

“Recent Histories” of a Porous Border: Mobility Across the Indo-Bangladesh Borderland

By

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I went to Dukhali (name changed) an unfenced border village located very close to Baduria, in Swarupnagar Block, while I was researching the Baduria Riots of July 2017 and its impact on the eastern borders with Bangladesh. This riot was touted by the media as the breaking point of “decades-long communal peace” in “one of the last secular bastions in the country.”¹ This excessive conclusion was reached mainly because of two reasons. First, riot as a phenomenon resumed in West Bengal after a very long time and was allegedly the first of its kind to occur as soon as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power at the Centre in 2014. BJP was also beginning to expand its base in West Bengal at the time which further bolstered this inference. Second, the location of the riot at the border immediately traced the communal fissures along the line of Partition and treated it as a point from which history picked up, after a long period of secular slumber, and stagnation. The confluence of these two factors subsequently birthed the “riot-at-the-border” narrative that appealed to my qualms as well. As a third-generation refugee from erstwhile East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh), witnessing and consuming news about escalating communal animosity at the Bengal border influenced me to wonder if this was the beginning of our gradual descent back into the riotous days in the wake of Partition.

I arrived in Baduria and then fortuitously went to Dukhali which eventually became my way to seek a deeper meaning of the event that had been reported till then and how they told a story of certain changes or “recent histories” unfolding along the borders of West Bengal. According to media reports, the communal conflagration in Baduria began on July 2, 2017, after an “explicit cartoon” of Prophet Mohammed was shared on Facebook by a 17-year-old living with his uncle in Mogurkhali ward of Baduria municipality in the eastern part of the North 24 Parganas of West Bengal.² The post was allegedly deemed offensive by the local Muslim community, who then launched an offensive on

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their Hindu counterparts. Though Mogurkhali was the epicenter, the riot quickly spread, eventually quaking throughout Baduria block, reaching even the adjoining Basirhat town. The Hindus, though initially shocked began to counter within two days i.e., July 4, 2017. Following this retaliation, the unrest magnified, becoming the most serious communal escalation between the two communities in the state since the 1964 East Pakistan Riots due to the Hazratbal incident. Ironically on July 5, 2017, Baduria was completely calm.³ Though there was widespread vandalism, arson, desecration of idols, and property damage, the scale of this riot was still reported to be *low* as the death toll did not exceed one. Later, however, a fact-finding report published by the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism in the same year presented many more cases of deaths and disappearances.⁴

The BJP leaders in West Bengal branded the riot as an attack on the “majority Hindu population” of the state.⁵ In this framing, the “surgical metaphor” was readily invoked and implied to connect the present to the past i.e., Partition.⁶ All political stakeholders in West Bengal, like, the incumbent Trinamool Congress (TMC) government and the main opposition the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI[M]) were publicly shamed for enabling a tradition of minority appeasement which they held was solely responsible for making religious minorities in the state audacious enough to launch an offensive of this nature. The strategy seemingly worked, especially in Baduria, as the BJP’s local chapter recorded a remarkable “surge in membership.”⁷ Although such a significant consequence left many obvious questions unanswered, it did successfully drive home the premonition of a grand scheme of communal polarisation underway in Bengal. Ironically, even the media reports fell into its trappings as they too began equating the presence of secularism with the absence of communal violence in the state. Scholars have time and again cautioned against such synonymous treatment. Heitmeyer opines that there are subtle ways in which communally coded sentiments between groups cohabiting in a common space often underlie the normalcy of everyday life.⁸ This cautioned cohabitation with the suspicious “other” in an atmosphere of carefully curated peace is also what Dipankar Gupta has termed “antagonistic tolerance.”⁹ The enthusiastic conflation between secularism and the absence of communal violence seemed like a diversion from real efforts to uncover *how* this alleged longstanding communal harmony collapsed so easily. In desperation to salvage the image of a secular Bengal, the entire blame of the riot was passed on to a vague category of “outsiders” without probing into *who* they may be, *where* they may have come from, and *what* the secret to their riotous influence was.

The narrative of the “outsider” that has expanded over the years in scope was my first entry point in this research: Who were these allegedly provocative outsiders? How did they transgress the increasingly militarised Bengal border? How did guarded unfenced borders in North 24 Parganas eventually develop into the *question of entry* and conflict in this region? Taking the case study of Dukhali, this report tries to answer some of the complex questions as to how the “recent histories” of the mobility narrative that had developed in the village since 2014; and how these mutations of movements

have led to the emergence of unique routines and processes of mobility that remain unseen in the *longue durée* of movement (like entry and exit) across Dukhali.

