003) p. 2.

there for days as both India and Bangladesh was unwilling to take them back until one night they just disappeared. No one knows what happened to them and even less do people care. From the Indian side we were told that they were pushed inside Bangladesh. No one even asked for evidence of what happened because this is a gray area. In such a situation woman can be exploited by anyone and are therefore particularly vulnerable to traffickers.

The border itself is a place of endemic poverty, substantial illiteracy among women and children and enormous violence against women. In a survey undertaken in three border villages namely Shikarpur, Charmeghna and Nasirerpara it was found out that most women in this area are illiterate. In Shikarpur out of 515 women only 190 had some forms of literacy, in Charmeghna out of 590 only 100 women are literate and in Nasirerpara out of 470 women only 85 are literate.³⁹ These women have very few options to improve their situations. Their problems are compounded by increased militarisation and criminalisation of the area. Here every other day women and children are molested or killed. On visiting one such border near Charmeghna two chroniclers poignantly write:

To assert that the control of the border still belongs to them the border security on both ends sporadically do a well-orchestrated show of national safety through aggression. It is then that one witnesses the elaborate, flexing of muscles and the violent exchange of fire and mortar. On such occasions the border sky is lit up by man made conflagrations and the air swells with the sound of brutal human games. At the end of it all, what are lost on both sides are the expendable lives of common people like Baba-Hasim, and Kanakchampa and the eyesight of 6-year-old Sonia, who paid the price for playing, foolishly enough, in her own front yard.⁴⁰

Women living in these borders live a life of extreme hardship. They are the quickest targets for both the security personnel and the criminals. “The robbers demand women during their raids and when they get none they leave threatening dire consequences: ‘you can hide your livestock in the camp. You can hide your money in the bank. But where will you hide your women?’”⁴¹ Any study on traditional security pays no attention to such insecurities, which has become part of their every day lives.

It is true that trafficking in this region is a terribly debilitating phenomenon for women and young men. Also it fits in well with the state concern over population flows and women’s victimhood. But sole attention to trafficking is an agenda that often obliterates the root causes of abuse against women. If one looks at cases of offenses against women in this region one finds out that although every year many such cases are reported but very few lead to actual convictions of people responsible for such violations. Often the attitude is that by stopping trafficking we can stop all that ails women’s lives in this region. We do not consider the holistic effects of violence against women that comes from privileging a certain form of the security question.

³⁹ Survey undertaken by Subharati Banerjee under my supervision for her unpublished M.Phil thesis *Bharat Bangladesh Simanta Samasya: Charmeghna, Shikarpur o Nasirerparar Porjalochona* (Problems in Bengal Bangladesh Border: A discussion of the three villages of Charmeghna, Shikarpur and Nasirerpara) Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Calcutta, 2000-2001, p. 73.

⁴⁰ Kishna Banerjee and Purna Banerjee, “Lives Delimited by Barbed Wires,” *Refugee Watch No. 13* (April 2003).

⁴¹ Ibid.

Narrated Time and Constructed Space: Remembering the Communal Violence of 1950 in Hooghly

Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury

Partition was in no sense like an operation that was concluded in August 1947. The border is far from being the trace of an event long over, like a healed and fading incision scar. It is still in the process of being formed. Its creation was not merely a matter of drawing a line through a map by a qualified technocrat: it was created again and again, by a number of different agencies, on the ground through which it ran. Its shape (both literally and metaphorically) has varied, and continues to vary, through time.

Joya Chatterji¹

Borders are not just lines in the landscape. Experts say that the borders, inert elements, shaping the societies and cultures that they enclose, the pre-given ground on which events take place. Borders denote a spatial dimension of social relationships that are continually being configured and, in this process, the meaning of borders is produced, reconstructed, strengthened or weakened. The notion of borders in today's world is a testimony to the importance of territoriality with the creation of the 'other'. The imagery of borders has become a popular metaphor in the study of socio-spatial development in post-Partition societies.

The partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947 is not just a 'surgical metaphor'² - an 'operation', an 'amputation', a 'vivisection' or 'dismemberment'. It is also a line inside our heads and our hearts too. In fact, the physical fence is the manifestation of these more cognitive and emotional lines that shape our thoughts and feelings. The inner lines express who we think we are and who are not like us, whom we trust and whom we are afraid of. Cynthia Cockburn has correctly pointed out that, when we are very afraid or very angry, at some identifiable moment, a line springs out and plans itself in the earth as a barrier.

The partition was a watershed in the history of the region. On the one hand, the erstwhile British colonies were being de-colonised immediately after the World War II, and on the other, their political liberation came in a fractured state. The phenomenon of this fractured identity was not only a state affair as such. In fact, the millions living in Punjab and Bengal bore the brunt of partition in a way that still defines their existence in many ways. For Punjab, partition and exchange of population – the Hindus coming from Western Punjab of Pakistan to India and the Muslims moving from Eastern Punjab of India to Pakistan – were primarily a one-time affair

¹ The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape: 1947-1952, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 185-242, 1999.

² *Ibid.*, p.185.

though it was no way peaceful or voluntary. Therefore, perhaps many would argue that, as if the blood-soaked partition of Punjab in 1947 resolved the growing tensions between the Hindus and Sikhs, on the one hand, and the Muslims, on the other. But, for Bengal, the Partition turned out to be an even messier affair that is yet to be concluded. The partition of Bengal in 1947 that way is a continuing process that perennially tends to influence the lives of the inhabitants on both sides of the boundary which Sir Cyril Radcliffe and his colleagues in the Bengal Boundary Commission decided to draw hurriedly before leaving India.

The studies on displacement due to the partition in the East of India tend to concentrate primarily on the Hindu refugees³ from East Pakistan. These studies often overlook the other stories of partition in the East – stories of the minorities - Muslims in West Bengal.⁴ In fact, impact of partition on the minorities, it created on the both sides of the border, who remained where they were and did not emigrate as refugees to the new nation, has not received the attention that it deserves⁵. Keeping this fact in mind in this study, we shall attempt to unravel the stories of Muslim women of Hooghly, the otherwise calm and quiet place during the turbulent years of partition. This article is about twice displacement of these Muslim women, who were once displaced during partition from their adobe in West Bengal, took refuge in Imambarah, a divine place for them, situated on the bank of the river Hooghly at Hooghly. Later the manager of Imambarah took initiatives to arrange a special train for these uprooted Muslims, who wanted to leave their country for the security of their lives. Crossing the newly carved international border they took shelter in a somewhat alien land in East Pakistan (earlier known as East Bengal) on the other side of the border. The violence that broke out in 1950 in different parts of West Bengal was mainly responsible for this displacement. However, ironically, the situation across the border was not hospitable enough for them. And, therefore, these displaced Muslims from West Bengal could not assimilate themselves with the people of East Pakistan, who mostly belonged to the Sunni sect of Islam, while the displaced Muslims, our respondents were primarily *Shias* and Urdu speaking. It caused them twice displaced.

³ In this paper by ‘refugee’ we mean a person who has been uprooted from his/her *desh*, and we shall not use the term ‘refugee’ as it appears in the UN Convention of 1951 or the subsequent UN Protocol of 1967. According to the 1951 UN Convention, a refugee is a person owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. For legal exposition of the status and rights of refugees see, James Hathaway, *The Law of Refugee Status*, Butterworths, Toronto, 1991; Guy S. Goodwin Gill, *The Refugee in International Law*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, Second edition; B.S. Chimni (ed.), *International Refugee Law: A Reader*, (New Delhi: Sage), 2002.

⁴ Exception is the recent publication entitled *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India, Part 2* edited by Jasodhara Bagchi, Subhoranjan Dasgupta and Subhasri Ghosh, which has tried to incorporate much of the Muslim voices and experiences often taking place on the other side of the border that is erstwhile East Pakistan. At the same time they have tried to capture the voices of those, who are still residing in West Bengal. See Jasodhara Bagchi, Subhoranjan Dasgupta and Subhasri Ghosh (ed.), *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India, Part 2*, Stree, Kolkata, 2009.

⁵ Mushirul Hasan’s book entitled *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India’s Muslims since Independence*, Delhi, 1997 presents an overview of the consequences of partition for the Muslims who stayed in India. See also Kothinka Sinha-Kerkhoff’s essay, “Partition Memories, “minoritisation” and discourses of rootedness in Jharkhand : A comparison of cross-border displaced and “invisible refugees” in Jharkhand”, the paper presented at the Indo-Dutch conference on ‘Displaced People in South Asia’, Chennai, March 2001.

To pay much attention to the social history of partition, the present study would intend to capture the lives and experiences of the people who lived through that ‘partitioned time’⁶, of the way in which the events accompanying the partition were constructed in their minds, of the identities or uncertainties that partition created or re-enforced. The main purpose of the study is two-fold. First, the study would enquire on how these Muslim women negotiated borders – borders of sect, community, patriarchy, and of conflicts not only in their own land but also in an alien land away from their homeland. Secondly, this article would also seek to analyze the role of Imambarah, the main witness of violence, the rescuer of thousands of Muslims at the time of communal disturbance in 1950 at Hooghly.

While dealing with the inner process of ‘line making’ and ‘line negotiating’ with the help of these women’s perceptions of victimhood, the study would like to focus on narratives of these Muslim women, which tend to be framed in rhetoric of Hindu-Muslim difference. It is true that these narratives may be subjective and selective in nature, but their selective memories could act as rich archive to unfold the ‘subjugated knowledge’⁷, the forgotten stories of partition. For the sake of analyses we would also depend on the published government documents, unpublished letters from the proceedings of Imambarah, books, journals, newspaper clippings and local magazines published from Hooghly. At the very outset we would like to start with the stories of Imambarah.

Being in Time: Imambara of Hooghly Revisited

“You know, this Imambarah saved our lives during that turbulence”. Naheda bibi (not her real name) was almost shouting. We were sitting at Islam bhai’s house in front of Imambarah. Islam bhai is a photographer by profession. He knows Naheda bibi for quite a long time and when he disclosed my purpose of visit, Naheda Bibi agreed to talk to me. She (72) was wearing a shabby printed cotton sari with a veil on her head. She stays along with her four siblings at Mooghaltuly, a place close to *Imambarah*, a predominantly Muslim area in Hooghly. She has altogether four sons and two daughters.. Two of her sons stay elsewhere. Medina, her elder daughter, is married to a rickshaw-puller of the same locality. However, for the last four years Medina with her son Nasser is staying at her mother Naheda bibi’s place after her husband deserted her. Rafikul and Iqbal, two sons of Naheda are staying with her mother. Rafikul, also a rickshaw-puller and Iqbal, a daily labour are not earning so much. As a result, Naheda despite her old age has to work to earn bread and butter. In her own words:

My father used to tell us that those days are gone. Therefore, we should be very cautious now and it is better to have friends from within our own community. My abbu (father) was a coachman (coachman) and my mother was a housewife. we were five brothers and sisters altogether and I was number three in the order of the siblings. We had our own small house in the locality close to my present residence. Though our locality was predominantly Muslim however, a few Hindu

⁶ Ranabir Samaddar, “ The Last Hurrah that Continues”, *Transeuropeennes*, 19-22, Winter 200-200, p.31 cited in Sanjay Chaturvedi, “The excess of Geopolitics: Partition of ‘British India’”, in Stefano Bianchin, Sanjay Chaturvedi, Rada Ivekovic and Ranabir Samaddar, *Partitions: Rshaping states and Minds*, Frank Cass, USA, 2007, p.153.

⁷ Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”, *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey, Picador, New York, 2003, p. 7.

families also lived in that area. We did not have any chance to go to school. But, we had many friends in our own community. My parents did not allow us to socialise with our Hindu neighbours.

I was 15 years old then. The riot took place around holi. Probably that was in the month of March. It was a very chaotic situation. Everybody in our locality kept saying that riot could break out at any moment. The situation was very tense. Soon, our area was badly hit by the riot. They looted and burnt many houses and we saw the flames from our windows. We got scared. We did not go out. Everyone in the locality became worried to save his or her own lives. However, there was no incidence of murder in our locality, although there were instances of large-scale looting and arson. Next morning, my father told us that he got the information from our relatives that they could forcibly take out many young girls from their houses and torture them. My abbu decided to leave our house as soon as possible and to take shelter in Imambarah.

We were not alone. Like us, many of our neighbours left their homes and came to Imambarah for their safety and security. As we were in a hurry, we left all our belongings except some ornaments of my mother before leaving our house. That was meagre. We became refugees. When we reached the Imambarah it was too crowded. Thousands and thousands of displaced people took shelter there. However, within a day or two, rations from the government reached us. We got rice and pulse. We used to cook for ourselves. But, inside the Imambarah there was no privacy. We used to share space with other families. You cannot imagine how those days were. Some families had to stay outside in open air as they reached quite late and all covered areas like rooms, long balconies, even the prayer hall were full of refugees. And, we could not go out of the premises of Imambarah fearing violence for the next two months⁸.

