

Bengal Borders and Travelling Lives

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Contents

1. Some Stories from the Bengal Borderland: Making and Unmaking of an International Boundary 3
by *Anwesha Sengupta*
2. From Refugee to Immigrant: The Career of a Refugee Population 22
by *Himadri Chatterjee*

Some Stories from the Bengal Borderland: Making and Unmaking of an International Boundary

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... one evening when we were sitting out in the garden she wanted to know whether she would be able to see the border between India and East Pakistan from the plane. When my father laughed and said, why, did she really think the border was a long black line with green on one side and scarlet on the other, like it was in a school atlas, she was not as much offended as puzzled.

No that wasn't what I meant, she said... But surely there's something – trenches perhaps, or soldiers, or guns pointing at each other, or even just barren strips of land. Don't they call it no - man's- land? ... if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all for then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between?

Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*¹

*You remember that village where the border ran
Down the middle of the street,
With the butcher and baker in different states?
Today he remarked how a shower of rain
Had stopped so cleanly across Golightly's lane
It might have been a wall of glass
That had toppled over. He stood there, for ages,
To wonder which side, if any, he should be on.*

Paul Muldoon, *Boundary Commission*²

The partition of British India at the very basic level meant division of the territory to carve out two separate nation-states. An international border to split an existing nation-space is bound to be arbitrary. Such a boundary line is always a contested one, making some people happy and turning others into minority. The line that Sir Cyril Radcliffe drew to separate East Pakistan from the rest of the India was a deeply disputed one. Hurriedly drawn, it gave birth to numerous confusions when both the governments tried to impose it on the ground. This paper tries to map the border-making attempts between 1947 and 1952, the year when the border came into being and the year when passport and visa became the necessary instrument for border-crossing. However, border-making is

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¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*, Ravi Dayal Publishers and Penguin Books, 1988 & 2008; pp 166-167

² Cited in <http://bengalpartitionstudies.blogspot.com/>, last accessed on 11.7.2011

not about border outposts and barber wires. It is about managing the people who suddenly find an international border in their doorsteps. To ensure a secured borderland, it is important from the state perspective to purge the borderland off any “suspicious elements”. When it came to Bengal borderland, the minorities and the communists were the prime “suspects”. This paper also talks about the ways through which both the state tried to manage people and their movements in the borderland. Simultaneously, it studies the processes of border-making from below – how did the people negotiate/resist the Radcliffe line that pushed their neighbours, paddy field, markets and post offices in a different country? To what extent they themselves participated in the border-making process? Divided into two broad sections, the first part of the paper studies the process of border making and controlling it from above, whereas the second part studies the negotiations of the borderland – residents with the border.

Section I

The Disputed Border

Sir Cyril Radcliffe, the chairman of the Boundary Commission, had less than two months time to separate India and Pakistan. A lawyer by training, he had very little knowledge of the social, demographic and cartographic realities of British India. Not surprisingly, therefore, the hurriedly drawn Radcliffe Line gave birth to multiple disputes.³ And as soon as the Radcliffe Award was announced, territorial disputes became inevitable between India and Pakistan. There were areas that were claimed by both the nation states. The state that already had a control over a certain disputed area tried to defend it, whereas the other country tried to gain control over that area by aggressive measures. As a result, the disputed areas like the border area of Rajshahi (East Pakistan)-Murshidabad (West Bengal), which was strategically very important, witnessed a heavy concentration of armed forces and border militia after August, 1947. As early as October 1947, India had eight border outposts (B.O.P) in place on the Murshidabad - Rajshahi border. However, eight were evidently not enough for maintaining the boundary line. So by April 1948, nine others were sanctioned. By this time, 15 wireless stations had also come up.⁴ Pakistan, too, put its defense mechanism in place soon after partition. The Pakistan Army was at the top of the border defense structure. Their Police and Pakistan National Guards worked under the Army. The *Ansar Babini*⁵ reported to the police. Under the Pakistan National Guards there were also the Muslim National Guards.⁶ India, too, had its own “volunteer” forces to maintain the border.⁷

³ For details, see Joya Chatterji, ‘The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947-52’ in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Feb., 1999), pp. 185-242

⁴ Short Note on the Char Affairs of this district including all the developments relating thereto. Sent by Superintendent of Police, Murshidabad to Spl Supdt., I.B; File No -1238-47 (Murshidabad) Part II, WBSA, IB Department

⁵ *Ansar Babini* was a voluntary organization mainly consisting Muslim youths who were recruited primarily to maintain law and order in the rural areas. They were used in the border areas to counter smuggling and seditious activities. However, there were frequent complains against them, especially from the minorities of East Pakistan, as they were often oppressive and exploitative. See Haimanti Roy, *Citizenship and Identity in post-Partition Bengal: 1947-65*, Unpublished Ph D dissertation, University of Cincinnati, pp 118-119

⁶ A note on the internal situation in Assam and activities on the Assam- East Bengal Border, File no 1238- A, part 1, I.B department, WBSA, 1947

Radcliffe had used rivers at certain areas to demarcate the border between India and East Bengal. Padma and Mathabhanga formed parts of the border between the two Bengals. These rivers soon proved to be the major source of border disputes. The rivers in Bengal delta frequently change their courses. Their locations on the maps that Radcliffe used often did not tally with their actual location at the time of partition. Whether to follow the map or to follow the actual course of the river became a point of disagreement between the two countries. The other question was when the rivers would again shift their courses, would the border also change or would it remain rigid?⁸ The *chars*⁹ on river Padma between Rajshahi and Murshidabad became another major site of contention between the two nation states because “the chars in the river Padma were not taken into account by the [Radcliffe] Commission.”¹⁰ As the exact boundary line here was a disputed one, certain *chars* were in precarious positions and were claimed by both the parties. *Chars* were (and are) strategically important to both India and East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh) because of their locations. Controlling a *char* would give the state a space from where it could keep an eye on the activities on the other side of the border. On the other hand, following the same logic, the presence of a foreign army and intelligence officers on the *char* was a threat to the defence of the other country.

The clashes between the border forces for controlling the *chars* became almost an everyday affair. Majhardiar or Majardia, one of the disputed *chars*, for instance, was a major site of conflict since 1947. According to the Indian government, this was under the Raninagar Police Station of Murshidabad district. The Pakistan Border Force “occupied” this *char* in November 1947.¹¹ Until the end of November 1948, it remained enlisted under the category of “task unfinished” – i.e, a piece of land that remained to be “occupied” by Indian state. Another disputed *char* was *char* Asaridaha, where both states tried to establish their claims. If in June-July 1948, the Pakistan Border Force and the Armed Militia set up camp there, the Indian forces established two camps on 8 and 9 November, 1948, and thus “re-occupied” the *char*. Such confrontations were regular features for most other *chars* as well.¹²

Attempts were made at diplomatic levels to solve such border disputes. For example, both governments agreed to maintain a status-quo in *Char Rajshahi Khashmahal*, which, for civil and criminal concerns, was within Murshidabad jurisdiction in colonial period, and for revenue purposes,

7 In 1948, West Bengal Government formed a group of volunteer border militia which was named *Bangiyō Jatiyo Rakshi Babini*. See Willem van Schendel; *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*; Anthem; London; 2005; p-97

⁸ The Bagge Commission addressed these issues regarding the border conflict. The other problematic river was Kushiara which was used to demarcate parts of the border between East Bengal and Assam. The Bagge Commission published its report on 26th January, 1950. The full text of the report is available online. See http://untreaty.un.org/cod/riaa/cases/vol_XXI/1-51.pdf, last accessed on 21/07/2011

⁹ *Chars* are islands within rivers, formed generally near its delta. It is formed by the deposit of alluvial soil brought by the river. They are often temporary land formations. The river often washes one away, while building another.

¹⁰ Short Note on the Char Affairs, op.cit

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *Chars* were not the only sites of confrontation though. Reports of territorial disputes, though less frequent, are available in IB files as well. For instance disputes arose in East Pakistan Bihar border in first half of August, 1949 when Nagar river, which flowed along the border, changed its course. See Fortnightly Appreciation of Pakistan Border Situation in Bihar for the first half of August 1949, File No- 1238-A/47, 1947, I.B. Records, WBSA

was within Rajshahi jurisdiction.¹³ This peace was breached sometime in early 1948, when the West Bengal Border Force fired at some Pakistani individuals on the *char*. But both sides later agreed to maintain status-quo until 'a firm boundary could be established in this difficult area'.¹⁴ Overall, however, India and Pakistan seldom showed this level of maturity when it came to territorial conflicts. The officials of both the sides met occasionally to resolve problems regarding the *char* areas. The District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police of Murshidabad met their counterparts from Rajshahi in February 1948. Similar meetings were held in May and June (1948) as well.¹⁵ But no constructive solution emerged from these meetings and both sides resorted to force. On 11 August, 1948, at a conference in Calcutta, it was decided that India would occupy "all dispossessed *chars*, if necessary by force."¹⁶

The Spies and the Suspects

Putting B.O.Ps and barbed wires to mark the border on the ground and appointing the police and border militia to guard the border were not enough to secure the territory of the nation-state. The states were eager to purge the borderland off any 'suspicious element'. They had, apart from their armed forces, their own informers. Informers were not only active in the border areas but they often worked across the border, in foreign territory as well to gather information. It is interesting to note how Indian informers, working in the border areas within Pakistan, were represented in the Intelligence Branch documents of India. They were not termed as informers or spies, but were shown as regular Indian citizens working in the Police Department or Intelligence Department who had gone to East Pakistan on leave and, only *incidentally*, had come to know something about the political, social and economic conditions or about the defense mechanism of Pakistan. Being dedicated officers of Indian State, they simply passed the information on to their superior officers!¹⁷

Who were the usual suspects in the border? In the partitioned Bengal, the 'suspicious elements' would mean primarily the minorities. However, writing about the violence against the minorities on both sides of the border is a difficult task, especially because of the nature of the sources that I have consulted. It is obvious that West Bengal I.B. records do not speak much about the violations of minority rights within the Indian border areas. But these records do give some interesting insights regarding the strategies that were proposed or adopted for monitoring the minorities. For instance, an inspector of the I.B. department sometimes in August, 1948, proposed to keep a constant watch on 'the movements and up to date present whereabouts of the important Muslim Leaguer, National Guards and Agitators.'¹⁸ This was necessary 'for the purpose of our successful and sweeping arrests in the event of such decision by our govt. for the security of the state,'¹⁹ he argued. He opined that such constant monitoring would not only be helpful for the

13 See F. No- CR 1B2-4 of 1949, Department-Political, Branch- Confidential Report (C.R.); 'B' Proceedings; List No 119 Year 1949; ANL, Dhaka

14 Ibid, note dated May 15, 1948

15 Short Note on the Char Affairs, op.cit

16 Ibid

17 For instance, see File No 1238- A, Part1, 1947, I.B., WBSA

18 File No 1238-47 (Murshidabad), letter dated 18.8.48 from inspector I.B, H.G Bose (The name is somewhat illegible, but most likely it was H.G. Bose)

19 Ibid

government, it would also have some effect on them and they will, out of fear, suspend their subversive activities...’²⁰ His proposal got a favourable nod from his superior officers.

This was not the first time when there were suggestions of policing the minority leaders in Murshidabad area. The letter, where the I.B. Inspector made their proposals, talked of similar actions that were in practice earlier. He wrote -‘Previously, frequent enquiries about the movement of and watching of some important Muslim suspects at Bahrapore town, were being made by D.I.B...’ But it is not clear which period he was talking of. He informed his superior that this practice was no longer in action. At least no such practice was there for the entire district since December 1947, when the I.B had to go for a ‘simultaneous action’ of tracing and apprehending some miscreants from the minority community in Murshidabad.²¹

The minorities on the border were perceived as *more* dangerous because of their proximity to foreign territory. Therefore, Shyama Prasad Mookherjee reminded Sardar Ballavbhai Patel about “the imperative need of putting non-Muslim officials especially for Executive and Police work in Assam areas bordering on East Bengal.”²² He also mentioned in the same letter that replacing Muslim officers with non-Muslims²³ would not mean “being unfair to any Indian Muslim officer.” They should be posted elsewhere in Assam. But “it is of very great importance that as many of the executive and police posts in the border areas should be held by *completely dependable* officers during the present crisis as possible.”²⁴ It is apparent from the tone of the letter that ‘Indian-Muslim’ and ‘completely dependable’ appeared as two mutually exclusive categories in Mookherjee’s paradigm. This was not typical of Hindu Mahasabha. Nehru was much distressed to find out that Congress government in West Bengal was trying to evict the Bengali Muslims from the border areas of Nadia district.²⁵ Similarly non-Muslims (i.e. Hindus and tribal people like Hajong, Garo and so on.) often had to face a tough time in the borderland which was included within East Pakistan. For instance, it was reported as early as the beginning of September, 1948, that some houses owned by Hindus were vacated to accommodate a contingent of *Ansars* in Godagari, which was in the border area of Rajshahi.²⁶

