

Labour in Borderland: Ichhamati River in North 24 Parganas

The Ichhamati – a tidal river is a case example of a trans-boundary river that makes up the international front between India and Bangladesh for about 21 km. An imaginary border in the middle of the river Ichhamati divides the two countries - India and Bangladesh at several stretches of the river course, while the water of Ichhamati glides between the high and low tides dividing the dwellers of the two countries on both sides of its banks. The study area sprawls across the CD Blocks of Basirhat – I and Hasnabad and an area housing the two municipal towns of Basirhat and Taki, stretching along a part of the river course - the strand of Ichhamati etching out the international boundary between India and Bangladesh for close to seven km from Hasnabad (near the confluence of Bidyadhari) to Basirhat (near Soladanga) in Basirhat Sub-division of North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal on the Indian side; while bounding part of the Satkhira district under the Khulna division of Bangladesh. Development of tourism serves as a source of potential income in the area.

Alluvium deposit along the river bank enhances the soil quality making it ideal for cropping and also for brick construction; people from Bangladesh often cross onto the western bank of the river on the Indian side through land port or across the river front to find work at the brick fields, small businesses, sculpt pottery, and often engage in trafficking of goods and cattle; some earn a living by fishing the waters of the river - this in turn raises the risks of loss of life, legal actions and vulnerability in a transitional riverine ecosystem for workers. This research work endeavours to follow the footprints of migrants in an attempt to understand the role played by river in shaping the development of border settlements and how dependence on a river serving as borderland affects the life and economy of workers.

Development of Basirhat and Taki municipal towns dates back to the late nineteenth century. Influences of zamindari rule shaped the settlements situated along a stretch of a trans-boundary river that upholds tales of the lives of migrants from the neighbouring country Bangladesh crossing the international boundary through the land port check posts or the watercourse – a less than ten minute boat ride from one bank to the other, in search of work. Owing to its historical past and the ecological niche of tidal inlets that enmeshes an ecosystem composed by golpata forest known as the mini-Sundarban – this region attracts tourists round the year in representing the northern fringe of Sundarban Biosphere Reserve with an uncanny resemblance to the tidal network of the delta down south, through which the Ichhamati river follows its course towards the sea. The prospects of tourism, work opportunities at kiln brick fields, micro-scale industries like pottery, small businesses, work for daily wage labourers and helper of masons together with the options of livelihood for fishermen at the river front, usher in prominent opportunities of work for labour migrants.