The main witness of those stories of violence, displacement and taking refuge is the *Imambarah* (Imam, an angel + Barah, a building to live in) a divine place, situated on the bank of the river Hooghly at Hooghly (see Map 1). The place is originally belonged to Haji Muhammad Mohasin, born in the year 1732 and died in 1812⁹. As he had neither children, nor the other relatives, who would become his legal heirs he gifted a huge area of land including Imambarah to the Trustees for the charity. In his words (translated from his deed, which is in Persian language):

*... That the Zemindary of Pergana Kishmat Syedpur, &c., appendant to Zilla Jessore and Pergana Sobnal, also appendant to the said Zilla and one house situated in Hooghly (known and distinguished as Imambarah), Imambazar and Hat (market) also situated in Hooghly, and all the goods and chattels appertaining to the Imambarah agreeably to a separate list;- the whole of these properties have developed on me by inheritance, and the proprietary possession of which I have enjoyed up to the present time; as I have no children, nor grand-children, nor other relations, who would become my legal heirs; and as I have ull wish and desire to keep up and continue the useages, and charitable expenditures (Murasum-o-ukhrajat-i-husneh) of the Fateha, &c., of Hazrat (on whom be blessings and reward) which have been the established practice of this family, I therefore hereby give purely for the sake of God the whole of the above property with all its rights, immunities and privileges, whole and entire, little or much, in it, with it, or from it...*¹⁰

As a result, a huge area surrounding Imambarah became part of *waqf* properties (see Map 2). History reveals that, when Murshid Kuli Khan was the Governor of Bengal, a Persian

⁸ Naheda Bibi was interviewed on 15.05.2007 in Imambazar, Hooghly.

⁹ Ranjit Kumar De, "The Call of the Hooghly Imambarah", in Ranjit Kumar De (ed.), *Hooghly Imambarah*, Bhraman Barta Paribar: Hooghly, 2007, pp.6-7.

¹⁰ *200 years of the Deed* (translation of the Deed of appropriation of Haji Mohumud Mohsin, dated 9th Bysakh B.E., corresponding with 20th April 106 A.D., as cited in note 1, pp. 16-17.

merchant, named Agha Mohamed Mutahar, who had been domiciled in India, came to settle in Hooghly with his family. After settling in Hooghly he purchased the site of the present Imambarah, and built thereon an ordinary one-storyed house, which he dedicated to god calling it “Nazargah Hossein”.¹¹ After wards, his son-in-law, Mirza Saleh extended the building by adding a portion which he termed “Tazea Khana”. It was upon the ruins of this structure the Imambarah was erected. It was again renovated in 1841 under the supervision of Syed Keramat Ali.¹² Therefore, the Imambarah as it is structured today is not the original one. (See recent photo of Imambarah)

Hooghly¹³ had a fairly large Muslim settlement since long time back. According to 1951 census report the 1209.2 square miles¹⁴ long district was home to about 2,06,230 Muslims, which

¹¹ See Shumbhoo Chunder Dey, *Hooghly: Past and Present*, Calcutta, M.M.Fey & co., 1906, pp.258-281.

¹² Gobindalal Bandyopadhyay, “Syed Keramat Ali: The Great Architect of Hooghly Imambarah”, as cited in note 6, pp. 14-15.

¹³ Earlier Hooghly was termed as Hugli / Hughli or Hughly. The district of Hooghly (lies between 22°36’ and 23°14’ north latitude, and between 87°30’ and 88°30’ east longitude) derived its name from the town of Hooghly situated on the west bank of Hooghly River about 40 km north of Kolkata. According to O’Malley the name Hooghly is probably derived from the *Hogla* (*Typha elephantine*), “a tall reed which grows in abundance on the river banks and in the marshy lowlands below them”. This town was a river port in the fifteenth century. The first European to reach this area was the Portuguese and the district of Hooghly was one of the main centres of their trading activities. In 1536 Portuguese traders obtained a permit from Sultan Mahmud Shah to trade in this area. In those days the Hooghly River was the main route for transportation and Hooghly served as an excellent trading port. Within a few decades the town of Hooghly turned into a major commercial center and the largest port in Bengal. Later in 1579-80 a Portuguese captain Pedro Tavares founded a settlement of Hooghly, under the authority of a *farman* from Emperor Akbar and thus Hooghly became the first European settlement in Bengal. The settlement grew rapidly and the trade and influence of the Portuguese in Bengal. The portuguese hegemony in this region soon brought in its wake some political problems which triggered a conflict between them and the Mughals. As a result, Emperor Shah Jahan ordered the then ruler of Bengal province, Qasim Khan Juyini to block the city of Hooghly. This eventually led to a war in which the Portuguese were defeated comprehensively and according to Jadunath Sarkar “it was the first land battle in India in which indigenous troops and method of warfare triumphed over European troops and European leadership. Other European powers that came to Hooghly were the Dutch, the Danish, the British, the French, the Belgians and the Germans. Dutch traders centered their activities in the town Chuchura which is just south to Hooghly. Chandannagar became the base of the French and the city remained under their control from 1816 to 1950. Similarly, the Danish established a settlement in Srirampur. All these towns are situated on the west bank of the Hooghly River and served as ports. But among these European countries, the British ultimately became most powerful. Initially the British were based in and around the city of Hooghly like other foreign traders but in 1690 Job Charnock decided to shift the British trading center from Hooghly-Chinsura to Calcutta. The reason behind this decision was the strategically safe location of Calcutta and its proximity to the Bay of Bengal. As a result the center of gravity of trade and commerce in the Bengal province shifted from the town of Hooghly to Calcutta and Hooghly subsequently lost its importance as Calcutta prospered. After the Battle of Buxar (1764) this region was brought under direct British rule until India’s independence in 1947. After independence this district merged into the state of West Bengal. Though the city of Hooghly is more than 500 years old the district of Hooghly was formed after separation of the district from Burdwan in 1795 with the city of Hooghly as its headquarters. Later the headquarters shifted to the town of Chinsura. In 1843 the Howrah district was created from the southern portion of this district. And in 1872, the south-west portion of this district was merged into the Midnapur district¹³. The district is bounded on the north by the

constituted 8.12 percent of the total population¹⁵. As elsewhere in Bengal, an overwhelming majority of Muslims of the district were *Sunnis* of the *Hanafi* sect. *Shias* were found in almost all areas of Muslim concentration but they were most numerous in and around Hooghly-Chinsura¹⁶. The area adjacent to Imambarah was predominantly inhabited by the *Shias*. “*Shias* living in Hooghly adjacent to Imambarah are from UP and they are mostly urdu speaking. However, it is true that, after two-three generation’s stay at Hooghly now we can speak Bengali fluently”-said Iftikar, the present *Mutawali* (Manager) of Imamabarah. Precisely the areas like Mughalpara, Imambazar, Chawk Bazar, Sonatuly, Hussain Gally, Karbala, Matijil, Khagra jhor, Mianr ber, Kaji Danga, Ghutia Bazar, Maheshpur were *Shia* dominated. Besides Hooghly-Chinsura *Shias* were predominant in the places like Gondolpara, Urdi Bazar, Farashdanga, Telenipara, Chapadani, Pandua, Kamal Gazi Darga of Chadernnagore and also in Srirampore subdivisions of

district of Burdwan; on the east by the river Hooghly; on the south by Howrah; and on the west by the districts of Midnapore, Bankura and Burdwan. The river Hooghly separates the district from the Ranaghat subdivision of the Nadia district and the Barrackpore subdivision of the North 24-Parganas. For the brief history of Hooghly please see L.S. N O’ Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer: Hooghly*, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1912; Amiya Kumar Banerjee, *Hooghly District Gazetteer*, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1972; Sudhir Kumar Mitra, *Hooghly Jelar Itihash o somaj* (in Bengali) (History of Hooghly District and its Society) ??; Jagabondhu Kundu (ed.), *Hooghly Jelar Sahitya O Sanaskriti* (in Bengali) (Literature and Culture of Hooghly District), Sahitya Setu Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003; Ashit Baran Mukherjee, *Shara Chuchura* (in Bengali) (Chinsura: A Town), Nabarun Press, Kolkata, 2002; Akhay Kumar Addha, *Hooghly Chuchurar Nana Kotha* (in Bengali) (Many Stories of Hooghly and Chinsura), Hooghly Sangbad, Hooghly, 2007.

¹⁴ Ashok Mitra (ed.), *District Census Handbook: Hooghly*, Government of India, Calcutta, 1956, p.55.

¹⁵ Amiya Kumar Banerjee, *Hooghly District Gazetteer*, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1972, p.221. In this context see L.S. N O’ Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer: Hooghly*, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1912.

¹⁶ It has been estimated that, by mid twentieth century, Muslims were concentrated in two distinct regions of West Bengal. The first zone, more densely populated, was in the south, in the industrial and urban tracts around Calcutta, 24 Parganas, Howrah and Hooghly. The second belt where Muslims were at large numbers was in north Bengal, especially in the agricultural tracts in Murshidabad and beyond Malda, where as in other parts of rural West Bengal like in Bankura, Midnapore and Western Burdwan Muslims were ‘few’ and ‘far between’. So far as Hooghly district is concerned, Urdu is by and large the mother tongue of Muslim immigrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. That should not, however, mean that all Muslims of northern India who have moved into the district invariably belong to the Urdu mother tongue group. On the contrary, many Muslim immigrants from rural areas of Bihar, where Muslim concentration is not very thick have returned Hindi and/or Hindustani as their mother tongue. Although most of the native Muslims of the district as well as those who have migrated from elsewhere in West Bengal belong to the Bengali mother tongue group, there are certain *Sayed* families in the district who regard themselves as Urdu speakers. These are old families, the members of which hold considerable *aima* or rent-free agricultural lands and use the title *Ashraf* after their names. Their matrimonial relations are usually confined to identical families elsewhere in Bengal, or to *Sayed* families of North India. Their background prompts them to keep aloof from the common Muslim masses mostly belonging to the *Sheikh* community. Most of the *Shia* Muslims are from UP in Hooghly. Urdu speakers are mainly found in the industrial areas of the district. According to *Hooghly District Gazetteer* (1972) in Magra police station they constituted about 7.6 per cent whereas in Bhadreswar and Serampore police stations they accounted for 10 and 5 per cent of the respective populations. There were also some Urdu speakers in the rural *thanas* of Pandua and Jangipara.

Hooghly district¹⁷. According to Jadunath Sarkar Hooghly became a *Shia* colony and a centre of *Shia* theology and Persian culture before the full growth of Murshidabad¹⁸. Proportionately, affluent agriculturist, white-collar workers and educated persons were mostly *Shias* and not *Sunnis*¹⁹. According to Hooghly District Gazetteer the community had the largest concentration in Chanditala police station, which was followed by Pandua, Bhadreswar and Khanakul police stations. Chandernagore and Uttarpara had the rear percentage of the Muslim inhabitants in compare to other police stations²⁰ (see Map 3). The District Gazetteer also indicates that unlike elsewhere in India, the relations between these two sects of Muslims in Hooghly were not marked by tension and conflict in those days. But it is true that the Sunnis usually did not entre into matrimonial alliances with the Shias.²¹

Mapping the Violence of 1950

History reveals that, communal disturbances between Hindu and Muslim occurred in the area under Hooghly Municipality, Chanernagore, Srerampore, Tarakeswar subdivisions of Hooghly district during 27 February to first week of March. According to the newspaper reports in order to control communal violence the then District Magistrate, S. Dutta Majumder imposed curfew on 27 February, which was lifted from the limits of Hooghly municipal area on 5 March. But an order under section 144 Criminal Penal Code (Cr.P.C) became effective for another one week. Police petrol continued and kept monitoring the situation over all the strategic points²². The Pakistani Deputy High Commissioner in Calcutta, accompanied by Deputy Inspector General of Police of East Bengal, Janab Doha visited Hooghly Imambarah, Imambarah hospital where the victims were admitted and also the ‘disturbed areas’, where ‘certain incidents’ of communal violence occurred²³. Immediately after their visit, due to some other unpleasant incidents the curfew was once again promulgated for the next eight days between 10 pm to 5 am²⁴.

Similarly Srirampore, Tarakeswar two other subdivisions of Hooghly district also affected by the communal disturbances of the first half of 1950. Newspaper reports identified that an order under Section 144 Cr.P.C was promulgated in Tarakeswar, 36 miles away from Howrah on 29 March, which prohibited meetings, processions and assembly of more than five persons carrying of weapons etc²⁵ and the curfew within the jurisdiction of Srirampore police station in Hooghly district continued from 8 pm to 4.30 am till 2 April and in order to control the situation armed police and military pickets were posted at some important stations in the eastern railway in the Srirampore

¹⁷ Interview with Raju Mirza, Imambarah, 15 Januaray, 2010.