20 *ibid*

21 *Ibid*

22 Letter dated 5th March 1950, S.P Mookherjee Papers (here after SPM), Subject File- 162, Inst II-IV, NMML

23 I would here like to draw the attention of the reader to the interesting use of the term ‘non-Muslim’ here. Does non-Muslim necessarily mean Hindu in this context? Or, shall we take it in a broader sense which would include Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Jains, Buddhists etc.? I guess in this context the word is used in the second sense. Because, it is interesting to point out, that in Hindu Mahasabha’s scheme of things in the decade of 1940s, only Muslims were seen as problematic category to fit in the broader section of Indians – they were not only foreigners but they had asked for separate nations. As this was not applicable for Buddhists and Sikhs and Jains, their loyalty to Indian nation state were not questioned. Christians and Anglo Indians too were exempted from Hindu Mahasabha’s grudge because they were numerically weak and hence not a threat to India’s or Indians’ interests, and they were also economically weak and had no chance to go and settle down in Europe was not an option for them. see Gyan Pandey, ‘Can a Muslim be an Indian’ in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, issue 41, 1999; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay: ‘Caste and the Territorial Nation’, in *Caste, Culture and Hegemony*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2004

24 SPM, Sub File- 162, Inst II-IV, NMML, emphasis mine

25 See Saroj Chakraborty, *With B.C Roy and Other Chief Ministers : A Record up to 1962*, Benson’s, Calcutta, 1974

26 Extract from W.C.R. of Supdt. of Police, Murshidabad, for the week ending 11/9/48.

F No – 1238-47 (Murshidabad), Part II, 1947, I.B. Department, WBSA

For both the states, the other “problematic” elements in the border were the Communists. In East Bengal, Communists had been engaged in a violent land struggle with the state since 1946-47. The leadership and supporters of the Communist Party in East Bengal were primarily non-Muslim. Therefore, they were often marked as pro-Indian by the Pakistan government. Primarily to curb Communist activities and to protect the border in general, Pakistan mobilized Muslim young men to form the *Ansar Babini*.²⁷ The East Pakistan Border Militia and the army in general worked in close cooperation with them. They were notorious for harassing Hindus and sympathetic tribal Hajongs, and Garos in the Communist strongholds.²⁸ An excerpt from the ‘Monthly Appreciation of the Pakistani Border Situation in Assam for February 1949’ will elaborate this point:

Ten Pakistan posts were functioning on Cachar border jointly manned by E.P.B.M, *Ansar* and Pakistan police. Pakistan border guards from Bholagunj to Maheshkhola on Khasi hill borders are reported to be about 80/100 E.P.B.M and armed police supported by the main force from Sunamgunj and Chhatak. Reinforcement of Pakistan troops on Garo hills border was noticed. This was to suppress the communist activities among the Hajongs under Nalitbari and Haluaghat police station on Garo hills border...Pakistan armed police, looking for insurgent communists, arrested a large number of people and realized money for releasing them.²⁹

The report for March 1949, too, indicates constant clashes between the Hajongs and Pakistan armed forces along the borders of Garo Hills- Mymensingh region. Hindus, often “dubbed as Reds”,³⁰ were harassed while migrating to India along this route. To counter Communists ideologically, the Pakistan government allegedly recruited communal Maulavis and religious leaders in these areas.³¹ To add an interesting anecdote, the District Magistrate of Rajshahi actually asked for a grant of Rs. 2400/- for running an “anti-Communist School”.³² To quote him, “The school will take in intelligent local people from all over the district... and give them four to six weeks training in propagating anti-Communist and Islamic ideas and practices...”³³ This proposal from a magistrate of a border district reveals the extent of Communist phobia that prevailed. The administrator wove together anti-Communist and Islamic ideas very smoothly in his letter. A possible corollary to this is that to him Communists and non-Islamic ideas (or non-believers) were identical.

It was important for the East Bengal Border Forces to ensure that no help came to the Communists from across the border. One strategy was to clear the borderland of those who were the probable sympathizers of the Communists. During the February riot of 1950³⁴, when the borderland

²⁷Haimanti Roy, op.cit, pp 109-110

²⁸ The major support base of Communist movement in East Pakistan consisted of Bengali Hindus and the leaders were primarily of upper caste, well to do, Bengali Hindu origins. Partition and the subsequent migration of Bengali Hindus affected the party structure and left politics in East Bengal adversely. See the interview of Nibedita Nag published in Jashodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds) *The Trauma and the Triumph : Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Stree, Kolkata, 2006 ; Also See Marcus Franda, ‘Communism and Regional Politics in East Pakistan’, *Asian Survey*; Vol 10, No 7; July 1970

²⁹ I.B Records, WBSA, File No- 1238-A/47, p- 253

³⁰ Ibid, p-265

³¹ Ibid

³² Letter dated March 10, 1950; addressed to the Secretary, Government of East Bengal Home (Political) Department; F.No -10R-8/50; Department Political; Branch Political; ‘B’ Proceedings; List No -118; ANL; Dhaka

³³ Ibid

³⁴ During the moments of communal or national tensions (like war or war like condition between India and Pakistan) The Bengal Borderland became more sensitive area, activities of state espionage systems augmented,

became an even more 'sensitive area', the majority from the Hajong tribe of Mymensingh had to face brutal state oppression. Most of them were forced to migrate to Assam and the Garo Hills area. The Pakistan government allotted their lands to Muslims, especially those who had migrated from India because, in the words of Moni Singh, a major Communist leader of Hajong Movement, the state wanted to plant loyal elements on these border areas.³⁵ Those who were displaced from India after partition were unlikely to have sympathies for the Indian state.³⁶

Managing Cross-border Migrations

Policing the border required keeping an eye on the cross border movements of commodities and people. A space like the border, in the eyes of the state, has a lot of room for seditious activities as the borderland generally witnesses a lot of movements and migration of people and commodities. Different people, with different nationalities, meet and interact here. They cross the border and go to foreign territory for social, political or economic reasons. Similarly commodities are legally or illegally sent from one territory to another, for the market or for the private use. Hence the state authorities feel a desperate need to control/manage trans-border movement of people and goods. They always try to put a necessary mechanism of monitoring in place, introduce permit, passport and visa systems, establish border check posts and deploy troops to calculate and control all types of migration of goods and people across the borders.³⁷

The Bengal Border after 1947 witnessed heavy cross border migration. In fact, this began before the partition from the days of Noakhali riots of 1946. There was a trend of Hindu migration to the Western part of Bengal from the East. This intensified with partition. There was a parallel migration of Muslims from West Bengal to the East. Both states were eager to map these movements through various institutions. No permit system was instituted in the Bengal Border at first.³⁸ The Passport-Visa system was introduced between India and Pakistan only in 1952. But that does not mean the border was absolutely open before, allowing free movement from one country to another.

concentration of police and armed forces became visibly more prominent and border came more under closer scrutiny of the states. On such moments of tension, Hindus and Muslims in general became suspicious and afraid of each other. Governments, by the same logic, became wary of their minority. Border area became a potential site of confrontation. It was now required to be under better control of the state. By the basic urge of governmentality, the states now try to enumerate and regulate migration of people and goods across the border. Riot of 1950 was one such moment. Communists too had a part to play in this riot. The riot triggered off from a confrontation between the Pakistan Police Force and the Communists in an East Bengal village named Kalshira (Khulna).

³⁵ Moni Singh, *Life is Struggle* (originally in Bengali titled *Jibonsangram*), translated by Karuna Bannerjee, Peoples' Publishing House, New Delhi, 1988

³⁶ Being Communist was not easy in Congress ruled West Bengal after independence. They had to face various repressive measures of the state. In 1948, the party was banned by the Government led by Bidhan Roy in West Bengal. The ban was lifted in 1950.

³⁷ Crossing the border at the level of experience is dealt with in the last section, Here I deal with the states' initiatives of mapping the movements of people and goods across the border. But these two parts of the same story can not be clinically separated, so I apologise for possible overlaps in the narrative.

³⁸ Permit system started between West Pakistan and India in 1948. In July 1948, India unilaterally imposed permit system in West Pakistan- India border, Pakistan too came up with permit system then on the same year, October. See for the politics of permit system Vazira Fazila Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia*, Penguin-Viking, India, 2008, Chapter 3

Border Militia, Customs Officials and volunteer troops like the *Ansars* were in charge of checking and interrogating the individuals crossing the border. They often crossed the limits of legality and harassed migrants and extorted bribes from them.

Things got worse when communal tension between Hindus and Muslims heightened or the tension between the two countries increased. The February riots (1950) were one such moment. They affected the borderland badly. Minorities of both nation-states crossing the border in search of a safer environment on the opposite side, often complained about being robbed and tortured by the border militia. The armed force and para-legal militia were frequently accused of sexually torturing women migrants. The extract from the Fortnightly Report on West Bengal and East Bengal border for the second half of March, 1950, will illustrate this point:

Indo-Pak relation in all the bordering areas deteriorated further during the period under report. Apart from the continued stream of Hindu influx from all parts of East Pakistan and Muslim exodus from West Bengal, large scale evacuation of minorities on both sides of the border is going on unabated... Aggressive and provocative activities of Pakistan police, *Ansars* and Pakistan Muslims along the entire borderline were well marked.³⁹

Provisions of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact addressed these complains and promised the migrants “freedom of movement and protection in transit;”, “freedom to remove as much of his movable personal effects and household goods as a migrant may wish to take with him”,⁴⁰ and “no harassment by the customs authorities.”⁴¹ After the Pact, matters changed for the better, at least temporarily.

The other major cause of concern for both states on the Bengal Border Area was smuggling. Paddy and jute were the prime objects of this illegal trade. Though both states had their machinery in place to control smuggling, yet to stop it completely was beyond their capacity.⁴² Apart from regular checks, there were occasional special attempts by both India and Pakistan, to deal with these illicit economic activities. A report published in the *Dawn* on September 23, 1950, spoke about the imposition of section 144 on a five mile radius along the border of Sylhet to control smuggling. To stop smuggling of jute between East Pakistan and West Bengal and Assam, the strength of the armed forces and *Ansars* present in the border were enhanced from time to time.⁴³

From the very beginning smuggling of arms and ammunition became a major concern. To maintain order and control the nation-space, both states required a monopoly over the means of violence. So, arms trade and production of arms were two areas where both India and Pakistan tried to establish their hegemony. Directives were issued to check the luggage of “suspicious” passengers on Pakistan bound trains “to detect persons carrying illicitly arms, ammunition and explosive.”⁴⁴ It

39 IB Records, WBSA, File Number Kw 1238 A-47, 1947

40 Ibid

41 Ibid

42 See van Schendel’s discussion on smuggling of paddy from East Pakistan to India after partition. Also, van Schendel extensively discusses the reasons behind and patterns of smuggling of jute and other forms of illegal trade in his book *The Bengal Borderland*, op.cit , pp 121-123 ; pp 156-175

43 Sachhidananda Sen, *Dhakar Chitbhi, Jugantar*, 4th October, 1952, Muktaadhara, Mujibnagar (Bangladesh), 1971

44 Letter dated 2/12/1947, ibid. Also, in the same file there is a letter addressed to Superintendent of Police, 24 Parganas from Special Superintendent of I.B, C.I.D (W.B), dated 15th January 1948, asking whether the suspicious vehicles proceeding by Jessore Road are being searched or not.

was suggested that the motor vehicles along the Jessore Road should also be checked to prevent smuggling of deadly weapons and bombs.⁴⁵

There was a general paranoia among the police and IB personnel as well as among the common people of India about smuggling of arms, explosives and government properties into Pakistan. However, a point that people often missed out was, much of the movements of arms and government properties was a part of the actual process of partitioning India. Partition included division of assets and arms or weapons in possession of erstwhile British Indian army were also divided between the two countries. To assure the common people that all the movements of properties between India and Pakistan did not amount to smuggling, the Ministry of Defence in India had to issue a circular citing the agreement between the governments of India and Pakistan which made “a considerable movement of arms and ammunition between two dominions...necessary.”⁴⁶

Introduction of Passport-Visa System

One of the most common measures for the nation-states to keep an eye on the movement of people and commodities on the border was to introduce the passport- visa system. Modern states try to expropriate ‘from individuals and private entities the legitimate “means of movement.”’⁴⁷ In other words, one needs authorization from the state for certain journeys/travel, especially if they are across the international boundary. The passport is not merely a travel document but it also freezes one’s citizenship. The visa fixes the tenure of one’s stay in a foreign country. The passport gives an individual the right to go out from the ‘nation-space’ of her/his origin and it ensures her/his right (and obligation) to return to that territory again. The visa gives an individual the permission to enter a foreign territory for a particular purpose and for a specified period. Thus, with a passport and a visa one’s mobility becomes possible across the borders. But, at the same time, it also becomes restricted; the mobile person comes under the gaze of the two different nation-states.

45 *ibid*

46 Following reasons were cited by the Ministry:

by far the greater proportion of assets of all types we held was held in depots, factories etc within the territory of the Dominion of India. in order therefore to adjust assets in the proportion agreed between the two Dominions, it has been necessary to transfer stocks from India to Pakistan in considerable quantities. This process is still in progress.

It is the agreed policy of both the governments of India and of Pakistan that when a complete unit, i.e., armed regiment, regiment of artillery infantry battalion, etc. , moves from one dominion to another during the process of the reconstitution of the Armed Forces of the Two Dominions, it takes with it all its arms and equipment. On the other hand, when only sub-units, i.e. squadrons, batteries, and companies or only small parties and individuals move from one Dominion to another, they carry with them only personal arms, equipment and clothing. By personal arms is meant the weapons with which the man happens to be armed, i.e. a rifle and bayonet, revolver, etc. equipment includes belts, packs, pouches, haversacks, and so on.

