Exploring "recent histories" of re-bordering along Indo-Bangladesh border: Stories emerging from villages lying along porous borders of North Twenty-Four Parganas in West Bengal'

(1) Introduction: Arriving at Dukhali[1]

I chanced upon Dukhali (name changed) while chasing the causes of a riot that wreaked havoc in West Bengal, specifically in the eastern flanks of its North 24 Parganas district in 2017, known since then as the Baduria Riots. Back then the media had touted this riot as *the* 'breaking point' of 'decades-long communal peace' in 'one of the last secular bastions in the country' (see Kumari, 2018; Mukherjee, 2017). This excessive conclusion was reached mainly because of two reasons- first, riot as a phenomenon resumed in the state after a very long time and was allegedly the first of its kind to occur as soon as the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power at the Centre in 2014. BJP was also beginning to expand its bases in West Bengal at the time which further affirmed this inference. Second, the location of the riot at the border immediately traced the lines of communal fissures along the line of the Partition and treated it as a point from which history picked up, after a long period of slumber and stagnation. This confluence of the two factors subsequently birthed the 'riot-at-the-border' narrative that appealed to my personal qualms as well and began to make a lot of sense. As a third-generation refugee from erstwhile East Pakistan (modern day Bangladesh), witnessing and consuming news about escalating communal animosity at the Bengal border convinced me of our gradual descent into the riotous days of Partition. Something needed to be done, and research seemed like a pathway to an informed public activism.

With this ambition, I arrived at Baduria and then got fortuitously rerouted to Dukhali. This does not mean that I completely snapped connections with Baduria Riots. I merely found a way to secure a deeper meaning of the event that had happened and how it was telling a story of certain things unfolding in the contemporary state of West Bengal. These, however, form a part of my larger research endeavour and is too wide an angle to be covered in the present paper.

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[1] Given the sensitive subject matter at hand and to maintain the safety of respondents, I have changed the names of the village that was affected by the riot (Shyamnagar), the border village this paper deals with (Dukhali), the Panchayat it falls under (Sonajhuri) and the refugee settlement it populates (Bilpara). Additionally, the names of the respondents have also been changed to protect their safety and privacy. The names of the rest of the places remain unchanged.

Nevertheless, for the sake of context, a summary of the riot I initially intended to study is mandated.

According to media reports (see, Chowdhury, 2017; Daniyal, 2017; Mukherjee, 2017; Kumari, 2017) that immediately followed the communal conflagration, the conflict began from 2nd July, 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 the Baduria municipality. The post was allegedly deemed offensive to the 'local Muslim' community, who then launched an offensive on their Hindu counterparts. Though Mogurkhali was the epicentre, the riot quickly spread, eventually quaking throughout the Baduria block, reaching even the adjoining Basirhat town.

While the scale of violence remained 'low' in most localities (meaning that it was restricted to vandalization of signboards, shops, desecration of a Kali temple and even arson that included police stations), at some others the things took a turn for the 'worse'. For instance, a 'Hindu' man was stabbed to death on his way home from the market – incidentally, the only reported casualty of the rioting. The 'Hindus', though initially 'shocked' began to counter within two days (that is, 4th July 2017). Following this retaliation, the unrest magnified, becoming the most serious communal escalation between the two communities in the state 'since 1964' (referring to East Pakistan Riots or Hazratbal Riots). By 5th July, however, 'ironically' Baduria was 'completely calm' (see Daniyal, 2017).

Following the riot, the BJP declared the event as an attack on the 'majority Hindu' population of West Bengal and established themselves as the latter's saviour. They called the police biased for not being coercive enough in subduing the 'Muslim' rioters (see Kumari, 2018). The current Trinamool Congress (henceforth, TMC) led state government had, by then, also been accused of going into 'shady deals' with Islamist factions (like present-day Wahhabis) in the state. BJP's strategy worked and the party's Baduria chapter recorded a remarkable 'surge in membership' (see Nagchoudhury, 2017). These significant fallouts, though left many obvious questions unanswered (as we shall discuss below), did drive home the premonition of a grand scheme of communal polarisation supposedly underway in the state.

A question that even a cursory reading of the riot is bound to raise is how did 'secularism' fall apart so easily in one of its 'last bastions'? Equation of the lack of communal violence with the presence of secularism in the state of West Bengal did not seem to check out.

