

# Voices of Women in the Borderlands<sup>1</sup>

Aditi Bhaduri

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

The border region between India and Bangladesh is densely populated and is a region of endemic poverty and social imbalance. Borders also unite and bridge divides, provide passages and transits. The result is that there is a steady movement of people and goods across the border, both legal and illegal. The borderland is a site of multiple forms of violence as well as contestations. Women form a particularly vulnerable group as they often cross the border in search of livelihood, security, or are simply trafficked, and become victims of multiple forms of violence. Yet, these women do not only embrace or affirm an identity of victimhood; they are also agents of their lives. In 2009 alone, for instance, 147 women have been held for smuggling contraband across the border. Thousands of narratives unfold daily in the borderlands between India and Bangladesh, and there are multiple realities of life here. Too often discourses are either only rights based or only security based. The reality is far more complex and the lived experience is that women inhabiting these areas engage in manifold negotiations with numerous agencies.

Keeping these facts in mind I have tried to capture voices from the borderland to portray the everydayness of life, as it is lived and experienced by women living in these borderlands. Interviews were deliberately not conducted with any victim-survivor of trafficking (which is rampant across the borders) or with any female sex worker, as these issues have received widespread coverage in academia and in the media. These interviews were conducted with women living in villages of Jayantipur, Hatkhola, Petrapole, Shutiya, as well as with women serving sentence in correctional facilities in Kolkata.

## Mukti Shahji

Village: Petrapole

*I grew up near Haringhata which is also a border village, but it was different. Here it's far more developed because of Petrapole border crossing. In my childhood it was common to see people go over to what is now Bangladesh. I thought it was all one village. That village would be just part of our village. But later we understood differently, as slowly more security people moved in on both sides. Then I got married and came here where my husband worked on some land owned by his sister and brother in law. Afterwards he opened a small business. Here too there were not so many security people like they are now. Over the years they have grown, and now I see this place is swarming with them. See that pond, we would all bathe there. Across the pond that is Bangladesh. Can you see one Bangla Desh Rifles (BDR) man is sitting there? With so many Border Security Force (BSF) people on this side and BDR on that side, we had to discontinue using the pond. Now we bathe here in this place that we have made.*

*We are living in fear all the time. The BSF people keep coming and measuring the land. They came last week too. They want to fence this place for security. What will happen to us then? We will be fenced out. We do not want that. It is bad enough living in a border village. We cannot have*

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people visit us or move out from our homes after 7pm. If someone comes to visit me from my village they have to leave by 7pm, as after that time movement becomes difficult. And at times when the BSF clamp curfew we cannot move out even after 5pm. We had to return home by evening. If we need to move after 7:30pm, the BSF asks us several questions – which often turn into interrogation. It is the same if any relative comes to our place after 7pm; they are questioned for hours on end, their bags are searched, and they feel humiliated. At times if they are shoot outs or the BSF suspects someone smuggling something, or if any intruder from Bangladesh comes here then we have had it. They come knocking, search our homes, and turn it upside down, with no respect for anyone or anything. If sometimes that happens at night, we just lock ourselves in, pretend to be sleeping, not knowing anything. We do not like to get caught in such stuff.

But, in spite of everything we do not want this place to be fenced off. The BSF presence has also resulted in some sense of safety and security. We do not have thefts or robberies, which used to take place earlier. Earlier, when there was less presence, we had more freedom to move around, but people from the other side would keep coming and stealing harvests, cattle, even household goods. I have heard once my sister-in-law had food that was being cooked on the fire-pit that got stolen by people from Bangladesh. They are something else. We are also Muslims, but we are not as daring as them; they have the nerves and guts to do such desperately daring things. If we are fenced out, we will lose the protection of the BSF. We will be exposed and vulnerable to people from that other side and left at the mercy of the BDR. We do not want that. It is not that there is no problem with the BSF here. See they are all over the place. We had much greenery and gardens around our house, but now see the land is bare. That's because we cannot grow plants and trees higher than three feet from the ground. They have cut down all the mango and coconut trees here. At nights they keep watch there, and when my neighbours have gone out to the toilet, they have been harassed. No one will tell you that it has happened to them, but it has happened to all of us. But of course we do not want to get into trouble.

My elder daughter goes to the school - it's a government school and I am always uneasy from the moment she leaves home until she is safely back. She has to pass all these constables, sometimes they call out and sing songs, and tease her. They don't understand Bengali and I think they don't like Bengali people. My daughter has to show her identity card while going to school and while coming back. But if we are fenced out, it will become even worse. We will have to submit our identity cards all the time. Even now if we return a little late, we have to answer so many questions and show papers. I cannot imagine what will happen then. Our lands for cultivation will be on that side. When we visit the other side of the fencing for cultivation, we would need to submit voter card/ration card etc at the BSF camps. They work for the protection of national security; on the other hand they violate the rights of people living on the border.

The hospital is in Bongaon at least 7 kms from here, and imagine if something is to happen suddenly to us at night, the gates would be closed by 6pm. And if they fence this place they would also take away the land from us. They have offered very cheap price. The BDO came once and he offered only Rs. 5000/- for one bigha. Just imagine! And we are very poor people. We do not have money to buy land on the other side, as the price of which will be considerably more. On this side we will be devoid of all security and protection as the BSF will move within the fenced area. We really do not know what will happen. We have submitted a petition to the BDO not to fence this place, but we have heard nothing. We live in mortal fear that anyday that will happen.