And it was suggested that “the Provincial Government ask the military authorities to investigate any such rumour or allegation they should first try to ascertain whether the reported move of stores is not due to one of the causes above.”

See, Extract from West Bengal Police Gazette Dt 6.2.48, File No: 1085/47, IB, WBSA

47 John Torpey, *The Invention of Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State*, Cambridge University Press,2000, p-4

The passport was introduced on the India- Pakistan border in 1952. However, it was not the first step towards initiating a paper regime on the border. From 16th April 1949, persons willing to leave East Pakistan had to show a certificate issued by the Income Tax department showing that they have paid their due taxes. People who would be able to show this document issued by the District Magistrate certifying their Pakistani citizenship or domicile status, or a document of release attested to by a Pakistani gazetted officer, would be exempted from this regulation. Foreigners below the age of 18 would not fall under the purview of this act. Travelers who were able to prove that their stay in East Pakistan did not exceed fifteen days, too, would not need the papers. In other words, people who were leaving Pakistan permanently had to prove that they had cleared all their dues to the state. Some apparent concessions were granted to agriculturalists: they were to show a certificate issued by the village headman or officials of the revenue department stating them to be tax paying residents of the village.⁴⁸ This was the first time when some kind of permit system was implemented on the Bengal border. The permit system was already in operation between India and the Western wing of Pakistan.⁴⁹ However, as mentioned above, the passport was a very different kind of document.

The initiative to introduce passports came from the Pakistan government first. Nehru initially expressed an unwillingness to introduce such a measure, though he argued that if Pakistan implements it India would have to accept it.⁵⁰ He was afraid that such a measure would go against the spirit of Delhi Pact and would create panic among the minorities in both countries.⁵¹ However Pakistan was in a hurry to introduce the passport system for crossing the Bengal Border at the earliest possible date. The reason for this sudden rush was embedded in the political developments of the time. East Pakistanis, especially the young generation, were becoming critical about the West Pakistan based leadership.⁵² The Language Movement was gaining momentum and the killing of students demanding Bengali as national language on 21st February, 1952 in police firing did generate intense reactions in the Eastern wing. The Language Movement was seen and projected as a conspiracy against the Pakistan government. Bengali Hindu intellectuals and leaders were prime suspects in the eyes of the state and many of them were arrested.⁵³ Communists, too, were on the list of suspects. Since the loyalty of the Communists and the Bengali Hindus were always under question in Pakistan, the authorities felt that instigation and inspiration for seditious activities could come from across the border. So there was an urge to keep a closer watch on the boundary itself.

As 'nation-states are both territorial and membership organizations, they must erect and sustain boundaries between nationals and non-nationals, both at their physical borders and among people within those borders. Boundaries between persons that are rooted in the legal category of

48 *Ananda Bazaar Patrika* (ABP), 1949, April 18

49 There were some kind very localized permit system in some areas of Bengal border. For example, in September 1948, a notice was served by Pakistan authorities that boats plying to and from Assam through Balimari post (Pakistan) should take out permit for 8 annas per boat from Pakistan customs authority. This was probably a measure to check smuggling. See Monthly Appreciation.. for Assam for the month of September, 1948. File No 1238- A/, 1947, part 1

50 Note to Secretary, Commonwealth Relations, 16/03/1952; *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Volume 17, Second Series, p- 484

51 Delhi Pact or Nehru- Liaquat Pact made provision for free movement of minorities across the Bengal Border.

52 According to Nehru, the increasing magnitude of return migration of Hindus to East Bengal made the government introduce passport visa scheme.

53 See the Six Monthly Report, July-December 1951; File No P III/52/ 55638/ 2; Min of E.A; NAI

nationality can only be maintained, it turns out, by documents indicating a person's nationality, for there simply is no other way to know this fact about someone.⁵⁴ The passport- visa regime follows from this rationality, a rationality that is widely accepted and endorsed in the mainstream media and the civil society in the public domain, which is constituted generally of the literate, well to do sections, of the population whose nationality is not disputed. The *Dawn*, for instance, in a report published on May 13, 1952, praised the proposed scheme of passport and visa to regulate travel between India and Pakistan, saying, "such a step will effectively check smuggling and also put a stop to the free movement of *undesirable elements* from crossing the border."⁵⁵

Both countries agreed that the passport required for traveling between India and East Pakistan would not be the usual international passport. East Pakistan and West Bengal and the North Eastern states of India were too intimately connected in social and economic terms for that. People often stayed in one country and had property, family and friends in the other. For their daily livelihood, the people of the borderland had to cross the border frequently. Therefore, this particular passport-visa system had to have the scope to accommodate these socio-economic factors. Representatives of the Pakistan government at the Conference that was held in Karachi to discuss the nitty-gritty of the proposed passport scheme suggested dividing the travelers into three categories – casual visitors, businessmen and officials, residents of the border areas. It was suggested that people falling under first two categories would be granted visas liberally for a specified time limit. For people of the third category, who would have to cross the border more frequently, special provisions were recommended which included the opening of a visa office in every district headquarters, especially in East Pakistan.⁵⁶ "A suggestion for the grant of special multiple journey visas for the residents of the border areas was also said to have been brought before the conference."⁵⁷ The *Hindustan Standard*, on 19 October, 1952, stated that for the purpose of issuing visas to Indians for

54 See 'Introduction', Torpey, op.cit

55 *Dawn*, 13th May, 1952, it claims this is the sentiment expressed in all local dailies of East Pakistan regarding the system. Emphasis mine

56 It is learnt from *Hindustan Standard* of 11th June, 1952 that there were two major bone of contentions between India and Pakistan regarding the passport system. During Indo- Pakistan talks at Karachi in May, Pakistan wanted that Pakistan nationals residing within 10 miles of Indo-Pakistan border especially agriculturalists and labourers should be allowed to enter India without any restrictions. India, while agreeing to Pakistani proposal on reciprocal basis urged for similar facilities for Indian nationals having business and social relations with Pakistan. Pakistan refused to consider Indian demand and this was one of the issues over which Karachi talks failed. But now Pakistan, according to this news, had agreed to allow Indian nationals having business, and social and some other kind of interests in Pakistan to enter Pakistan ten times a year at the maximum.

One of the other main grounds for failure of Karachi talks was that Pakistan insisted that Dacca would be the only centre in East Bengal for granting visas to Pakistani nationals to enter India. However Pakistan, according to this report, had agreed to allow India to open several centers in East Bengal, though the exact number and location of such centers were yet to be settled.

However, one must remember that it is very difficult to know the exact terms of disputes and discussions between India and Pakistan in the passport conference from newspapers. *Dawn*, being almost official mouthpiece of Muslim League, and by default, that of Pakistan government, would have certain obvious biases. Indian newspapers too, most of them being overtly national and anti-Pakistan, would not be able to see matters like passport from objective position.

57 *Dawn*, May17, 1952

entry into Pakistan, the government of Pakistan has decided to classify Indians into 6 categories. These were:-

- (a) cultivators, blacksmiths, petty traders, carpenters – who normally earn their livelihood in Pakistan but reside in Indian territory within 10 miles of the border. They will be given visa for a period of 5 years.
- (b) for persons, who derive their income from immovable property in Pakistan or their duly authorized agents, or persons who have near relatives in Pakistan, or who are recipient of periodical payments, including pension, from Pakistan. their visa will be valid for one year.
- (c) for government officials and diplomats on duty, the period of visa would be specified in each case.
- (d) businessmen and transport workers will be given visa for a specified number of journeys during a period of one year at a time.
- (e) Indian nationals other than government officials and diplomats serving in Pakistan for more than three months.
- (f) for persons who are not included in the above categories : their visa will be valid for a single journey covering a period not exceeding three months.⁵⁸

In spite of the promise of multiple provisions, the scheme generated widespread insecurity and fear among the minority community in both countries. It was assumed by many that once the passport system starts operating, migration to the other country would become virtually impossible.⁵⁹ There was a sudden increase in cross border migrations across the Bengal border line. After much deliberation, the passport system was finally implemented from 15 October, 1952. Though initially skeptical of this system, Nehru, it seems, was happy to note a fall in the number of migrants to India immediately after the coming of the passport. He noted in a letter written to Bidhan Chandra Roy how the passport system had slowed down migration and checked smuggling.⁶⁰ In the face of constant criticism from the right wing groups,⁶¹ it was necessary for Nehru to defend the system that he had already been a party to.

Studying the techniques of controlling the Bengal border and border areas opens up a space for exploring the character of both nation states. These are the sites which reflect the multiple

⁵⁸ *Hindustan Standard*, News Cutting taken from SPM Collections, Inst 1, NMML

⁵⁹ Indeed after the introduction of passport in Indo- Pakistan border, migration to India from Pakistan or vice-versa with an aim of permanently settling down became increasingly difficult. See Zamindar, op.cit, chapter 5

⁶⁰ Nehru wrote “I think it is a good thing that this check has been instituted. It is easy enough for people to come who want to, whether as migrants or temporarily. But the check prevents them from coming in large numbers suddenly and on the spur of the moment.” See *Selected Works*, Volume 20, 25th Oct, 1952 P-317

Also in a press conference held in New Delhi, on 2 November, 1952 Nehru told the press the checks initiated by passport “prevent a very large number of smugglers who used to travel to and fro.” Ibid

⁶¹ On 23rd November, 1952, ‘East Bengal Day’ was observed in various parts of West Bengal under the initiative of Hindu Mahasabha and other right wing groups. Newly introduced passport and visa system were strongly condemned in the meetings and assemblies that were organized in this occasion. To give an example, in an assembly held in Kalain Bazar on this occasion, the following resolution was passed – by the introduction of passport and visa system people of the country had been pushed into great misery. We demand withdrawal of these systems.

anxieties of India and Pakistan in their first years of independence. The first five years of the Bengal Borderland was the time when this space was in a complete flux. The picture was extremely fuzzy - who belonged to which side of the border, who crossed the border and with what intention, which area was on the eastern side of the Radcliffe Line and which was on the west – all these questions often had no definite answers. Radcliffe drew the border on paper, implementing it on the ground and to give it a life was a process. With the introduction of passport, the making of the border was not complete. But it entered a different phase.

Section II

Living in the Borderland

The Radcliffe line created a curious situation for the people who suddenly found it on their backyards. The border forces, armed militia and intelligence department officials became a part of their landscape all of a sudden. Theoretically, it was the line separating two nation states that were not necessarily on the best of terms. However, the border also separated men from their fields, villages from their nearby markets, children from their schools, individuals from their families, neighbours and friends. Imposition of an arbitrary border, posting army and police and establishing border check posts here and there could not take away the fact that both sides of the border were like Siamese twins, it was not possible to break them into two neat separate parts. People near the border had to negotiate with it regularly- border crossing for many was a part of their everyday routine. Thus, there was a tension – the border was the dividing line between two unfriendly, if not hostile, nation states; it was also the line which ran through the familiar social habitat of the people staying here and for them crossing the Radcliffe Line became a regular, commonplace affair which was not very difficult, especially where the border was not a disputed one. People frequently crossed the border to visit their friends and families staying on the other side of it. A boundary line could not suddenly make the space just across it totally inaccessible and foreign to the borderlanders. A piece of news that was published in the *Anandabazar Patrika* on 1 February, 1949 would establish my point. Suniti Ranjan Sarkar, Secretary of the local Congress Committee of Seoai (West Dinajpur, India) went to see a relative in a nearby village named Mohanpur (under Foolbari *thana*, East Dinajpur, Pakistan). He took with him eight or nine children of his. At around 11 o' clock in the night, as he was coming back, the Pakistan Border Militia stopped his bullock cart, asked him and his children to get down and tried to take the cart away. The guards demanded money from Sarkar. He had no money and managed to borrow Rs 6/- from a local man. Only after paying that were they allowed to go.⁶² The story talks of troubles on the border. But it also proves that even after 18 months of its existence, people could think of casually traveling across the border with children as late as at 11 o' clock in the night. However, it is most likely that after this incident, the relationship between Sarkar and the border would change. He would possibly be extra cautious the next time while returning home from Mohanpur. Through these lived experiences and tactics to deal with new quotidian eventualities, the space of the borderland emerged gradually.