¹⁸ Not only *Shia* teachers, but many Persian Physician and perfumers settled at hooghly, attracted by the large number of rich patrons in that town and in its neighbouring district, because the Arabic medical science was then in high favour all over the East. See Jadunath sarkar, same as note. *The History of Bengal*, Vol.II, Dacca, 1948, pp.469- 70

¹⁹ A Banerjee, same as note 13, p.220.

²⁰ Ashok Mitra (ed.), District Census Handbook: Hooghly, same as note 9, p.149.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ananda Bazar patrike*, 5 March 1950.

²³ *The Statesman*, 8 March 1950.

²⁴ *The Statesman*, 9 March 1950.

²⁵ *The Statesman*, 31 March 1950

subdivision as a precautionary measure, in addition to the protection police force provided in some trains as well²⁶.

According to the proceedings of the meeting of the District Minority Board, Hooghly for the month of February held on 25 February 1950, 11 am at the chamber of the Senior Deputy Magistrate of Hooghly the general situation arising out of the communal disturbances was discussed by the then Mutawali (manager) of Imambarah S. A. Jafri.²⁷ He reported that few minor incidents were occurred like bursting crackers near Imambarah. A peace committee consisting of influential Hindus and Muslims of the locality was formed and the situation was temporarily quiet. He made an urge for the similar peace committee to be formed in other mohallas of this town to restore peace and harmony with in the district²⁸. However, the proceedings of the District Minority Board's meeting held at Commissioner's house on 25 May 1950, at 3.30 pm indicated that though no written complain was received by the DM of Hooghly Abdul Wahid Sarkar, MLA of Pandua subdivision mentioned about the 'recent communal disturbances' and raised the question of rehabilitations of the displaced Muslims and issue them suitable grant to them. He also explained the urgency to give them agricultural land and free distribution of seeds among the displaced Muslim cultivators to enable them to cultivate their land. He further narrated an incidents where Muslims were 'roughly handled' and asked for police protection to save minority community. In response, the DM mentioned that, concrete proposal had already been forwarded to the Government for the sanction of suitable allotments of gratuitous grants as well as loans to be given to Muslim refugees.²⁹

Hooghly was not the only place in West Bengal that was affected by the post-partition communal disturbances. Calcutta, Howrah, Murshidabad were largely affected by bitterly anti-Muslim climate of post-partition West Bengal. It is worth-mentioning here that, partition dramatically changed the position and status of the Muslims of West Bengal. For a decade before 1947, Muslims has been the political masters of United Bengal, increasingly asserting themselves in the social and cultural life and even the places where Hindus outnumbered them³⁰. However, partition at a stroke reduced the Muslim majority to be an 'exposed' and 'vulnerable minority'. After partition Muslim mass all over West Bengal lived in fear especially with occurrence of the sporadic violence which became regular feature in Calcutta, Howrah and other parts of the state. Joya Chatterji has pointed out that, the new 'Hindu mood of aggressiveness' soon spilled over to affect many Muslim public rituals, which caused communal tensions in the newly created West Bengal. Out of all examples that she has cited in her recent book *Spoils of Partition*, one is very interesting and has a similarity with the incident that took place in Hooghly in the early 50s. She explained a dispute that occurred in June 1949 at Kandi in Murshidabad between Muslims, who taking a *tazia* (bier) in licensed procession and Hindus who refused to allow them to prune branches of a sacred Hindu tree, which prevented the *tazia* getting past. The Muslims had to back down, persuaded 'at a secret meeting' by one of their leaders that the 'authorities would redress their grievance in due course'. Joya further has said that, every outbreak of violence and rioting, whether

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sayed Ejaaz Hussain Jafri served his duties as Mutawali of Imambarah twice; 1936 - 1938 and 1948-50.

²⁸ *District Minority Board Proceedings*, File No. XIX, Serial No. 19, From Manager of Hooghly Imambarah to Chaiman of the District Magistrate Board, 1949-50.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, pp.213-19.

in Bengal or else where in India, was inevitably followed by the surrender by Muslims of more 'sacred space'.³¹

The unpleasant incidents happened near Imambarah in Hooghly during *Holi* in March 1950.³² Growing animosity between Hindus and Muslims caused a sense of insecurity among the Muslims. In Saleha Begum's (73 years staying at Sonatuly near *Imamabarah*) words:

There were rumours everywhere in Hooghly in those days. Everyone was interested to deposit his or her valuables at a safer place. We had a three-storied house. Apprehending an impending attack, all of us along with many of our neighbours went to the top floor of our house to seek shelter. We were gathering brickbats those days to defend ourselves. Then, one day, we saw Mooghaltuly on fire. The fire gutted almost all the houses in the locality!

As a result, the young boys in our locality started organizing night patrols. Rumour-mills were abuzz with the stories of gruesome atrocities perpetrated on women. We realized that it would not be safe for us to stay there for long. So, we decided to shift to Imambari (same as Imambara). It was already very crowded.

My father was a lawyer. He knew few people who were close to Imambari. They, in fact, helped us to get a shelter inside the Imambari. Like us, thousands of people from Tikiapara, Serampur and other places of Hooghly took shelter there. I remember that they (the majority community) had even planned to attack Imambari. But, our boys were cautious and ready with sticks near the main wooden gate of Imambari. So they could not enter into the premises of Imambari. Oh! Those days were so turbulent!

It was heard that, a train was coming from Naihati. They were trying to throw the Muslims into the river Ganga out of the train and after cutting them into pieces. They did not even show any mercy for the infants. They threw the children one by one into the river. However, those who managed to reach this side of the river were offered medical care and relief. People from Imambari provided them medicine and ice. My father and some of his associates helped the injured people. The worst victims were those who were pregnant and about to deliver. They were traumatized and were unable to move to any other place.

Our food was cooked together. We did not have much to eat. There were very few little options for us. We used to boil rice, pulses and some potatoes. The government supplied rice and pulses. There was no privacy for women. Our lives became full of uncertainty. This uncertainty increased as rumors spread.

I do not know why. Suddenly we heard that the riot could take place at any moment. The Hindus and Muslims both got frenzied and were at loggerheads with each other. But I can tell you that the trouble began at Tikiapara and then it spread to our locality. My father was an advocate. We had our own house. In our area, the Muslims were predominant. Hindus were few. We did not have a culture of modern education. Therefore, we studied at home. Some of my friends were Hindus as well. But when the riot broke out around Holi, they never avoided us. It was not expected even! My father-in-law stayed at Mahestola. A man was brutally killed with a sword. I do not remember his name anymore! It was so horrifying! I saw him lying in front of the Imambari in a pool of blood. I also witnessed tremendous violence in our locality. They killed a man and our boys rushed him to the hospital. We did not know that man.³³

A sense of insecurity and alienation was also clear in the words of Nafisa Banu. Nafisa (nearly 80 years) stays alone in Hooghly for more than 60 years. For the last fifty-seven years she

³¹ Joya Chatterji, *Spolis of Partition: Bengal and India 1947-67*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 2007, p.180.

³² Interview with Raju Mirza, whose family was victimized due to that incident and took shelter at Imambarah.

³³ The interview of Saleha Begum was taken on 16.07.2007.

stays in *Imambarah* itself. Her son and daughter stay in Karachi. She was born in Moradabad of Uttar Pradesh. She still recalls her village, Nougawa Saddat. Her father was a businessman. He used to lend money and he mostly conducted his business from home. They were five sisters and two brothers. She was the fourth child of my parents. Her brothers were all involved in the tea business. She told that, her family had huge property in their village. She was wearing a *salwar-kameez* using her *dupatta* as a veil to cover her head. She seemed comfortable in Hindi though she could speak Bengali with an accent of a typical non-Bengali.

The condition was deteriorating everyday. They burnt a girl of our locality alive. A gardener who used to work there, a close friend of our family told us to leave that place as it became very unsafe for us. Yeah! They beat, looted, plundered, killed and threw men into fire near Mughaltuly. But we were fortunate enough as we did not lose any relative in the riot.

My husband left our house with our children and my father-in-law. Finally, we came to the Imambari for our safety and security. My maternal uncle also came with us. We did not find any other option but to take refuge at the Imambari itself. Imambari was full of displaced people. Many refugees came to Imambari from Hazirnagar and Gorifa by a train from the other side of the river in the fear of violence. They stayed in the Imambari for one and a half month. Syeed Jafri was the motowali at that time. The riot broke out during holi. As far as I remember it was in 1950. More than two thousand people took shelter in the Imambari. We had to share our space with other families inside Imambari. Everyone became helpless after being uprooted. However, they were hoping to return to their houses once the riot would stop. Most of them could not carry anything with them. They were concerned to save their lives at any cost. Inside the Imambari, we used to stay in a huddle with other families and we used to cook together. The government sent rice, pulses and potatoes for us. There was a tremendous chaos inside the Imambari. Many pregnant women gave birth to their children inside the Imambari. The women were the worst victims. I don't know why that bloody feud took place between the Muslims and Hindus ...³⁴

According to Nafisa Hindu displaced persons came from East Bengal were the 'culprits'. "They tried to capture vacant houses and plots of land. They also burnt many houses. Allah saved us! My father-in-law used to read Majlis³⁵ at Imambari. He was already too old. In spite of his age he helped so many people". Like Nafisa two other respondents identified the Hindu refugees as the main perpetrator of the violence though they believed that the local Hindus were also responsible for the turbulence. Quoting Nilanjana Chatterjee it can be said that, East Bengali refugee settlement across West Bengal affected the minority Muslim community most adversely³⁶. The East Bengalis' discourse of partition victimhood reflected their acute sense of insecurity with regard to life, livelihood and honour as a numerically and politically subordinate group in a Muslim-majority state, as much as it reflected entrenched anti-Muslim prejudice.

The major influx of Hindu displaced persons took place following the massacre in several districts of East Bengal, particularly in the villages called Kalshira in the Bagerhat subdivision of

³⁴ Nafisa Banu was interviewed on 18.07.2007.

³⁵ Majlis is the mourning session where heart-rending tales of Imam Hussain's martyrdom are narrated. A majlis or mourning ritual typically comprises a *salaam* (introductory poem), *marsiya*, *hadis* (sermon), and *nauha*. A notable aspect of the mourning ritual is self beating or *ma'tam* done during the *Nauhas* (elegies and lamentations) to visually express sorrow for the death of Imam Husain who was the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. It ranges from a silent rhythmic touch to the chest in keeping with the chant of the *nauha* to flagellating oneself with steel chains and swords.

³⁶ Nilanjana Chatterjee, "Interrogating Victimhood: East Bengali refugee Narratives of Communal Violence" cited in <http://www.pstc.brown.edu/chatterjee.pdf> accessed on 12. 01.2010.

Khulna district on December 20, 1949 and in Nachole in Rajshahi district on January 1950 and then violence spread up to Dacca, Mymensingh, Barisal, Sylhet, Chittagong, Santhahar of East Bengal in February 1950.³⁷ In the massacre of February 1950, the epicentre of violence was mainly the *Namasudra*-inhabited areas, where most of the people were very poor and mostly agricultural labourers. According to the Census of India 1951, between 1946, the year before the Partition when a large scale communal riots occurred, and February 1951, altogether 51153 number of persons (males 26844 and females 24309) belonging to the minority communities in Pakistan moved on to the district of Hoogly as displaced persons. All most all of them were from East Bengal districts although a very small number came from West Pakistan. Persons from the district like Dacca, Barisal and Faridpur were in a majority in numbers.³⁸ Large number of these displaced persons did not enrolled themselves as ‘refugees; of the Indian state. They began to resettle themselves by acquisition of land either through legal means and procedures or by occupying the vacant land owned by the government or by big landowners, was acquired through forcible occupation. The government termed the areas of refugee settlement as ‘private colonies’ for the first case. But, in other cases, this process of ‘collective takeover’ was known as *jabar dakhla*. Particularly in the areas around Calcutta and suburb many East Bengali refugee settlements were established on land formerly inhabited by Muslim labourers and artisans who were replaced by the displaced Hindus³⁹. In many places of Hooghly the incidents of capturing vacant space, be it vacant houses or vacant plots of land also took place. Newspaper report says that many ‘peasantry men’ were arrested on charges of rioting, causing mischief by fire and assault in connection with their attempt to oust the refugees from the plot of land belonging to their masters, which caused tensions between Hindus and Muslims in the district like Hooghly⁴⁰.

The narratives of our respondents clearly show a sense of ‘disrespect’ against the Hindu refugees, who took shelter in Hooghly in and around partition. The way they have portrayed the Bengali Hindu displaced as the main ‘culprit’ for the turbulence it signifies the experience of social recognition which depends on a vital condition, as Axel Honneth points out curial for the development of human identity and its denial is, necessarily accompanied by the ‘sense of a threatening loss of personality’. It asserts a close connection between the kinds of violation of the normative assumption of social interaction and the moral experiences that the subjects have in their everyday communications⁴¹.