We belong to lower middle class. We face various kinds of difficulties – especially economic stress – throughout the year. Now the NGO Petrapole Simanta Unayyan Samiti is helping us. I am the head of this group of 25 women. We save Rs 60 per month (Rs 180 in three months). After three months a woman is eligible to receive Rs 1000 as loan amount. After every three month, she gets additional Rs 500 upon repayment. Loans are provided to women after careful examination of her business proposal and feasibility. Women are becoming self sufficient with the help of their small enterprises. I have bought some chicken and engage in poultry. I sell the eggs to my neighbours and that helps me complement our income. We have three daughters, and as you know everything is becoming more expensive. I have given birth to all my daughters at home, as the nearest maternity home is in Bongaon. Now, two of them go to school. My youngest one is just two years old and she stays at home with me. There are no ICDCs in this village. So you see it would be doubly difficult for

*us if the village is fenced out. We only pray that the government does not fence this area. Please pray for us.*

**Parweena Bibi**

Village: Hatkhola

District: Nadia

*I was born and brought up in this village. My natal house is down the other side, about a kilometer or two away. I live here with my 7 children and husband. I have been married for almost twenty years. Our fields are on the other side of the fence, and I tell you what a problem it is for me to tend to them. To go out to the other side, we have to keep our IDs with the border (security) people. When our children go to school, they have to keep their IDs. When my husband goes to tend to the fields, he has to submit the ID. When I take him some lunch, I have to keep my ID with them. When people come to visit us from the other side, they have to keep their ID with them. If we go to the market, the hospital, or any other place it's the same. At 6pm they close the gates, and life for the day ends for us. Not that we go out much. All the over this border area as you know the day is over by 6-7pm. But when we have an emergency, it's terrible. Worst is the attitude of the guards. On and off they check us. We are women, but they do not spare us. They take their weapon and nudge us with it, feel us up to see if we are hiding anything on our person. As if! But no one will complain. No one will speak up. We are at their mercy, if we speak up then it's our fault and we have to bear the consequences. They just behave as they want to. There is a gate close to my house, but they can close it at their mercy and I have to trudge all the way to the main gate which is almost two kilometers away from here. Same is true of my children experience when they return from school. Sometimes they find the gate nearby closed and they have to walk all that way to the main gate and then from the main gate to our house here.*

*We cannot cultivate the more lucrative items like papaya, which fetches a good price. No, everything has to be just three feet tall, so we have 'path' and paddy. During harvest, we have to specify the number of sacks of harvest we will be collecting and have to enter them in their register. Now, just tell me, is it possible to be absolutely accurate? Sometimes we may enter a certain number and then have a sack or two extra, but that will just be confiscated by them. I cannot tell you how many times they have done this. Sometimes, if they are hungry they will just take away stuff to eat; maybe a chicken and they won't even pay for them. We are poor people and farming is all we have. So many of our youth are now leaving this place, they want a better life, not this horrible sad border village life. Many of them would go to Mumbai, now. We have two of our youth in Kuwait; for the first time someone from our village is living in the Arab countries. There was an agency in Chapra that was scouting for workers. We don't know how they are, and what life they are leading. We are looking forward to hearing their news. For here there is no future. Also, Mohameddans we hear find it difficult to find jobs in other places.*

*But here life is really horrible; it was not so earlier. People would come here from that other village. See across this khal, that is Bangladesh on the other side. Earlier they would come over here, cross the khal, and buy things from us. See, there you can see the BDR men. In front of us are the BSF men, they are there every 10-20 ft.. It's such a nuisance, all the time we are surrounded by strange men. At least the BSF people move around. They turn and sit with their backs to us. They face the other side, but these BDR men just sit and stare this side, they don't move at all. I don't know why.*

*People do try to sell some things from this side to that side of course. I don't know exactly what. I know they like to buy fruits from here, and sometimes some cattle; but my family does not sell anything, so I do not know. But it's true, that many things are sent from here, and things come from there too. And people came from that side too, earlier. Of course, people from Bangladesh liked to visit India but it has stopped and it is of no use to us. We are not involved in that. We just need to lead a peaceful life. Earlier it used to be better, but now with this fence it's really difficult. We feel so abandoned, as no one cares for us. If someone suddenly goes to that side, the BDR people catch him and thrash him, while here the BSF are always so suspicious of us. They don't treat us like humans. They make fun of us. They don't speak Bengali. I don't think they even like Bengalis. Some*

*of them tease the young girls and women, you know. Now see, no one will tell you that something has happened to them, but I am telling you that all have had some kind of unpleasant experience. We live here and that seems to be our crime. We are always looked upon with suspicion, as if we are all criminals doing something illegal. Now many of our friends from the other side have stopped visiting us. So we stand and chat with each other through the fence, but these men keep standing, so we always have company.*