Living in the Disputed Areas

⁶² *ABP*, 1949, February 1

People living in the disputed areas had a more difficult life. They had to negotiate with the state apparatus like the army and the police on a daily basis. Intelligence Branch records kept in the West Bengal State Archives show that the intelligence department and border forces were most bothered about the situation in Murshidabad- Rajshahi region and the people staying there had a tough time dealing with them. Partition proved to be a raw deal for many of the residents of the disputed *chars*. They often had their houses on one *char*, and their lands on another. The journey from home to the field was no longer the same as it was before. There was now an international boundary line and a large concentration of army, police and armed border guards for policing the line. When Inuddin Sarkar, who had his home in a village which fell under Raninagar Police Station (and therefore in the western side of the Radcliffe Line), went to the disputed *char* known as *char* Khidirpur to harvest paddy from his field on August 16, 1948, he had no idea what was waiting for him there. On his way back home, the Pakistan Police arrested him, detained him for ten long hours and took the paddy away.⁶³ Archival records show that this was not an exceptional case; such harassments were a part of the everyday of the collective border-life. People of this area were aware of this problem and had to maneuver their way around them accordingly. They could not ignore or avoid the border. Things did not always remain within the ambit of minor harassments though. At around 5 o' clock in the evening, on 4 September 1948, two 'upcountry manjhis'[i.e. boatmen] were passing by the side of *char* Diar Manikchak. They were plying two boats. One was empty but the other was 'laden with coconuts.'⁶⁴ They were stopped by the policemen posted in the *char* and were asked to go to the police camp. The boatmen, made anxious by the order of police, hesitated. This hesitation was probably interpreted as refusal and the head constable, who was in charge of the camp there, fired at them, killing one boatman.⁶⁵

People and the Making of the Border

Borderlanders had their ways of imagining nations. In the disputed areas like the *chars*, territorial and national identities were fuzzy in the cognitive world of local inhabitants. Their national loyalties were often determined by their religion. Since they lived in areas which could be a part of either India or Pakistan, they had every reason to hope and support that country where they would not be a minority community. But that very hope made them appear as 'fifth columnists' in the eyes of the other state. Haripada Saha, a resident of one such disputed *char* village Narayanpur, learnt this lesson the hard way. India claimed Narayanpur to be within Suti police station and hence a part of India. Pakistan too claimed it. Haripada Saha was caught between these claims and counter claims. He wanted his village to be a part of India and helped the Indian Border Forces in all their activities. But Pakistan managed to establish a foothold here by May, 1948.⁶⁶ A survey team of the Pakistan government visited the *char* on August 2 of that year and stayed there for three days surveying 'the whole of Narayanpur village and also the field adjacent to Narayanpur village.'⁶⁷ The survey party was assisted by eight constables of the Pakistan Police Force and about 10 armed members of the

63 File number -1238-47 (Murshidabad) Extract from the W.C.R of S.P Murshidabad for the week ending 21.8.48, p-154, Miscellaneous (Border Affairs)

64 Extract from W.C.R. of Supdt. Of Police, Murshidabad, for the week ending 11/9/48. Miscellaneous Affairs, Border Affairs, IB, WBSA

65 *ibid*

66 Short Note on the *char.*, op.cit

67 File no 1238-47 (Murshidabad) , Copy of D.I.O's report dated 15.7.48

Pakistan Border Forces. They enquired from Haripada Saha, who, on an earlier occasion had openly helped the Indian Border forces, to which dominion Narayanpur fell. Being loyal to India he replied 'that to the best of his knowledge he is a resident of the Indian Dominion and that the village fell under West Bengal.'⁶⁸ Loyalty to one dominion was seen as equivalent to disloyalty to the other. Since, at least at that moment Narayanpur was under Pakistan, Saha was severely punished. He was sent to jail and the charge was passing of information from Pakistan to West Bengal. Some other Hindus and a few Muslims, who had been loyal to India, were also detained. But Muslims were released because their religious identity went in their favour. This Haripada Saha incident was reported in detail by one I.B. official working in Murshidabad. Apart from narrating the difficulties faced by Saha and the other Hindus, it reported in detail about the local residents who supported the activities of the survey party. Names of Arshad Mandal, Idris Mandal, Faijuddin Biswas, Yunus Biswas, Mojahar Biswas, Warish Mandal, Helal Mandal, Saiful Biswas featured on the report for rendering 'all possible help to the survey party.'⁶⁹ Of course, one can very well predict that if and when the balance of power in this disputed land tilted in India's favour, these men were going to face a difficult time.⁷⁰ The direct involvement of the local people in the border making exercise is important to note for another reason: it reminds us that border is not necessarily imposed from the top-down and centre outward and the people are not passive recipients of the state policies. The people living here too has a participatory role in the making of the border by taking sides, acting as local informants, at times actively resisting the activities of the opposite side. ⁷¹ The IB records too recognized the role of the local people at times in policing the border. For instance, it was reported that the assistant Sub-Inspector of Police of Molladanga Camp with 'some friendly members of the public'⁷² chased away peasants from the other side of the border that had come to harvest paddy from Begumpur *char* (which was, according to India's claim, a small area under Bansgara *char* under Raninagar Police Station). It is interesting to note that the report which talks of this incident does not show any discomfort while writing about the participation of the civilian population in this run and chase game.

Being Minority in the Borderland

Being minorities in the border was a different experience from being minority in the heartland. For a Hindu, staying in a part of borderland within Pakistan meant that he or she was in close proximity to India, a place where (s)he could take refuge should there be any trouble. This nearness to 'enemy' territory, on the other hand, made them potential spies and fifth columnists in the eyes of the state forces and to the local majority community and hence made them easy targets of oppression and harassment. Mahindra Nath Maitra, inspector of police (Murshidabad), after returning from an "official trip" from Rajshahi reported about minority condition in this border district. Hindus in the border areas had to pay to the state and border forces on multiple grounds, reported Maitra. They

⁶⁸ *ibid*

⁶⁹ *ibid*

⁷⁰ At least till the end of November, 1948 Narayanpur remained 'task unfinished'. See Short Note on the *char*, *op.cit*

⁷¹ See, Peter Sahlin, 'The Nation in the Village: State Building and Communal in the 18th and 19th Centuries' in *Journal of Modern History*, 60, June 1988, pp 234-263 and Farhana Ibrahim, 'Defining a Border: Harijan Migrants and the State in Kachchh' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 14, no- 16, April 16, 2005, pp 1623-1630

⁷² 1238- 47 (Murshidabad), *op.cit*

had to made subscription to the Jinnah Fund, the Ansar Fund and the Kashmir Fund.⁷³ Hindus who possessed guns and rifles had to pay a hefty amount at the time of renewal of their licenses.⁷⁴ Maitra categorically accused the Officer-in-Charge of Salar thana for being biased against the local Hindus. He felt that generally the Hindus of the border areas within Rajshahi were panicky. They were having a tough time also because of the economic situation there. He wrote:

Coarse rice sells at the rate of Rs 16/- per kachi maund, vegetables and fish are cheap, sugar sells at Re 1/- a seer and kerosene oil annaseight per seer. As regards cloth – saris are available ar Rs 12/- per piece, Dhuti is not at all available. Match boxes sell at an anna and a half per box. The physicians have been handicapped for want of medicine.⁷⁵

Because of these reasons, Maitra argued, that the Hindus were trying to shift their bases somewhere else.⁷⁶

Sensational descriptions of atrocities against Hindus by the Pakistan Border Forces and Ansars were provided by Banerwar Mandal of Char Sarandajpur.⁷⁷ He accused the Ansars of forcing them to witness cow slaughter on the morning of the Bakr-Id. Ansars also allegedly forced three Vaisnavites attached to a local Vaishnava temple to consume beef. They told the Ansars that they would eat beef the next day with rest of the local Hindus. But these men committed suicide that very night. It is difficult to say how far such allegations were true and how far they were exaggerated.⁷⁸ But even if these were highly exaggerated, the possibility of imagining such violence by state organs proves the possibility of their occurrence.

If things deteriorated between Delhi and Karachi or Calcutta and Dhaka, it was bound to affect the dynamics of the borderland adversely. Troops would be mobilized on the frontier to intimidate the neighbour, espionage activities would intensify, and movements across the border would be more stringently governed and controlled. The position of the minorities would become worse than usual. The mundane daily lives in the borderland would generally be disrupted. These were extraordinary times.

One such moment on the Bengal Borderland emerged when tension brewed between India and Pakistan over India's annexation of Hyderabad. Pakistan reacted to this negatively and there was a general increase in communal hostility between Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent, making the minorities in both countries further insecure. The annexation of Hyderabad coincided with 'a wave of indignation'⁷⁹ in the border districts of East Pakistan, reported the intelligence officer from Assam- East Pakistan border. Petty traders and retailers were forced to contribute to 'Hyderabad Fund' in Sylhet and Karimgunj.⁸⁰ Hindus in the bordering districts of Pakistan were compelled to pay hefty sums to the 'Jinnah Fund'.⁸¹

73 Copy of report of Sri Mahindra Nath Maitra, Inspector of Police, Murshidabad, dated 23.12.48, who had been to Rajshahi to arrange for the defence of our men detained there, Memo No. 5979 dt/- 24.12.48 from S.P. Murshidabad to S.S., I.B., W.B, File No 1238-47 (Murshidabad), Part II

74 ibid

75 ibid

76 Memo No. 5979 dt/- 24.12.48 from S.P. Murshidabad to S.S., I.B., W.B, file no 1238-47, part II

77 Memo No. 5501 dated 3.12.48 from the S.P., Murshidabad , Copy of statement of Banerwar Mandal son of Ram Kamal of Char Sarandajpur, ibid

78 The I.B. officer too found this report exaggerated, especially the beef eating and the suicide part. See the side notes, ibid.

79 Monthly Appreciation...for Assam for September, 1948. File no 1238- A, Part 1, op.cit

80 Ibid

81 Ibid

After the Hyderabad crisis, the border situation hit an all time low during the February riot (1950). This was the crisis moment for the minorities on both sides of the Indo- East Pakistan boundary. Communal violence that had spread in East Pakistan and West Bengal or Assam, triggered off the migration of Hindus from East Pakistan to India and of Muslims in the opposite direction. This was a time of intense border crossings. In a communally charged situation, when minorities were leaving East and West Bengal en masse, it was natural for the governments to be extra cautious on the borderland. Police, border militia, and armed forces became very active in their daily routine of policing the border. What aggravated the policing activities along the border was the Communist 'threat.' Many regular, natural movements were interrupted, making lives of the borderlanders extremely difficult. Crossing the border to harvest paddy from their own fields situated in the other dominion became difficult along the Assam and East Pakistan border, as the border forces of both nation states no longer were willing to allow these movements.⁸² Similarly, people were not allowed to cross the border to sell their products in the markets situated beyond the boundary line. The monthly report on Assam- East Pakistan border conditions for the month of December 1949, reported the miseries faced by the fishermen from Sylhet.⁸³ They were disgusted with the Pakistan authorities for not allowing them to sell their products in Indian markets. They were getting much lower price for their catches in Sylhet markets and thus were suffering great losses. It was the same situation with vegetable sellers.⁸⁴

The riot threatened the very existence of the minorities in the borderlands. The Fortnightly Report on the border situation of West Bengal for the second half of March, 1950, stated that large scale evacuation of the minorities on both sides of the border was going on unabated during the period under observation.⁸⁵ The report for the following fortnight too did not note any 'remarkable improvement in the Indo-Pak relation and the situation along the entire border line remained uneasy with panic and tension still persisting.'⁸⁶

An expected reaction to such oppression was migration. Migration through property exchange was quite common on the borderlands. People living in adjacent villages now had an international boundary line going through them. But they still knew one another, personally or through friends, neighbours and families. So making property exchange negotiations in the border area was not that difficult.⁸⁷

On some occasions, however, these negotiations did not turn out well. In early 1951 Upendra Ray (Barman) of Jagatibari (Tang- Tanger – Danga, P.S. Patgram), along with Nindalu Ray, Pagla Ray, Fuleswar Ray and Rupeswar Ray of the same village exchanged properties with Mamtazuddin, Nalu Md., Azizuddin and Muzakherali of Lasman Dabri, (P.S. Falakata). The properties of Upananda were exchanged with the properties of Mamtazuddin, while other Hindus exchanged their properties with Muzakherali and Nalu Md. Muslims took possession of the properties of the Hindus at Jagatibari, but at Lasmandabri only the house of Nelu Md was given possession. Hindus numbering 46 were compelled to come to Lasmandabri and started staying in the house of Nelu Md. After seven days of their stay, many members fell ill. Hindus now put pressure on

82 Monthly Appreciation..for Assam in December 1949, File NO – 1238-A, 1947, op.cit

83 ibid

84 Ibid

85 Fortnightly..West Bengal for second half of March, 1950. see File no Kw 12380 A-47,opcit

86 Fortnightly..for first half of April 1950, see ibid

87 For example, Tazmuddin (readers are already familiar with him), exchanged property and shifted from his village which was in India to a neighbouring village of Pakistan after riot.

the Muslims to give over other houses to them. But, in the meantime, Muzakherali stealthily sold some portions of his land and he and Nelu Md shifted to Jagatibari. Thus there were disputes about the property. Upananda was no longer in favour of taking part in this transaction. But already, Mamtazuddin's men had occupied Upananda's house. Mamtazuddin was all along living with his family at Lasman Dabri. Upananda went to court. The court ruled in his favour. Mamtazuddin had no objection to returning the properties to Upananda. But Muzakherali objected. On the strength of the court's order Upananda got back his house and when he went to cultivate his land in monsoon, Muzakherali with his men protested. A fight broke out between Upananda and 5/6 of his men with Muzakherali. As a result, Mubarak Hossain, the son –in-law of Muzakherali, died.⁸⁸

At times, border forces too became involved in property disputes. For instance, Basanta Kumar Roy who exchanged his property and settled down in the border village of Mandalpara (Sannyashikata Union, Rajganj Thana, Jalpaiguri), was a victim of such a conflict. On 30th July, 1951 he was shot dead in his home and his house was ransacked. This was a fall out of some property disputes. *Ansars*, according to a report of the *Hindustan Standard*, were involved in this attack.⁸⁹ Obviously, border forces could not have legally taken a part in such a conflict – they sided with the person who had exchanged property with Roy. Thus such fights were not like ordinary property disputes between two parties. It often became a matter of the locality or the village, involving border forces and militia. The tone of the *Hindustan Standard* report makes it clear that participation of the local people in such fights was expected. No one of Mandalpara could help Basanta Kumar Ray because 'there are very few licensed firearms with the villagers,'⁹⁰ regretted the newspaper. The *Hindustan Standard* also claimed that 'Pakistan villagers on the other side of the border have been allowed to keep guns by East Bengal government'⁹¹. The time was such that any border dispute or any argument between people of diverse religious identities was articulated in partition rhetoric – the binaries like India -Pakistan and Hindus - Muslims were invoked.