Upon acquiring a somewhat elementary knowledge of neighbourhoods in Baduria's Shyamnagar (name changed) village during my very brief period of pilot visit right before the

second wave of Covid-19 struck, I only found more evidence to support the riot-at-the-border narrative. For one, the residents of Shyamnagar tended to impress upon me the peacefulness of them. As tangible evidence of peaceful cohabitation, I was escorted to beef shops (both butcher shops and roadside eateries serving beef, locally known as 'Muslim hotels') openly operating on state highways.[2] The blame for the riot was completely passed on to 'outsiders' who had entered the area through the unfenced porous borders scattered all over its adjacent Swarupnagar Block. This was unsurprising as the tendency to push the blame on to 'outsiders' have been observed in other riot affected areas. This happens despite insiders nursing feelings of antagonisms with who they view as the 'other'. Heitmeyer (2009), in this regard, talks about the 'subtle ways' in which communal sentiments persist behind the mask of everyday normality, where those viewed as 'other' continue to be viewed with deep-seated suspicion albeit surreptitiously (Heitmeyer, 2009: 116-17). The sociologist Dipankar Gupta poignantly terms this cohabitation 'antagonistic tolerance' (Gupta, 2011: 5). Viewed this way, the 'provocation by outsiders' narrative raised more questions than answered. Could outsiders provoke a riot so easily in a peaceful neighbourhood that did not have a history of communal violence without any involvement by its insiders? Who were these influential 'outsiders' who could come from outside and destroy peace among seemingly peaceful locals? What is meant by 'outside' from where they were believed to have come from? And lastly and more importantly, how did outsiders break 'decade long secularism' using just a Facebook post or were there prior undercurrents? For me, therefore, the media frenzy around the 'sudden-rupture-of-secularism' narrative did not quite align with the 'riot-at-the-border' narrative. I needed to know the everyday forms of antagonistic tolerance that kept peace in the area and then in one 'sudden' moment assisted a group of riotous outsiders in breaking it so wantonly.

To look for these outsiders, I was escorted to the unfenced border gateways or entry points closest to Baduria from where these riot-causing outsiders allegedly arrived. I had been informed that Swarupnagar's border villages are often chosen as entry points for these provocative 'outsiders' intent on causing local unrest akin to the 2017 riots. Dukhali, a village in Swarupnagar Block was one such entry point. At the same time, I was also parallelly getting acquainted with the multifarious ways in which the term 'outsider' came to be defined. With

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[2] The sale and consumption of beef is a frequent cause of violent communal animosity between caste Hindus and Muslims in India. In Bengal, though while not a common occurrence, beef consumption is still frowned upon by caste Hindus, and Muslims, therefore, tend to keep the practice limited in their clusters.

greater engagements with the field, I divided up the field into three parts- the entry point of rioters, the participants of the riot and finally, the location of the riot.

In this paper, I deal with the first part of my fieldwork, that is, looking at one of the entry points of the alleged rioters. This paper, however, does not deal with the Riot and gets rerouted the same way I did from Baduria to Dukhali. In focus, is the issue of entry, cross border movements and how it changed from 2014. Before delving deeper, I start by introducing Dukhali.

(2) Contextualising the Dukhali border

Dukhali is an unfenced border located at 'zero point'[3] along the India-Bangladesh border. The village falls on the eastern end of North 24 Parganas district and shares border with Satkhira district of Khulna division in Bangladesh. As per the Census of 2011, Dukhali is divided into two 'booths'- Uttarpara (the chosen neighbourhood for potential fencing in the future, as mentioned above) and Dakshinpara. The village has a population of 1982 residents belonging to the Namasudra community distributed across 485 households. The total area covered by the village is 77.7 hectares (Census of India, 2011: 278). As already mentioned, Dukhali has a homogenous demographic- it is dominated by Namasudra community who are natives to the area, though there are also few residents who identify as 'refugee' Namasudras. At the margins of Dakshinpara, there are also a handful of Muslim residences who are locally known as the Chaudalis.