I began my fieldwork formally in March 2020 but had to return after a week due to the declaration of nationwide lockdown due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Baduria was not an entirely unknown territory for me. Before beginning my fieldwork, I had a chance to stay there for a few weeks in November of 2019. At the time, I was working as a research coordinator in an ICSSR project focused on exploring the potentialities of early education institutions across three districts of West Bengal. As North 24 Parganas was one of the three chosen districts, I got a chance to work in a few Panchayats of Baduria for roughly three weeks. Though the schedule then did not allow me to explore Baduria to know it enough for my subsequent work for this research, it did help me make a few crucial administrative and NGO connections whose help I eventually sought to make my initial contacts with the field. NGO Dishari (name changed) helped me access unfenced “outsider entry points” closest to Baduria- like Dukhali- with their volunteers.

Dukhali: Notes from a Mobile Geography

Dukhali is an unfenced border village at “zero point” along the India-Bangladesh border. Geographically it falls on the eastern margins of North 24 Parganas district, in its Swarupnagar Block, and shares border with Satkhira district of Khulna division in Bangladesh. Encompassing the village is an expansive marshland known as the *Bil*. Once consolidated, an uncharacteristically polished Public Works Department (PWD) road presently runs through the center of the *Bil*, splitting it into two halves. The “zero point” is located on the right half of the *Bil*, which due to the lack of any other visible clear markers sort of blends into Bangladesh. Looking eastwards from the PWD road, one can see another road running parallelly along the limits of the right half of the *Bil*. This road belongs to Bangladesh. At first glance, this road appears to be the sole way to identify the territorial limit of one nation and the beginning of another. However, white triangles ensconced amongst the rice crop being cultivated on the *Bil* represent the true markers of territorial limits—the ones that the residents presently abide by with utmost caution. Dukhali is a densely populated village. It is divided into two main neighbourhoods—Puberpara and Paschimpara, linked by the PWD road, though shortcuts through dirt roads and alleys parallelly exist. In terms of proximity to the “zero point,” Puberpara is closer than Paschimpara. The demographic is nearly homogenous with the dominance of the Namasudra community along with a handful of Muslim families dwelling on the outskirts of Paschimpara. The main source of livelihood in Dukhali is primarily fishing in the *Bil*, agriculture, and poultry farming.

It is difficult to trace a detailed history of cross-border movement through the Dukhali *Bil*. Therefore, “narrative history” had to be gradually pieced together through family histories, colonial records, and the larger history

of Khulna and 24 Parganas. Madhab, a Paschimpara resident and the current patriarch of the village's respectable Sarkar family said that the village was established approximately a hundred years ago to exploit the agricultural potential of the Bil by his ancestors Raghab and Jadab. "Back then, there were only forests beyond the Bil. Our family cleared the forests and started living here." Before that, Dukhali was part of the Khulna district and was partly governed by its Roychowdhury zamindars. Following Partition, after many deliberations, when Khulna was finally handed over to erstwhile East Pakistan, Dukhali, being a region falling on the east of river Mathabhanga, became a part of India.¹⁰ Though this made Dukhali a border by default, till the 1980s, Dukhali remained a non-functional border and despite being a "zero point," never encountered strict bordering practices.¹¹ Thus movement across the Bil largely remained free and unfiltered. The first Border Outpost (BOP) came up in Dukhali towards the end of the 1980s when the erstwhile consolidated 24 Parganas was bifurcated into North and South 24 Parganas. Before the BOP was set up, Dukhali's checkpoint was set up at three locations: Hakimpur, Amudia-Khalsi, and Sonajhuri. This loose maintenance of border control immediately after Partition could have been a direct consequence of the Standstill Agreement of 1947 whereby the Nehruvian administration decided to let the Bengal borders remain porous to keep the process of trade, property evacuation, and compensation flexible.¹² Though this was proposed as a temporary solution, Dukhali continued to remain a readily accessible gateway long after the Agreement's expiry. Movement continued as before and weekly *haats* (markets) continued to thrive on business brought to it by the traders of Satkhira, crossing the border through the Bil, on feet and carts. Amit, an octogenarian fisherman from Paschimpara, recalled haat days in his youth when carts from Satkhira would hustle through the muddy trails of Dukhali from the crack of dawn to reach the haats on the Indian sides in time for the customers.

Although movement remained unfiltered, cross-border trading through the Bil was still viewed as illegal as Dukhali, unlike Ghojadanga Land Port at present or the older transit Hakimpur, did not fulfill the legal criteria for being a transit for international trading. As a result, these trade practices came to be described as black marketing or *black* for their illegal orientation. Nevertheless, no major steps were ever taken by the government to prevent it. As a result, cross-border trading continued in full visibility, defiantly aware of its connotations with the active participation from the local population of both Dukhali and its neighbouring areas.