Not all had the time or opportunity to migrate after making arrangements for their properties. At times, especially when there were some communal disturbances in the locality, movements were hurried and in large numbers. And in the period following partition, when communal tension was always in the air, a neighbourhood fight too had the potential to turn into a riot.⁹² In January, 1948, Tentulia Village (Murshidabad) witnessed such a tense moment. A quarrel between a few local Hindus and Muslims over the destruction of crops by some Hindu cowherds turned into a riot like situation : 'the Muslims of the village Tetulia uttered that they, if necessary, would flee to Pakistan overnight, but before that they would make that place "Noakhali".'⁹³ Hindus from Garura village (Kushtia) migrated to Shikarpur, a neighbouring village within Nadia (India) overnight, after a trouble broke out between Hindus and the police forces on 26 May,1949. It was the day when a gun belonging to a constable of Pragpur, (Pakistan Border Out Post) was snatched

88 Copy of report dated 24.8.51 of O.C., Falakata P.S. , File Number 1238-A (Jalpaiguri), op.cit

89 See *Hindustan Standard*, 17.08.51 ; also see File Number 1238-A (Jalpaiguri), op.cit, IB

90 *HS* report, ibid

91 ibid

92 For an excellent micro-study of such a riot see Beth Roy, *Some Troubles with Cows*, Originally published by California University press, 1994, First Indian Edition by Vistaar Publication (A division of Sage Publication), New Delhi, 1996

93 Extract from Murshidabad District Weekly Confidential Report for week ending 17.1.48, File No -1238-47 (Murshidabad), op.cit

away by some local Hindus as two armed constables of the B.O.P. assaulted a Hindu to extort some money from him. Obviously such an incident was bound to have some repercussions. Anticipating it, the Hindu population of that region left their homes.⁹⁴ But such hurried movements which were triggered off by an immediate event were bound to be temporary. People, who moved into nearby villages, would come back to their homes, at least for some time, to make arrangements for whatever properties they had, once the tension died down.

However, as already mentioned, it is difficult to understand the condition of the minorities in the Indian side of the border from the West Bengal IB records. Similarly, the situation of the Hindus in the East Pakistan borderland is not reflected in the archival records kept in Bangladesh National Archives. On the other hand, regarding the oppression of the Hindus in the borderland within East Pakistan, material kept in West Bengal State Archives (Intelligence Department) is much more explicit. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the organizational politics of the archival records while one tries to weave a story based on them.

Conclusion

This paper talks of multiple issues - the arbitrariness of the border, difficulties of the local people because of the Radcliffe Line, its effect on their daily lives, their participation in the border-making process, insecurities of both the states and their measures to tackle the border. Through these numerous stories, one can get a glimpse of how the division was *actually* happening on the ground and how people were gradually being incorporated within the fold of 'partitioned times'.⁹⁵ The ramifications of partition in the borderland were very different from that in the heartland. In a sense, '*Partition happened here*,'⁹⁶ taking the visible forms of border outposts and armed police. In the border partition 'inscribed itself indelibly in the landscape.'⁹⁷ Yet, from another angle, partition *did not happen here*. Men went daily to the fields that were now a foreign land, married their daughters and sisters to eligible men from the neighbouring villages – which were now in a different country. Women crossed the border daily to go to the local markets. These two aspects made the border/borderland a deeply contested space - porous but policed.

94 Fortnightly... West Bengal for 1st half of June, 1949, op.cit

95 A phrase used by Ranabir Samaddar in his essay 'The Last Hurrah that Continues' in G G Deshaumes and Rada Ivekovic (eds), *Divided Cities, Separated Countries*, OUP, New Delhi, 2003

96 Willem van Schendel; *The Bengal Borderland*, op.cit, p-31; Emphasis as in original

97 *ibid*

From Refugee to Immigrant: The Career of a Refugee Population

Himadri Chatterjee*

Introduction

Partition in the eastern Indian context has been synonymous with the long and difficult journey of ‘emplacement’⁹⁸ of the refugee population generated by the event. Even more importantly the process of displacement in eastern India has continued through several cycles of violence and migration. This trickling in of refugees has given rise to a network of informal habitations that the successive governments neither accepted nor rejected in totality⁹⁹. This paper presents a fragment of that ‘informal network’ of habitation in order to iterate a narrative of the accumulation of this population. This narrative is contextualised against a reading of the early political endeavours of the refugee organisations in establishing a dialogue with the government agencies in order to have some effect on the policy formulations and to provide their own versions of solutions to the rehabilitation question.¹⁰⁰ The major part of this paper is based upon ethnography of the inhabitants of a selected number of villages in North 24 Parganas. In order to situate that ethnography a context in terms of the earlier political genesis of the target population becomes necessary. The narrative of this political genesis plays out through the interactions between three major groups of actors contesting the field of refugee rehabilitation and iterating several different solutions to the rehabilitation question. These three groups of actors were (a) the various strata of the refugees, (b) several refugee organizations such as Nikhil Banga Bastuhara Karma Parishad (NBBKP) and United Central Refugee Council

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⁹⁸ Samir Kumar Das, ‘State Response To The Refugee Crisis: Relief And Rehabilitation In The East’, in Ranabir Samaddar (ed.), *Refugees And The State: Practices Of Asylum And Care In India, 1947-2000*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003) p 147. It is of utmost importance, I believe, that we distinguish the concept of ‘emplacement’ from the more commonly used concepts such as ‘inclusion’ or ‘integration’ when speaking of the interaction between refugees and the host or receiving society. It is important because the concept of ‘emplacement’ allows us to think of and investigate various forms of political and functional interactions between the refugee groups and the host society which gives a certain surface stability to representational and occupational interactions without obliterating the difference between the two groups. In fact the concept of ‘emplacement’ probably invites us to think of the production of various ‘places’ that both accommodate and contain various populations thus producing new topographies of relations and inhabitation.

⁹⁹ Ranabir Samaddar, ‘Introduction’, Ranabir Samaddar (ed.), *Refugees And The State: Practices Of Asylum And Care In India, 1947-2000*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003) pp 21-68

¹⁰⁰ Arun Deb, ‘The UCRC: Its Role in Establishing the Rights of refugee Squatters in Calcutta’, in Pradip Kumar Bose (ed.), *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional; Processes and contested Identities*, (Calcutta: Calcutta Research Group, 2000) pp 65-79

(UCRC) among others, and (c) several tiers, committees and agencies of the state responsible for the formulation of official rehabilitation policies. The relation between the first two actors has been problematised by several scholars. UCRC, in the later years a predominantly left inclined mass organization of refugees, arguably the most prominent and successful in wresting rehabilitation benefits from the government has been consistently studied as an important apparatus of refugee politics. Its relation to the internally differentiated mass of refugees and the asymmetries of representation within its ranks as also the asymmetries of the demands pursued by the organization have been the central focus of much of the arguments that have been presented by the scholars. While some have argued that there exists a causal link between the rise of the left political forces in post-independence West Bengal and the systematic hegemonization of the refugee mass organizations by communist activists¹⁰¹, others have constructed sophisticated and layered histories of the interactions and relays between the refugee political organizations that show a slow and continuous evolution of the left political idiom among the refugee population along with the popular development of a language of 'Right'¹⁰². Recent scholarship has begun to find other fault lines that remained dormant or absent in previous scholarship. Two major fault lines which have figured boldly in recent discussions are (a) the preponderance and almost hegemonic situation of the 'Squatter's colony movement in the historiography of refugee rehabilitation in Bengal and (b) the position of pre-eminence of the UCRC as the platform of political struggle of the refugee groups as a whole. These two tendencies have come to be challenged through ethnographies and archival studies that seek to demonstrate the presence of a refugee population that remained largely alienated from or at least somewhat distant from both the UCRC and the 'squatter's colony movement'¹⁰³. The defining co-ordinates of this population are its belonging to the lower caste of *Namasudras* and their late arrival in India which indicates that they belonged to the rural lower classes or the peasant population prior to their dislocation. Related to the rise of this population as an object of academic enquiry is the increasing importance of the perspective that sees the history of partition in eastern India as a series of 'internal displacements' rather than a tragedy defined and determined by the originary dislocation resulting from the partition¹⁰⁴.

'Dispersal' and the History of 'Internal Displacement'

The beginning of the above mentioned series of 'internal displacements' can be found in the early years of rehabilitation in the 1950s when the government first begun debating the 'dispersal'¹⁰⁵ of

¹⁰¹ Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men: Refugees and The left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, (Calcutta: Lumiere Books, 1990)

¹⁰² Joya Chatterji, 'Right or Charity? The Debate over Relief and Rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947-50', in Suvir Kaul (ed.), *Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India*, (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), pp 74-110

¹⁰³ See Anusua Basu Roy Chaudhury and Ishita Dey, *Citizens, Non-Citizens and in the Camps Lives*, (Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta research group, 2009) and Udit Sen, *Refugees and the Politics of Nation Building, 1947-1971*, (Unpublished Dissertation, Submitted to the University of Cambridge, 2009)

¹⁰⁴ See Debjani Sengupta, 'From Dandak to Marichjhapi: Rehabilitation, Representation and the Partition in Bengal', *Social Semiotics*, Vol. 21, Issue. 1, 2011, pp 101-123 and Gyanesh Kudaisya and Tai Yong Tan, *The Aftermath of Partition in south Asia*, (London & New York, Routledge, 2000)

¹⁰⁵ Joya Chatterji, 'Dispersal and The Failure of rehabilitation in Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 5, 2007. This article lays down the argument that the policy of dispersal was the major failure in terms of

refugees from West Bengal to other parts of the national territory. This was the solution proffered by the policy makers in order to tackle the spatial and economic rehabilitation of a large number of refugees. The state government's strategy was to define the problem as a national problem and therefore to bring the central government into play so as to distribute the responsibility of rehabilitation between the different states of the Indian union¹⁰⁶. The refugee organization 'Bengal Rehabilitation Organization' sought to contest this by proposing that the refugee population be settled in the 'contiguous' Bengali speaking areas so as not to alienate the population completely from its locational context¹⁰⁷. This plan was not able to make much headway in convincing the authorities of the necessity of keeping the rehabilitation spaces within the proximate areas of origin in order to help the possibilities of permanent rehabilitation. The 'dispersals did take place and were followed by mass scale desertions of the rehabilitation sites by the refugee population within a few years. Through the years 1954 to 1958 the city of Calcutta saw groups of refugees that came seeking refuge in West Bengal after deserting rehabilitation settlements in Bihar and Rajasthan among other states¹⁰⁸. These desertions and the consequent accumulation of the refugee population in the city of Calcutta created a volatile political situation that resulted in a satyagraha by the *Bettiah* Deserters and an intensification of the public presence of refugee political organizations. Following this however, in the year 1958 the government reiterated its desire to close down all relief and transit camps in West Bengal and relocate the refugee population in the Dandakaranya Development Area for permanent rehabilitation. This time UCRC sought to open a dialogue with the state agencies by submitting a detailed document on "An Alternative Proposal for Rehabilitation of Camp Refugees in West Bengal" to the Chief Minister¹⁰⁹. The state government sought to answer this alternative proposal through a public statement issued by the then Chief minister Dr. B. C. Roy arguing that the paramount consideration of 'economic necessity'¹¹⁰ rendered the demands made by the 'alternative proposal' impossible to fulfil. The parameters of this necessity was defined by the theory of 'economic saturation' that argued that the territory of the new state of West Bengal was already too densely populated and economically saturated to accommodate the sizeable refugee population. The state government's refusal of the 'Alternative proposal' had a series of serious impacts in the rehabilitation policy scenario. Firstly the long term projects of land reclamation and permanent rehabilitation in various parts of West Bengal such as *Bagjola* work-site camp and *Sonarpur* camp came to a standstill, thus making redundant the years of labour invested by the refugee population in reclaiming swamp lands at the margins of the city of Calcutta. Secondly the earlier policy decisions of transforming large transit camps like *Dhubulia* and *Cooper's* camps into satellite industrial townships at the periphery of the city of Calcutta were abandoned. Lastly and most importantly it cemented the

rehabilitation in Bengal because the political-economic model of rehabilitation worked out by the refugees themselves in the form of the squatter's colonies proved beyond doubt that proximity to developed urban centers allowed for secondary occupational entry points which were necessary for the economic integration of the refugee population.