*We feel unsafe sometimes because our husbands are away tending to the fields and we are all alone. I'm telling you life here is hard, very hard. You do not know the hardships we face. Our hardship comes from this side and from that side; it's as if we do not belong to any side. Which is our home? Which is our land? Which is our country? We are scared of people from that side. Earlier they would come and take away our harvest, i.e., before the fence was made. Now our fields are safe because they lie within the fence, but our household goods and cattle are not. Deep in the night they sometimes come here and rob things from our house. We have no one to complain to, or no one to turn to for protection. I do not like the people from the other side. They talk sweet, but they harm you. Once, a couple of our village boys went that side. The people over there informed the BDR, and they arrested the boys. Our poor boys! That's how people are; you cannot trust anyone.*

*And the BSF people think they are kings. See if I go somewhere in a van and we happen to pass any BSF person on the way, the driver of the van has to get off and walk while crossing them. As a mark of his submission he cannot sit and ride the van. Why? Are they kings? They will stop the men, even though they know the men are from this village, but still they will ask them what they do, where they are going and why. Just some months ago a young girl died. I don't know what really happened. I hear that there was a 'thrower' and the BSF people were chasing him, and the girl happened to be in the way and got shot. But what does it matter, who is right or wrong? The young girl paid with her life. We are not Bangladeshis, so we can never ever forget to take our Ids. Anywhere we go, we are so scared of being called Bangladeshis and put in prison. There is no peace, no peace, this is torture. The only way we can escape all this is by buying a house on that side, but it's too expensive. The moment they erected the fence, the price of land on that side shot up and on this side it went down. So who will buy our house? And where will we get the money to buy a house on that side? No, we have to live here and suffer here; that is our fate.*

## **Srabanti Karmakar**

Constable: Border Security Force

Haridaspur

*I am from Bankura district village, Soldah. I went to a government primary school nearby. We are three sisters, I am the eldest. My father's mother also lives with us. My father is a carpenter, and my mother a housewife. I had a kaka who worked in the army, lived in the village, and I loved to see him in his uniform. Since then I had harboured this dream that I too would join the forces one day. I loved history most of all, I completed Madhyamik in 2004 and Higher Secondary in 2007. Then I enrolled in college. High school was 45 mts away from my house; I used to go school on my cycle. We took classes in a coaching centre for help with all the subjects that we studied in school. The teachers used to come to school, but did not teach us fully. They would show us something's, for example, some mathematics or come and tell us what we had to study in history. Then we had to do it on our own, so that's why we went to the coaching center. Boys and girls studied together in the school. College was 45 minutes away. I went to the bus stand by cycle, left the cycle there and took the bus to college. On way back, I came by bus, took the cycle and cycled back home. There was no fear that the cycle would be stolen, and we were in a group, as most girls in our village studied. Most of the people in the village were farmers and some were not, like my father was a carpenter. Others had small businesses, like a ration shop, or a small shop selling knick-knacks. In college, I did NCC, and did not choose honours. I knew from Class IX that I would join the forces. I used to read the employment news paper that my father usually brought for me. It is in this newspaper that I found the advertisement for my job. Actually I wished to join the air force, but that's a very advanced field. However, I knew that I would join the forces, perhaps the west Bengal police. So I knew I had to have some higher education for it, so I studied history and Bengali and Sanskrit. I am*

not married, and I never thought of marriage. I studied in the pass course and 45 percent was the minimum needed to pass. I studied for two years and then took the first year exam for my college degree. Before the second year I got recruited. I went back and took the second year exam; however, I got the appointment for here. So, I have not yet completed my graduation. In my village, people appreciated me. Some would tell my parents to get me married off. My mother was under tremendous pressure, but my father stood by me. He always told people, my daughter has ambitions; she is not doing anything illegal. I would run in the field each day and people would see me work hard on my form and physical fitness. My second sister is now doing a diploma in computers and my youngest sister is in school but she too runs and wants to join the forces.