Presently, illegal trading across the India-Bangladesh border immediately takes the conversation to cow smuggling. However, in this case, it was not just cows that were traded but also many other everyday items like fruits, vegetables, fresh fish, rice, puffed rice (*muri*), etc., that were part of the traded commodity. This is because agricultural returns were often not enough to sustain families and cross-border trading was much more profitable. Dukhali being one of the impoverished villages of Swarupnagar, heavily depended on these haats for bringing in the much-needed cash flow to the region. During the 2000 India-Bangladesh flood there was heightened agricultural distress in Dukhali, putting the residents in a dire economic crisis. To cope, black transactions became the veritable lifeline

to combat the financial slowdown. As one resident of Dukhali's neighbouring refugee-dominated village Bilpara remarked: "*Tokhon ekhane taka urto*. (Back then, money used to fly in the air)." The economic impact of black marketeering in the region was so intricate that even authorities would hardly make their presence felt to actively prevent it. On the rare occasion that they did, it was enough to be singled out and registered as an exceptional moment in the neighbourhood's history. One such memorable event centered around an accidental "*ilish utsab*" (*hilsa* festival) when the entire hilsa consignment was confiscated from traders by the customs office following a rather unanticipated raid in one of the haats. The raided fish were later auctioned off in the neighbourhood. It is fondly remembered by the residents as a good day as they were able to get their hands on the best quality hilsa at a price much lower than the market rate.

This free-flowing cross-border trade remained uninterrupted even during the brief interlude of the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence (or *Muktijuddho*, as it is popularly known). The movement across Dukhali had even then remained quite open. According to a *Muktijoddha*, a current resident of the Dukhali's adjacent, Mallapara, the Bil formed one of the stations for the *Mukti Bahini* during the War. Watching warplanes fly by and collecting bombshells constitute the childhood memories of many of the respondents who were children back then. Following the War, the problems of the porosity of the border began to be readily recognised by the Indian state, especially due to the mass exodus that followed, on a scale surpassing even the Partition. As the Indian state began to be mindful of its inability to accommodate the huge number of people entering the country, for the first time, the "threat" of refugees was realised and recognised.¹³ The setting up of a BOP in Dukhali many years after Partition potentially emerged from this threat. Since the 1980s, Dukhali has witnessed a steady rise in border administration and policing, peaking around 2014, and according to many residents, it increased with the BJP government coming to power at the Centre.

Today, though still unfenced, Dukhali is one of the most heavily militarised regions of Swarupnagar. Time is strictly regulated, and nobody is allowed to access the right half of the *Bil* post after 5:30 pm. "We have permission to shoot anyone accessing the Bil past the curfew," was the curt response of a Border Security Force (BSF) personnel I had a chance to befriend. To further securitise movements across the Bil, the BSF built makeshift towers camouflaged inside backyard gardens, especially those that opened to the Bil. One of these was shown to me by Kamala, a Puberpara resident whose banana orchard was one of the locations chosen for housing a tower. Due to the lack of a fence, it is very difficult to visualise the border at first. To mark the border white triangles are haphazardly placed in the paddy fields in the Bil which one must be mindful of while making their way to work every day. For instance- if one flag is placed close to the Bangladesh side, the very next one could be close to Puberpara, on the Indian side. Although the cultivators who work in these fields have gained clarity of the border, lapses are common. As one of the Puberpara residents said,

While working in the field we would often exchange *bidis* (handrolled cigars) with farmers of *odesh* (Bangladesh) or rest under the same tree. After border restrictions tightened, a BSF personnel saw me sharing *bidi* with a ‘Bangladeshi’ from his post and attacked me. He came over and frisked me to check for drugs and then asked me not to talk to ‘those people’ again. Now, tell me, the borderline is not even visible to us. We just know that it passes through the middle of a field that we are both tilling, how can we continue to work without exchanging any words with each other?

To further prevent movement across the border and check black marketeering, the muddy village roads were replaced with a 12km PWD road that now runs through the circumference of Dukhali with three strategically placed BSF checkpoints. Every public transport (mostly battery-operated vans locally called magic vans, and autos) from Dukhali is stopped and searched at these checkpoints. Passengers aboard are not allowed to pass without producing valid identity proof cards issued by the Government of India. Public transport on these border roads is allowed only till 5:30 pm after which only the residents of Dukhali are allowed to drive their personal two-wheelers and cycles as their number plates are already registered with the BSF.

According to Dukhali’s *Panchayat Pradhan* (leader of the village council), a bus route from the village to Basirhat started operating to ease the transport woes of the residents but it was discontinued within the first month due to an alleged lack of demand. Madhab told me later that the incessant security hassles in Dukhali had made the transport workers reluctant to run a service there. “The situation is such that now even our relatives do not visit,” he added. Both the BSF and the Panchayat Pradhan boastfully emphasised several times that unlike before, “cows cannot be seen running through the field anymore in Dukhali,” as a marker of absolute stoppage of unwanted movement and trade. Despite the adoption of such extreme securitisation measures to police movements, however, it was not clear how and why Dukhali continued to be seen as one of the main entry points for outsiders. As I will argue now, it turns out that the increase in security is directly proportional to the sustenance and rise of cases of entry through the Dukhali border.