¹⁰⁶ Nilanjana Chatterjee, *Midnight's Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation*, (unpublished theses, submitted to Brown University, 1992), pp 133-135

¹⁰⁷ S. P. Mookherjee, *Summary of Refugee Rehabilitation Plan by the Bengal Rehabilitation Organization*, (Private Papers, File No. 38), pp 1-4

¹⁰⁸ Tushar Sinha, *Maranjoyee Sangrame Bastubara*, (Kolkata: Dasgupta's, 1999), pp 42-49

¹⁰⁹ *Alternative Proposal for Rehabilitation of Camp Refugees in West Bengal* Memorandum submitted by U.C.R.C. to Dr. B.C. Roy, Chief Minister West Bengal on 11.08.58, (Calcutta: United Central Refugee Council, 1958)

¹¹⁰ Dr B. C. Roy, *Rehabilitation of Camp Refugees*, (Calcutta: Government of India Press, October 13, 1958), pp 8-9

tendency of absorbing the refugee population as a dispersible group of freed up labour that could be employed in the large projects of national infrastructural projects and wide projects of agricultural colonization¹¹¹.

A small qualification is necessary to understand the importance of the last tendency listed above. From the 1950s onwards one general assumption that was entertained by most policy makers was the idea that the Bengali refugees living in the camps had largely become incapable of sustaining social interactions and occupational functions due to their long term habit of living on doles in the camps. This idea led them to strongly advocate 'hard labour' as a curative to the 'primitivation' and 'infantilism' that, the government agencies argued, the refugee population suffered from¹¹². Parallel to this assumption was the necessity of marking some form of belonging for this dislocated population within the new nation whose territorial identity had just received an immense blow from the partition. This belonging came to be largely defined in terms of this population's participation in the production of 'national wealth'¹¹³.

With the stabilisation of the above tendencies the policy discourse shifted to the concept of 'residuary' population which it saw as a remnant of the refugee population that had become dissolved in to the general population of the 'poor' and could no longer be differentiated properly thus making it impossible to target them with specifically designed rehabilitation programmes. The policies concerning this population therefore were targeted towards areas with known concentration of informal refugee populations so as to deliver rehabilitation benefits to refugee families as a part of the general welfare initiatives¹¹⁴.

Following this began a period of largely unmapped desertions and circulation for this refugee population one end of which remained these areas of refugee concentration that the policy documents had already marked. In the next section of the paper we will attempt to map the formation of a set of informal inhabitations formed by circulating refugee families in the areas contiguous to earlier refugee settlements that became permanent either through the squatter's colony movement or the formation of Government sponsored colonies.

A Village Level Ethnography in North 24 Parganas

In order to lay down a background description of the field of the ethnographic study, it is perhaps helpful to delineate the importance of the area in terms of the history of refugee rehabilitation. The North 24 Parganas, lying adjacent to the city of Kolkata, is an important district in terms of refugee agglomerations. A 1987 survey by the Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Directorate states that the most number of squatter's colonies that were set up between 1951 and 1971 were situated in the

¹¹¹ See in this relation Gyanesh Kudaisya and Tai Yong Tan, *The Aftermath of Partition*, pp 125-140 and B. H. Farmer, *Agricultural Colonization in India since Independence*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1974)

¹¹² B. S. Guha, *Memoir No. 1*, (Calcutta: Department of Anthropology, Government of India, 1954), pp i-xiii

¹¹³ See in this relation *Purbo Pakistaner Bastuhara Punorbashoner Panch Bochor 1952-1956*, (New Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Rehabilitation, 1956), *71st Report (3rd Lok Sabha)*, (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, Estimates committee, Ministry of Rehabilitation, 1965) pp 9-11 and *Report of the Committee of Ministers for the Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal*, (Calcutta: The Committee of Ministers, Manager of Publications, Government of India, Calcutta, 1954)

¹¹⁴ *Residuary problem of Rehabilitation of Old Migrants in West bengal*, (New Delhi: Committee of Review of Rehabilitation Work in West Bengal, Ministry of Labour and Employment and Rehabilitation, 1967), p 22

North 24 Parganas.¹¹⁵ The total number of squatter colonies in the district was 101 at that time. The same district also has the highest number of Government Sponsored Colonies (both urban and rural which are 155 and 81 in number respectively).¹¹⁶ The North 24 Parganas is the district with the highest number of undeveloped Government Sponsored Colonies as well.¹¹⁷ Most importantly this district is also the administrative unit that contains the largest number of the 998 group of squatter's colonies which were the last surveyed group of refugee squatter's colonies that came up for regularisation. A 1995 list provided by one of the first generation United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) activists concerning the history of the refugee colony movement recorded 138 squatter's colonies in this district which were yet to be regularised¹¹⁸. The history of this group of colonies is particularly interesting because its regularisation process has remained incomplete for more than a decade. The 998 group of squatter colonies were surveyed and the resultant list was appended by the State Government to the 607 group of colonies pending the ascent of the Central Government. The State government began regularising the colonies that were entirely on *Kbas* land belonging to the State government but the Central Government returned the 998 list and approved only the 607 group.¹¹⁹ The last general order concerning this negotiation dates back to 24th December, 1999¹²⁰. This documentary evidence points towards the possible presence of refugee Squatter colonies which have not been regularised and also a refugee population unlike the Government Camp and Squatter's Colony population. In addition to this we have to remember that the political parties have insistently marked out older refugee agglomerations of this district as a possible refuge of Bangladeshi infiltrators. This combination of things points towards a heavily contested space within the political field of West Bengal and also a particularly intensified space of refugee politics.

The villages covered in this ethnography are Geetanjalipally, Netajipally, Palpakuria and Nabopally of district North 24 Parganas. While the first three are within the Khilkapara Gram Panchayat area the last one is in Guma. The Barasat-I subdivision has had a large share of both squatter colonies and camp-colonies. The sub-division has both urban and rural colonies and the enclaves being in close proximity to each other project an aggravated contrast that seems to play out in local politics as well. The Barasat I subdivision now forms an important extension of the sub-urban growth of the city of Kolkata. The areas that are to be studied in this section border the regions that have been progressively subsumed into the Kolkata Municipal Development Area (KMDA) in the last two decades as periodic extension of the project of building a 'Greater Kolkata'. Geetanjalipally, Netajipally and Palpakuria are villages with functioning Panchayats but at the same time they are villages bordering areas administered by the Kolkata Municipality. These areas are quite close to *Tallab* and *Dumdum* which, prior to the expansion of the city under the greater Kolkata programme, used to mark the northern limits of the city. The district of North 24 Parganas borders Bangladesh in the east and Kolkata in the west. Of its 0.42 million hectares of land area about 0.37 million hectares is rural and 0.05 million hectares urban. This fraction of the land however supports 55 urban administrative units and 54% of the total population of the district. The occupational

¹¹⁵ Government of West Bengal, *Manual of Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Volume-I*, (Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, Refugee Rehabilitation directorate of West Bengal, 2000), pp 116-124

¹¹⁶ Ibid, pp 54-61

¹¹⁷ Ibid, pp 273-275

¹¹⁸ Anil Sinha, *Poschimbonge Udbastu Uponibesh*, (Kolkata: Privately Published, 1995)

¹¹⁹ *Manual of Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Volume-I*, (Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, Refugee Rehabilitation Directorate of West Bengal, 2000), pp 146-148

¹²⁰ Ibid pp 146-148

pattern of the district therefore, in spite of the greater extent of rural land area, shows a tilt towards urban activities¹²¹.

The population in the area is an interesting collection of individuals and families that have been through multiple phases of displacement and change of status. Status in this context means the legal status of the person or persons in relation to his or her categorisation as a refugee or an infiltrator. The lives described in these interviews are punctuated with tales of border crossing. Each crossing changes the status of the individual in relation to state authorities and institutions. Many of them had originally migrated to India before the Cut-off date of 25th March 1971 but thereafter most of them have gone through repatriation, rehabilitation, desertion and return. Many of the respondents hail from split families where various fragments of the family have migrated to India over a period of ten years or more. According to the early policy of providing a limited number of 'refugee certificates' for 'special circumstances' therefore members of split families should have been permissible as bonafide refugees. Their documentation is in most cases, however, not only scant but all together absent. Allow me to quote at some length a typical interview which provides a sense of the population profile mostly hailing from the lower caste of 'Namashudras'.

My family had come from *Khulna Labonchar* village in 1970 through the Ghoshadanga or Beniapol border. I lived in *Basirhat Maitrobagan* Camp and after a month we were transferred to Mana Bhata Camp in Madhya Pradesh. We were kept near the old Mana camp where they used to keep the old migrants. I was repatriated to Bangladesh in 1972 but I came back with my family. After going back we were in dire straits for two years. We starved. The war had left nothing. Everything was changed. We crossed over again in 1980. ... We did not cross as a family. I left for India with my brother. It took us till 1985 to sell off all our land in Bangladesh and bring the entire family over. There are 18 people in my family and my parents are still alive and well. When we were going through the negotiations for selling our lands, some people started asserting that all lands belonging to the *Namasudras* were going to be taken over by them for free because the *Namasudras* would eventually have to leave any way. What this meant for us was that we had to sell land that was worth rupees 50,000 per bigha for rupees 10,000. We had about 11 bigha land back there.... By 1985 my family came over here. It is not advisable to cross the *Chorai* border frequently. None of us has gone back since then. We started staying in Barasat Palpakuria village. There were many refugee families living in that area. They were mostly settled on or squatting on Government land. The land belongs to the Railways department. Many of them were from Khulna, even from my own village. Some of them have been here since 1960-62. Many of them started living there from 1970 onwards. They helped us quite a bit. They helped us to rent a house and also to buy land later. Everybody would come together willingly if there were to be an untoward incident ... I do not live in a colony, but in my neighbourhood, the people living on the railway land have built a colony. We are all participating in the movement for getting electricity and water lines in that colony. Everybody in the colony are *Namasudras*. Many of them work as masons. Some are master masons but most are helpers (*Jogare*). A few work as day labours and there are many rickshaw pullers too. There are a few who work in hosiery factories and as *Biri* binders. Many do not have Voter's Identity or Ration Cards. There are people who have come in very recently, within a year or two. They do not have any identification papers yet. I have a Voter's Identity but no ration card. It is hard to get these papers made.¹²²

The Squatter's colony that is mentioned in the above interview is one of the 998 group colonies waiting to be regularised. Interestingly however we can see that the refugee families are not only settled within the area marked as the squatter's colony. The village around the colony has in fact

¹²¹ *District Human Development Report: North 24 Parganas*, (Kolkata: Government of West Bengal, Development and Planning Department, 2010), p 3

¹²² Sarkar, interviewed on 22nd December, 2011 in the *Palpakuria* village of, District North 24 Parganas.

grown into a larger group participating in political activities that concerns the colony specifically. The person interviewed above works as a master mason and employs several *Jogares* from the *Palpakuria* area. This area has an interesting mix of refugees from various episodes of migration. The respondent relates the reasons as to why between 1970 and 1985 he had crossed the border several times in order to sell his land and to bring his family over. He also mentions that several refugees from an earlier period, dating from the 1960's continue to live in the same squatter's colony. Thus the 'old migrants' are found mixed with 'new migrants' in these villages. The principle that we had found mentioned in the Review Committee policy papers discussed in the second section of the paper seems actualised in these villages where the old and new migrants are not only living in the same area but actually have become indistinguishable from each other due to several journeys across the border. Another respondent will bear this out as we listen to his testimony given below.

My father came to this country along with his elder and younger brother and their families. They arrived in 1952 and took shelter in the Cossipore Camp in Calcutta. In the camp they were involved with the only *Namashudra* leader Jogen Mondal's movement and later got rehabilitation in Bagula. There were quite a few colony-camps in Hashkhali, Bagula, Murogacha etc. My eldest uncle was the family head and we got 7 bighas of agricultural land and also 5 kottahs homestead land. My eldest uncle had a fight with my father and my younger uncle regarding the distribution of the agricultural land during the first sowing season. After the fight my father and uncle went back to Khulna in East Pakistan. We were three brothers born in East Pakistan. We came over to India in 1968 and my eldest uncle who was staying in Bagula settled us in five kottah land that he let us have out of his agricultural land. After some time I got married and in few years more my brothers got married as well. Then in 1999 there was a flood that submerged everything. My house was drowned to the roof. I moved out and over here thereafter. I knew the people here. I still live in a rented house but I have a shop. I make and sell furniture from the shop. I have two sons and two daughters. I bought a 'position' near the main road that goes through the *Bajar*. There are two carpenters who work and live in my shop. My younger son works at my furniture shop and the elder one works as a wood painter and he also has two other workmen working for him. He also has a shop in the market. It's a small beetle leaf and cigarette shop.¹²³

Far from being rare, such family histories of constant back and forth movement are common in these villages. We should not however think of the process of formation of these agglomerations as a natural process or supported only by the presence of kin groups. The primary refugee agglomerations in the area were created by the state's rehabilitation initiatives in '*Helencha*', '*Haskhali*', '*Bogula*' and '*Murogacha*'. This was followed by a period of political agitation by refugees when several squatter's colonies such as 'Pioneer colony' and 'Aurobindo colony' were founded. These spaces are repeatedly mentioned by respondents as a network of interconnected sites that mark a long term migration route for several branches of split families. One such account unfolds below.