Initially my parents did not like the idea of me joining the forces because it is really tough work, difficult, and painful. And BSF work is even more difficult. The training is so hard, and if I failed to pass the training it would have been so humiliating. I had to fill in my height and weight details too. Then I had to go to Kalyani to the BSF outpost there for physical test. I had to run for 800 meters, do 3ft high jump and 9 ft long jump. Then we had a written test, viva and medical tests. My father accompanied me to Kalyani. We rented a hotel room; but it was a little expensive for us, since we had to pay for the accommodation out of our own pockets. My father would accompany me and wait outside. In the test I wrote that I wanted to do something for my country and also that I had dreamed of being in the forces since childhood. I was very tense and nervous. There were some 420 applicants, and only 32 were selected. We had all the tests over a period of 6 days. The commanding officer of Kalyani was there. This was in 2008. I was so tensed up that I would not eat anything. I would eat something in the morning and only after I returned to the hotel in the night. The snacks I would take with me to the test each day would remain in my bag. Then on 2 September I got the appointment call. We joined in September in Kalyani and then we were sent to Punjab in November for training. There were many officers there; we got training in drill, in shooting, rifle training, training in light machine gun, pistol, training in physical fitness and agility. We had training for 9 months and learnt how to adjust with each other. There were Punjabi girls too and I learnt how to live with non-Bengalis. The first border I was in Wagah. I was very scared the first time I saw it. Especially because there the border is with Pakistan and Pakistan is always causing some trouble or the other for India. So I used to be nervous and wondered if I ever had to serve on such a border, would I be upto it? My father likes to read newspapers and discuss politics, so since childhood I knew about Pakistan's harmful intentions. Then I came to know about Taliban, that everyday there is some blast, some infiltration. Every day one of our jawans is killed on some place in the border or the other. Regarding Bangladesh it's a little different. See wherever there is no fencing they try to take stuff out, so we have to be extremely attentive during our vigils. And where there is fencing we have to be more careful alert, because if any part of the fence is cut or damaged then we have to pay for it. A month's weapon is taken away from us, we have to work 28 days extra over the period which we sign for in the contract. We have been inducted in the forces because so much of smuggling across the borders was being engaged in by women. They were not checked by the other male constables, so they continued. That is why we have been recruited. Regarding Bangladesh, I just feel angry with them. Do you know how much they harass our jawans? They cut the fence and our jawans have to bear the penalty. They take cattle from here, jewellery, clothes, Indian currency, and sometimes weapons too. I really dislike that. I feel no familiarity with them. I really like this place and my work in the BSF. I had many hopes. I came with much hopes and expectations in my heart and I really like this job. It's a lot of responsibility. I am really doing something worthwhile; no woman from my family has worked before. It's peaceful here, though my village is even better; but I like this work. All the sirs, all the people in the force are really nice, and treat us with a lot of respect. We do miss home, but here all have become like a big family. In fact when we go home on holidays now, we wait eagerly to get back here and exchange all the news. We women constables miss each other when we go away. However, we are told not to be too friendly with the local people here. We are not encouraged to mix with the people here. The moment we become friendly with them, they will take advantage and ask us to help them move goods across the border. You see Bangladeshis can take things from here precisely because they are helped by people here, so we are not encouraged to interact with the people here much. We keep aloof and maintain our distance. So you see, our work is tough and it's really something for the country. I am so proud

*of doing this work and of doing something for my country. Honestly, I never thought I would be up to it and reach this place and achieve this. The people in my village today look up to me. My mother now says how was I to know that you would become such a big person?*

*We don't have any night duty till now but sometimes if they suspect anyone of carrying anything, then they call us in the night, based on the case. Then in Jayantipur there is a gate, so if they find some woman without an ID there, or suspect that some woman is carrying something on her person, we are called. I don't have any feelings for Bangladesh. For me they are strangers. It's a different country. It makes no difference, whether the people are Hindu or Muslim, if they are doing something illegal, it is my duty and work to stop them. Just a few days ago I caught an old woman, almost my grandmother's age, who was trying to sneak into India from Bangladesh. She was a Hindu, but she was lying, so much, I was ashamed of her and also embarrassed that an elderly person could lie in such a way. But we caught her and made sure that she was sent back to Bangladesh. I don't allow myself to feel sorry for them; they have seriously endangered the life of people in our country. Indians are also people and we are responsible for keeping the country and our people safe. I do not allow myself to think that the people we catch are poor or doing all these illegal activities out of poverty and squalor. I also grew up in a not well to do family, but I have never tried to engage in any illegal activity. I thank god and I pray to god every day. Sometimes I carry flowers if I find some. My parents are proud of me and I am happy to have set this trend. We are the very first women in the BSF and already my younger sister and some girls in my village tell me that they want to be like me. They too want to join the forces and are working towards that.*

### **Firoza Bibi**

Village: Jayantipur

*Life for me became hell after the birth of my second daughter. I was brought up to believe that home and family are all that matters. But what bad luck visited me. I studied till Class IV. I have three brothers and three sisters. I was born and grew up in this village of Jayantipur, my natal house is further down. My father worked on the fields for the rich people and my husband too worked on a rich man's farm. It is on the other side, inside Indian territory and it is fenced in. I got married when I was fifteen years old. I have two daughters – the elder one is about 13 years, she began menstruating recently. The younger is about six years old. Life was hard, but alright for us; my husband worked on the farm and we raised some poultry too. When I was pregnant for the second time, I noticed that my husband began craving sex in a way he never had. He would demand sex like an animal, that's when I began to feel that something was changing. But I was pregnant, and he began visiting other women. I did not immediately understand what was going on. I know now that when you begin smoking heroin, you become sex crazy initially, and then gradually you become like a small boy, unable to perform at all. But I did notice that he began to lose his looks. He became dark. Also, things and money began to mysteriously go missing from the house. We are poor people, and money became short more and more. Then one day I saw him try to steal some of our chicken and I threw a row. He began losing his appetite. It is then that I came to know that he was addicted.*

*He lost the ability to work; all he wanted was money, money and money. Life became hell. I had two daughters to look after; I was not too strong myself physically. Then I learnt that there were others in the village who were afflicted like him. I felt strangely consoled that he was not the only one. I came to know that you can never be addicted by yourself, you need company a group. I tell you that I even followed him a couple of times to see where he went. Once I followed him pretty far, but it became dark and it was almost 5pm. That's when curfew begins here. I got scared and turned back. Another time I saw him sit with some others and put some things on a piece of paper, light a matchstick over it and lick it. I was horrified, but he was in a group and I came back. I want all the peddlers to be punished. Those like my husbands are fools. They are being ruined, but the main culprits are the ones like Yaar Nabi. They are the rich ones who sell the stuff, and those like my husband get addicted. Even the sons of rich get addicted, I know my rich neighbour, who takes pity on me and often lets me take her ration rice, and she lost her son too to this madness. Her son committed suicide. I am lucky that my husband is still alive and trying to improve. But it is difficult.*

