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Media Discourses on the Bengal Bangladesh Border


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Media Discourses on the Bengal Bangladesh Border

Paula Banerjee

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Introduction¹

On 7 January 2011, a young girl's body was found swinging from the barbed wire fences in the Chaudhurihat check point in Dinhata, Coochbehar district of West Bengal. Felani was only a 15-year-old, and she was allegedly killed while crossing the barbed wire to return to Bangladesh, soon to be married off. The picture of Felani's lifeless body hanging upside down went viral in the cyberspace. This horrific event propelled Indian and Bangladeshi human rights activists into action. They vociferously took up the cause and launched a campaign. Odhikar, a human rights organisation based in Bangladesh reported:

According to Nurul Islam, an eye-witness to this killing, he and Felani were crossing into Bangladesh, by climbing over a barbed-wire fence using bamboo ladders, through the vacant space between number 3 and 4 S pillars, which are adjacent to the 947 main pillar of the Kitaberkuthi Anantapur border. To cross the wired fence, they had made a deal with two Indian smugglers, namely Mosharaf Hussein and Buzrat in exchange of 3,000 Indian Rupees. While they were crossing the fence, Felani's clothes got tangled in the barbed-wire, which frightened her and caused her to scream in panic. In quick response to her scream, the BSF on patrol opened fire at them. Felani was shot and killed, but her father managed to escape. The body of the deceased teenager hung on the fence till 11 am that morning; subsequently, 5 hours later the BSF brought down Felani's body and took it away.²

Both the national and international news media covered the incident for months and then years. The national media was a little behind the international media but once it took it up it kept running with the "story." Felani's death was so sensational that after two years when a court case began against the BSF jawan who allegedly shot Felani the national dailies covered it with a lot of interest. In 2013 a journalist wrote in the Indian Express:

Did Felani die soon after she was shot? Or did the 15-year-old scream for hours for help, maybe for water, strung up on the border fence between Bangladesh and India? These are questions her father Nurul Islam hopes a BSF court of inquiry that began this week will answer. Islam crossed the border on August 17 to depose before the court of inquiry.³

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The incident led to the signing of an agreement between India and Bangladesh, where the two border forces agreed not to use lethal weapons while guarding the border. That the national dailies have retained interest in the issue is proven by the fact that every year these newspapers carry some stories on this young girl's death while the court cases continue. Even in 2020 when the Supreme Court agreed to take up the petition made by Felani's family there were features published on the tragedy. In one such feature the journalist concerned linked it with a trail of violent reprisals by BSF:

Torture, indiscriminate killings and abductions are among the many allegations against the BSF. Several survivors and eyewitnesses of attacks allege that the BSF engaged in indiscriminate shooting without warning. No one has been persecuted despite the evidence, say the human rights activists working on these cases.⁴

The Indian Human Rights Commission however made it clear that shooting unarmed civilians is not an acceptable mode of behaviour by the BSF. Amongst all these events something interesting emerged and that is the local media from the borders was fairly silent over the issue.⁵This paper is meant to be a study on this dichotomy. It is meant to be a study on the Indo-Bangladesh border from the perspectives of English and Bengali language newspapers that claim to have a national readership and local newspapers from the border districts and try to compare and portray how the border is represented and constructed by different discourse communities. What are the questions that both fascinate people and yet make this border a vexed region? In fact, a cardinal question that is addressed here is the role of local media in constructing the border. The border is not just a material space, but also a discursive challenge and an emotive issue. My purpose is to find out what makes this border an almost mythical and sacred space where the state justifies and legitimises its presence by upholding national security and yet the border becomes increasingly an insecure space. It remains an enigma to most people. Whereas to the border people it is a space that demystifies the nation. They look at the nation from the prism of the border. What concerns them is not merely the security of the nation but their own insecurities at times because of the nation and at other times notwithstanding the nation.