My father had received rehabilitation in Dandkaranya. The village was at Malkangiri in Orissa. It was impossible to settle down there and my father decided to go back to East Pakistan. The village was called MV and there was a number at the end of it. We were originally from Faridpur district, Kotalia thana of Gopalganj sub-division. My father went back and started working there. In 1986 I had to escape from my village due to the fear of political persecution as I was with the Awami League and I participated in the Sub-divisional elections. After the elections I had to run to save my life. I am a political refugee. My brother, who grew up with me, married while he was still there and had a child. He entered this country on the very day that Jyoti Basu took his oath as Chief Minister. Since 1977 he has been waiting for a voter Identity card. He is illiterate and works as a *Sebait* (priest) in the

¹²³ Ray, interviewed on 22nd December, 2011 in *Netajipolly* village, District North 24 Parganas.

Thakurbari located in Thakurnagar. He has a really dark complexion. He lives in the room at the end of the field adjacent to the *Thakurbari*. The room is as dark as him.¹²⁴

At times the return of split families and individuals were products of the way the government agencies transferred the refugee groups from one camp to another while trying to keep the 'old migrants' separate from the 'new migrants'

People in the camp got the call for rehabilitation in Dandakaranya. Our train was stopped at the border of Orissa by a group of people who were against Bengalis being rehabilitated in Malkangiri. We were kept in tents in a nearby village and later repatriated. I came back to India a year later. I did not find my parents for a long time after that. They were in a train that left a day before and they got to Malkangiri.¹²⁵

An important feature of their journey is perhaps their passage through several rehabilitation spaces of various characteristics. One of the processes through which this fluid population grounded itself in a network of acquaintances and transactions was its circuitous movement through various rehabilitation spaces where the families recombined with their branches or village level acquaintances that were harnessed to create further opportunities.

At first nine of us came in 1970 crossing the Bagda border. We were 8000 people all together when we crossed. We first came to our uncle's house in Tangra Rehabilitation Colony in *Bongaon*. We stayed there for 2 days. Then we stayed in *Barasat* for a few days and then went to labourhod camp. Then we went to *Barasat Courter Math*. We were later evicted and sent to the Allahabad camp. There we had bamboo partitioned long rooms. I stayed there for 8 months. Some people used to escape to the nearest town for work. Then again we were sent back to Bangladesh. The situation turned bad there. We came back in 2001. I sold a bit of my land and the rest was left alone. One of my brothers stayed back. I came here to the *Barasat Courter Math*. My elder brother was living here. I have bought a bit of paddy land (agricultural land). I had to borrow money and the debt is not yet fully paid. I work as a daily wage labourer. I do odd jobs at people's houses, gardening, fixing things, plaster work etc.¹²⁶

The elder brother mentioned by the above respondent was an 'old migrant', being a 1964 migrant. Yet he had never registered with any government camp. He had bought land in a camp-colony from a deserter. His account follows below.

I came to India in 1964 through Benapol. I bought land in Tangra Colony from another refugee family. I worked there on other people's land. I was a member of the refugee committee of that colony. I sold that land in Tangra colony and went to Bardhaman and lived on government land. It was DVC project land. At first I did agricultural work but then I started a rice dehusking business. I bought two dehusking machines and sold rice in the market. I came away from there 12 years back and bought land here (approximately the year 2000). I have built two houses for my two sons. My eldest son works as a master mason and my youngest died in an accident a couple months back. I lived in the Allahabad camp for six months. It was a matter of finding opportunity. I went and stayed with my brother's family in the camp. We thought that we will take a chance for getting rehabilitation. But such was not the case. When we came to Tangra my uncle's family members were still living there. We had many relatives in the Tangra colony, who had received permanent rehabilitation there.¹²⁷

The above respondent was not unique in thinking of the camp as an opportunity. Other refugees sought other things in the camps. While the above respondent thought of the camp as a possible place for getting rehabilitation benefits, other refugees have sought out government camps

¹²⁴ Roy, interviewed on 22nd December, 2011 in *Geetanjaliipally* village, District North 24 Parganas.

¹²⁵ Barui, interviewed on 28th December, 2011 in *Nabopally*, Guma, District North 24 Parganas.

¹²⁶ Bar, interviewed on 23rd December, 2011 in *Netajipally*, District North 24 Parganas

¹²⁷ Bar, interviewed on 23rd December, 2011 in *Netajipally*, District North 24 Parganas

for cheap shelter which were made available through acquaintances within the camps or an informal structure of transactions built by the camp population over a long period of inhabitation. A similar account follows below.

I came to India in 1985. I did not know anyone in this country so I went to Nadia Dhubulia Camp. I went there by myself and arranged something with the local club. The Camp officers were not there and the Camp was closed. I got a room with the help of the club people in the Camp. There were some old refugees there. Many had gone away but some still stayed there. I paid two hundred rupees for that Camp room. I worked as a carpenter there but the income was low in that neighbourhood. I came to Barasat later. I work as a carpenter still. I was a part of the first Upodeshta committee that acquired land for the Guruchad Bajar.¹²⁸

The zones of 'containment'¹²⁹ that the camps had practically become by 1989 also point towards another function in this testimony. The squatters who became such an important object of screening exercises in the 1980's were gathered together in those campuses of common containment precisely because of the maintenance of the camp and the camp population in a kind of suspended animation. The camps and the GSCs became zones into which immigrants from different times, generations and different levels of resources gathered and deployed. The long term presence of these cheap sources of shelter and a network of acquaintances translated into a constant accumulation of people in the camps, in and around the GSCs and the undeveloped colonies in the districts. The maintenance of the Camp population contributed towards slowly building a network of neighbourhood institutions like local clubs which became an instrument of a form of interaction between the migrant and the local social milieu including both the indigenous population and old migrant population.

Coming back across the border meant the fresh beginning of a struggle towards acquiring land and resources. The struggle for land and work however had been the mainstay of the earlier refugee movement but the engagement had shifted by the 1980's. Acquiring land became harder and harder and the possibility of capturing Government land and forcing negotiations for rehabilitation became impossible due to the cut-off date and the Central Government's refusal to comply with the new survey. The above situation gave rise to the possibility of enforced eviction of refugee families from new squatter colonies that were made inadmissible by the Central Government's refusal to accept the list of the 998 group of colonies prepared by the 'Rehabilitation Directorate'. The eviction of refugee families from informal settlements on government land created a ripple effect due to the dispersal of the evicted population in the nearby villages. One such account is presented below.

I crossed the border in *Beniapol* in 1984 and came to *Barasat*. We stayed in tents. We had to buy tents, the government did not help. We stayed in the '*Courter Math*'. This place was a part of the Barasat court premises. This *Barasat* court premises had around Five hundred refugee families living here in tents and other temporary arrangements. In 1997 there were evictions. We were all working around this place at that time, mostly as masons, carpenters and helpers ... we came here because there was nowhere else to stay. This was government land so we had started staying here.¹³⁰

The eviction from '*Courter Math*' created another floating population that we can find in other villages as well. The eviction however forced a part of the population out from the cycle of occupying land and asking for permanent rehabilitation. This group became dispersed throughout the area trying to acquire shelter. In the process they sought out acquaintances and connections who

¹²⁸ Biswas, interviewed on 24th December, 2011 in *Netajipally*, District North 24 Parganas

¹²⁹ *The Screening Committee Report*, (Kolkata: Refugee Relief And Rehabilitation Directorate, Government of West Bengal, 1989)

¹³⁰ Mondol, interviewed on 22nd December in *Nabopolly* village, District North 24 Parganas.

could offer support which meant circling back through several well known areas dense refugee settlements. Many of the families that came to West Bengal in the 1970's had several members or branches of family living either in old Camp-Colonies or near agglomerations of squatter colonies. The old refugee colonies and camps offered shelter and protection. Because of this function the areas which have had dense refugee settlements have tended to build up contiguous areas of satellite refugee settlements. We can take the testimony provided below as a demonstrative account.

My elder sister and brother-in-law were living here. His family had migrated in 1950-52. He was born here. He had a shop in the *Barasat* station platform. I came and lived with them for four years. After the eviction I lived with him for two years. It took me ten years after the eviction to buy my own land. All the people who were evicted from Courter Math dispersed to places nearby. Some went to Bamongachi and some to Gumah. A group stays at Dattapukur. Some of them bought some land after 10-12 years and some others have been less fortunate. Most, in fact; have not been able to get any place of permanent residence. They live in rented accommodations here and there. The young people among us are all now joining in the carpentry or masonry trade. Not many can open or run a shop; business requires investments which not everyone can afford.¹³¹

Here however we will have to introduce a qualification. While there are reasons to believe that old refugee settlement areas attract new migrants or circulating groups, a major part of the older refugee settlements have begun precisely to shed off this function. There are qualitative differences between 'urban' or '*bhadrolok*' colonies and rural, non-regularised settlements. Along with rural non-regularised settlements undeveloped GSC's or camp-colonies also seem to carry out this function. The urban-bhadrolok colonies however have closed off the accumulative project that had been elemental to its own formation. This closure can be seen reflected in the way that the village population relates to the nearby GSC and early or regularised *bhadrolok* squatter's colonies.

Pioneer Colony, Noapara Salbagan colony, Gupto colony, Lakhi Narayan Colony, Surendranath Colony each of these are government colonies from the early days. *Barasat Colony Mor* was named after the colonies which were sanctioned here. Now that they have become *bhadrolok* they do not like the word Colony. They got the name of the *Colony Mor* changed to *Vivekananda Mor* in the Vivekananda centenary year. But it is not that easy to change things in people's minds. Everybody still calls it *Colony Mor*. Everybody remembers it as *Colony Mor*. *Pioneer Colony* has become *Pioneer Park*. We are refugees now and they keep their distance from us. Women from our families work in their houses but none of these lands were given by the government. We earned our own livelihood and shelter. The Government has not even sanctioned a primary school in our village. Such is the integrity of a *Bhadrolok*. The worth of their promises is for everyone to see. Every Political Party has cheated us. My own party promised us a school for years when they were in office and still promises one now that they are not in office. We are not even included into a scheduled caste reserved gram panchayat. Along with all the government colonies there are squatter colonies as well. Subhashnagar, Kadambagachi and Bijoyee Das colony are squatters colonies built under the supervision of comrade Chitto Bosu. Even those people call our village '*Jhiparu*' (neighbourhood of housemaids) because we are lower than them in caste, education and income. Those places have been brought under Municipal administration and they receive development money because they are marked as urban area.¹³²

The fact remains that a major part of this population did circulate through the camp-colonies and squatter colonies but a certain distance cannot be gain said while trying to understand their contemporary relation. While speaking of the colonies an oddly wistful statement becomes indicative of the strenuous relation between the Colony and its contiguous area.

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Roy, interviewed on 22nd December, 2011 in *Netajipally* village, District North 24 Parganas.

He can't raise himself up. Most of these people can't help themselves. It is the task of the better-off to raise them from these conditions but those Congress chaps will not help.¹³³

Being called Congress seems to serve the function of an abuse or at least overtly a dismissal in such conversations. Interestingly the above respondent was an elected member of the Khilkapur Gram Panchayat and was a member of the Forward Block during the interview. It will be interesting to note here that in 1981 while writing the rehabilitation report, Samar Mookherjee had repeatedly mentioned the cooperation extended to him by the village level refugee organisations and the Panchayats. It would seem then that refugee activism in areas with significant proportions of undeveloped GSC's and unauthorised colonies retains panchayats as one of its main political channels. Yet, one thing remains remarkable that the village population holds on to a sense of a relation between themselves and the colonies.

Later a group of us refugees started building the Doba Colony. It was marshy land. It was full of water hyacinths. Now it is called Rail Colony. I have filled the voter identity card form ten times. Last time I told the officer that it was the tenth time and pleaded with him, still the form was cancelled. I do not have any land. I do not have a home. My address is not an address. Feeding ten people has been struggle enough. In 1972 our *Deora* camp was flooded and we somehow got out with almost nothing of our possessions. Some people escaped from the camp then. The camp officers never came to see us after the flooding why will the *bhadrolok* officers get into dirty water? During that flooding local people got into the camp and posed as refugees to get dole. The officers could not tell them apart so they stayed with us and received refugee relief. We are like flood waters. It is as if we came here on flood waters. I have worked on the lands of old refugees. I worked tapping palm trees three days and received 65 ruppees. They were not able to help us much. They gave us work when they could but they had to survive on limited resources themselves.¹³⁴

The surface does not need to be scratched very far before another figure of the *bhadrolok* jumps up out of the memories of living in the camps. The figure of the Camp officer lends itself as a ready parallel to the election commission officers. In contrast to that neglect the respondent begins to speak of the 'old migrants' who used to live in the camp-colony near the Deora Camp. They were a source of succour in terms of resources and even though that resource was limited, recourse to it was possible. It is this function of the colony that appears to have either become constrained or entirely changed in the earlier responses. However, materially the household economy of much of this population depends upon the resources and employment that comes from the *Bhadrolok* colonies in the area. Most of the women of the Netajipally village appear to be employed as domestic workers in the various colonies while the furniture shops, shoe shop and cosmetics shop receives much of its customers from the neighbouring colonies. The masons and helpers of those masons mostly work small contracts within the colony area. According to Anup Sarkar,

Most of us work within the area between Gumah and Hridaypur. I do not think any of us goes to Kolkata to work. A few *Rajmistiri* (master masons) who work with *Thikadar* (contractors) go to Kolkata but very often the *Thikadar* is from *Hridaypur* or *Barasat*, from one of the 'Old colonies'.¹³⁵

The excerpt from Phanibhushan Shikder's interview also points out another important tendency of these enclaves. Certain individuals and families from the host society becomes a part of the refugee/immigrant group in terms of livelihood, documentation and political salience. This is a tendency that is still markedly present in these settlements. The reason that the respondent gives for such confusion or mixing is not what holds true in all cases. It rather seems to be the case that being

¹³³ *ibid*

¹³⁴ Shikder, Interviewed on 8th February, 2012, at Nabopolly, District North 24 Parganas

¹³⁵ Sarkar, interviewed on 22nd December, 2011 in the *Palpakuria* village, District North 24 Parganas.

a resident or a settler of these areas contiguous to the border and the old refugee settlements identifies one as a suspected migrant whether or not one would identify with the migrant or refugee group. The inevitable effect of such suspicion is that the people living in these areas form strong political alignments while holding on to internal differences.