Due to its relative obscurity, not much is known about Dukhali. This context is thus, pieced together from accounts of residents and larger history of Khulna and North 24 Parganas. According to a resident belonging to the family that allegedly founded the village, Dukhali formed a part of Khulna district and was partly governed by its Roychowdhuri zamindars. Following Partition, after many deliberations when Khulna was finally handed over to East Pakistan, Dukhali, being a region falling on the east of River Mathabhanga, became a part of India (Chatterji, 1999: 215). Though this made Dukhali a border by default, it was not a functional frontier. For one, despite being a 'zero point', there was no border outpost (henceforth, BOPs) in Dukhali. The nearest checkpoints, according to the respondents, were located only at three points since 1947: Hakimpur, Amudia-Khalsi (nearest) and Sonajhuri

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[3] As understood, 'zero point' here signifies the last village before the 150 yards leading to the border begins. Since Dukhali is an unfenced border, there are flags placed among the paddy fields to mark the territorial limits of the Indian state.

(name changed). Dukhali falls in the middle of Amudia and Sonajhuri. There is no river in Dukhali and it is surrounded on both sides by a marshland known as *Bil*. The main occupations of the people of Dukhali are fishing and cultivation, both of which are carried out in the *Bil*. There are two crops in Dukhali- the summer crop which is the main source of livelihood and the monsoon crop which yields lower quality paddy that is mostly used for self-consumption.

Despite its location, Dukhali was never at the receiving end of excessive border controls till about the 1980s. In the 1980s, following the bifurcation of the erstwhile 24 Parganas district into North and South 24 Parganas, the village got its first BOP while continuing to remain unfenced.

Due to the inertness of the border since its implementation in 1947, unfiltered cross border movements spontaneously occurred between Dukhali and Satkhira across the *Bil*. This loose maintenance of border control immediately after Partition could also have been a direct consequence of the Standstill Agreement of 1947 whereby the Nehru administration took a decision to let the Bengal borders remain porous in order to keep the process of property evacuation and compensation flexible. The Agreement further recognised the interdependence that existed between the two new nations and attempted to keep it untouched through absent customs barriers and excise taxes across the open borders. This was supposed to be the arrangement till a long-term trade policy could be drafted. This included cultivators who were allowed to move their produce from across the borders to their homes on the Indian side (see Chowdhury, 2018: 6-8). For instance, as I found out, a *haat* known as Hathaganj Bazar in Tentulia thrived on business brought to it by people crossing the border through the *Bil*, on feet and on carts to buy and sell goods in the market. Though termed as 'black' because it wasn't legal, it was visible, large-scale and drew active participation and assistance of the local population. A resident of the neighbouring refugee dominated village, Bilpara (name changed) remarked- "*Tokhon ekhane taka urto*." (Back then, money used to fly in the air). Authorities would hardly make their presence felt and 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*' that occurred in a club located close to Hathatganj after the Customs office carried out an unexpected raid of illegal *hilsa* in the Bazar. The raided fish were then auctioned off in the neighbourhood. It was a good day for the residents because most of them were able to get their hands on the best quality *hilsa* at a rate much lower than the market rate.

Even during the '71 War, despite cautionary removal of inhabitants during wartime, movement in Dukhali had remained quite open. According to a *Muktijoddha*[4], a current resident of the adjacent village, Mallapara (name changed), the *Bil* also formed one of the stations for the *Mukti Bahini* during the War. Watching war planes fly by and collection of bombshells constitute the childhood memories of many of my respondents who were children back then. Following the War, the problems of porosity at the border began to be readily recognised, and especially after the mass exodus that occurred due to it. The Indian state began to encounter its inability to accommodate the huge number of people entering the country. To prevent it, for the first time the 'threat' of refugees began to be realised and recognised (see Datta, 2013: 40-41). The setting up of a BOP in Dukhali so many years after Partition could have also emerged from this threat.

This, however, peaked sometime around 2014[5], with the coming of the BJP government at the Centre. Currently, deliberations for fencing Uttarpara in Dukhali are underway. Uttarpara has been chosen due to its geographical closeness to the 'zero point' and the fenced Amudia-Khalsi border. Fencing would require the evacuation of houses up to 150 yards area from the fence as per protocol. By default, it would then effectively lead to the removal of an entire section of Uttarpara, including the three-storey residence of the Panchayat Pradhan. Though the matter has been temporarily hushed amid protests from residents under the leadership of the Pradhan, it is at first important to gain a better picture of the frontier in question.