Let us look at the discourses culled from a few of the leading national newspapers. Their news about the Indo-Bangladesh border takes two prominent but different lines. The newspapers either harp on the quantum of people coming into or infiltrating Indian borders or on the nefarious role played by the BSF, BGB and border criminals. The border people are discussed only incidentally. Even well-intentioned reports are premised on these questions of illegality. One such example is a story that appeared in *India Today* on 14 January 2011. In this story the author describes the situation thus:

Several immigrants...have, over time, become naturalised citizens of India. They have ration cards, educational certificates, voter identity cards and even passports. Touts on both sides of the border have been helping immigrants for decades now. 'Earlier, immigrants had to pay Rs. 1000 to Rs. 2000 per person for each document. We now charge anywhere between Rs. 5000 to Rs. 10000 per document per person says one tout.⁶

If one looks at newspapers that come out from the border areas the coverage is of a different kind. These papers can hardly be called dailies. Typically, they begin abruptly as a response to certain events, run for a certain time and stop abruptly. The editors may or may not support a political party or line but usually the news is about the everyday lives of the people in the area. Even

when they carry news of national/international importance there is usually a local twist. In one such story the writer comments:

Even though the barbed wires have managed to divide the two countries they have not been able to divide the hearts of the people of the two countries. The love that people have for each other cannot be stopped by the fence. The two people not only share a language but also their hearts so why this fence? This question is raised by Afsar Sheikh, from Rasikpur village in Nadia, when he comes to visit his grand-daughter Marufa. Marufa broke down in tears when she first saw her grandfather. She wanted so much to touch him, but the fence did not let that happen.⁷

But not all local news reporters are so kind towards people across the border. From a close reading of these newspapers, I want to reflect on what the questions are that interest different population groups or discourse communities and what makes borders such a select space.

The Frame

It is a consensus idea perhaps, but merits restating here that media is the institution to which people turn to for vital information affecting their lives. Communication researchers often testify to the fact that the media does not only provide information but shapes discourses as well. This suggests that the media has an important bearing on shaping what the major issues of the day might be. The public expects the media to provide unbiased and non-statist information but, in this donor driven world, much of the bourgeois media represents special interest groups and often act as the cheering squad for these groups such as Republic TV for BJP. That necessitates alternatives where a different viewpoint that does not reflect the national power base can be accommodated.

The field of alternative media is still fairly under researched. In the current times speaking of alternative media inevitably means technological diversity and not spatial diversity. One of the most user-friendly definition of alternative media comes from Mitzi Waltz that defines alternative media as media that constitutes an alternative to, or positions itself in opposition to, widely available and consumed mass media products.⁸ Christopher Atton on the other hand has created a typology of alternative media that includes radical content, different aesthetics, different distribution sites and transformed communication process.⁹ Much of this typology of alternate media is based on the practice of communication and the frames that are used.¹⁰ By this standard, the local or border newspapers/pamphlets that form a major source for this paper may be considered as using alternate frames and therefore can be considered as alternate media.

Now we come one of our central question as to how these discourse communities are constructed and how does that shape the space in which they belong. Do individuals come together voluntarily and represent themselves? As we have mentioned before the media helps to shape discourses by championing or repressing certain ideas. Discourses therefore construct identities based on not just an acceptable knowledge corpus but also associated interests. In this sense discourses create discourse communities or certain focal audience groups that might evolve with time around certain interests that are legitimised by these groups. According to experts, “what is represented are not persons as such, but some of the interests, identities, and values that persons have or hold. Representative relationships select for specific aspects of persons, by framing wants, desires, discontents, values and judgments in ways that they become publicly visible, articulated in language and symbols, and thus politically salient.”¹¹ A discourse community is formed of individuals who frame their desires, discontents and values from a shared source. “A discourse community shares assumptions about what objects are appropriate for examination and discussion,

what operating functions are performed on those objects, what constitutes ‘evidence’ and ‘validity,’ and what formal conventions are followed.”¹² The print media products/newspapers from the borders therefore can be said to have created/formed its own discourse community. But can one call the discourse generated by this community a public discourse? That is a point that merits some discussion at this juncture.