*Initially I cried over his addiction, but then I began to hit him. I turned him out of the house. But all that was of no use. I could not stop him. I told my parents and my brothers and they spoke to him but it was useless. I had to start working in the homes of others to sustain myself and my children. Then I filed an FIR with the police who refused to take it, so I went to Bongaon court and signed papers and paid Rs. 200/- and got my husband imprisoned for three months. During this time they gave him treatment. Then after three months, I paid Rs. 300/- and got him released. He had become so ugly. He had withdrawal symptoms and it was hell to watch him like that. He used to shiver, get fits and go into spells. It was like when he was addicted too. He would demand money and if I did not give him any, he would take a knife and start slashing his wrists, threatening to commit suicide. How much I have cried over this only I know. Sometimes I think about how much I have had to cry in this life. But I am just continuing because I want my daughters to lead a proper life. I pay for my husband too. He is out of work now. we just have some chickens and we sell those eggs, and I work in people's houses here in Jayantipur. He seems to be okay now, but twice before he seemed to have given up his addiction and then went back again. So I am not sure how long this will last this time. I feel sorry for him sometimes. He was persuaded into addiction. He is not the real criminal. Criminals are the the people who trade in the drugs. May they find no place in hell, for ruining people's lives like this? I think the police and a lot of big people are involved in this drug tracking business. Otherwise, how is it that they cannot stop it? I know this dealer, but no one can lay their hands on him. How? All the people know that it is this person who is the main drug lord in these parts, but are we to pretend that the police do not know?*

*Now sometimes the Dadas from the BSF come and talk to my husband. They threaten him not to go back to his life of addiction. They urge him to lead a normal life, which gives me some relief that he will not go back to addiction out of fear. I hope the BSF people can keep a watch and can find out the culprits and prevent other innocent people from getting caught in this nightmare. There are one or two of them (the BSF personnel) who are like my brothers. I trust them and I think they will deal with this sternly. I have heard worse things happen in places like Jamtala where people cut themselves up on the streets to feed their addiction. I have two daughters to bring up. Life is so hard, as we have no land and have to work for others. But I love my husband. I can never think of leaving him. Leaving him..? Where would I go? And what would he do by himself? He would die in a day. I just hope the culprits will be exposed and punished. I hope my husband will be back to normal and will lead a normal life like before. That is my greatest hope. Otherwise, living in this border village, there is not much significance or anything of particular concern in my life. I have lived here my whole life and I am used to it. Yes, sometimes, there may be some problems from the BDR people on that side. Problems between BDR and the forces on this side can happend as they run around chasing each other, but they know me and my husband and we have no problems. Like last year, when there was problem between the BDR and the BSF. The BSF people told us, that if anyone from that side comes here, we should let them come and offer them shelter, but we were to also eventually bring them to the BSF. No one has ever robbed me; we are too poor to take anything from us. If we are fenced out, I do not know what will happend. I have not thought of it. I work in the house and then in other people's houses and then raise some poultry for income. I am too busy the whole day and then I have to return home to look after a recovering addict as a husband. We have security for now. I will think of other things when they happen.*

**Rita**

Village: Shutiya

*My name is Rita and I am 24 years old. I am a widow. My husband died of HIV/AIDS. I was born and grew up in Shutiya where my father is a farmer. I have a younger brother and sister. My husband was from the village right next to us. There are no jobs in the village, so most people are migrating. A lot of boys are leaving the village and going to other towns in search of jobs. Our farm is too small, and since I have only one brother he will inherit my father's farm. But when there is more than one son in the family, the land is too small to be shared. My father grows mustard, rice (dhaan), and path. Ours is a mixed village of Hindus and Muslims. Most families in our village have relatives across the border. Previously, men also used to send cattle across the border, but now I*

*think it is becoming difficult. We have never sent cattle across. I went to school and studied till Madhyamik and then was married off. My husband is one of those who migrated out from the village. He went to Mumbai where he worked as a driver for a babu. A lot of boys from my village went to Mumbai. I lived in his house, with his mother who was considerably old. He visited me and his mother for a few months, during which I fell pregnant. Right after I got pregnant my husband again left for Mumbai. Six months into my pregnancy, I had a miscarriage. My blood tests revealed that all was not well with me. The doctors asked me what my husband did. The hospital in Habra referred me to R.G. Kar Hospital, where the nurses behaved very badly with me. When they came to know of my HIV status, they told it to everyone and I was shunned by all.*