Perhaps my first impression of arriving at Dukhali describes the village the best. Accessing Dukhali is not easy or convenient. Being located at 'zero point', it is heavily militarised area and an illegal migration and trade route. There are three major checkpoints in the village where every public transport (mostly, Magic vans and autos) is stopped and searched and every passenger's ID gets checked. In this particular Magic/auto route, nobody is allowed to travel without IDs- the drivers themselves will not even accept a passenger without an ID. Apart from the frisking, there are also time curfews. There is no public transport available at night and the last Magic van is allowed to pass through Dukhali between 5:30pm to 5:40pm, post which the roads have to be made free for BSF patrolling. Private vehicles require special permission from the MLA to pass through, that too, only during daytime. Personal two wheelers and cycles

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[4] A member of the paramilitary guerrilla army known as Mukti Bahini who fought for an Independent Bangladesh.

[5] Most respondents have told me that the rules became stricter after the BJP government came to power in the Delhi though they were unsure of the year most of the times.

belonging to the residents, however, can pass by any time of the day as their numbers are already registered with the BSF. According to the Pradhan, a bus route to Basirhat was started in Dukhali but got discontinued due to alleged lack of demand in the village. Throughout fieldwork, this problem of communicability remained a major challenge.

On my first day, I was shown around by one of my correspondents (henceforth, K), a young local whose contact I found from the Shyamnagar Panchayat office. We travelled on a scooty and reached Dukhali after many minutes of bumpy ride till we abruptly found ourselves on an uncharacteristically smooth road, unseen anywhere else in the Block including its main connector, Tentulia Road. Gradually, the signs of the buzzing *moffusil* disappeared from our view and was replaced by horizon-touching stretches of lush green paddy fields spread across the *Bil*. The *Bil* too had undergone changes. Once a consolidated marshland, the building of the PWD road tore it into two halves. Though the *Bil* continues to form the horizon on both the halves, its right one lies in Bangladesh. Standing on the PWD road, one can see vehicles passing by on another road lying parallelly at the opposite end of the *Bil* on its right-hand side. This road, as I am told, belongs to Bangladesh.

Due to the lack of fence, it is very difficult to make out the border at first. To a layperson's eye, there are haphazardly placed white flags between 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 closer to the Bangladesh side, the very next one might be very close to a person's house in Uttarpara, on the Indian side. Though the cultivators who work in these fields have gained clarity on how they are supposed to move now, lapses are fairly common. As one of the Uttarpara residents informed, 'While working in the field we would often exchange *bidis* with farmers of '*odesh*' 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 border line 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 work without exchanging any words amongst each other?'

The tightening of the border he talks about roughly began, as already mentioned, from 2014. 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 (see Gupta, 2014). This is because unfenced borders such as Dukhali are often held solely responsible for being convenient gateways for 'infiltrators' ('*onuprobeshkaris*') to enter India (see Jamwal,

2004: 8-9; Mondal, 2017). Thus, in order to curb 'infiltration', security in the *Bil* was also tightened. All symbols of unceremonious existence that enabled 'black' and 'illegal movements' like the muddy village dirt roads was cleared off and PWD roads were built to aid increased BSF patrolling in the area. Hathatganj Bazar gradually lost its might as money didn't fly anymore like before (discussed above).

Border controls were further tightened right in the aftermath of the riots to prevent 'outsiders' from coming in. According to some residents in Dukhali, it has remained the same ever since. But how far has it been successful? Was this shift in 'bordering practices'[6] at all intended to curb 'infiltration'?

As we will illustrate in the sections to follow, this order of border controls and curbing of asylum forged a range of contentions among the residents of our area of study, especially in the two neighbourhoods- between the Uttarpara and Dakshinpara with respect to border controls. Through longer engagements and secret meetups, Dukhali's dynamics gradually began to make sense to me.

3. How far did the increased border controls work?

According to a news article from 2018, BJP government's fervent campaigns to sanctify the Indian population through prevention of 'infiltrator' entry by focusing on fencing and increased border controls paralleled Donald Trump's frenzy to build a wall at the US-Mexico border (see Chakravarty, 2018). The justification to do so offered in the name of national security, however, was communally motivated as 'infiltrator' was a term designed to mark out the Muslim border crossers. While working in Dukhali and its neighbouring refugee dominated settlements in Swarupnagar, BJP workers 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 lures the Muslims to cross over from Bangladesh. Though there is some truth to this and relatively better wage structure in India does attract a number of Muslim migrant workers to enter India, 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

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[6] According to Parker and Adler-Nissen, 'bordering practices' refer to those activities that a state engages in to 'constitute, sustain or modify' borders between itself and its neighbouring countries from time to time under a specific pretext, like prevention of illegal immigration, in our case (Parker and Adler-Nissen, 2012: 776-777).