Can the discourse generated by the border’s discursive communities be considered a public discourse? Nancy Fraser’s notion of subaltern counter publics defines discourse community created by local media as something similar to but not quite in the border districts of West Bengal. In this regard the idea of counter public is important because it shows that even if some groups are on the edge of public discourse, they form a community based on interlocking ideas. Their ideas may or may not be counter hegemonic, but are usually based on a desire for recognition and respect within and outside that community. Fraser’s argument was built on that of Geoff Eley’s who argued that the realm of Habermasian public sphere came to be dominated by the “civil society,” that was both exclusionary and class conscious. It was the constitutive organizational form of a new force for cultural and political change.¹³ By extension of this logic then the Habermasian public space was dominated by civil society organisations that extolled male values and was meant to be a training ground for men aspiring to govern. This public sphere created a new class of elites that differed both from the old elites which were perhaps more aristocratic in nature and the plebians that were pushed to the periphery both in a spatial and interventionist sense.

In her analysis Fraser posits the concept of a “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”¹⁴ This is how the counter public takes shape and is formed by the plebians in the public discursive space. The local print media that forms the basis of our study can be located within that genre of the counter public. Unlike the public sphere and the media that dominates and symbolizes it the counter public space is home to the counter public media groups that are volatile and can be short lived. These media outlets can withdraw and regroup effortlessly.¹⁵ This makes it possible for them to come together when needed to disseminate their discourse. They are not completely self-contained as the enclave discourses because they are affected by the insecurities perpetrated by the national public discourse. But the counter public discourses transform these insecurities and contextualise these and creates a discourse that is its own.

But Fraser’s discourse on subaltern counter public merely defines the people but does not give us a key to understanding what the logic behind border as a space is. Is it a cohesive unit, an exclusive domain, or a counter public domain? Can theories of subalternity define a border? Here, an understanding of Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities gives us a different perspective. As Anderson had pointed out in his much-famed *Imagined Communities* that print media and growing literacy of the population, “made possible the imagined community floating in homogenous empty time.”¹⁶ Perhaps the border newspapers were creating such a community, albeit that might be seen as counter-public. This communitarian perspective gave the border people a sense of cohesion. Again, invoking Anderson this sense of cohesion, in creating the border as a particular unit was achieved through “multiple significations” and, “cultural artefacts of a particular kind.”¹⁷ Among these might be the presence of the Border Security Forces, the wired fence, the local bazars, the mobile connections where the tower that serves is often in Bangladesh, the local language, religion and newspapers all contributes to creation of what is imagined as a border. A comparative analysis of the public discourse on the border and from the border gives us some understanding as to how the border is constructed.

Public Discourse and the Border

The Bangladesh border is considered as a friendly border and yet the discourse that it has generated in the last two decades is one of belligerence. There are two major strands of this discourse from the Indian national print media. That segment of the print media led by right wing ultra nationalist groups privilege discussions on illegal migration from Bangladesh into India. But the more critical newspapers talk usually about the trigger-happy border regimes that kill at will. Both these media quotes researchers who support their political trajectory. The print media that discusses to a greater extent infiltration from Bangladesh also highlight the issue of insurgency and of border conflicts. One such report points out:

In 1951, the Hindu and Muslim population in West Bengal was 79.40 per cent Hindu and 18.63 per cent Muslim, which changed to 77.10 per cent Hindu and 21.55 per cent Muslim in 1981, and reached 72.90 per cent Hindu and 25.37 per cent Muslim in 2001. From North and South 24 Parganas, traversing Nadia, Birbhum, Murshidabad, Malda till North Dinajpur, a strong Muslim-dominated corridor has emerged and it could well be the kingmaker, playing a crucial role in the imminent change of political guard in the state.¹⁸

This news report shows the angst of the right wing about Muslim “infiltration”. Since the logic behind the border was to keep large sections of the Muslim population to the east of the border and the actual division was much more haphazard or unclear therefore it stands to reason that the Indian side of the border will also have concentrations of Muslim population especially in the Nadia, Murshidabad and Malda sections of the border. Yet the notion that infiltration from Bangladesh created a Muslim corridor in the border region is a popular rallying cry of the right that often features in the public discourses especially in times of elections. Another report that is based on a research by a research organisation follows thus:

The barbed wire fences apart, floodlights will be installed in the border areas to prevent cross-border movement of people at night. The fenced border would be backed by proper patrolling for which the BSF is acquiring advanced gadgets. The troops are also being provided patrol vehicles to check trans-border movements of insurgents.¹⁹