With an agenda to secure the Indian state, the BJP government began an active campaign to urgently fence the porous borders of West Bengal, including its riverine borders as soon as it assumed power at the Centre in 2014.¹⁴ This is because unfenced borders such as Dukhali are often held solely responsible for being convenient gateways for *onuprobeshkaris* (infiltrators) to enter India.¹⁵ According to a news article from 2018, the BJP government’s fervent campaigns to sanctify the Indian population through the prevention of infiltrators’ entry by focusing on fencing and increased border controls paralleled Donald Trump’s frenzy to build a wall at the US-Mexico border.¹⁶ The justification offered in the name of national security, however, was communally motivated as infiltrator was a term designed to solely mark out the Muslim border crossers. The new security regime in Dukhali was also a means to this end. Through its implementation, as existing border was re-bordered with these frenzied “recent histories” in mind.

While working in Dukhali and the neighbouring refugee-dominated settlements, BJP affiliates consistently told me how despite Bangladesh being a “Muslim state,” those illegally entering India were mostly Muslims. According to them, better job prospects in India lure Muslim labourers to cross over from Bangladesh. Though there could be a semblance of truth to this- as a relatively better wage structure in India does attract several Muslim migrant workers from Bangladesh- the number of Hindu migrants (mostly belonging to Namasudra and Rajbanshi communities) is much higher in comparison. Speaking to “native” local communities (also belonging to Namasudra and Rajbanshi communities) in at least three villages spread across two Panchayats covering Dukhali and its neighbouring areas, I have only found evidence of Namasudra and Rajbanshi border crossers and settlers who are emphatically categorised as Hindus, especially by the BJP. It is also important to remember that the Muslim workers who cross the border for work eventually also return to Bangladesh. This, however, may not be the case for their Hindu counterparts who cross the border to seek a new home, thereby, becoming permanent settlers in India. These border crossers often do not have the option to return owing to their permanent expulsion due to routine minority persecution in Bangladesh. Providing access to asylum seekers, however, is not a new phenomenon in Dukhali and legal routes were available for the purpose. Before 2014 the asylum seekers had the option to surrender at the Border Observation Post (BOP) and formally appeal for asylum through the challan system i.e., by filling out a challan. However, this system was effectively stopped after the BJP assumed power in 2014 which was in contradiction to the party’s longstanding agenda to protect the persecuted Hindu minorities who came from Bangladesh. As an extension of this protection programme, security in Dukhali and the Bil was also tightened and to uphold it further, new, and less lenient companies of BSF were posted in the village during this time. As one resident said,

Now they do not allow anyone to enter anymore. Currently, no matter what the situation is, the BSF drives the asylum seekers away almost immediately.

I later verified this information with even a BSF personnel who said,

Yes, this used to be the rule but now it has changed. We now have strict orders to shoot or arrest anyone we see in the Bil after dark. We do not have permission to let anyone in, no matter who it is or whatever their reasons are.

Contrarian to such intolerance to movement displayed by the BSF personnel, however, in the last decade alone, various settlements inhabited by Namasudra and Rajbanshi communities have come up in villages adjacent to Dukhali. One such settlement is Bilpara which took over an *aambagan* (mango orchard) between two villages in Harighata Panchayat adjacent to Dukhali. From a few sparsely populated shanties of the early 1990s, Bilpara has now assumed the shape of a full-fledged village gradually expanding in size. Interestingly, most Bilpara residents have entered in the last decade through unfenced borders such as Dukhali, some of them in broad daylight

notwithstanding the almost impenetrable security barriers. This seemingly contradictory development not only raises questions about the effectiveness of the increased border controls but more importantly about the potential correlation between it and the rise in incidents of border crossing and settlement.

Postcoloniality of *Haats*: Changing Nature of Black Marketeering

The devastating flood of 2000 changed Dukhali. Though *gorom er dhaan* (the rice crop of summer) was introduced post the flood and continues to be the main crop in the village, it could not provide essential and immediate relief. Having lost their homes, land, and cattle, the residents of Dukhali were looking for ways to recover the losses and start afresh. Agriculture was badly affected, and the soil was still in the process of recovery. In these desperate times, black marketing emerged as the most viable quick-fix recovery for the residents. However, this time the focus was no longer on trading regular everyday items like before. Life had to be rebuilt and the trade of cows seemed like the quickest way to make money. 150–200 cows on a single day could be seen being chased down by their owners in broad daylight through rice fields to get across to the other side. As the cow trade took off, black marketing expanded in scope to include even gold bars and drugs.

These heightened trade practices *visibly* waned post-2014 with the introduction of stricter controls and the deployment of the new company of BSF. Currently, black marketing is no longer *seen* on the streets of Dukhali. Additionally, the BSF keeps a count of all the domestic cows in the village. Even if cows need to be sold locally between residents of other villages, a very long and arduous process must be followed to safeguard its legalities. “It usually takes us a minimum of one month to sell our cows. We do our dealings now keeping this formality period in mind,” a resident of Paschimpara, Sahadev had told me when I first began working in Dukhali. This strict policing of cow trade showcases the success of the new security regime. Accordingly, it was boastfully exhibited by the BSF, Panchayat officials alike and strangely also most of Dukhali’s Puberpara residents: “*Goru r jayena, black ekhon bondho* (Cattle trade is no more and black or illegal trading has ended).” The unanimity was perplexing as the end of the black market would imply loss of livelihood for most of Dukhali’s residents, especially Puberpara as it was more strategically suited to the trade owing to its greater proximity to the border.