villages spread across two Panchayats, located between Dukhali and Hathatganj Bazar, I have only gotten evidence of Hindu border crossers and settlers. Additionally, the Muslim workers return to Bangladesh eventually but the Hindu migrants become permanent settlers in the area. Being survivors of majoritarian persecution, they embrace India as their new home. In 2016, a study conducted in the backdrop of increased border controls at the US-Mexico border, revealed that these forms of 'bordering practices' often end up being 'counterproductive'. Using empirical evidence, the study demonstrated how increased controls failed to bring down 'infiltration' and lead to the opening up of parallel systems to enable it (see Massey, Durand and Pren, 2016: 1573). In a follow-up article to this study, Massey (2017) further argued that not only did the increased border controls fail to bring down 'infiltration' but in an unfortunate turn of events, this move ended up empowering the 'coyotes' or intermediaries who shifted their base of operation to remoter, more obscure and porous locations. This shift then made border crossing a gamble in the hands of the coyotes who began to enjoy greater control over border crossers, further compromising the latter's safety by making them more vulnerable (see Massey, 2017: 544). Though not executed in the exact same manner but based on the accounts I have collected from Dakshinpara residents and members of opposition parties and factions, this also seems to be the case in Dukhali as well.

Observably, in the last decade alone, despite heavy BSF patrolling, violence and shoot-at-sight warnings, Dukhali and its adjoining porous borders have been responsible for helping such 'infiltrators' to cross over in numbers large enough to constitute a refugee dominated village known as Bilpara (mentioned above) in the adjacent Panchayat. The question, then, is, how did it become possible?

3. (a) Has black trade ended in Dukhali?

During my initial interactions with the residents of Dukhali, I got two distinct answers to these questions. The first response came from Uttarpara where I was informed that all kinds of illegal movements- be it 'black' trade or 'illegal immigration'- across the border have completely stopped as a result of the increased border controls. "*Goru r jayena, black ekhon bondho.*" (Cattle trade is no more and 'black' or illegal trading has ended).

Before delving deeper, it is important to mention that Dukhali used to be one of the most impoverished villages before the introduction of '*gorom er dhaan*' or the summer crop was introduced in 2000. In fact, the situation was so dire at one point that some local Namasudras managed to secure 'refugee cards' that were issued for the refugees during the '71 War and

volunteered to be taken to Dandakaranya[7] in the hope of achieving better living conditions. Thus, when 'black' began, it became the main source of income for the residents.

Not just 'black trade', despite BJP's widespread propagandist emphasis on the brutality faced by the 'Hindu minorities' in Bangladesh, legal grant of asylum to those fleeing persecution also stopped following 2014. Earlier, a challan system was operative in the borders whereby an asylum seeker could gain safe passage to India legally, upon filling in a challan after surrendering to the nearest BSF camp at the border. As one respondent told me, "Now they don't anymore. Currently, no matter what the situation is, they (the BSF) drive them (asylum seekers) away almost immediately." I later verified this information with even a BSF personnel who said- "Yes, this used to be the rule ten years ago. Back then, the rules were different and people could come and go easily. But now we have strict orders to shoot or arrest anyone we see in the *Bil* after dark. It is no longer our concern to entertain even asylum seekers. It is not in our hands and we simply do not have permission."

As if to exemplify this further, I was told how in the past 150-200 cows would be seen being chased down by their owners in broad daylight through rice fields to get across to the other side. At present, such blatant transgressions cannot be *seen* anymore. As an additional measure, currently, BSF keeps a count of all domestic cows in Dukhali. Even if cows need to be sold locally between residents of other villages, a very long and arduous process has to be followed to ensure its legalities. "It usually takes us minimum one month to sell our own cows. We do our dealings now keeping this formality period in mind."

But can a mere lack of visibility of cows being smuggled across the border be enough evidence to suggest that all kinds of movement across the border have entirely stopped? If we take this to be true, then how does one explain the population boom in Bilpara in the last decade (mentioned above)?