There are a number of newspapers that have reported on the phenomena of the increasing number of illegal migrants from Bangladesh into India especially in 2013 and 2014 perhaps catering to their base before the 2014 national polls. The insecurity over infiltration was skilfully morphed into insecurity over land:

The fresh spell of violence in Bangladesh has led to a steep increase in real estate prices in West Bengal, with people from the neighbouring country buying land in the eastern state of India. A leader of Bengal's ruling party, the Trinamool Congress (TMC), feels this is a “phenomenon the last few generations have never seen”. “Many are buying land to settle here in future. This is happening in areas such as Duttapukur, Habra, Basirhat and Bongaon (in North 24-Parganas district). Bongaon is a small town. Now, it has very few empty plots left,” said Shankar Adda, a TMC leader.²⁰

Around the same time another cluster of news appeared on the fall outs as a result of BSF jawans being forced to use non-lethal weapons. After Felani's death and the adverse reaction against the usage of lethal weapons by BSF there were BSF BGB summits where it was decided that the BSF

will henceforth use non-lethal weapons to guard the border. This decision was not at all popular among the BSF personnel. It was around this time that newspapers published reports on the adverse effects of usage of non-lethal weapons. One such report stated:

After the Indian border guards started using non-lethal weapons crimes along the India-Bangladesh border have increased, an official said here Thursday.

The border guards of India and Bangladesh decided at a conference in Shillong earlier this week to increase the frequency of joint patrolling and tighten the security along the boundary to deal with growing crimes. "After the Border Security Force [BSF] stopped using lethal weapons and started using non-lethal weapons, crimes and crossing of border fencing have increased," BSF's chief spokesman Bhaskar Rawat told IANS. He said: "BSF jawans are currently using rubber bullet, pump action gun and sting grenade. These weapons upon firing make a loud noise and release smoke to disperse people trying to do any illegal activities along the border."²¹

In the same article it was stated that BSF did not go after innocent civilians because the people who were pursued always appeared near the border at odd times. Therefore, the same logic that was used to mark an area as disturbed from colonial times onwards was used here to vilify people who were present near the border. The shelf life of this particular news was long. Even after a few months it was again reported:

India and Bangladesh on Sunday decided to increase joint patrolling by their border guarding forces even as the neighbouring country claimed that instances of border killings have reduced along the frontier they share.

India, during its meeting with top Bangladeshi security officials here, also handed over a list of 71 insurgent camps and those of their cadres which it suspects are based in the neighbouring country.²²

This discussion of increasing joint patrolling was done to underscore the increase in instances of crime due to BSF's use of non-lethal weapons. With that the news of insurgent camps was conflated so that people then could be led to the obvious conclusion that non-lethal weapons resulted in an increase of anti-India insurgent activities.

There was also news about BGB acting in a hostile manner and killing Indian citizens. In one instance it was stated that, "A 40-year-old farmer was today killed and a child was injured in 'unprovoked' firing by suspected Bangladeshi border guarding force personnel in north Bengal, officials said.

The incident took place around 9:30 am in Uttar Dinajpur area of West Bengal, they said, adding one person identified as Mohammed Saeed (40) was killed while a 14-year-old boy SoorAlam was injured. He was admitted to a hospital in Raiganj."²³ These reportages were in direct opposition with the news about BSF strong arm tactics.

Parallel to these news items came stories of increasing violence perpetrated by the BSF. These stories were published in newspapers that were more critical of established power hierarchies and more willing to address questions of human rights such as The Indian Express. The original impetus to such news was given by a report from a Bangladeshi human rights organisation Odhikar. This report stated:

The porous 2,000 kilometre border between the Indian state of West Bengal and Bangladesh is densely populated by farmers and landless peasants. Poor irrigation and continuous river erosion has destroyed farms and livelihoods and entrenched poverty. As a result, smuggling of cattle, narcotics, and human trafficking is on the rise.