The veil was lifted by the residents of Dukhali’s other neighbourhood-Paschimpara. It was through this subtle difference in the operation of the black market that I understood the geo-sociality of Paschimpara and Puberpara. I first heard about it from a Paschimpara resident, Sahadev whose daughter, Payal was a part-time worker at Dishari. That day, Sahadev was telling us stories of the flood of 2000 and his subsequent social mobility through black marketeering. As the conversation progressed, I enquired about the atypical three-story house of the Panchayat Pradhan which looked more fitting to a posh South Kolkata neighbourhood than Dukhali. It was quite unusual because I knew by then that the Panchayat Pradhan, Sabari Sarkar, was a former Anganwadi worker who

could not have had the means to own a house like that. As I asked, Sahadev's smile turned crooked. In his usual candid way, looking straight into my eyes, he told me, "*Didibhai, tumi ki sotti bhabcho black bondho ekhon? Shob dekhnai. Jar korar shey arale ja korar kore bari kori nise* (Sister, do you think black has stopped? These are all eyewash. Those who can do it have done it in secret and built houses)." Sahadev's remark, thereafter, exposed the reasons behind the cautious air of Dukhali to me, for the first time. From his statement, I discovered that black marketeering has not stopped. What has been contained through increased securitisation is solely its visibility. Additionally, as further engagement revealed, there was a nexus between the Panchayat Pradhan and the BSF to maintain black's invisibility to uphold the illusory success story of securitisation.

Echoing Sahadev, thus, another resident of Paschimpara, Ashok ranted to me about how the visible absence of cows from the Bil and the dirt roads were nothing more than marketing gimmicks employed by the Panchayat and the BSF to project the increased border control as a success story. Ashok's rage stemmed from the daily frustrations he had to live with since 2014 on account of heading one of the poorest families in Paschimpara. Devoid of his source of income from the black market, his family had to depend solely on government grants and the declining profits from the harvest of *groom er dhaan*. He added, "Just because you cannot see it does not mean it is not happening. Times have changed and the black market has too. In our time we used to trade in goods but now they even *trade in people*. You can trade if you start serving the *master* and give away most of your profits as commission." Now, trade in people immediately takes one's mind to human trafficking. Later, however, I received clarity on the practice of trade in people from Tapan, a tailor from Bilpara who had crossed the border via Dukhali to settle down in India at the beginning of 2022. To cross the border, he paid INR4,000 to the *dalal* (intermediary) to get him across. He had to pay this much as he had a lot of luggage with him. Later, when his wife, children, and mother migrated, he had to pay a total sum of INR7,000. Though he was apprehensive about their safety, his family could cross the border in daylight, a special request he had made to his *dalal*. The transition had been smooth as his *dalal* on the Indian side had already "taken care of the BSF." Like many others in Bilpara, Tapan too had crossed the border in the hope of a safer life than the one he had back in Bangladesh. He had arranged the money to pay the *dalal* on either side by selling his house and land in less than a week. "I needed money to start a new life in India and to pay the *dalal*. There is no other way possible," was his very simple explanation. Tapan's incident pieces together a lot of puzzles vis-à-vis the entry of "outsiders" through unfenced borders of Swarupnagar like Dukhali. It also unfolds a new dimension of the black market owing to "recent histories" emerging out of increased security at the Dukhali border. As I discovered, trade in people, or as it is locally known as *dalal dhore dhur pachar*¹⁷ has emerged as one of the most profitable trades in Swarupnagar, as the rapid growth of Bilpara confirms.

Despite the profitability of the business, however, trade in people has not been accepted by many in Dukhali across neighbourhoods. It is also one of the main reasons for the growing antagonism between Puberpara and Paschimpara as the former has more residents willingly or unwillingly involved

in this trade than the latter. The location of the Pradhan's residence/headquarters in Puberpara further explains the fearful conformity of its residents. The general disapproval, however, stems from the rapid breakdown of cross-border solidarities between the Namasudra communities of the two countries. Interactions between the two sides of the border have always remained unhinged in Dukhali but the monetisation of the movement of people has increasingly created binaries between natives and refugees, *dalals* and *dhurs*, and Puberpara and Paschimpara within a community of people that are already split across two nations. As exceptions to the conformists, Puberpara resident Moloy frequently narrated tales of how he and his friends used to help people cross over when mobility was less constrained. Even before 2014, asylum seekers (mostly Namasudras) seeking legal passage to India would have to wait for hours at the BOP to complete the challan system's formalities. "After seeking permission, we would provide them with food and water." Such stories of solidarities can be further clarified from Rakhal's account. Rakhal hails from one of the first families that settled in Bilpara *aambagan*. Before 2014, he used the Dukhali border to frequent his relatives in Satkhira. According to him, the people of Dukhali were "*experts*" at aiding border crossing,