The answers to these questions, acting as contrarian to Uttarpara's response was offered by Dakshinpara's response where I was informed that the functionality of increased border controls is emphasised upon just to soothe the eye. In their opinion, the practice of 'black' still not only exists but have also exponentially grown in scale since the excessive controls were set

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[7] The Dandakaranya region spread across Madhya Pradesh and Orissa was chosen by the Government of India in the 1960s to resettle refugees from East Pakistan. The Dandakaranya Development Authority (DDA) was thereby formed to implement the project of resettlement. The project remains controversial to this day because of the allegedly draconian means it adopted to resettle the people involved. For more information, see Maudood Elahi (1981).

in place. What has stopped is the visibility of the border crossing. In Section (2), I discussed how the 'black' traders used to enter through Dukhali, cross the Bil to get to Hathatganj Bazar to sell their goods. The same route was also used by non-asylum seekers trying to immigrate to India. Back then, one could see these activities in front of them. After restrictions, one cannot see these activities anymore which gives the impression that 'black' has stopped. And this impression is the precondition for black to continue.

According to an ex-black trader, Ashok (name changed), the visible absence of cows from the *Bil* and the dirt roads is a marketing gimmick used by both Panchayat members and BSF personnel to project increased border control as a success story. He further told me, "Just because you cannot see it does not mean it is not happening. Times have changed and black has too. In our time we used to trade in goods but now even helping asylum seekers across the border is a business. So, 'black' has not stopped and you can continue to be a trader as long as you remain in the good books of certain people and pay them their share of commission." Whether it has increased or not requires data that is beyond the scope of this present endeavour. However as one of the Balti-Basirhat Magic van drivers, Parimal (name changed) whose vehicle have been used to transport immigrants away from the border once they have entered India, told me, "People have not stopped coming in. We have transported them to places also. Though they try to hide it, we can understand very well by now. It is very clear from their expression and language who they are."

When asked what role does BSF play in this, he said, "Those who are involved know how to keep the BSF happy." By this estimation then, the reasons why an erstwhile semi-inert border is reinforced through increased border controls is not founded on historical events such as the '71 war. On the contrary, it ends up enabling the same illicit activities that it was supposed to prevent based on more 'recent histories'.

3. (b) How does the new kind of black trade operate in Dukhali post 2014?

Post 2014, when old black trade visibly ended, it opened up opportunities for some locals who were able to make more money than others and then use it to build political and social credibility. Dukhali's Dipankar (name changed) is one such character.

Dipankar is an influential TMC leader of Swarupnagar who lives in a plush three-storey house, very unbecoming for Dukhali's Uttarpara. His mother is the Panchayat Pradhan of Sonajhuri, who despite the position she holds is not known by her own name and is referred to as '*Dipankar er ma*' (Dipankar's mother) by the people of Dukhali. Soon I realised that though

she is the titular Pradhan of the village, it is her son who actually calls the shots. She is rarely present in the Panchayat and it is Dipankar who carries out all the work. My own Panchayat permit that I had to secure to carry out fieldwork in Dukhali was not only signed by Dipankar but also recognised by the BSF even though he is not the Pradhan, which echoing Parimal, further confirms that existence of a mutual arrangement. Later, I discovered that maintaining an image of order is necessary to keep up in order to sustain the main source of livelihood of Dukhali- 'black'. Dipankar's ascent began in 2012 after he switched from Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M) to TMC, peaking in 2018 after his mother won the Panchayat elections. He himself had fought in the elections before nominating his mother but had not been successful. Today he controls every 'black trade' through all the borders in Sonajhuri Panchayat, including Dukhali. There is even a dirt road near his house that is known as '*Goru pachar rasta*' (Cow smuggling road) which goes to Satkhira in Bangladesh. All this information was given to me by old TMC members who have, over the years, grown increasingly resentful of the climate of fear, violence and intimidation that Dipankar has put in place. One of them, Moloy, who used to act as a translator for the BSF, informed me, "There is no opposition in this village anymore. Everyone must vote for TMC or face grave consequences. Some people in Dakshinpara who dared to join BJP to empower themselves against him were instantly cut off from all social services and government allowances. In Uttarpara (where Dipankar lives), nobody would even dare to go against him, politically or otherwise." Moloy himself have been waiting for an opportunity to switch over to BJP but he fears for his life. Another Dakshinpara resident, Ajay (name changed), further informed, "We are not allowed to speak with opposition party members or visit their own house even if they belong to one's external family."

I too managed to get a taste of Dipankar's control first-hand when during one of my earlier meetings with this faction, we were surrounded by Dipankar's men who wanted to find out what we were talking about. After that, all the meetings we had were in secret locations, all outside of Dukhali and never in the same place twice. As three of the five members I was regularly speaking with lived in Uttarpara, they were in greater risks of facing consequences. Moloy was the one who I could speak the most to as he, owing to having relatives in other parts of Swarupnagar, could easily slip out of the village without raising suspicion.