Both Bangladesh and India have deployed border guards to prevent these activities. Abuses by the BSF and the Bangladeshi border force, the Bangladesh Rifles, are common. However, the BSF is more regularly responsible for serious violations of international law, including torture and the indiscriminate use of lethal force.²⁴

Once the report got published it immediately attracted the attention of a vast community of human rights activists and media from all over the world. Many national media reacted to this report. A Hindu correspondent Annanya Dutta asked the Additional Director General B.D. Sharma for his reaction to the term “trigger happy.” Sharma, refuting claims that the BSF was a “trigger-happy force,” said: “We do our work in a professional manner and will continue to do so.”²⁵ Meenakshi Ganguly, the Director of South Division HRW, countered in another newspaper that even if people smuggle cattle, “or any other goods, the offence does not amount to killing. There should be punishment commensurate to the crime and the people should be brought to the magistrate. The standing procedure of BSF - shoot-to-kill - should be changed.”²⁶ In another reportage it was stated that: “Border forces on either side are mandated to address illegal activities, especially narcotics smuggling, human trafficking, and transporting fake currency and explosives. But instead of arresting suspects and handing them over to the police for trial, BSF soldiers are often accused of taking the law into their own hands.”²⁷

The international media also proved to be extremely critical of these policies. Journalists such as Brad Adams did a number of stories on this issue. Some of his writings were extremely critical of BSF action. In one such story he writes:

This might seem unexceptional in a world increasingly hostile to migration. But to police the border, India's Border Security Force (BSF), has carried out a shoot-to-kill policy – even on unarmed local villagers. The toll has been huge. Over the past 10 years Indian security forces have killed almost 1,000 people, mostly Bangladeshis, turning the border area into a South Asian killing-fields. No one has been prosecuted for any of these killings, in spite of evidence in many cases that makes it clear the killings were in cold blood against unarmed and defenceless local residents.²⁸

Such reportage kept appearing in the writings of journalists, researchers and human rights or pro-human rights groups:

This dissonance between the Indian government's actions in the domestic sphere and its policy on the Indo-Bangladesh border, flies in the face of the democratic, free world image that India strives to attain. The sad truth is that the actions of the BSF on the border are largely accepted by Indians as necessary evils, all for the benefit of Indian supremacy in South Asia. The gunning down of an innocent Bangladeshi citizen by the police in New Delhi would be treated with the utmost urgency, and yet the same on the border is seen as the Indian Government protecting the motherland. This double standard stems from the conventional definition of a superpower, one that aggressively enforces supremacy, to the extent of being ruthless.²⁹

In a more recent feature similar allegations against the trigger happiness of BSF has resurfaced. In this account it was underscored that when BSF officials are confronted with abuse of human rights their response range, “from, ‘we shoot in self-defence’ or ‘we never shoot to kill’ to ‘we shoot illegal border crossers’”. The United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms urge officials to apply non-violent means before resorting to the use of force and firearms, and exercise restraint and ‘act in proportion to the seriousness of the offense’.”³⁰

These critical reportings found resonance in the international press as well as particularly when a 16-year Bangladeshi student was killed by the BSF in April 2020. The al Jazeera reported:

Shimon Roy, 16, was shot on April 19 in the northern border district of Thakurgaon, according to local media reports. Terming the border killing as “very unfortunate” and “unacceptable”, Lieutenant Colonel Fayezur Rahman, director operations of the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), told Anadolu Agency, “Our field-level officers and high-level officials at the headquarters have sent several protest letters against those killings. “Unfortunately, there have been killings at the border, and we cannot assure that it will not repeat in the future,” he added.³¹

The border killings have been a popular theme over the years with what might be termed as the “critical” media. The theme also finds resonance among the international media and human rights activists and researchers. As have been portrayed it is a recurrent theme. A study shows that every year there are stories, reporting and features on this theme in national and international news media, more so in the international media than in the national media for obvious reasons.

As has been stated above the international and national media are divided into two major camps: one group enthusiastically covering stories of illegal migrants arriving in droves and the other reporting on horrific crimes perpetrated on those droves when they peacefully try to enter India to fulfil a demand for cheap labour. These coverages are interspersed with stories of smuggling of cows and narcotics. The picture that emerges is that of a border where violence is an everyday occurrence. The coverage from both sides is that of the sensational events. In much of the national and international public discourse on the border makes this a liminal space. It is not so much as the border that is in focus but the state that contains this border.