Once while returning from attending a funeral at my relative's place across the border, a BSF personnel saw me from a distance. Though he did not see my face clearly, he could figure out that someone was illegally crossing the border. This is mostly enough for the BSF to act. I quickly ran into the nearest house where a woman was cooking. I did not even have to explain myself fully when she asked me to change into *gamcha-genji* (the common attire of men in Dukhali) immediately and smoke bidi in the *dawa* (courtyard), acting as if nothing happened. By the time the BSF personnel came looking I was much too blended with the fabric of Dukhali to draw any attention. Later, she fed me pork curry with rice, and I left when it was safe for me to pass.

Today, this interaction is impossible as increased surveillance has led to a situation where movement can occur solely through prior arrangements in exchange for money.

The monetisation of asylum is, thus, one of the many outcomes of extreme security regimes in the borderlands. This is further corroborated in a 2016 study conducted in the backdrop of the US-Mexico border that showed how increasing border controls proved "counterproductive". Using empirical evidence, the study demonstrates how excessive bordering practices not only failed to bring down infiltration but also led to the opening of parallel systems to enable it further.¹⁸ Increased border controls, according to the researchers, not only fail to bring down infiltration but in an unfortunate turn of events end up empowering the *coyotes* or intermediaries who shift their base of operation to remoter, more obscure, and porous locations.¹⁹ This, then, makes border crossing a gamble in the hands of the *coyotes* who are empowered with greater control over the fate of border crossers, compromising the latter's safety by making them more dependent and vulnerable.²⁰ In Dukhali, the Panchayat Pradhan-BSF nexus indicates precisely this form of a coyote network that has made a business out of the plight of asylum seekers - harking back to Ashok's

narration that moving across the border in present-day Dukhali depends on servitude to a certain master. The gradual transition of the black market from household items like vegetables, and cows to drugs and eventually people direct one to reflect upon the unending possibilities by which security mechanisms in the borderlands are exploited to further unauthorised trade in a formalised and organised manner.

Now, when I say Panchayat Pradhan, I must make it clear that I am mostly referring to the position here than any one individual. This is because the position of the officially elected Panchayat Pradhan, Sabari Sarkar, merely holds the position on paper. The real work is carried out by her son, Dipankar, the man Dukhali considered the Pradhan and who in the opinion of Paschimpara was the mastermind behind the second innings of black trade currently operational in the village. An amusing yet telling anecdote from the early days of fieldwork will substantiate her nominal position as Panchayat Pradhan further. When I was asking around the village about the Panchayat's office timings to secure a permit, everyone I spoke to referred to the Pradhan as "*Dipankar er ma*" (Dipankar's mother) rather than by her name. Most of the residents did not seem to be aware of her name. Later, I found out her name from Dipankar himself when he signed my permit, despite having no authority to do that. Doubtful about its validity, seeing the permit get readily accepted by the BSF clarified Dipankar's authorization and further implied the nexus.

Dipankar's steady ascent began in 2012 after he switched from CPI(M) to TMC, peaking in 2018 when his mother, Sabari, won the Panchayat elections. He had contested earlier too but had not won. At the time of fieldwork, he controlled every kind of black market trade through all the borders in Sonajhuri Panchayat, especially the one that occurred through Puberpara in Dukhali. There is a dirt road near his house which is known as the "*gornu pachar rasta*. (Road through which cows are smuggled)" that connects Dukhali to Satkhira in Bangladesh. Manipulating his fresh political influence and the new regime of increased security, Dipankar took it upon himself to remodel the black market trade to his absolute advantage which soon turned him into the "master." In the new setup, everyone was allowed to trade in the black market if they worked under him and paid him a sizeable commission. In return, for this commission, Dipankar managed the BSF to ensure both the traders and the trade. That the BSF accepts bribes to enable cow smuggling along the Indo-Bangladesh border is a cliché at this point. However, in Dukhali, there were more ways than bribery to achieve this insurance. Being the son of an aging single mother, Dipankar could establish himself as her protector, a role which he then extended to the rest of Dukhali. This became easier to achieve once his mother was elected Pradhan as it made him the mediator between Panchayat resources and the residents. This almost forced people to accept his position as challenging him could be detrimental to both business and life. As the established guardian, he guaranteed the BSF a peaceful border on behalf of the residents on the condition that they allowed the black market to operate surreptitiously. Keeping his promise, the black market visibly disappeared from the lanes of Dukhali as 150-200 cows being chased across the Bil could no longer be seen, thereby,

giving birth to the security success story that I heard several times during fieldwork.