*I was 19 years old when I first heard of my HIV status. I wanted to commit suicide, especially when I came to know how we were perceived. People were disgusted with me. They hated me, but worst of all they were frightened of me. But it is only now that I know that it is not so easily contagious. Anyway, my husband came down from Mumbai after I was diagnosed with HIV and this time and he underwent a blood test. It was revealed that he was HIV+ too. That's how I contracted it, because my husband is the only man I have been intimate with in my life. I had never heard about this disease in my village. I do not know if anyone else has it, but I have not heard of it. We moved to Gobordanga, where my husband found work as a driver. Initially he did not accept the diagnosis. My sister-in-law and her husband first blamed me. But they knew well that the only way I could have contracted it was from my husband. Initially I was angry and hurt with my husband. I went away to my mother's place, but he begged me for forgiveness. Moreover, how long could I live in my mother's place? My father had three more mouths to feed with the income from his tiny piece of land. When my parents came to know about our HIV status they simply did not believe it. They could not understand what it was all about.*

*Meanwhile my husband was becoming weaker; he explained to me that his unprotected sexual encounters had taken place before our marriage. He was lonely and alone in Mumbai. He needed some warmth and so he visited some women from whom he contracted the disease. But he told me that he did not visit any woman after our marriage and I believed him. Anyway, now he is no more, so it makes no difference. However, I like to believe that he did not visit any woman after we got married. My husband lived in Gobordanga for 9 months and worked as a driver, but the income was not good. Eventually he went back to Mumbai, where he earned more and would send money home. But he kept falling sick, his condition deteriorated and he came back to Gobordanga. It was during this time that I conceived again. This baby was an accident. When I found out that I was pregnant again, I wanted to abort the foetus. I took some pills for terminating the pregnancy, but nothing happened. After this, I just wanted to keep the baby even though I knew its future was already doomed. For my second baby I visited Barasat government hospital. The attitude there to an HIV+ patient was also extremely bad. Often the doctors tried to avoid treating me. But the counsellor there was really good. She got me admitted, made me stay there and got doctors to treat me. It was she who told me about NN+, about People living with HIV/AIDs. It was during this time that my husband passed away. While he was alive, anti-retroviral therapy (ART) was still not available to us. This was two years ago. Then my baby was still born. Life lost much of its meaning for me. It was the counsellor didi who helped me through it. I used to cry and tell her about my life and she put me in touch with the positive network. I joined it more than a year ago. We have a meeting once a month in Bongaon and I simply love the meetings. It is difficult for me to come. It's a long way off Shutiya, where I stay now. After my husband's death, I moved back into my parents' home. Where else can I go? My husband left very little money for me. I do not have any skills. I do not know, maybe I will find some work through this group.*

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



*Medicines for HIV+ began soon after my husband died. For more than a year now, I have been taking ART and I feel much better. Soon after my second baby was still born I used to feel very weak. Now for the last two months the medicines are available at Barasat which is more convenient for me to access rather than go all the way to Calcutta. People in Shutiya spread rumours about me and gossiped a lot. They would talk to me, but also avoided me. Thank god that my sister got married before my positive status was discovered, otherwise it would have been difficult for us to find a match for her. But I am glad they are advertising about HIV on TV now. My advice to all other girls would be to get a blood test done, if you are getting married and do not know their husband well. This is especially true if the prospective groom is living away in another city or town*

**Firoza Begum Halsana**

Village: Hatkhola

*I grew up in Chapda and studied till Class V. and then at age 15, I got married. My husband was a widower and had a daughter from his first wife. We are farmers, my husband has land and we hire people to work on it. He is a Congress member and was the panchayat samiti member. Now he is the ex-Pradhan of Gongda. So, when the next elections were held and a seat was reserved for a woman, he asked me to stand for elections. I have two daughters and a son. My eldest daughter is 12 years old. I had absolutely no idea what to do. They said all will be taken care of. Of course people respected me because of my husband, and my husband is well respected in the village and in all of the villages of our panchayat. We have seven villages under our panchayat. Now Habibur Rahman Khan is Panchayat pradhan. I was busy with my housework and the responsibilities of bringing up my children, so I did not campaign. My husband campaigned for me, and his friends. Also people liked me as they respected my husband. This area of ours is a Congress stronghold – they listened to him and I won by 154 votes and became a panchayat member. Our Panchayat has 17 members out of which 5 are women. Now I have to go out two to three times a month for meetings in Hatkhola Gram Panchayat. Initially, my husband accompanied to the meetings, now I can go alone. I know the people, and I have the support of the women in the village, as they are all like sisters to me. I have to sign papers from time to time, but I do not deal with money matters. My 'shachiv' fixes up everything and I simply sign. However, I do have to go to the anganwadis and inspect the food from time to time see if the children are being looked after properly. Also, I got toilet steps/feet installed in the houses in this village. I have to sign papers and meeting minutes, even if I am not in the meetings; however, I try to be there. I sign job cards for the NREGS. I don't know who the cards are for, but I trust the people handling it.*

*The women and girls here respect me. They come to me with their problems. When they bring me their domestic problems I give them advice. I tell them how to handle their husbands and look after their children. When couples have problems they come to me and I counsel them on how to live amicably with each other. Of course, the men will have their ways and will sometimes beat up the women, but women should be patient. Women should be able to sometimes go out and the husband should look after them. Young girls like me and tell me they want to be like me. Actually, I like to look after my home, which is the most important thing for me. My husband and home is my priority, but since my husband's work is mixed up with the panchayat, I have to help out also. Yes, it is nice to be a panchayat member. I did not ever think of it, but now it is here and I am part of it. I will try to make life a little better for my sisters.*