Negotiating Borders: Learning to Survive

Due to partition a large section of Muslims left West Bengal and took shelter in East Pakistan. However, there is no accurate record of how many Muslims crossed the border from West Bengal to eastern slice of Pakistan. While dealing with this issue of the Muslim flight Joya Chatterji in her recent book *Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India: 1947-67* has identified that, the 1951 Census of Pakistan recorded total 700,000 numbers of Muslim *muhajirs* in East Bengal, of whom

³⁷ *Jugantar*, February 28, 1950.

³⁸ Amiya Kumar Banerjee, same as note 13, p.180.

³⁹ See Nirmal Kumar Bose, Calcutta: A Social Survey, Lakshmi Publishing House, Bombay, 1968.

⁴⁰ *The Statesman*, 23 March 1950.

⁴¹ Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, Polity Press, UK, 2007, pp.71-72.

two-thirds or 486,000 were known to be refugees from West Bengal⁴². She has further said that, imperfect records of these turbulent times leave the observers with only the roughest of ideas about who among the Muslims left, where they went and why⁴³. Though it is true that now, these figures can hardly give one any idea of the pain, trauma and agony through which the displaced might have gone due to the ruptured economic, social and cultural ties with their original homeland. Nevertheless, they are important to understand the scale and magnitude of the post-partition displacement in the Eastern part of the subcontinent.

Naheda, Saleha, Nafisa and many of such Muslim women in West Bengal became refugees due to the riots accompanying the partition of 1947. They were displaced from their land, from their 'foundational home' where some of them could come back as 'returnees' and some could never return. They lost everything they had – home, friends, relatives and all their material belongings and had to start their lives afresh. Displacement changed their perspectives toward lives.

To them partition was an 'urban affair'⁴⁴, a distant reality until 1950. However, displacement from their own home due to communal violence converted these housewives of yesterday – the wife of a business man, a *ricksaw* puller or a service man respectively – into the uprooted refugees leaving a deep impact on their whole psyche. They had to negotiate borders – borders of sect, community, patriarchy, and of conflicts not only in their own land but also in an alien land away from their homeland.

According to Naheda:

We were at a loss. After spending some time at Imambarah, one day the Mutawali (the person in charge of the Imambarah), Jafri sahib came and enquired if we wished to go to Pakistan. In fact, that would be better for us according to him. He had already arranged a train for our journey. The train would leave at 4 in the afternoon and it would go up to Darshana, a point near India-Pakistan (now Bangladesh) border. My abbu immediately decided to go to Pakistan as he believed that it would be a safer place for us. And we were not alone. Many Muslims who took shelter in Imambarah were also willing to leave the place and go to Pakistan. So, we left our homeland and our possessions.

The train was too crowded. Everybody was jostling to find a place inside the train. Finally, we managed to get in. We went up to Darshana and from Darshana we went to Iswardi and took a steamer to move further to Dhaka.

Like Naheda, Saleha and Nafisa also spoke about the train, which was arranged by the then *Mutawali* of Hooghly Imambarah, *Janab* Jafri to help these displaced people to cross the border to take refuge at the newly created East Pakistan. The narratives of the displaced women now living around Imambarah make it clear that an overarching sense of insecurity become part and parcel of the lives for these uprooted people in general and of the women in particular. Displacement due to communal tensions caused a sense of insecurity – for herself, for her family members and for her community. Furthermore, they became worried about the effects of the

⁴² *Census of Pakistan 1951*, Vol. III, East Bengal, Report and Tables, Karachi, n.d. cited in Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 2007, p.166.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Most of my respondents at Hooghly believe that partition of India was an urban affair, which did not have any direct impact on them before 1950. They are born and brought up at Hooghly. And in 1950 it was like a village without any proper communications. So what is going on in the cities took much time to reach their countryside. They first started realizing the impact of partition during the violence of 1950.

uncertainty and dislocation on their children, about the psychological trauma that many of their children suffered from.

As a result, a large number of these displaced persons after coming back to Hooghly preferred to live in ghettoized clusters, mainly due to their perception that the threat to their life and property was greater when they were physically isolated from their community. Post-partition violence made them aware about their vulnerability living with “enemies”. Violence of 1950 created a psychological barrier between these two communities at Hooghly. The violence left its vicious imprint on the human settlement of the *mufassal* town of Hooghly in such a way that the town that was not hitherto strictly polarised into Hindu and Muslim localities and where, in many instances, both communities lived side by side, has now become increasingly divided into the “majority” and “minority” areas. So far as the *Shias* are concerned they have become ‘minority among the minorities’⁴⁵. 60 years after the violence, today there are only eight *Shia* families living in the area under the jurisdiction of Chinsura municipality of Hooghly⁴⁶ and most of these families live in the area, demarcated as *waqf* property, adjacent to Imambarah.

Those who left Hooghly in an expectation that they could be able to resettle themselves in East Pakistan became disillusioned very soon. Most of the displaced were *Shiite*. They were not welcomed in East Pakistan, which was predominantly *Sunni* inhabited area. They had to negotiate the existing invisible border between these two sects of *Islam* away from their original home. The situation became quite uneasy for them and soon they were again forced to leave their new-found home. They were displaced twice.

To quote Naheda:

At Dhaka, we stayed in a rented house located at Chawkbazar. But, we could not be happy at all. However, we were safe and secure in Pakistan. My abbu started pulling rickshaws and my brothers became daily labourers. But, we could not stay there beyond a couple of months. You may be surprised to hear that, but it is true. We could not adjust in the new, alien place. That was not ours. How could we stay there? The people of that place could not accept us whole-heartedly. They started thinking that we are Bihari Muslims. We did not have similarities with the Bengalis although we were Muslims. They never assured us to stay there. The Hindus from that side reaching here felt quite safe. But we could not feel the same way.

Within two months, we left Dhaka and returned to Hooghly, our own place. But, by that time, the Hindus had occupied our homes. We were not alone. Like us, many others lost their homes and possessions, and therefore, were forced to take shelter in the Imambarah again. My abbu went to the court to get an order to get back our house. At last, we came back to our own house from Imambarah. However, meanwhile we lost every thing... Our entire household items, our furniture, everything. We had to start from the scratch.

Saleha, our another respondent told us that, most of their relatives were staying in East Bengal at that time and they were the only one living in West Bengal. Her father owned huge property. However, Hindus could not capture their house. Her elder brother protected it. She confessed that on the other hand, her in-laws were not so rich. But they were not poor either. Her father-in-law owned a house, where they stayed after her marriage. When they heard that a riot was imminent they sold their house and land at a much cheaper price. Some went to Rajshahi and

⁴⁵ This is the view of Raju Mirza, who was interviewed at Imambarah on 22.01.2010. He said that, most of the displaced *Shiyas* did not return to Hooghly. A large section of them went to West Pakistan.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

others to Dhaka. Her husband Sayeed Baskuran Navi and she however initially decided to stay at Hooghly at his in-laws house.

I asked her whether she ever thought of going to Pakistan at that stage or not. She replied:

It is not that, we did not consider going to Pakistan. When the riot was on the wane, Mutawali Saheb informed that all arrangement for our departure for East Pakistan had been finalized. We took that opportunity to leave our place. When the train crossed the river and reached Darshana, we saw thousands of people waiting for the vehicle to cross the border. All of them were struggling to board the connecting train. There was a huge chaos and confusion among the people. In Darshana, we were served with chira, muri, gur and dudh (milk) for children.

From Darshana we went to Rajshahi by a car. My brother-in-law was there. So we all went there. My husband, child and I stayed there for a while and then went to take refuge at my sister-in-law's place at Dhaka. We had to stay there for about a couple of months. Meanwhile, my elder brother informed us that the situation was under control in Hooghly. The turbulence ended and all was well. My husband said that he could not get any job in Rajshahi as the place was alien to us. Besides, in Dhaka, people spoke a different dialect and nourished a culture of their own. We did not have much in common with them. We could not assimilate with them. So we decided to return to our own place. Thus, we came back home. However, there were not many people in the area. Everyone had left.

It is interesting to mention here that, while recalling those days of violence Salefa said that her elder brother had a teacher, who was very kind and helpful. He used to send food to my brother who was guarding our house. He really cared for my brother and they would never forget him. His name was Pashupati Borat. It was true that their house was not occupied but they took all their possessions. Whenever she recalled those days she felt very bad.

Our respondents left their home in view of the riots of 1950. Before these riots, the female members of their families used to live in a private space of their respective houses, behind the veils. All on a sudden, the riot placed them on the streets, in the midst of the public space. When the country was partitioned and the riots broke out in Hooghly, males and females alike were on the streets. For their safety and security they had to take shelter at Imambarah with their family members, where they could not find any privacy. Moreover, when the patriarchs themselves were at risk, these women perceived themselves as insecure. Newer insecurities and uncertainties engulfed their lives when some of them got detached from the male members of their family. The self-proclaimed guardians were no more there to play the role of the protector. Patriarchal dominance became meaningless, at least for the time being, due to the forces unleashed by the partition (that was primarily an outcome of an almost all-male politics) and beyond the powers of the patriarchs. Therefore, when these women began to reconstruct their lives in an unknown territory on the other side of the border or after coming back to their known place in an unknown atmosphere, the boundaries between public and private space had already become blurred for them.⁴⁷

In Nafisa banu's words:

That riot forced us to learn how to survive in a post-violence situation. We did not decide to leave Imambarah as most of the sheltre-seekers did. I never went to East Pakistan. We used to stay at Imambari. My husband stayed here for a couple of years. During the era of Mujib-ur-Rahman, they went to Chittagong. My children also left. But I did not go. My husband Sayad Gulam Haider,

⁴⁷ Rachel Waber, "Re (Creating) the Home: Women's Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta", in Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta, eds., *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Kolkata: Stree, 2003, p.64.

a businessman had a second wife. My husband and my children went to her. I did not want to lose my dignity. I decided to stay alone. When the bloody riot broke out during Mujib's time, probably in 1971, they went to Karachi. Earlier my husband worked here in Bhadreswar and later Baidyabati. Then he went to Chittagong to work in a British Company.

You know, when I came to Hooghly, I was only 11. When our father passed away, my mother did not have any other option and had to come to our maternal uncle's place in Hooghly. My uncle used to perform Majlis⁴⁸ in the Imambari. I studied up to seventh or eighth standard (not in any formal school) and got married at a very young age to. When the riot broke out I was in Mirzabari – near the place of Haji Mohammad Mohsin.

How did she manage to survive alone?

She looked quite confident and smilingly said:

I learnt the way of performing Majlis from my uncle as well as from my father-in-law and used to practise it after the turbulence was over. I used to read in Mehfil-e-Haideri in Bowbazar on a regular basis and get Rs.250 in return. In that way, I started earning and now I have a substantial amount of money in my bank account. I still do not accept any money from my son or daughter for my day-to-day survival. But, they paid for my travel to Mecca twice. I am happy. In fact, I don't want to be dependent upon anybody. So, I have already bought some land here close to Bara Imambari for my last rites.

Violence induced displacement indeed put thrust upon a fixed identity on these Muslim women as displaced. But that was not the end. As their escapades from violence compelled them to negotiate with various new choices, their identities were forged through their macro-level struggles. The narratives of these women help us to realize how violence reshaped these women's identities and forced them to change their priorities in life; it required them to step out of their homes to earn their livelihood. In a way these are the stories of recreating space. Bodies, space, time are all inscribed and altered by violence. In the aftermath, occupying the same social space may or may not be possible.⁴⁹

In their afterlife, these doubly displaced Muslim women, as the trauma survivors, live not only with memories of the past and the reality of an uncertain present. This present seems to have no ending. From their perspective, it is very much real – the crude reality they cannot escape and a bitter past they cannot forget. Even their selective memories carry those bitter moments with an unbearable subtlety.

Forgotten Histories: Past as Present

The narratives of these three protagonists in this article are basically collective memories, and are in the form of flashbacks, as envisioned by these women. This flashback relates to the idea of past, which is remembered as reality. The existence of Imambarh acts as the only link between past and present. Moreover, their visualisation of this flashback is in the form of a reconstruction. Narrative and construction bring about a similar kind of inscription, the one in the 'endurance of

⁴⁸ Majlis is the mourning session where heart-rending tales of Imam Hussain's martyrdom are narrated. A majlis or mourning ritual typically comprises a *salaam* (introductory poem), *Marsiya*, *hadis* (sermon), and *nauha*. A notable aspect of the mourning ritual is self beating or ma'tam done during the Nauhas (elegies and lamentations) to visually express sorrow for the death of Imam Husain who was the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. It ranges from a silent rhythmic touch to the chest in keeping with the chant of the nauha to flagellating oneself with steel chains and swords.

⁴⁹ See Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India nas Pakistan*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1998.

time', the other in the 'enduringness of materials'.⁵⁰ In fact, all memory is of past⁵¹. In that way partition was of past if seen through homogeneous units of measurable time, its continued presence in people's lives (be it Hindu or Muslim) was apparent in story, gesture and conversation. Though of past, it did not have a feeling of pastness about it⁵².