With the discontinuation of the challan system and Dipankar's ascent, the practice of trade in people emerged through the participation of an increasing number of teenage dalals. Owing to the arrangement put in place by Dipankar, these boys were free to operate as the BSF remained conveniently absent from their designated posts during their maneuvers. This newly achieved insurance not only encouraged many, especially the youth into the profession but also made them disciples of Dipankar, further establishing him as the "master." This centralised regulation of the trade in Dukhali resonates with and has a stark similarity with what Pinzon and Mantilla have termed an Organised Crime Group (OCG) operating in the Columbia-Venezuela border.²¹ These OCGs gradually begin to wield social control that allows them a greater degree of immunity to not only carry out these activities but also dictate their terms. In short, they become both the rule makers and breakers in their areas of influence where they curb any forms of dissent.²² This curbing of dissent is the premium Dipankar charges for the insurance he guarantees the black traders of Dukhali. Thus, as Ashok's testimony indicates, Dipankar monopolised the black market trade by eliminating all forms of traditional autonomy. Today, it is impossible to carry out this trade independently in Dukhali without getting arrested or killed. Initially, many like Ashok in Paschimpara refused to lose their autonomy by working under Dipankar. However, the consequences of defiance were usually heavy. Moloy said, "One fine day the BSF will raid your house and find a pack of ganja and charge you with a drug case. The pack is not yours and you do not know where it came from, but you will not be allowed to give any explanations. If you want to pay them to get out of the case, they will charge you an amount you can only loan from Dipankar which would then compromise your autonomy by default." This system of false allegations or getting charged in drug cases is by far the most feared consequence in Dukhali because these are usually non-bailable offenses. Other forms of punishment include revoking government grants. As the Panchayat is usually responsible for managing and distributing resources among the residents, they cannot help but conform to the dictates of Dipankar.

There is also a lack of autonomy in political expression. Being a TMC member, Dipankar does not allow any political opposition to thrive in the village. Even within TMC, he rarely tolerates challenges to his authority which is why veterans like Moloy are increasingly looking for opportunities to deflect. I too managed to get a taste of Dipankar's control when during one of my earlier meetings with five members of the conflicting faction within TMC, we found ourselves surrounded by Dipankar's disciples who demanded to preside over our conversation. As a result, our meetings henceforth had to be carried out in secret outside of Dukhali and never in the same place twice. As three of the five members I was regularly speaking with lived in Puberpara, they were at greater risk of facing consequences. Moloy was the one with whom I could speak the most as he, owing to having relatives in other parts of Swarupnagar, could easily slip out of the village without raising suspicion. Despite the risks, however, talking to me seemed to give a release to the members of this faction

as continuous silencing had by then turned their dissonance into anger and frustration. Despite my repeated clarifications, they continued to think of me as a journalist and shared in the hope of exposing Dipankar and his dealings.

Conclusion

Since Partition, Dukhali has witnessed its transition from an open border to a semi-porous border. Following a change of the central government in 2014 and the Baduria Riots of 2017, the border was successfully shut off, making it a heavily administered zone for the first time since its creation. Though the border continued to remain unfenced, the inertia of its porosity gradually waned with increasing state presence and control to prevent the entry of infiltrators into India and reaffirm her territorial sovereignty. Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004) argues that to make its presence more distinct, the state often relies on “illegible” local-marginal manifestations of its legible bureaucracy and law.²³ They argue that to retain its control at the margins the state often uses agents from the lowest rung of its machinery and sometimes even private individuals and collectives wielding local influence.²⁴ By doing this, the state tends to detach itself from its structures of legality, supposedly to better manage the population of the margins under an “aura” of legality rather than sharply recognised legality.²⁵ In Dukhali, the Panchayat-BSF nexus to control the black market and through it, its residents living at the margins of the state is indicative of precisely this “aura” of legality. It is observable in the role played by the Panchayat Pradhan’s son in the village, especially with respect to its complete loss of socio-economic and political autonomy in the post-2014 period. Increased security and subsequent monetisation of asylum further allowed the state to regulate *who gets to come in* and *who does not* through its reliance on local musclemen like Dipankar, which seems to further explain the rationale behind the point of introducing increased border controls in borderlands like Dukhali in the first place.

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter and to maintain the safety of respondents, the names of all the locations and institutions and respondents have been changed by the author to protect their safety and privacy. The research article was presented at the Conference on Migrant Asias: Refugees, Statelessness and Migrant Labour Regimes in the panel on “Seeing Like a State” organised by Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group in collaboration with the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, and several other institutes from November 17–19, 2022.

Notes

¹ Shikha Mukherjee, “BJP Gains as Cracks Appear in West Bengal’s Consensus on Communal Harmony.” *The Wire*, April 20, 2017; Sweety Kumari, “Looking back, Bengal Fights ‘Communal’ tag: Basirhat Riots Lead the Pack, Social Media ‘Menace’ Under Police Scanner.” *The Indian Express*, December 31, 2017.