*We have no problems with the BSF people. If sometimes people complain, then they should know that the BSF are here for our own safety and security. Maybe it is people from beyond the fence who sometimes have some problems with ID cards etc., but we do not. If you are good with people then they will also be good with you. But there are people who want to send out somethings to those on the other side. You know the 'throwers' sometimes like grains and food and of course then they will have problems with the security people. After all the security people are here for us, for our safety and we have to have good relations with them. There is no use in antagonizing them. We should understand how to behave. Why go out after 5pm? What need is there for women to go anywhere after that? Why should she return home late and alone? In our village everyone must return home by 5pm for security and there is no problem if you do. If the people ask you for ID, then*

*you should not create any problems. Of course she must work and study – my daughters also study and I encourage parents to send their daughters to school. All girls in our village go to the school nearby. The older ones take vocational training too. But family and home is important.*

**Tanya Sharif, Bangladeshi**

**Charged and convicted under the Foreigner's Registration Act 1946**

**Presidency Correctional Home for Women**

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

*We left our village early in the morning, and travelled by bus to a place near the border. I do not remember much about it. I just went blindly holding on to my mother. There we waited below some trees. I remember for it to be dark and I fell asleep. I did not know we were crossing a border, and that too an illegal one. Along the way our dalal spoke to different people at different places. Later on I came to know, on my subsequent trips to Mumbai and back that some of the people the dalal spoke to were BDR and BSF people, but none stopped us from crossing over. I don't remember about the first journey, where we stopped and where we crossed into. It was a long journey and we travelled by bus, then sometimes we walked, and at other times we crossed a shallow stream with knee high water. The dalal took us into a house where there were other women and children. A day later we were taken to Howrah station; I had never seen a place like it before. There we boarded a train and were taken to VT in Mumbai. At VT my jamaibabu came to receive us and took us to his house in Meera Road. We lived in a basti, with other Bengalis. I missed my father and brother, who were in Bangladesh.*

*I found a job in an apartment nearby, working for a family of 7-8 people. I cleaned, washed the dishes, wiped and swept the floors, and dusted. I was paid Rs. 500/- per month for the work. I lived for about two years in Mumbai thus. Once I got the hang of the work, I took up work in two more houses and was earning Rs. 2000/- per month, plus I got food and clothes from the houses that I worked in. In the meantime I got married, because the young men in the basti used to harass me. My mother used to worry for my safety, and soon a friend of my brother-in-law intervened and proposed to me. He was a construction worker by the name of Raju Seth, also a Bangladeshi Muslim. He lived far away from our basti. Initially after marriage I lived with my mother, as I was scared of living away from her; but, after a while I joined my husband. I was about 13 then.*

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

time, I remember the guide (dalal) made us stand aside, went and negotiated with a guard on the Indian side for a while, and then we were allowed to cross over.

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

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

**Moyna Sardar**, Bangladeshi

Charged and convicted under the **Foreigner's Registration Act**

Presidency Correctional Home for Women

I have been here for 2 years. I was convicted, and ordered to serve a 2 and-a-half year sentence. So far, I have served 19 months and 11 months are left. But I don't think that when we are set free we can go home immediately. I have seen many women freed but they cannot go home. I do not know why. I hope I do not have to wait long to get home. This is the first time that I came to India, and here I am, in a correctional facility. I was 17 years old when I came here. I am originally from Rangpur, but my mother moved to Dhaka to work, and I stayed with her and grew up in Dhaka. I was married at 14 years, but have no children. I came here 3 years after my marriage. My husband works in Bangladesh, in Dhaka. He has a shop, where all kinds of broken goods are sold. We had a love marriage. I used to work too. I can stitch and do some embroidery. I can make kurtas. My mother used to work as a domestic help with a family. My husband and I had a fight once. Actually, his mother used to cause a lot of problems for us. I had a friend also from Rangpur who had also moved to Dhaka with her mother. We grew up together. She got married to a man and worked as a domestic help in Dhaka. Her husband also worked as a domestic helper. He was from Jessore. Once I had a bad fight with my husband, his mother beat me up. So, I went off in a huff to my friends. She advised me to live apart from my husband for some time. The plan was to give my husband enough time to, so that he would miss me and would come to get me. We wanted to teach him a lesson so he

would behave better. My friend informed me that to help me survive during that period of separation she arranged for a job for me in Jessore. Also she told me that I could stay with her husband's parents in Jessore.

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

**Radha Rani Das**, Bangladeshi  
Bashirhat

I came here about 4-5 years ago from Khulna, Daulatpur. I am Hindu. One of my daughters, my mother and my brother are still in Bangladesh. I am about 45 years old. I got married when I was about 12 years old. My husband died 5 years ago. He had a damaged liver. I have three daughters; one is 22, another is 18 years and the younger is 15 years. The elder two are married, but the younger one is still with me. I have one son. The elder daughter is still in Bangladesh but the others are here. I went to school till Class IV and then got married. My father had sweet shop. My in-laws place was in Jessore. My husband used to be a dhobi. We had both Muslim and Hindu neighbours. But Muslims were the majority in numbers and that's why I had to come away. I could not continue to live there with my daughter. I had not seen disturbances in my childhood, as we lived amicably, but later a lot of persecution began. This began about 10 years ago. There has been a lot of harassment. I do not know why the problems began, but if leaders (neta) start messing up things then we can no longer survive there. I suppose there the people are ok, all living amicably, but it's on the Hindus that the persecution is carried out more.