According to Ranabir Samaddar, "[W]e live in Partitioned times. It is within our post-colonial being, in our agony, pessimism and our strivings.... Partition lives on in post-colonial times to such an extent that we should truly prefer the phrase 'partitioned times' to the more common 'post-colonial times'⁵³. With all these burdens of history the doubly displaced Muslim women live in the 'partitioned times'. Partition lives on in the lives and times of these old women. Partition had made their homeland hostile and they started imagining that peace and security were on the other side of the border. Most of them got disillusioned crossing the border taking refuge in East Pakistan. The episodes and characters of their past remain present to their minds, mostly because, they shape their identities.

In this process of remembrance the role of Imambarah, as an institution, as a rescuer has been revisited. Following Paul Ricoeur, we could say that, after all, we are both the readers and writers of the past; that words of the past from our narrative identity, in the sense that they tell us who we are. It is by telling and memorizing events of the past that we become and remain a historical community.⁵⁴ In this article we have attempted to unravel the stories of forgotten past, stories of Imambarah, the epitome of peace and security to the local Muslims of Hooghly.

This article is an humble attempt to listen to the 'minority of the minorities' in Hooghly keeping the fact in mind that, now a days, speaking the need to confront trauma, has been considered central to the process of healing. Herman has argued that, "to hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and the witness in a common alliance. For the individual victim, this social context is created by relationships with friends, lovers and family. For a larger society, the social context is created by political movements that give voice to the disempowered⁵⁵. The partition of India 1947 changed the social context, which has been felt by the Muslims of Hooghly in and around 1950 violence.

To conclude it can be said that, in this article the trajectory has been towards micro-histories, inflected by anthropology, sociology and theory, which have resurrected the ordinary, everyday Indian (here Muslim women) in the picture and restore her to the past. Urvashi Butalia is right in a sense that the partition stories are personal, intensely subjective, constructed through memory, gender and ideas of self and span the subcontinent. In this article we have tried to unfold the stories of those Muslim women, who have come to symbolize the fate of women who saw it all- communal blaze, riots and massacres, displacement, migration to an alien land and then, finally, a return to the 'scarred roots'.

⁵⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2006 (paperback edition), p.150.

⁵¹ Vina Das, *Life and Words: Violence and The Descent Into The Ordinary*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006, p. 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.97.

⁵³ Ranabir Samaddar, "The Last Hurrah that Continues", same as n 9.

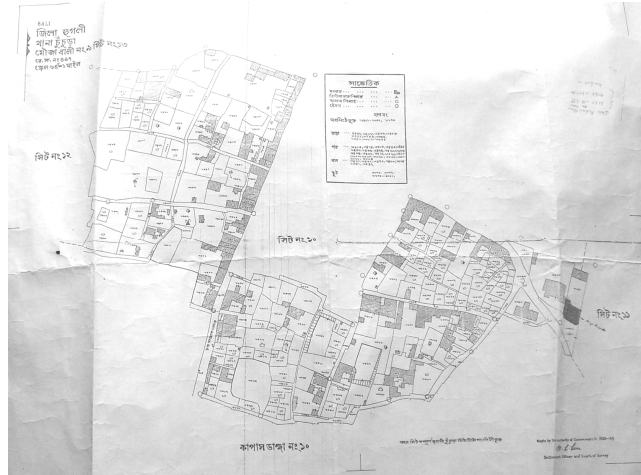
⁵⁴ Paul Ricoeur, same as n. 44.

⁵⁵ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and recovery: From Domestic Violence to Political Terror*, River Oram Press, London, 1994.

*So do not even ask,
Do not ask what it is we are labouring with this time;
Dreamers remember their dreams when they are disturbed-
And you shall not escape
What we will
Of the broken piece of our lives*

- Abena P.A. Busia⁵⁶

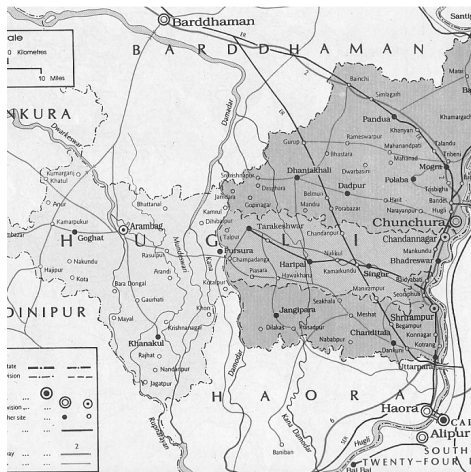
Map 1: Waqf Property Adjacent to Imambarah



Source: Imambarah

Map 3: District Map of Hooghly

⁵⁶ Abena P.A. Busia, 'Liberation': 1983, in Stella and Frank Chipasula (ed.), *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Poetry*, Heinemann's Educational Publishers, Oxford, 1995.



Source: *District Statistical Handbook, Hooghly: 2007*, Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata, 2009.

Recent Photos of Imambarah





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Voices of Women in Borderlands¹

Aditi Bhaduri

One of the most difficult international borders to be “manned” and secured is the Indo-Bangladesh border. Both closed and porous, it defies all established political norms and security measures. The total length of Indo-Bangladesh border is 4096 kilometers. Of this almost three fourth has been fenced. However the fencing is not continuous or contiguous. There are villages right on the zero line and within 150 yards of the international border. The border is also criss-crossed by the river Padma and 53 other small rivers, which makes it difficult to fence the entire length.

The border region between India and Bangladesh is densely populated and a region of endemic poverty and social imbalance. The borderland is a site of multiple forms of violence as well as contestations. Women form a particularly vulnerable group as they often cross the border in search of livelihood, security, or are simply trafficked, and become victims of multiple forms of violence. Yet, they are not only victims. In 2009 alone, for instance, 147 women have been held for smuggling contraband across the border. Borders also unite and bridge divides, provide passages and transits. The result is that there is a steady movement of people and goods across the border, both legal and illegal.

Thousands of narratives unfold daily in the borderlands between India and Bangladesh and there are multiple realities of life here. Too often discourses are either only rights based or only security based. The reality is far more complex and the lived experience is that women inhabiting these areas engage in manifold negotiations with numerous agencies. Keeping these facts in mind this paper has tried to capture voices from the borderland to portray the everydayness of life as it is lived and experienced by women living in these borderlands. Interviews were deliberately not conducted with any victim-survivor of trafficking (which is rampant across the borders) or with any female sex worker as these are narratives and issues which have received widespread coverage in academia and in the media. Interviews were conducted with women living in villages of Jayantipur, Hatkhola, Petrapole, Shutiya, as well as with women serving sentence in correctional facilities in Kolkata.

Mukti Shahji ; Village: Petrapole

I grew up near Haringhata which is also a border village, but it was different. Here its far more developed because of Petrapole border crossing. In my childhood it was common to see people go over to what is Bangladesh, the village would be just part of our village. But as we understood, slowly, more security people moved in on both sides. Then I got married and came here where my husband worked on some land owned by his sister and brother in law. Then he opened a small business. Here too there were not so many security people like they are now. Over the years they have grown, and now see this place is swarming with them.

See that pond, we would all bathe there. Across the pond that is Bangladesh, can you see one Bangla Desh Rifles (BDR) man is sitting there. With so many Border Security Force (BSF) people on this side and BDR on that side, we had to discontinue using the pond. Now we bathe here in this place that we have made.

We are living in fear all the time. The BSF people keep coming and measuring land. They came last week too. They want to fence this place for security. What will happen to us then? We will be fenced out. We do not want that. It is bad enough living in a border village. We cannot have people visit us or move out from our homes after 7pm. If someone comes to visit me from my village they have to leave by 7pm as after that movement becomes difficult. And at times when the BSF clamp curfew we cannot move out even after 5pm. We had to return home by evening. If we need to move after 7-30, BSF ask us several questions – which often turn into interrogation. It is the same if any relative come to our place after 7pm, they are questioned for hours on end, their bags searched, and humiliated.

At times if they are shoot outs or the BSF suspects someone smuggling something or if any intruder from Bangladesh comes here then we have had it. They come knocking, search our homes, turn it upside down, with no respect for anyone or anything. If sometimes that happens at night, we just lock ourselves in, pretend to be sleeping, not knowing anything. We do not like to get caught in such stuff.

But in spite of everything we do not want this place to be fenced. The BSF presence has also resulted in safety and security. We do not have thefts or robberies, which took place earlier. Earlier, when there was less presence, we had more freedom to move around, but people from the other side would keep coming and stealing harvests, cattle, even household goods. I have heard once my sister-in-law had food that was cooking stolen by people from Bangladesh. They are something else. We are also Muslims but we are not as daring as them, they have the nerves and guts.

If we are fenced out, we will lose the protection of the BSF, we will be exposed and vulnerable to people from that other side and to the BDR. We do not want that. It is not that there is no problem with the BSF here. See they are all over the place. We had much greenery and gardens around our house, but now see the land is bare. That's because we cannot grow plants and trees higher than three feet from the ground, they have cut down all the mango and coconut trees here. At nights they keep watch there, and when my neighbours have gone out to the toilet they have been harassed. No one will tell you that it has happened to them, but it has happened to all of us. But of course we do not want to get into trouble.

My elder daughter goes to the school - it's a government school and I am always uneasy from the moment she leaves home till she is safely back. She has to pass all these constables, sometimes they call out and sing songs, tease. They don't understand Bengali and I think they don't like Bengali people.

And if we are fenced out it will become even worse. We will have to submit our identity cards all the time. Even now if we return a little late we have to answer so many questions and show papers, and I cannot imagine then. My daughter has to show her identity card while going to school and while coming back.

The hospital is in Bongaon at least 7 kms from here, and imagine if something is to happen suddenly to us at night, the gates would be closed by 6pm. And if they fence this place they would also acquire land from us. They have offered very cheap price. The BDO came once and he offered only Rs. 5000/- for one bigha. Just imagine!

And we are very poor people. We do not have money to buy land on the other side, the price of which will go up considerably. ON this side we will be devoid of all security and protection as the BSF will move within the fenced area. We really do not know what will happen. We have submitted a petition to the BDO not to fence this place, but we have heard nothing. We live in mortal fear that anyway that will happen.

Our lands for cultivation will be on that side. When visit the other side of fencing for cultivation, needs to submit voter card/ration card etc at the BSF camps.

They work for the protection of national security, on the other hand they violate the rights of people living on the border.

We belong to lower middle class. We face various kind of difficulties –specially economic stress – throughout the year. Now the Ngo Petrapole Simanta Unayyan Samiti is helping us. I am the head of this group of 25 women. We save Rs 60 per month – Rs 180 in three months. After three months a woman is eligible to receive Rs 1000 as loan amount. After every three month, she gets additional Rs 500 upon repayment. Loans are provided to women after careful examination of her business proposal and feasibility. Women are becoming self sufficient with the help of their small enterprises.

I have bought some chicken and engage in poultry. I sell the eggs to my neighbours and that helps me complement our income.

We have three daughters and as you know everything is becoming more expensive. I have given birth to all my daughters at home as the nearest maternity home is in Bongaon. Now, two of them go to school. My youngest one is just two years old and she stays at home with me. There are no ICDCs in this village. So you see it would be doubly difficult for us if the village is fenced out. We only pray that the government does not fence this area. Please pray for us.

Parweena Bibi ; Village: Hatkhola ; District: Nadia

I was born and brought up in this village. My natal house is down the other side, about a kilometer or two away. I live here with my 7 children and husband. I have been married for almost twenty years . Our fields are on the other side of the fence, and I tell you what a problem it is for me to tend to them. To go out to the other side, we have to keep our IDs with the border (security) people. When our children go to school, they have to keep their IDs. When my husband goes to tend to the fields, then he has to keep the ID. When I take him some lunch I have to keep my ID with them. When people come to visit us from the other side they have to keep their ID with them. If we go to the market, the hospital anything it's the same. At 6pm they close the gates, and life for the day ends for us. Not that we go out much. All the over this border area as you know the day is over by 6-7pm. But when we have an emergency, its terrible.

Worst is the attitude of the guards. On and off they check us, we are women, but they do not spare us, they take their weapon and nudge us with it, feel us up to see if we are hiding anything on our person. As if! But no one will complain, no one will speak up, we are at their mercy, if we speak up then its our fault and we have to bear the consequences.

They just behave as they want to. There is a gate close to my house, but they can close it at their mercy and I have to trudge all the way to the main gate which is almost two kilometers away from here. Same thing with my children when they return from school, sometimes they find the gate nearby closed and they have to walk all that way to the main gate and then from the main gate to our house here.