It is from Moloy, that I got to know the ways in which 'black' trade has also come to include '*dhur pachar*' in recent times. According to him, just like cattle smuggling, illegal immigration has also not stopped, though not visibly and is now termed as '*dhur pachar*'. Contemporary

'black' trade, as Ashok had also told me, is no longer restricted to mere trading in tangible good or services but also includes a *dalal* or intermediary network involved in '*dhur pachar*'. *Dhur*' is a Bengali interjection used to express disturbance. From its context, then, it is clear that it is a derogatory term that is used to define a border crosser from Bangladesh. The word, according to some, allegedly emerged from the disturbance due to the prevalence of armed robbery in the border villages before the BOP was set up in Dukhali. These robbers came from across the border to not only rob people but also to damage property that they could not steal. As a tuck shop owner, Kalpana (name changed) of Uttarpara recalls, "Our house was robbed thrice. Twice it was at my maternal home in Dakshinpara 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 booming 'black' business that aids immigrants and asylum seekers to cross the border by paying intermediaries. Though prevalent in other places like Bongaon, this was not exactly a business in Dukhali.

We can take the example of Tapan (name changed) who migrated to India earlier this year and currently lives in Bilpara where he has set up a small tailoring shop. To cross the border, he paid Rs.4000 to the *dalal* (intermediary) to get him across. He had to pay this much because he had a lot of luggage with him as he intended to settle in India permanently. Later, when his wife, children and mother migrated, he had to pay a total sum of Rs.7000. Though he was apprehensive about their safety, his family could cross the border safely. Tapan further informed that he and his family both could crossed the border in broad daylight on different days. According to him, his *dalal* had already taken care of the BSF with the help of his Indian associates.

This management is where Dipankar comes in. The *dalal* network that assures safe passage to migrants is run by him and most of the people who work under him are residents of Uttarpara. Currently, it has taken the form of an organised crime group (henceforth, OCG) that enjoys political immunity owing to its founders affiliation to the political party in power, TMC in our case.

Thus, in the new era of black trade, people do not enjoy the autonomy they used to. Earlier, the 150-200 cows that used to be chased belonged to several people who were all trying to earn money in Hathatganj Bazar. Currently, in order to make a living from black (including making safe passage to asylum seekers) one has to get employed into Dipankar's network. According to Moloy, who was once a part of this network, the BSF is complicit in this because Dipankar has worked very hard to keep them entertained. From providing them expensive alcohol to sex workers, Dipankar allegedly does not spare any expenses. Thus, when one of his employed *dalals* goes for an assignment, the BSF is conveniently absent from their post.

The problem occurs when one tries to carry out business autonomously, without informing Dipankar and by denying him commission. According to Moloy, "These are the smugglers you read about in the newspapers who get arrested or shot dead by the BSF." There are other forms of punishment too for open defiance to Dipankar's authority. According to Malay, "One fine day the BSF will raid your house and find a pack of *ganja*. It is not yours; you do not know where it came from but you will be allowed to give no explanations. Drug cases are the most feared because they are non-bailable. If you want to pay your out, they will charge you an amount you cannot pay." The increased border control, thus, enables Dipankar by eliminating all competition. In Dukhali, thus, if you have to make a living in black trade, you either have to join Dipankar's organisation or learn to make a living out of underwhelming revenues from agriculture.

The give-and-take relation between Dipankar and the BSF help each other maintain their cover. Additionally, Dipankar also promises peace in the area. This could probably be a reason why Uttarpara residents do not speak ill of the BSF. The role played by OCGs to exert social control allows them a greater degree of immunity- they become both the rule makers and breakers in the village, thereby curbing all forms of dissent (Pinzon and Mantilla, 2020: 269).

As part of this framing, one could rely on Das and Poole's (2004) reflection on how the state maintains its control at the margins through 'illegible' local-marginal manifestations of its legible bureaucracy and law. The scholars just mentioned argue that the state often uses agents from the lowest rung of its machinery and sometimes even private individuals and collectives wielding local influence to administer its 'margins' (see Das and Poole, 2004: 14). By doing this, the state tends to detach itself from its own structures of legality, supposedly to better manage the population of the margins. This causes the latter to confront and negotiate with the state, getting managed thus under an 'aura' of legality rather than sharply recognised legality (see Das, 2004: 241).