The Counter Public Discourse

Amazingly the border newspapers were fairly silent about the Felani case. That is what indicated that there might be a difference in the issues that are of importance to the coverage from the borders. In the case of national and international print media it was a gaze on the border from the outside but in this counter public gaze it is from inside the border. Unlike the newspapers that shape the public discourse the counter public discourse is shaped by the media that is not supported by any big institutions. Therefore, loyalties are not always based on big money but rather based on personalities. Among the newspapers consulted are Rupantarar Pathe from Malda; Writer’s Guild from Murshidabad, Krishi Sahitya, Nadiar Sangbad, Rashmi Bangla, and Sangad Pradip from Nadia. I have consulted these newspapers consistently from 2013 until 2016. Further to that I have consulted certain border news media sporadically and over any certainly specific issue. From 2017 I have consulted Sarangsha from Basirhat over the question of communal tensions and citizenship rights, Sera Khabar from Nadia over displacement of tribal people and Sochchar from Burdwan over the bomb blast in Burdwan. In all of these news outlets the border is a much more alive region than it is in the national news media. The focus is on the lives in the border. The border is the backdrop. When critiques of state and governance are made it is through people and institutions that they are familiar with such as the local BDO or the local officer in charge. There is a certain intimacy in this counter public discourse. The audience seem to know each other well and also know each other’s follies. These newspapers appear sporadically, run for a few months or a few years and then disappear. The newspapers give precedence to news that is important to the area from where these are published.

One of the first issues that have generated a lot of interest among the local press from the border area is over the situation of indigenous people living in the border area. In the national newspapers the border communities are usually homogenised. When the border population is discussed then only two communities are privileged: the Hindu and the Muslim community. There is little understanding that there is a sizeable tribal community that is often missed. The tribal people in the border area face a lot of problems of which forceful occupation of their land is an important occurrence. One such incident happened in the Ghughuragachi, a border village in the district of Nadia on 23 November 2014. In Ghughuragachi the government owned among other things a 22 bigha plot of land that was cultivated by 54 tribal and dalit families. Each family cultivated 7-8 kathas for years and lived on the income generated from that land. On the fateful day a local syndicate leader Nanda Ghosh alias Lanka Ghosh tried to occupy the land with 3 tractors, friendly police and his goons. The tribal women who were at that time supervising the farming mounted a protest were led by a widow named Aparna Bag. Lanka Ghosh's men in trying to break this opposition killed Aparna. This created a huge stir and the goons disappeared. This news was diligently covered by a number of newspapers in the border areas though completely ignored by the national press.

One of the more known newspapers of Majdiya in Nadia, *Krishi Sahitya* brought out a full front-page reportage of the event and expose of Nanda Ghosh. It gave a long history of the land that passed from one beneficiary to the other. Ultimately the state grabbed it and gave it to the poor adivasis to cultivate it. It was reported that, "On the day of the event, at 10 in the morning, members of the Lanka syndicate came with tractors. There were harvest ready crops which they destroyed by running tractors on the land. The syndicate members were supported by friendly police and some members of the ruling party. They waged a war against the simple folks that put up a resistance. Then after killing a few they ran away."³² This news was captured by other print media of the district. *Sera Khabar*, whose editor was Kusum Kanti Biswas, a caste Hindu, reported, "When the ruling CPIM Party leaders could have handed over this land to the poor adivasis they did not. Now by naming Aparna Bag a martyr they are trying to publicize this struggle over land."³³ Much of this news remarked obliquely on inter party conflict between CPIM with BJP against TMC. These newspapers said that now CPIM and BJP was pointing to TMC goons for having supported Lanka. But when CPIM had the ability to something for the adivasis they did nothing.