We cannot cultivate the more lucrative items like papaya, which fetches a good price. No, everything has to be just three feet tall, so we have 'path', paddy. During harvest, we have to specify the number of sacks of harvest we will be collecting and have to enter them in their register. Now, just tell me, is it possible to be absolutely accurate? Sometimes we may enter a certain number and then have a sack or two extra , but that will just be confiscated by them. I cannot tell you how many times they have done this. Sometimes, if they are hungry they will just take away stuff to eat, maybe a chicken and they won't even pay for them.

We are poor people and farming is all we have. So many of our youth are now leaving this place, they want a better life, not this horrible sad border village life. Many of them would go to

Mumbai, now we have two of our youth go to Kuwait, for the first time someone from our village is going to Arab lands. There was an agency in Chapra that was scouting for workers, we don't know how they are, and what life they are leading, we are looking forward to hearing their news. For here there is no future, also Mohameddians we hear find it difficult to find jobs in other places. But here life is really horrible, it was not so earlier. People would come from that other village, see across this khal that is Bangladesh, earlier they would come over here, cross the khal, buy things from us. See, there you can see the BDR men. In front of us are the BSF men, they are there every 10-20 ft., and behind us BDR men. It's such a nuisance, all the time we are surrounded by strange men. At least the BSF people move around, they turn and sit with their backs to us, they face the other side, but these BDR men just sit and stare this side, they don't move at all. I don't know why.

People do try to sell some things from this side to that side of course, I don't know exactly what. I know they like to buy fruits from here, and sometimes some cattle, but my family does not sell anything, so I do not know. But it's true, that many things are sent from here, things come from there too. And people came from that side too, earlier. Of course people from Bangladesh liked to visit India but it has stopped and it is of no use to us. We are not involved in that. We just need to lead a peaceful life. Earlier it used to be better, but now with this fence, it's really difficult. We feel so abandoned, no one cares for us, if someone suddenly went that side, the BDR people catch him and thrash him, and here the BSF are also always so suspicious of us. They don't treat us like humans, they make fun of us, they don't speak Bengali, I don't think they like Bengalis. Some of them tease the young girls and women, you know. Now see, no one will tell you that something has happened to them, but I am telling you that all have had some kind of unpleasant experience. We live here and that seems our crime. We are always looked upon with suspicion, as if we are all criminals, doing something illegal. Now many of our friends from the other side have stopped visiting us. So we stand and chat with each other through the fence, but these men keep standing so we always have company.

We feel unsafe sometimes because our husbands are away tending to the fields and we are all alone. I'm telling you life here is hard, very hard. You do not know the hardships we face. From this side and from that side, it's as if we do not belong to any side. Which is our home, which is our land, which is our country? We are scared of people from that side. Earlier they would come and take away our harvest, before the fence was made. Now our fields are safe, because they lie within the fence, but our household goods and cattle are not. Deep in the night they sometimes come here and rob things from our house. We have no one to complain to, or no one to turn to for protection.

I do not like the people from the other side. They talk sweet, but they harm you. Once a couple of our village boys went that side, and the people over there told the BDR people and they arrested the boys. Our poor boys, and when the people from that side would come here, they would talk so sweet. That's how people are, you cannot trust anyone.

And the BSF people think they are kings. See if I go somewhere in a van or come back in a van then when we pass any BSF person the driver has to get off and walk while crossing them, he cannot sit and ride the van. Why? Are they kings? They will stop the men, even though they know the men are from this village, but still they will ask them what they do, where they are going, why. Just some months ago a young girl died. I don't know what really happened, I hear that there was a 'thrower' and the BSF people were chasing him, and the girl happened to be in the way and got shot. But what does it matter, who is right or wrong? The young girl paid with her life. That man has been suspended, but she will not just call us Bangladeshis, and try to arrest us. But we are not Bangladeshis, so we can never ever forget to take our IDs, anywhere we go, we are so scared of being called Bangladeshis and put in prison. There is no peace, no peace, this is torture. The only way we can escape all this is by buying a house on that side, but it's too expensive, the moment they erected the fence the price of land on that side shot up and on this side it went down. So who

will buy our house? And where will we get the money to buy a house on that side? No, we have to live here and suffer here, that is our fate.

Srabanti Karmakar ; Constable: Border Security Force ; Haridaspur

I am from Bankura district. Village, Soldah, I went to a govt. primary school nearby. We are three sisters, I am the eldest. My father's mother also lives with us. My father is a carpenter, and my mother a housewife. I had a kaka who worked in the army, lived in the village, and I loved to see him in his uniform. Since then I had harboured this dream that I too would join the forces one day. I loved history most of all, I completed Madhyamik 9n 2004 and dHigher Secondary in 2007. Then I enrolled in college, high school was 45 mts away from my house, I went to it by cycle.

So we took classes in a coaching centre, all the subjects that we studied in school. The teachers used to come to school but did not teach us fully, they would show us somethings, for example some mathematics or come and tell us what we had to study in history. Then we had to do it on our own, so that's why we went to the coaching center, for its difficult to remember everything on our own. But in our coaching class teachers used to come. Boys and girls studied together in the school. But we did not have electricity in our house, though the village some homes did have it.

College was 45 minutes away, I went to the bus stand by cycle, left the cycle there, took the bus to college. On way back, came back by bus, took the cycle and cycled back home. There was no fear that the cycle would be stolen, and we were in a group, most girls in our village studied.

Most of the people in the village were farmers and some were not, like my father was a carpenter, some had small businesses, like a ration shop, or a small shop sellin knick-knacks.

I really like this place and my work in the BSF. I had many hopes, I came with much hopes and expectations in my heart and I really like this job. It's a lot of responsibility, I am really doing something worthwhile, no woman from my family has worked before. Its peaceful here, though my village is even better, but I am liking this work. All the sirs, all the people in the force are really nice, and treat us with a lot of respect. We do miss home, but here all have become like a big family. In fact when we go home on holidays now, we wait eagerly to get back here and exchange all the news. We women constables miss each other when we go away.

In college, I did NCC, and did not choose honours. I knew from Class IX that I would join the forces. I used to take employment news paper, my father used to bring it to me, and there I found the advertisement. Actually I wished to join the airforce, but that's very advanced. But I knew that I would join the forces, perhaps the west Bengal police. So I knew I had to have some higher education for it, so I studied history and Bengali and Sanskrit.

I am not married, and I never thought of marriage. I studied in the pass course and 45 percent was the minimum needed to pass. I studied for two years and then did the first year present, and then before the second year I got recruited, and then I went back and did the second year exam and then I got the appointment here. I have not yet completed my graduation.

Initially my parents did not like the idea of me joining the forces because it is really tough work, difficult, painful. And BSF work is even more difficult. The training is so hard, and if I failed to pass the training it would have been so humiliating. I had to fill in my height and weight details too.

Then I was called and had to go to Kalyani to the BSF outpost there for physical test. I had to run for 800 meters, do 3ft high jump and 9 ft long jump. Then we had a written test, viva and medical tests. My father accompanied me to Kalyani, we rented a hotel, and it was a little expensive for us, since we had to pay for the accommodation. My father would accompany me and wait outside. In the test I wrote that I wanted to do something for my country and also because I wanted to be in the forces since childhood. I was very tense and nervous. There were so 420 applicants, and only 32 were selected. We had all the tests carried over a period of 6 days. The commanding officer of

Kalyani was there. This was in 2008. I was so tensed up I would not eat anything. I would eat something in the morning and only after I returned to the hotel in the night. The snacks I would take with me to the test each day, would remain in my bag.

In my village, people appreciated me, some would tell my parents to get me married off. My mother was under tremendous pressure, but my father stood by me, he always told people, my daughter has ambitions, she is not doing anything illegal. I would run in the field each day and people would see me work hard on my form and physical fitness. My second sister is now doing a diploma in computers and my youngest sister is in school but she too runs and wants to join the forces.

Then on 2 September I got the appointment call. We joined in September in Kalyani and then we were sent to Punjab in November for training. There were many officers there, we got training in drill, in shooting, rifle training, training in light machine gun, pistol, training in physical fitness and agility. We had training for 9 months and learnt how to adjust with each other. There were Punjabi girls too and I learnt how to live with non-Bengalis.

We were trained on the border too, how the fencing was done, what was the height, the distances, how the area for fencing was marked, how the gates are opened, how people are allowed entry and exit. The border is a very tough place, because anytime any place there can be an accident. For instance, so much of goods are going to Bangladesh, if we are not vigil, then anyone can suddenly cut the fence. So we have to keep strict vigil. It is more difficult than the Punjab border because there is no river border in Punjab, but here in West Bengal there is, as a result of which many places are not fenced. In Punjab the entire length is fenced.

We have been inducted in the forces because so much of smuggling across the borders was being engaged in by women. They were not checked by the other male constables, so they continued. That is why we have been recruited. The first border I was in Wagah, I was very scared the first time I saw it. Especially because there the border is with Pakistan and Pakistan is always causing some trouble or the other for India. So I used to be nervous and wondered if I could ever serve on such a border, would I be upto it? My father likes to read newspapers and discuss politics, so since childhood I knew about Pakistan's harmful intentions, then I came to know about Taliban, that everyday there is some blast, some infiltration, every day one of our jawans is killed on some place in the border or the other.

Regarding Bangladesh it's a little different. See wherever there is no fencing they try to take stuff out, so we have to be extremely attentive during our vigils. And where there is fencing we have to be more careful alert, because if any part of the fence is cut or damaged then we have to pay for it. A month's weapon is taken away from us, we have to work 28 days extra over the period which we sign for in the contract.

Regarding Bangladesh, I just feel angry with them. Do you know how much they harass our jawans? They cut the fence and our jawans have to bear the penalty. They take cattle from here, jewellery, clothes, Indian currency, and sometimes weapons too. I really dislike that, I feel no familiarity with them.

We are told not to be too friendly with the local people here, we are not encouraged to mix with the people here. The moment we become friendly with them, they will take advantage and ask us to help them move goods across the border. You see Bangladeshis can take things from here precisely because they are helped by people here, so we are not encouraged to interact with the people here much. We keep aloof and maintain our distance.

So you see our work is tough and it's really something for the country. I am so proud of doing this work and of doing something for my country. Honestly, I never thought I would be up to it and reach this place and achieve this. People in my village look up to me so, and my mother now says, how was I to know that you would become such a big person?

We don't have any night duty till now but sometimes if they suspect anyone of carrying anything, then they call us in the night, based on the case. Then in Jayantipur there is a gate, so if they find

some woman without an ID there, or suspect that some woman is carrying something on her person, then we are called.

I don't have any feelings for Bangladesh, for me they are strangers. It's a different country, it's a separate country. It makes no difference if the people are Hindu or Muslim, if they are doing something illegal, it is my duty and work to stop them from it. Just a few days ago I caught an old woman, almost my grandmother's age who was trying to sneak into India from Bangladesh. She was a Hindu, but she was lying, so much, I was ashamed of her and also embarrassed that an elderly person could lie in such a way. But we caught her and made sure that she was sent back to Bangladesh.

I don't allow myself to feel sorry for them, they have seriously endangered the life of people in our country. Indians are also people and we are responsible for keeping the country and our people safe. I do not allow myself to think that the people we catch are poor or doing all these illegal activities out of poverty and squalor. I also grew up in a not well to do family, but I have never tried to engage in any illegal activity. I thank god and I pray to god every day. Sometimes I carry flowers if I find some. My parents are proud of me and I am happy to have set this trend. We are the very first women in the BSF and already my younger sister and some girls in my village tell me that they want to be like me, they too want to join the forces and are working towards that.

Firoza Bibi ; Village: Jayantipur

Life for me became hell after the birth of my second daughter. I was brought up to believe that home and family are all that matters. But what bad luck visited me. I studied till Class IV, I have three brothers and three sisters. I was born and grew up in this village of Jayantipur, my natal house is further down. My father worked on the fields for the rich people and my husband too worked on a rich man's farm. It is on the other side, inside Indian territory, its fenced in. I got married when I was fifteen years old.

I have two daughters – the elder one is about 13 years, she began menstruating recently. The younger is about six years old. Life was alright for us, hard life, my husband worked on the farm and we raised some poultry too. When I was pregnant for the second time, I noticed that my husband began craving sex in a way he never had. He would demand sex like an animal, that's when I began to feel that something was changing. But I was pregnant, and he began visiting other women, and so I did not immediately understand. I know now that when you begin smoking heroin, you become sex crazy initially, and then gradually you become like a small boy, unable to perform at all. But I did notice that he began to lose his looks, he became dark, and that things began to go missing in the house. Money, things, we are poor people, but money became short more and more. Then one day I saw him try to steal some of our chicken and I threw a row. He began losing his appetite and then I came to know that he was addicted.

He lost the ability to work; all he wanted was money, money and money. Life became hell, he stopped working, I had two daughters to look after, I was not too strong myself physically. Then I learnt that there were others in the village who were afflicted like him. I took heart that he was not the only one, I came to know that you can never be addicted by yourself, you need company a a group. I tell you that I even followed him a couple of times to see where he went, once I went far but it became dark and it was almost 5pm. That's when curfew begins here. I got scared and turned back. Another time I saw him sit with some others and put things on a paper, light a matchstick over it and lick it. I was horrified, but he was in a group and I came back.