Apart from the residents losing their rights and asylum seekers having to pay money to seek basic refuge, another unfortunate consequence of *'dhur pachar'* is the observable decline in such community relationships in Dukhali. Interactions between Uttarpara and Dakshinpara residents have become extremely restricted. Additionally, aiding border crossing had always been a part of life in Dukhali. Moloy informed me how he and his friends used to help people cross over when movement was less restricted. Even before 2014, asylum seekers seeking legal passage to India would be made to wait for hours at the BOP for the formalities to get completed. "After seeking permission, we would provide them with food and water." The fact that most asylum seekers were fellow Namasudras made the Dukhali residents more compassionate towards them, as evident from Rakhal's (name changed) account below.

Before 2014, he used the Dukhali border to frequent his relatives in Satkhira. According to him, the people of Dukhali were 'experts' in aiding border crossers. He corroborated this with an instance from his own experience. Once while returning from attending a funeral at his relative's place across the border, a BSF personnel saw him from a distance. Though he did not see his 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* immediately and smoke *bidi* in the *dawa*, acting as if nothing happened." By the time the BSF personnel came looking he 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."

Though it may be far-fetched to assert that nobody made any money from aiding asylum seekers cross the border before 2014, it never transitioned into a full-fledged business like it is now.

While borders are identified with conflict, instances from Dukhali demonstrates how it can be tweaked to create an atmosphere of artificial peace and enable profitable illegal trade ventures. In this formation, then, increased BSF control and reinforcement of an inert border provides a safe space to carry out organised crime by guaranteeing it invisibility and immunity. This reinforcement is not historically determined but is founded upon contemporary political arrangements or 'recent histories'. It also demonstrates the much unexplored ways in which politically influential gang lords in the Indo-Bangladesh borders completely dominate the life and livelihoods of individual residents by stripping them off their autonomy.

4. Conclusion

While attempting to discover who the 'outsiders' responsible for causing a communal riot in Baduria in 2017 were, I was directed to a border village called Dukhali. Being an unfenced border village located at zero point, Dukhali is believed to be one of the convenient entrances through which these provocative outsiders allegedly entered to disrupt peace in the area. On reaching Dukhali, however, I found out that it was heavily guarded with its administrative heads and BSF asserting how increased border controls from 2014 onwards and especially in the aftermath of the 2017 Riots, have successfully shut off the village's border. Simply put, in their estimation, the semi-inert porous border was no longer porous.

Evidence collected from local refugee settlements, however, revealed that there were many new residents, especially belonging to the Namasudra community, who have used and continue to use the Dukhali border to enter India for the purpose of seeking asylum. Majoritarian persecution faced by the Namasudra community in Bangladesh is usually the reason for these border crossers to make their way to India. Though earlier a legal process- the challan system- was in place- to aid these asylum seekers, it was stopped in 2014 after the BJP government came to power in Delhi. Along with other borders, restrictions and control tightened in Dukhali as well though it continued to remain unfenced. According to the central government, this was done to prevent entry of 'infiltrators' in India. Though this was done keeping the Muslim community in mind, it ended up affecting the Hindu asylum seekers as well, especially the Namasudra community. Increased border controls and the stopping of the challan system, made passage through Dukhali border extremely difficult. Thus, through reinforcing a somewhat inert border, the Indian state managed to effectively reaffirm its territorial sovereignty. Further, by closing its border, it sent out a strong message to all potential infiltrators.

However, in an interesting turn of events, a *dalal* system, under the headship of a politically influential local strongman, emerged out of this new setup. Using the increased border control as a shield and by gradually showering favours on the BSF, he made a full-fledged business out of getting asylum seekers to cross the border. In order to cut down competition, he convinced the BSF to only give passage to *dalals* working under him. In return, he guaranteed the BSF peace and compliance from the community.

As discussed in (2), Dukhali border, historically, has been a porous border through which unfiltered movement could take place. This remained unchanged even during the '71 War. When the village got its first BOP, restrictions continued to remain relatively relaxed. Giving

passage to asylum seekers were more of an aid than a business. This helped in building stronger community relationships among people of the same community divided across nations. It was only when the restrictions tightened with the intention of preventing entry of 'infiltrators', that irony struck with the might of a cartoon anvil. Asylum became an option for only those who could afford the price as security tightened around the rest to pay the price. Amid all this, with the aid of increased security, the project of reasserting the nation proved counterproductive.

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