In some newspapers the role of the women in this clash was highlighted with due diligence. It was repeatedly mentioned that women's protest forced the goons to leave. "When women protested the thugs destroyed the crops by running tractors over them. This was reported by Shampa Haldar, a resident of Ghughuragachi village. Haldar also added that on hearing about this attack by the assailants other women also came from the village and joined the protestors. Suddenly Aparna Bag (38) collapsed and fell to the ground. As a bullet hit her on the chest she died instantly."³⁴ The same newspaper also carried human interest stories about how Aparna's son Dipankar could not give his school leaving examination due to his mother's killing. In that article the reporter mentioned how Aparna was the bread winner of the family. By tilling land and making bidis she not only paid for essentials such as food but also made sure that her three children went to school and got a decent education.³⁵

As I have mentioned earlier a common feature of these newspapers is an intimate knowledge of the people about whom they report. In these stories there is no mention of Aparna's husband. There seem to be no need. Aparna is not painted as this super woman but rather a simple village woman who tried to eke out a dignified living for her family. Even though Ghughuragachi borders Bangladesh there is no mention of infiltrators but just in passing. One report merely said that, "sometimes as per convenience the syndicates sell the land to rich Hindu's displaced from

Bangladesh or to rich people from Dubai.”³⁶In this case the villain is not the “infiltrators” who figure so prominently in the national media but local police, political leaders and nefarious characters from the locality.

It is not as if border newspapers do not cover cross border movements but these news are but one of many other news. In one such news it was reported that Bangladeshi citizens are entering India fairly easily. The author reports: “In my house a middle aged didi works as domestic help. She often says that back home she had plenty of paddy, different trees, two ponds etc. But the Shahabagh movement brought home the fact that they could not safely and securely live in Bangladesh any longer. The Jamat and the miya’s will not let them do so. They took a mosquito net, two pillows and some clothes and came to India. They left behind didi’s married daughter, son-in-law and grandson. They were inspired by their relative who came to Murshidabad, settled there and lived happily.”³⁷The didi here is obviously a Hindu undocumented migrant from Bangladesh. The reporter here is not critical of the person who has entered but rather of the process by which these movements are conducted. The real concern of the journalist is in his own words, “the way these migrations through both water and land routes are taking place between the two countries, how can one say that militants are also easily entering in these countries.”³⁸ The journalist is more concerned about the security forces and others who are aiding and abetting such movements.

There are a number of news on trafficking in persons. Not all of them is on women. There are several news on trafficking in children. In one such news it was stated:

Eight children trafficked from Malda was rescued by police from Balia thana in UP. 1st June these children were returned to their families by the district child welfare committee. This committee’s Chair, Chaitali Sarkar (Ghosh) informed that a few months back these children were lost from Betaha village near Harish Chandrapur thana. Their families contacted local police and the child helpline number. After a long wait on 26 May it was informed that the children for found and rescued.”³⁹

This news is significant because it is always presumed that trafficking is largely done to acquire women to fill brothels but that there is a huge market for trafficking in children for labour is often overlooked. If one looks at border newspapers one realises the spectrum of people made vulnerable by traffickers.

Illegal trade does find space in the local newspapers. Such news is regularly addressed in right wing newspapers such as Writer’s Guild. In typical news it is reported that, “are the police informed that in the Raninagar thana area villages such as Katlamari, Mohongunje, Kargiler Math, is a long stretch of land border? In this border every day 500 to 700 cows are collected. Every night 250 to 300 men gather here and through Kargil Ghat and Ghosh’ Ghat they smuggle cows to Bangladesh. Next to that through Raninagar -2 and Katlamari -2 girls are being trafficked to Bangladesh. A few days back 10-15 girls were smuggled to Bangladesh. Perhaps the police are completely unaware of this.”⁴⁰ In this case also more than the smugglers the reporter was critical of local administration who according to their view aided and abetted the smugglers. The same news paper consistently carried stories on smuggling. In another report a few years later the same newspaper stated:

...in Murshidabad smuggling of cows to Bangladeshis a common place occurrence. From 2009 to 2011 however, it increased manifold. The road used to become dark with the traffic of cows. All the lorries that came were also filled with cows. Townships, field, riverbanks wherever one looked one only saw cows. The administration ignored it and the police were participants in this. Crores of rupees exchanged hands because of this illegal trade. Both the police and the press got shares of this

ill begotten cash. The only exception was our four-page newspaper...because of recent changes made in the police department Murshidabad it is no longer the centre of illegal cow trade. But that has not stopped the smugglers, only the district has changed. Now it is through Nadia and North 24 Parganas that the smugglers operate.⁴¹