Say, they tortured my daughter. I know that if any girl looks nice they are abducted, there were two goons after my daughter. They are Muslims ...we are Hindus. If they harass a girl then all our pride and respect is gone. Isn't it? Unable to bear the torture we came away here. They harassed the men too, but they would harass the women more. And of course there would be attacks on homes, and land. We could not sell and bring anything. We had to leave everything behind. They said, leave and go, everything yours is in that country (India). They said that in that country you have everything. What luck... Now I have to work to survive. In that country, no woman, no (house)wife ever went to work outside. In this country I am working. I run my household myself. I am working in another's house and surviving. I don't have any respect. I am surviving. But in Bangladesh I could not do it, I never went outside the house (to work). After marriage also (we) never stepped out. If ever there was any problem of survival in the village, the men folk would go outside. We women would not. We housewives never went out. Maybe, if my husband had been alive, I might not have come here. My husband never wanted to come here. So it is because there was no male member in my family that I came away. My son was still small, now he is growing up but he does nothing. And I had adolescent daughters; I was scared that they would take my daughter away, that's why I

came here. What ill luck, in this age. Otherwise does one leave one's country? It was so painful. But what to do, soon after the death of my children's father, the brothers-in-law started telling us to go away with the adolescent girls.

It was good when Hasina was there. But it was politics of course. BNP – Awami League like that. Yes you have heard of Hasina, Kalida Zia. Hasina is for the Hindus. She used to help us a lot but when she stepped down and that other one came to power it was all over. So now they want us to leave the country. We are poor people; we had to face much trouble. But the ones causing all the problems are rich, ruffians; they survive by hitting others on the head. They are educated, they know everything. Now again I hear Hasina has come back, but we are here. We had to leave everything behind. I had some land, they took it away. They did not do it because we were women, but because we were Hindus. So when my brother-in-law decided that we should come here, we agreed to his proposal. They (brothers-in-law) helped me to come here. Brokers were known to us, so they brought us. The girls have all grown up, so they took care of us while bringing us (here.). We were four of us when we came here - two daughters, me and my son. We had to pay Rs. 400/- each and we spent a total of Rs. 1600/- We did not have to face any problem as such but we had to spend a night at the border, and crossed over in the morning, at dawn. We do not know if the police or security guards created any problems. They may have, but that was not our responsibility. It was the broker's responsibility; of course there would be problems on the way.

The journey was painful, extremely painful. We were on the road for a long time and it was terrible leaving behind my mother, brother and other relatives. One day we did not eat for a whole day. We fasted an entire day, of course it was difficult. After crossing the border, we were put up at someone's place for the night. It was the broker who had arranged to put us up. Next day we came here to Bashirhat. It was the first time that we had come to this country. Before coming, I did not think a lot about India; but people there (in Bangladesh) used to say that it was good in India. I could live in peace with my children. People used to recommend that I go to India, so that I could live in relative safety and security with my children. That is why we came away. After coming here I found it was true.

Well, in any case if people here are good then its good and if they are bad then it's all right. Now its all the same, as I won't get the same people I had left behind back home any more. Am I not right? It took time for us to get a house to rent. We have not yet built a house, yet. I have to work, so I work in people's houses. It took me six months to find this work. They pay Rupees three hundred each. I get Rupees nine hundred from three houses. From that I pay Rs 300 as rent and with the rest (Rs 600) I manage to run my family somehow. There are problems at work. After doing everything for an entire family I get only Rs 300. I survive with difficulty. My brothers-in-law helped me run the family.

No, I have not received any ration card and neither have my daughters. Neither have my daughters? No, I have not submitted money. They said it will take time. So, why to submit money? If I don't get a ration card, there's no point in submitting money. But I feel safe and secure here, better here than back home. Here no one harasses us. We are free here. No one tries to take advantage of us. I can depend on my neighbours if I need any help. But no political leader has done anything for us. We are just struggling. Back home (Bangladesh) there would have been relatives, but now we are all here, working and feeding ourselves, struggling. Some of the people that I work for are nice. They give me money when I fall sick and tell me to go to the doctor. I do not have fixed holidays, but can take leave when I require any.

However, I always miss Bangladesh. Some time I cry for it. But I cannot return to it. How will I go back home? My children are my family and I don't have a husband. I don't have a family; I am like a bird flying around here and there. But this is not home (desh). Back home, I could celebrate religious festivals and rituals. But here, I have to work all the time. It becomes difficult as I always wonder should I work in another's house to survive, or should I keep up the practices, fasts and all? But during festivals like Durga Puja there is no trouble here, as opposed to all the troubles one had to face in Bangladesh. So, I think I did the right thing to come here. But my mother is there. I cannot bring her here, as she is too old and moreover the roads are terrible. So if she died, I'm just thinking aloud, then I would have to go there one last time.

