

ABSTRACT FOR CRITICAL STUDIES CONFERENCE, 2022

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Abstract

The present paper follows from my ongoing fieldwork in villages located on the Indian side along the Khulna-North Twenty-Four Parganas border. The very mention of the India-Bangladesh border inevitably brings forth two critical points of departure- first, formative historical events (like Partition or the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971) and second, the continuing political contention surrounding its porosity. In this light, one of my primary goals of fieldwork was to explore the impacts these criticalities carried on the everyday lives and mobilities of the border residents, in the present. In this pursuit, what I found instead were changes affecting the porosity of these borders that are born out of largely contemporary processes bearing at best, marginal influences with the above-mentioned historical conversation starters on Indo-Bangladesh borderlands. For instance- Dukhali (name changed), one of the villages where I am presently working in, became a “border in practice” through fencing merely a decade ago. Though this urgency to fence was greatly stimulated, leading to an increase in border policing to allegedly prevent illegal cross-border movements and crush illegal trade networks, on a scale previously unimaginable in the area, its residents

often have different stories to tell. Additionally, I argue that these policing practices, on account of being relatively new, are based on certain “unpredictable rules” that have come to determine the everyday lives of the residents.

The existing body of scholarly works exploring the intricacies of the India-Bangladesh borderland often commence from boisterous episodes of past occurrences like Partition and the War of 1971. Implicated in this context, the study of movement across these regions becomes limited either to demographic exchange characterised by the refugee exodus that occurred during these events, or the present limitations that characterise the everyday lives of border residents, because of these events. However, as I intend to argue, there are added layers to this narrative. Using illustrations from my ongoing fieldwork, I will argue in my paper how activation of dormant borders is an ongoing process that may be founded on contemporary political factors rather than historical ones. The current pattern of movement and its limits thereof also follows from these contemporary factors or “recent histories”.

Against this backdrop, my larger goal will be to advocate for the urgency to account for these “recent histories” and treat the border not only as the historical cause of contemporary occurrences but also as the outcome of contemporaneous histories. In this endeavour, I do not intend to disregard or dismiss the episodic history of borders but merely attempt to open up newer routes to explore life in contemporary borderlands.