I want all the peddlers to be punished. Those like my husbands are fools, they are being ruined, but the main culprits are the ones like Yaar Nabi, they are the rich ones who sell the stuff, and those like my husband get addicted. Even the sons of rich get addicted, I know my rich neighbor, who takes pity on me and often lets me take her ration rice, she lost her son too to this madness.

Her son committed suicide. I am lucky that my husband is still alive and trying to improve. But it is difficult.

Initially I cried, but then I began to hit him, I turned him out of the house, but all was of no use. I could not stop him. I told my parents and my brothers and they spoke to him but it was useless. I had to start working in the homes of others to sustain myself and my children. Then I filed an FIR with the police who refused to take it, so I went to Bongaon court and signed papers and paid Rs. 200/- and got my husband imprisoned for three months. During this time they gave him treatment. Then after three months I paid Rs. 300/- and got him released. He had become so ugly. He had withdrawal symptoms and it was hell to watch him like that, he used to shiver, get fits, go into spells. It was like when he was addicted too. He would demand money and if I did not give him he would take a knife and start slashing his wrists, threatening to commit suicide. How much I cried, how much I have had to cry in this life. But I am just continuing because I want my daughters to lead a proper life. I pay for my husband too. He is out of work now, we just have some chickens and we sell those eggs, and I work in people's houses here in Jayantipur.

He seems to be okay now, but twice before he seemed to have given up his addiction and then went back again. So I am not sure, how long this will last. I feel sorry for him sometimes, he was persuaded into addiction. He is not the real criminal, it's the people who trade in it, they are the ones, may then find no place in hell, for ruining people's lives like this. I think the police and the lot of big people are involved in this. Or how come they cannot stop it, I know this dealer but no one can lay their hands on him. How? All the people know that it is this person I named just now, but the police does not know?

Now sometimes the Dadas from the BSF come and talk to my husband, they threaten him not to go back and to lead a normal life, that gives me some relief that he will not go back to addiction out of fear. I hope the BSF people can keep a watch and can find out the culprits and prevent other innocent people from getting caught in this nightmare. There are one or two of them who are like my brothers. I trust them and I think they will deal with this sternly. I have heard worse things happen in places like Jamtala where people cut themselves up out on the streets for their addiction.

I have two daughters to bring up, life is so hard, we have no land, we have to work for others. But I love my husband, I can never think of leaving him. Leaving him..? Where would I go? And what would he do by himself? He would die in a day. I just hope the culprits will be exposed and punished and I hope my husband will be back to normal and will lead a normal life like before. That is my greatest hope. Otherwise, living in this border village there is no such significance or anything of particular concern in my life.

I have lived here my whole life and I am used to it. Yes, sometimes, there may be some problems from the BDR people that side and the forces on this side, and they may be running around or chasing each other, but they know me and my husband and we have no problems. Like last year, when there was problem between the BDR that side, the BSF people told us, that if anyone from that side comes here, then let them come and give them shelter and bring them to us. But no one has ever robbed me; we are too poor to take anything from us. If we are fenced out... I do not know, I have not thought of it, I work in the house and then in other people's house and then raise some poultry and I am busy the whole day and then this husband to look after. We have security for now. I will think of things when they happen.

Rita; Village: Shutiya

My name is Rita and I am 24 years old. I am a widow, my husband died of HIV/AIDS. I was born and grew up in Shutiya where my father is a farmer. I have a younger brother and sister. My husband is also from the village right next to us. There are no jobs in the village, so most people

are not migrating out. The farms are too small, since I have only one brother he will inherit my father's farm, but when there are more than one son in the family the land is too small to be shared. My father grows mustard, rice, (dhaan), path. Ours is a mixed village of Hindus and Muslims. Most families in our village have relatives across the border, and a lot of men also used to send cattle across the border, but now I think it is becoming difficult to. I do not know, we have never sent cattle across. SO a lot of boys are leaving the village and going to other towns in search of jobs.

I went to school and studied till Madhyamik and then was married. My husband is one of those who migrated out from the village. He went to Mumbai where he worked as a driver for a babu. A lot of boys from my village went to Mumbai. I lived in his house, with his old mother. He visited for a few months, during which I fell pregnant, and then left for Mumbai. It was during pregnancy, when I miscarried the baby when it was six months old, that my blood tests revealed that all was not well with me. The doctors asked me what my husband did. The hospital in Habra referred me to R.G. Kar, where the nurses behaved very badly with me. When they came to know of my HIV status, they told it to everyone and I was shunned by all.

I was 19 years old when I first heard of my HIV status, I wanted to commit suicide, especially when I came to know how we were perceived. People were disgusted with me, they hated me, worst of all they were frightened of me. But now I know that it is not contagious. My husband also came down from Mumbai this time and he underwent a blood test, and it showed that he was HIV+ too. That's how I contracted it, because my husband is the only man I have been intimate with in my life. I never heard about this disease in my village, I do not know if anyone else has it, but I have not heard of it. We moved to Gobordanga, where my husband found work as a driver. Initially he too did not accept it, my sister in law and her husband first blamed me. But they knew well that the only way I could have contracted it was from my husband.

Initially I was angry and hurt with my husband. I went away to my mother's place, but he begged me for forgiveness. Moreover, how long could I live in my mother's place? My father had three more mouths to feed with the income from his tiny piece of land. When my parents came to know about it they simply did not believe it. They could not understand what it was all about.

Meanwhile my husband was becoming weaker; he explained to me that all that had taken place before my marriage. He was lonely and alone in Mumbai and he needed some warmth and so he visited some women from whom he contracted the disease. But he told me that he did not visit any woman after our marriage and I believe him. Anyway, now he is no more, so it makes no difference, but I like to believe that he did not visit any woman after we got married.

My husband lived in Gobordanga for 9 months and worked as a driver, but the income was not good. Eventually he went back to Mumbai, where he earned more and sent money home. But he kept falling sick, his condition deteriorated and he came back to Gobordanga. It was during this time that I conceived again. This baby was an accident. When I found out that I was pregnant again I wanted to abort the foetus. I had a medicine but nothing happened and then I just wanted to keep the baby even though I knew its future was already doomed. For my second baby I visited Barasat government hospital. The attitude there to an HIV+ patient was also extremely bad. Often the doctors tried to avoid treating me. But the counsellor there was really good. She got me admission there, made me stay there and got doctors to treat me. It was she who told me about NN+, about People Living With HIV/AIDs.

It was during this time that my husband passed away. While he was alive anti-retroviral therapy (ART) was still not available to us. This was two years ago. Then my baby was still born. Life lost much meaning for me. It was the counsellor didi who helped me through it. I used to cry and tell her about my life and she put me in touch with the positive network. I joined it more than a year ago. We have a meeting a month in Bongaon and I simply love the meetings. Its difficult for me to come, it's a long way off Shutiya, where I stay now. After my husband's death I moved back into

my parents' home. Where else can I go? My husband left very little money for me. I do not have any skills, I do not know, maybe I will find out some work through this group.

Right now its enough for me to know that I am not alone in the world, there are others like me. We are normal human beings, it's not that anyone talking to me or sitting next to me would contract the disease. I meet others like me at the network meetings and I have been benefited through the network. I had to have a gall bladder operation some months ago and the network helped me to have the operation in the Calcutta Medical College. Doctors initially were cold but gradually attitudes have changed. I see much more patience in the doctors and also greater publicity about HIV+ patients.

Medicines for HIV+ began soon after my husband died. For more than a year I am taking ART and I feel much better. Soon after my second baby was still born I used to feel very weak. Now for the last two months the medicines are available at Barasat which is more convenient for me to access rather than go all the way to Calcutta.

People in Shutiya spread rumours about me and gossiped a lot. They would talk to me but also avoid me. Thank god that my sister got married before my positive status was discovered, otherwise it would have been difficult for us to find a match for her. But I am glad they are advertising this on TV now. My advice to all other girls would be to get a blood test done if you are getting married and do not know your husband well, especially, if he is living away in another city or town...

Firoza Begum Halsana ; Village: Hatkhola

I grew up in Chapda and studied till Class V and then at age 15 I got married. My husband was a widower and had a daughter from his first wife. We are farmers, my husband has land and we hire people to work on it. He is a Congress member and was the panchayat samiti member, now he is the ex-Pradhan of Gongda. So when the next elections were held and a seat was reserved for a woman he asked me to stand for elections.

I have two daughters and a son, my eldest daughter is 12 years old. I had absolutely no idea what to do. They said all will be taken care of. Of course people respected me because of my husband, and my husband is well respected in the village and in all the villages of our panchayat. We have seven villages under it. Now Habibur Rahman Khan is Panchayat pradhan.

I am busy with my house and housework and bringing up my children, so I did not campaign. My husband campaigned for me, and his friends. Also people liked me and as they respected my husband, this is a Congress stronghold – they listened to him and I won by 154 votes and became a panchayat member. Our Panchayat has 17 members out of which 5 are women.

Now I have to go out two – three times a month for meetings in Hatkhola Gram Panchayat. Initially my husband accompanied to the meetings, now I can go alone, I know the people, and I have support of the women in the village, they are all like sisters to me. I have to sign papers from time to time but I do not deal with money matters, my 'shachiv' fixes up everything and I simply sign. But I have to go to the anganwadis and inspect the food from time to time, see if the children are being looked after properly. Then I got toilet steps/feet installed in the houses in this village. I have to sign papers and meeting minutes, even if I am not in the meetings, but I try to be there. I sign job cards for the NREGS, I don't know who the cards are for, but I trust the people handling it.

The women and girls here respect me, they come to me with their problems, domestic problems and I advice them. I tell them how to handle their husbands and look after children. When couples have problems they come to me and I counsel them on how to live amaicably with each other. Of course men will have their ways and will sometimes beat up women, but women should be patient. Not too much but they should be able to sometimes go out and the husband should look after them.

Young girls like me and tell me they want to be like me. Actually I have to also look after my home, that is the most important thing for me. My husband and home is my priority but since my husband's work is mixed up with the panchayat, I have to help out also.

Yes, it is nice to be a panchayat member, I did not ever think of it, but now it is here, I am part of it and I will try to make life a little better for my sisters.

We have no problems with the BSF people, if sometimes people complain, then they should know that they are here for our own safety and security. Maybe it is people from beyond the fence who sometimes have some problems for ID cards etc., but we do not. If you are good with people then they will also be good with you. But there are people who want to send out somethings to those on the other side, you know the 'throwers' sometimes like grains and food and of course then they will have problems with the security people. After all the security people are here for us, for our safety and we have to have good relations with them. There is no use in antagonizing them. We should understand how to behave. Why go out after 5pm? What need is there for women to go anywhere after that? Why should she return home late and alone. In our village everyone must return home by 5pm for security and there is no problem if you do. If the people ask you for ID then you should not create any problems. Of course she must work and study – my daughters also study and I encourage parents to send their daughters to school. All girls in our village go to the school nearby. The older ones take vocational training too. But family and home is important.

Tanya Sharif, Bangladeshi ; Charged and convicted under the Foreigner's Registration Act 1946 ; Presidency Correctional Home for Women

My name is Tanya Sharif. I was born and grew up in Panigati village in Khulna district. I had 3 elder sisters and a younger brother. I studied till Class V in the village school. We were extremely poor and suffered much poverty. Often there was nothing to eat. I came to India when I was about 13 years old, with my mother and elder sister. We used to see and hear often people going to and coming from India. My elder sister got married to a man from the village of Pedoli, he lived and worked in Mumbai kabarkhana. On a visit to Bangladesh he married my sister, who is four years older than me. He stayed on till sometime, then after my sister had a child he went back to Mumbai. Soon he made arrangements for my mother, my sister and me to go to Mumbai with a dalal. Since we were very poor, we felt it would be a good option for us to go and work in Mumbai. We hears someothers had done that and were living well. A lot of people from my jamaibabu's village was also coming here and his brother fiexd a dala who charged us Rs. 2000/- to help the three of us get to Mumbai.

We left our village early in the morning, and travelled by bus to a place near the border. I do not remember much about it, I just went blindly holding on to my mother. There we waited below some trees, I remember for it to be dark and I fell asleep. I do not remember much, I did not know we were crossing a border, that too an illegal one, along the way our dalal spoke to different people at different places.