When the refugees came here they were scattered all through the place. They have lived here in makeshift homes. So many of them died that there were none to dispose of the dead bodies. Bodies floating down the Bidyadhari canal would get stuck in our fishnets. I have been here from much before the partition. Yet I do not have any identity cards. The officers want birth certificate. I am from Barobamonia. Fishing is my occupation. I have applied for fisherman's card but never got one. I do not have any papers for the land where I stay. My family has been living here I do not know for how many generations. But I do not have all the papers. I have become a refugee because I live here. I am living like a refugee. I am support them in all their demands. I go where they go. My fate is the same as theirs.¹³⁶

This cohabitation is marked by common lacks and demands. The refugee/infiltrator families and the local families that claim to be citizens constantly point towards a general threat that they perceive most urgently.

A few of us have some documents but not all. A few of us have both Voter Identity and Ration Cards. We did not get BPL. You have to get close to political parties to get BPL. It's your face and who knows it that counts. Caste certificates are impossible to get. If you want a caste certificate then they want citizenship certificate and for that you need documents from before 1956.¹³⁷

This threat however does not take the concrete shape of the lack of any one document. The respondents have a graded variation of problems with documents. The importance of particular documents changes from time to time and from family to family. While older documentation papers such as the ration card has become one of the first pieces of paper that is common sense to acquire, when asked for something like a Citizenship Certificate most of the population finds itself confused and doubtful.

These people are my neighbours and I am exactly like them but I don't know what you mean by a refugee. These people are *Sharanarathi*, the government calls them squatters. We are all illegal. After 1970 all of us became illegal. They are not even giving voter identity card. I am not sure this citizenship card is necessary for a voter identity card. No one is talking about this. I have lived here. I work here. I pay tax for the land that I have bought but none of those papers are admissible proof for getting me a voter identity card. May be the Indian government does not accept us as citizens but that does not mean I do not live here. The voter identity card is my right. I have a house here, complete with sanitary toilet. I have people who have known me for decades. I have a ration card but they will not even allow that as residence proof. They told me my Ration Card was a fake. I have to get a Citizen Certificate first and only then they will give me a voter identity. In Calcutta if the land lord writes a certificate saying that so and so has lived in my house for a year on rent it is considered residence proof for issuing voter identity card but all the rules change when you come to the village. I do not know why this is so.¹³⁸

The Citizenship Certificate is a new necessity. It is not a part of the community's commonsense. The specific use of that paper also seems a hazy one to the above respondent. It seems neither linked to the owning of land nor to voting. The daily material transactions with the Panchayat members or the acquiring of provisions were not hindered by the lack of a Citizenship

¹³⁶ Parui, interviewed on 8th February, 2012 at Guma, North 24 Parganas

¹³⁷ Sarkar, interviewed on 22nd December, 2011 in the *Palpakuria* village of, District North 24 Parganas.

¹³⁸ Biswas, interviewed on 8th February, 2012, in Guma, District North 24 Parganas

Certificate earlier. Yet this document seems to be making an unexplained incursion into the politics of the area that the respondent is unable to account for.

The cluster of villages studied in the above ethnography coalesces into a narrative of multiple displacements of a population through a dispersed circuit of labour migration structured by different types of rehabilitation spaces. These spaces function both as resources used by the circulating population in order to facilitate their mobility while also giving structure to their movements and bringing together the process of circulation in order to invest the migrating labour population at the fringes of the developmental process actualising at the periphery of the city. Structurally this seems to come together as a process of dispersal and accumulation of the labouring population through informal networks that are nonetheless constitutively linked to state intervention. One of the processes that came to light in our discussion of policy documents was that the government started targeting areas with known agglomerations of refugee settlements through welfare initiatives. The discrepancies in the government's statistical mapping of the refugee population had become not only common knowledge but one of the working assumptions behind policy initiatives. Therefore, instead of targeting the refugee population with rehabilitation programmes the government targeted welfare policies towards areas of known refugee agglomerations in order to deliver welfare benefits to the refugee population inextricably mixed into the local poor population¹³⁹. The construal of these areas of the districts peripheral to the Kolkata metropolitan area started with the act of poverty alleviation and indirect rehabilitation. The recent marking of these areas as places where a suspect population of illegal immigrants could be found is therefore a reversal of the earlier welfare motive which retains the sense of mapping where these remain spaces ill-integrated with the broader processes of inclusion and participation in the national polity. These spaces are given their specific characteristics by the convergence of the processes of periurban development, concentration of migrant labour population and informal settlement building. The state agencies therefore begin categorizing the population inhabiting the periphery by treating the periphery itself as a space that needs different rules or practices of governance. The convergence makes it necessary for the state to produce a constantly changing set of administrative rules which define themselves through deviations from rules and practices in the metropolitan centre. In the case discussed above, international immigration also becomes a part of the perceived political character or profile of these spaces thus further *exceptionalising* these enclaves. The periphery of the Kolkata metropolis therefore resembles a borderland in a substantial sense where a rapidly transforming space is occupied and structured by a suspect population at the edge of sovereignty.

Guruchand Bajar in the Netajipally Village; or - In Lieu of a Conclusion

It has been noted in academic works concerning refugee groups and their self-initiated efforts at economic rehabilitation that the building of markets adjacent to the settlement itself has provided for some of the most successful examples of refugee initiatives for autonomous rehabilitation.¹⁴⁰ While the question of refugee agency remains central to such academic and historical accounts it may be

¹³⁹*Report Of The Working Group On Their Residual Problem Of Rehabilitation In West Bengal*, (New Delhi, Committee Of Review Of Rehabilitation Work in West Bengal, Ministry of Labor, Employment & Rehabilitation, 1976)

¹⁴⁰ Dipankar Sinha, 'Foundation of a Refugee Market', in Pradip Kumar Bose (ed.), *Refugees in West Bengal: Institutional Processes and Contested Identities*, (Calcutta: Calcutta Research Group, 2000) pp 80-97

possible for us to discern a multitude of local anecdotes or stories that constitute the narrative of the founding of a refugee market.

Let us consider here the case of *Guruchand Bajar* which has been mentioned by two respondents in the interviews quoted above. This market has been central to the strengthening and apparent prosperity of the refugee settlement in Netajipally village. It is necessary here to have a better understanding of the location of Netajipally vis-a-vis Kolkata to appreciate its importance. *Netajipally* was carved out as a separate village from two revenue units (*Mouja*) in 1987. The two revenue units were *Chaturia* and *Chak Borboria*. That it is in the vicinity of *Colony Mor* and therefore several early 'squatter colonies' and 'Government sponsored' colonies has also been mentioned by the respondents. It is also important for us to keep in mind its distance from or its nearness to *Chapadali Mor* which is one of the busiest centres of *Barasat* city area which is one of the fastest growing wings of the 'Kolkata Metropolitan Development Area'. The eastern limit of the village is marked by the national highway number 34. This nearness to urban centres coupled with the increasing population density due to the growth of the refugee settlements has given rise to a rapid shift in the land use patterns of the area and almost the entire village land has already completed its shift from the agricultural (*Krishti*) to residential (*Bastu*) category. The tendency of the refugee groups to settle in areas adjacent to urban centres has been noted by Joya Chatterji as a counterpoint to and as a critique of government policy in the early 1950's. Chatterji argues that the availability of subsidiary employment in the urban areas played a major part in helping the squatter settlement refugee groups find enduring and autonomous rehabilitation.¹⁴¹ The account given below is aimed at generating an anecdotal image of the founding of the market in order to suggest that refugee agency probably has to be thought of as a variable within a complex field constituted by multiple forces.

The pictures of the market provided below can testify to the fact of it being an evening market in terms of the volume of goods sold or the number of customers arriving in the market. While in the morning the market serves the local population, in the evening the profile shifts owing to the arrival of customers from the neighbouring urban areas.

¹⁴¹ Joya Chatterji, 'Dispersal and The Failure of rehabilitation in Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 5, 2007, pp 995-1032



Figure 1: East wing of Guruchand Bajar, (15.11.2012)



Figure 2: North wing of Guruchand Bajar, (14.11.2012)



Figure 3: Eastern wing of Guruchand Bajar in the early evening, (16.11.2012)



Figure 4: The market centre seen from the southern end of the market in the late evening, (16.11.2012)

Let me describe here three different narratives concerning the foundation of the market that are collated from a number of interviews with various shopkeepers and residents of the village. The first narrative seems to repeat the general structure of foundation of refugee markets in so much as it is narrated in terms of autonomous rehabilitation initiative. In this version the *Bajar Committee* is placed at the beginning of the foundation of the market. It is interesting to glean this story out of the testimony of a shopkeeper and a long standing member of the *Bajar Committee*.

The land for the Bajar was hard earned. Many of the shopkeepers you see here were plying their business out of makeshift roadside shops. Periodically there were evictions and people ended up losing all of their income. Few of us early residents of the village came together to form the Bajar committee and collectively acquired this land for a permanent market. Each shopkeeper paid for the land and the *pucca* shop structure individually over a long period of time and now each shopkeeper has individual rights over the shops. This is a registered market. We bought this land from a local Muslim farmer. The shops you see here are all *pucca* now but when we started in 1993 all we had were mud walls and bamboo thatching. It was in 2001 or 2003 that the final plotting and the making of concrete shops were finished. This market is the product of the long standing struggles of the people living in this village. To this day the Bajar Committee remains active in maintaining the facilities of the market, the roads inside the market and electricity bills.¹⁴²

The above interview however quickly gives way to a different narrative when we take into account the testimony proffered by another member of the *Bajar Committee*.

Kartik Mondol- The village you see in front of you today was not always this prosperous. Even ten years back this village had mud lanes and bamboo thatched houses. The market is the centre of everything. I built it for the people of the village. After coming from Bangladesh I had nothing. Through the years I have had to take up several occupations. I have sold fish; I have pulled rickshaws and vans and even worked in construction. It was much later that I started working as a builder. Now I have met with some success and I thought it is only fitting that I try to help my own village with my new found success. I acquired the land for the market and for many years I tried to get together enough time and capital to build a permanent market there. By the grace of *Guruchand* I finally achieved my goal in 2001.

Interviewer- Where were the shopkeepers before 2001?

Kartik Mondol- They were in the same place. They had started putting up shops earlier. In 2001 I was able to properly plot and build the *pucca* shops. Now I am in the process of building a Guruchand temple in the market. Most of the shop owners took years to pay the price of the land alone. I did not charge them anything for the building of the *pucca* shops. I just told them to pay me the cost of the land. By the Grace of *Guruchand* I do not want for much. I am moderately successful in my business. It is my responsibility to see to the upliftment of the village.¹⁴³

The above testimony attaches the foundation of the market to the efforts of an individual and his sense of community service. The above respondent remains one of the most important and permanent members of the Bajar committee and an important builder and land developer in the area. A different story seems to lurk behind the scenes and comes around only in fragments. A group of shopkeepers during a community interview recounted how there were other proposals for markets from other builders and developers from the area. One such testimony can be reproduced here.

Today you see the market surrounded by houses on all sides. Earlier there were empty plots all around it and other builders had acquired a plot to the north of the present market and offered to build a permanent market there. so many of the shopkeepers were scattered all around. Some of us were plying our trade in makeshift shops beside NH34. The promoters discussed among themselves and

¹⁴² Anandomohon Biswas, interviewed on 22nd December, 2011 in *Netajipally*, District North 24 Parganas

¹⁴³ Kartik Mondol, interviewed on 15th November, 2012, in *Netajipally*, District north 24 Parganas

there were meetings among the elders and early residents. Some of the shopkeepers were also called for the meetings. Later it was decided that the market will be built in front of *Bibek Sangha* Club.¹⁴⁴

Another shopkeeper remembers the possibility of a completely different genesis; “The land was collectively acquired by the *Rickshaw Samity*. It was later developed by Kartik Mondol.”. The above possibility remains largely forgotten or omitted in all other testimonies.

The above narratives place the foundation of the *Guruchand Bajar* in the midst of several tensions. The foundation of refugee agency seems to get distributed along the layerings of competition among local land developers, altruistic designs and secret negotiations that remain behind the scenes. In its brilliantly fragmented materiality and confounding crosscurrents of anecdotal ‘agency’; Guruchand Bajar stands at the limits of the city. The refugees in another tenuous situation of circulation; inhabit a confluence of stories in a transitory place where the ever extending limits Kolkata blurs across erstwhile illegal and now legalized squatter colonies and new villages like *Netajipally*.

¹⁴⁴ Community interview with shopkeepers, interviewed on 14th November, 2012, Netajipally, District North 24 Parganas