² Sweety Kumari, “Looking Back, Bengal Fights ‘Communal’ Tag: Basirhat Riots Lead the Pack, Social Media ‘Menace’ Under Police Scanner,” *The Indian Express*, December 31, 2017; Sayandeb Chowdhury, “Why is the BJP Communalising West Bengal Instead Offering it Good Governance?” *The Wire*, July 6, 2017; Shoaib Daniyal,

"A Facebook Post was All it Took to Undo Decades of Communal Harmony of a West Bengal Town," *Scroll*, July 14, 2017; Mukherjee, "BJP Gains."

³ Daniyal, "A Facebook Post."

⁴ Amaresh Misra, Irfan Engineer, Neha Dabhade, Mohammad Jalaludin, Nasim Choudhary, Kingshuk Chakroborty, "Baduria and Basirhat Fact Finding Report," Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, 2017, <https://csss-islam.com/fact-finding-reports/baduria-and-bashirhat-fact-finding-report/>.

⁵ Sweety Kumari, "Looking back, Bengal fights 'Communal' tag: Basirhat riots lead the pack, social media 'menace' under police scanner." *The Indian Express*, December 31, 2017.

⁶ Joya Chatterji, "The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947–52," *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (1999): 185–242.

⁷ Subrata Nagchoudhury, "In Bengal Area Where Communal Riots Broke Out, BJP Officials Claim a Surge in Membership." *Scroll*, July 6, 2017.

⁸ Carrie Heitmeyer, "'There is Peace Here': Managing Communal Relations in a Town in Central Gujarat," *Journal of South Asian Development* 4, no. 1 (2009): 116–7.

⁹ Dipankar Gupta, Dipankar. *Justice before Reconciliation: Negotiating a 'New Normal' in Post-Riot Mumbai and Ahmedabad* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 15.

¹⁰ Chatterji, "The Fashioning," 215.

¹¹ Noel Parker and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "Picking and Choosing the 'Sovereign' Border: A Theory of Changing State Bordering Practices," *Geopolitics* 17, no. 4 (2022): 773–77.

¹² Debdatta Chowdhury, *Identity and Experience at the India-Bangladesh Border: The Crisis of Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2018), 6–8.

¹³ Antara Datta, *Refugees and Borders in South Asia: The Great Exodus of 1971* (London: Routledge, 2013), 40–1.

¹⁴ Saibal Gupta, "India to Fence Over Water to Stop Immigration from Bangladesh," *Times of India*. August 24, 2014.

¹⁵ N.S. Jamwal, "Border Management: Dilemma of Guarding the India-Bangladesh Border," *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 1 (2004): 5–36; Dibyendu Mondal, "Bengal's Cow Smuggling Business is Drying Up," *The Sunday Guardian*, June 11, 2017.

¹⁶ Ipsita Chakravarty, "On the Fence: Fluid and Ever Changing, the Indo-Bangladesh Border Defies the Idea of a Neat Boundary," *Scroll*, January 20, 2018.

¹⁷ *Dhur* is a Bengali interjection used to express disturbance. It is a derogatory term used to define a border crosser from Bangladesh. The word emerged from the armed robbery menace that plagued Dukhali before it got its BOP. These robbers came from across the border to not only rob people but also to damage property that they could not steal. As a truck shop owner, Kalpana from Puberpara recalls, "Our house was robbed thrice. Twice it was at my maternal home in Paschimpara and once here. At this house, the robbers not only took away everything, but they also threw away the food that was left over from the previous night's dinner. They did not want to leave anything for us." Much after the robbery phenomenon had died, the term has survived and has been extended to define immigrants from Bangladesh, including asylum seekers. The relatively better socio-economic growth rates among the immigrant population, sometimes cause annoyance among the locals which further affirms the "*dhur*" rhetoric. At present, '*Dalal dhore dhur pachar*' (crossing borders using intermediaries) has emerged as a booming black market business that aids immigrants and asylum seekers to cross the border by paying intermediaries.

¹⁸ Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Karen A. Pren, "Why Border Enforcement Backfired," *American Journal of Sociology* 121, no. 5 (2016): 1573.

¹⁹ Douglas S. Massey, "The Counterproductive Consequences of Border Enforcement," *Cato Journal* 37, no. 3 (2017): 539–554.

²⁰ Massey, "The Counterproductive," 544.

²¹ Viviana García Pinzón and Jorge Mantilla, "Contested Borders: Organized Crime, Governance, and Bordering Practices in Colombia-Venezuela Borderlands," *Trends Organized Crime* 24 (2021): 265–81.

²² Pinzón and Mantilla, "Contested Borders," 269.

²³ Veena Das and Deborah Poole, "State and Its Margins: Comparative Ethnographies," in *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, eds. by Veena Das and Deborah Poole (New Delhi: Oxford, 2004), 3–33.

²⁴ Das and Poole, "State and Its Margins," 14.

²⁵ Veena Das, "The Signature of the State: Paradox of Illegibility," in *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, eds. Veena Das and Deborah Poole (New Delhi: Oxford, 2004), 241.