Later on I came to know, on my subsequent trips to Mumbai and back that some of the people the dalal spoke to were BDR and BSF people, but none stopped us from crossing over. I don't remember much about the first journey, where we stopped and where we crossed into. It was a long journey, we travelled by bus, sometimes walked, crossed a shallow stream with knee high water. The dalal took us into a house where there were other women and children. A day later we were taken to Howrah station, I had never seens a place like it before. There we boarded a train and were taken to VT in Mumbai. At VT my jamaibabu came to receive us and took us to his house in Meera Road. We lived in a basti, with other Bengalis. I missed my father and brother, who were in Bangladesh. I was found a job in an apartment nearby, it was a family of 7-8 people, I cleaned, washed the dishes, wiped and swept the floors, dusted. I was paid Rs. 500/- per month for the

work. I lived for about two years in Mumbai thus. Once I got the hang of the work, I took up work in two more houses and was earning Rs. 2000/- per month, plus I got food and clothes from the houses that I worked in. In the meantime I got married, because young men in the basti used to harass me. My mother used to worry for my safety, and soon a friend of my brother in law intervened and proposed to me. He was a construction worker by the name of Raju Seth, also a Bangladeshi Muslim. He lived far away from our basti, initially after marriage I lived with my mother as I was scared of living away from her, but after a while I joined my husband. I was about 13 then.

It was then that I made a trip to Bangladesh with my mother and didi after I first arrived in Mumbai. My jamai babu got in touch with the broker, from Mumbai we came to Howrah and one man came and met us. I do not remember his name or what he did. He took the three of us to a village. We spent a day there in someone's house and next night a group of us – about 15-20 people, also my jamai babu's brother and his wife, who were also working in Mumbai – crossed the border at night at Bhomia. This time I saw some armed men, but they did not do anything to us, or stop us. Our guide went and spoke to them. I do not remember which year this was, but that I had been living in Mumbai for almost two years. But my mother wanted to visit home and see my father and brother and so did I. Again we had to swim, our hands got cut. We stayed for almost two months in Bangladesh and then crossed the border back once again at Bhomia into India. This time my mother stayed back in Bangladesh with my father. From there we went to Howrah and back to Mumbai. Again none of the guards, neither on the Bangladesh side nor on the Indian side stopped us. At one time, I remember the guide (dalal) made us stand aside, went and negotiated with a guard on the Indian side for a while, and then we were allowed to cross over.

We returned to Mumbai and I joined work again. I did not join back the same houses that I had worked in as they had hired other help in my absence but I found employment in other apartments nearabout. Few months after I came back from Bangladesh I became pregnant. This time my husband also wanted to visit Bangladesh as he wanted to meet my family there who also wanted to see him. A few of my husband's friends also wanted to visit desh and so a group of us again got together, paid the dalal, came to Howrah and crossed the border near Bashirhat. The cost had already gone up as we paid Rs. 1000/- per person to the dalal, who lived near the border and were helped to cross over. This time I carried home saris for my mother, children's clothes and stayed home for 2 months and then returned to Mumbai. After my return I soon had the baby at a government hospital, After the birth of my daughter, my husband's relationship with me deteriorated. He went out with other women, beat me up, humiliated me. So I decided to go away to Bangladesh again. I got together with two girls from Jessore who worked in the same building that I did and together with their families we returned to Bangladesh. This time I paid the dalal Rs. 2000/- We went from Mumbai to Kolkata, crossed the border at Benapole, at about 8.30pm. Again neither the BSF nor the BDR guards said anything to us. I stayed home for a month or so, showed my baby to others, and when my money finished I had to return to India. I left my baby with my mother. Again I returned with a group, entered India and went to Mumbai.

In Mumbai my husband treated me worse than he had done before. One day he thrashed me mercilessly. It was then that I decided to leave him. I thought of returning to Bangladesh, together with another Bangladeshi man called Prince who lived near my house in Mumbai. He helped paint people's homes and I called him 'brother'. He promised to accompany me to Bangladesh as I did not dare to travel there alone. He went to Howrah first and I followed a few days later. He picked me up from the station and took me to a place near Bashirhat. There the dalal gave him a sack of Rs. 5000/- of Rs. 500/- notes. It was while we were in the bus stand that we were caught by the police. The notes turned out to be fake. I was very scared and said that this man was my husband. This happened 17 months ago. We were produced in Barasat court. Then I was brought here to Presidency Jail and my 'brother' was taken to Dumdum. My didi from Mumbai came to visit me once. She has a ration card, her children were born here and they have papers. I have filed a

petition to employ a public prosecutor for me. I am now waiting for my case to continue and for justice to be done. I am innocent, simply got caught because of a dalal's cunning. I do not remember the name of the dalal.

Moyna Sardar, Bangladeshi ; Charged and convicted under the Foreigner's Registration Act ;Presidency Correctional Home for Women

I have been here for 2 years. I have been convicted, for 2 years and 6 months sentence. Served 19 months, 11 months are left. But I don't know, when we are set free we cannot go home immediately. I have seen many women freed but they cannot go home. I do not know why. I hope I do not have to wait long to get home.

This is the first time that I came to India, and I have come here. I was 17 years old when I came here. I am originally from Rangpur, but my mother moved to Dhaka to work, and I stayed with her and grew up in Dhaka. I am married, at 14 years, no children, I came here 3 years after my marriage. My husband works in Bangladesh, in Dhaka. He has a shop, where all kinds of broken goods are sold. We had a love marriage, I used to work too, I can stitch and do some embroidery. I can make kurtas. My mother used to work as a domestic help with a family. My husband and I had a fight once, actually his mother used to cause a lot of problems for us.

I had a friend also from Rangpur who had also moved to Dhaka with her mother, we grew up together. She got married to a man and worked as a domestic help in Dhaka. Her husband also worked as a domestic helper. He was from Jessore. Once I had a bad fight with my husband, his mother beat me up and I went off in a huff to my friend. She advised me to live apart from my husband for some time, so that he would miss me and would come to get me and would behave better. She said to help me survive during that period she would arrange a job in Jessore for me and that I could stay with her husband's parents in Jessore.

I believed her, and so left the next day with her husband, who she said would take me to Jessore. I had never been out of Dhaka so had no idea where Jessore was and how I could reach it, I followed her husband blindly. We took a bus to Jessore, that's what he told me, then crossed a river in a boat, then took a van. It was already night by then. I did not know then that we were crossing into India, we crossed over sometime around 8pm. I understood later that he wanted to sell me to Pune. WE took a van to the station, and from there took me to Howrah. It was there that he began talking over phone to someone and I overheard him telling the person on the other end of the phone that I was with him and he was taking me to Pune. I understood that I had been duped, I walked away from him, looked around, then spotted a policeman and went up to him and told him that I had been brought from Bangladesh by a man who pretended to be a friend and was going to be taken to Pune to be sold. The police called me to the police station, took down the details, I do not know how you call it. I was caught wearing this kurta and jeans that I am wearing now. Then lady police took over and I was taken for some medical tests. The next day I was produced in Bankshall court. Sometimes I was produced in court once in 15 days and sometimes once a month. I have served much of my sentence but am scared that once my term is over I will have to wait a long time to get back home. I want to go back to Bangladesh. The food here is horrible, we get 3 meals a day but often they have insects in it, so how can we eat it? We are 21 women in my cell. Sometimes I am called to sweep the fields or the floors.

I am waiting for my time to be over and to get back home. I don't want to come here ever again.

Radha Rani Das, Bangladeshi ; Bashirhat

I came here about 4-5 years ago from Khulna, Daulatpur. I am Hindu. One of my daughters, my mother and my brother are still in Bangladesh. I am about 45 years old. I got married when I was

about 12 years old. My husband died 5 years ago. He had a damaged liver. I have three daughters, one is 22, another is 18 years, younger is 15 years. The elder two are married, but the younger one is still with me. I have one son. The elder daughter is still in Bangladesh but the others are here. I went to school till Class IV and then got married. My father had sweet shop. My inlaws place was in Jessore. My husband used to be a dhobi. I had some both Muslims and Hindus. But there were more Muslims and that's why I had to come away. I could not continue to live there with my daughter. I had not seen disturbances in my childhood, we lived amicably, but later a lot of persecution began.

This began about 10 years ago. There has been a lot of harassment. With the girls, the adolescent girls, its not possible to stay with them, so we came away. I do not know why the problems began, but if leaders (neta) start messing up things then we can no longer survive there, suppose there the people are ok, all living amicably, but its on the Hindus that the persecution is carried out more.

Say, they torture my daughter, if any girl looks nice they are abducted, there were two after my daughter. they are Muslimswe are Hindus. If theyharass a girl then all our pride and respect is gone, isn't it? We are Hindus. Unable to bear the torture we came away here. They harassed the men too, but they would harass the women more. And of course there would be attacks on homes, land. We could not sell and bring anything. We had to leave everything behind. They said, leave and go, everything yours is in that country (India). They said that in that country you have everything.

What luck... Now I have to work to survive. In that country, no woman, no (house)wife ever went to work outside . Like in this country I am working, I run my household myself, I am working in another's house and surviving, I don't have any respect. I am surviving. But in Bangladesh I could not do it, I never went outside the house (to work).

After marriage also (we) never stepped out. If ever there was any problem of survival in the village, the men folk would go outside. We women would not. We housewives never went out.

Maybe, if my husband had been alive, I might not have come here. My husband never wanted to come here. So its because there was no male member in my family that I came away. My son was still small, now he is growing up but he does nothing. And I had adolescent daughters, scared that they would take my daughter away, that's why I came here.

What ill luck, in this age. Otherwise does one leave one's country? It was so painful. But what to do, soon after the death of my children's father, the brothers in law started telling us that go away with the adolescent girls. It was good when Hasina was there. But it was politics of course. BNP – Awami League like that, yes you have heard of Hasina, Kalida Zia.. Hasina is for the Hindus. She used to help us a lot but when she stepped down and that one came to power, so now they want us to leave the country. We are poor people, we had to face much trouble. But the ones causing all the problems are rich, ruffians; they survive by hitting others on the head. They are educated, they know everything. Now again I hear Hasina has come back, but we are here.

We had to leave everything behind. I had some land, they took it away. They did not do it because we were women, but because we were Hindus, they attacked us most. So when my brother in law decided that we should come here, we agreed to his proposal. They (brother in laws) helped me to come here. Brokers were known to us, they were our acquaintances, so they brought us. The girls have all grown up, so they took care of us while bringing us (here.).

We were four of us when we came here - two daughters, myself and my son. We had to pay Rs.. 400/- each and we spent a total of Rs. 1600/- We did not have to face any problem as such but we had to spend a night at the border, and crossed over in the morning, at dawn. We do not know if the police, security created any problems. They may have, but that was not our responsibility, it was the broker's responsibility, of course there would be problems on the way. The journey was painful, extremely painful. We were one day in the road, and since then we somehow have come, leaving behind relatives, mother, brother. So it was very painful, a very sad thing. One day...we did not eat for a whole day, we fasted an entire day, of course it was difficult. After crossing the

border we put up at someone's place for the night, the broker put us up. At that house that they put up at, they have a contract there. So we were put up there. Next day we came here to Bashirhat. It was the first time that we have come to this country. Before coming, I thought what not about it, but people there (in Bangladesh) used to say that it was good here; I could live in peace with my children. They used to say, Let's go there, here there are problems, there you can stay in safety, live with your children. That is why we came away. After coming here I found it was true. Well, in any case if people here are good then its good, and if they are bad then its ok, now its all the same, I won't get the people back home any more, yes? It took time for us to get a house to rent, we have not yet built a house, didi, not yet. I have to work, so I work in people's houses. It took me six months to find work. They pay Rupees three hundred each. I get Rupees nine hundred from three houses. From that I pay the rent of Rs 300. With Rs 600 I run my family somehow. There are problems in the work. After doing everything in a family I get Rs 300. Till then I survived with difficulty. My brothers in law helped me run the family. No, I have not received any ration card and neither have my daughters. Neither have my daughters? No, I have not submitted money They said it will take time. So why to submit money, if I don't get a ration card, there's no point in submitting money. But I feel safe and secure here, better here than back home, here no one harasses... We are free here. No one tries to take advantage of us. I can depend on my neighbours if I need any help. But no political leader has done anything for us. We are just struggling. Back home there would have been relatives, but now we are all here, working ourselves and feeding ourselves, struggling, working in people's houses. But some of them are nice, they give me money when I fall sick, tell me to go the doctor. I do not have fixed holidays but take leave when I require any. But I miss Bangladesh, always. Some time I cry for it. But I cannot return to it. How will I go back home? My children are my family and I don't have a husband. I don't have a family; I am like a bird flying around here and there. But this is not home (desh). Back home, I could celebrate religious festivals and rituals. But here, I have to work, where the time is! It becomes difficult, should I work in another's house to survive, or should I keep up the practices, fasts and all? But during festivals like Durga Puja there is no trouble here that happened in Bangladesh sometimes. So I think I did the right thing to come here. But my mother is there. I cannot bring her here, she is too old and moreover the roads are terrible. So if she died. I'm just thinking aloud, everyone has parents, then I would have to go there once.

Conclusion

Very little can be said in conclusion here as these events are still evolving. Here I have tried to foreground the multiple realities of women's presence in the borderlands. Women's voices are self-explanatory and so, I have not tried to rationalise it in any form.

Notes

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