The same newspaper also consistently wrote about infiltration from Bangladesh. In one such report the newspaper stated, “if one looks at the people of Bengal closely one will find out how many people have infiltrated the state during the left regime. North 24 parganas is completely swamped under them. From Duttapukur to Bongaon, Barasat to Basirhat, Ranaghat to Bongaon, 8 out of 10 people are infiltrators. The left has given them citizenship so that they can join the ranks of their supporters. On the other side the situation of Murshidabad, Malda, the two Dinajpur’s and Alipurduar is also similar. As a result land prices are increasing tremendously. There are new configurations based on religion and ethnicity”⁴²Writers Guild is perhaps the most right wing of the newspapers consulted. The editor Shanta Chowdhury is a caste Hindu living in a Muslim majority state. This perhaps explains her angst to a large extent. In most of these papers the coverage is done by the editor and one or two other staff. In much of the coverage in this newspaper Chowdhury’s mark is unmistakable. But even when speaking of infiltration, the paper was actually speaking against the establishment that made such movements possible. Most of the other newspapers did not take such an extreme stand. For example, another newspaper covered a similar story and said that as a result of migration, “Bengal is now the safe haven of extremist organisations.”⁴³ But the reporter clearly attributed this comment to Dilip Ghosh, the leader of BJP in West Bengal. Migration is a recurrent theme but it is no more important than many other themes that we find in the counter public discourse on border. Also often news on Bangladeshi migrants is covered in a matter of fact way. For example there are news that just says, “three Bangladeshi entrants were presented before a magistrate of Barasat court. The police found them aimlessly loitering on Monday night near Machlandapur. There was a woman and a child in this group.”⁴⁴As for smuggling of cows and Phensydyl or any other cough syrup, those news are covered but perhaps border newspapers get equally passionate over news that talks about how Hilsa fish is going away to Bangladesh. “In the height of Hilsa season Bengali fishermen are shocked because they cannot find any Hilsa. In South 24 Parganas or East Medinipur markets there are no Hilsa but the demand is huge. A group of researchers say that it is due to heavy siltation near Farakkaas a result of which all of our Hilsa fish is being diverted to Bangladesh.”⁴⁵

If there are news on communal tensions in the border there are also news of communal harmony. There are a number of news on how the districts are trying to maintain communal harmony. Often get togethers were organised where people from all denominations participated. There was a news on illegal construction of a minority boys hostel in Nadia that was stopped by Hindus and Muslims.⁴⁶There are editorials written on the question of communal harmony in different border publications. In one such editorial it is written that, “when there is an effort to destabilise known relationships both parties in that relationship becomes subverted. But there are some petty people who thrive on such disturbance. A little fire can burn an edifice but it takes many people to stem that fire. Communal harmony can be destroyed by the efforts of just a few people. But it takes the activism of many to preserve solidarities between communities. When communal tension increases it has to be recognised that no patch up job can save the situation. It is essential to destroy the origin of the evil from its base.”⁴⁷

There are many more news focussing on the malpractices of the police, politicians and the BSF. There are multiple news items on illegal liquor trade where police are silent. One report states,

“Near Birnagar rail station there are a number of places where illicit liquor trade continues. As a result of this trade parents are scared to send their children to school...In poor families this is creating havoc. When the bread winner wastes his hard earned money on liquor then they return to their family empty handed. As a result, their families are facing acute food shortage. According to a few wisemen this business is running without any obstacles because they are paying substantial amount to the police and excise department.⁴⁸In another news it was stated that, “Kaliachawk is becoming the centre of poppy cultivation...The capital is coming from international markets. When a tradesman dealing with the sale of poppies was questioned why the police are not catching the producers of poppy, the trader replied that the policy, officers of exchequer, everyone knows about it. This business is done openly.”⁴⁹Then there are multiple news on police demanding cash or in indigenous terms *tola* from the people. In one such report it was stated, “Murshidabad is an interesting place. There is nothing that can happen here. If it is about police, then there is no comparison. In this district the police super is involved in everything starting from bribery, smuggling...malpractice and misuse of power.”⁵⁰ In another report it was stated, “in the process of asking for money from a lorry driver and beating up the same driver Police Super Arnab Ghosh suspended (closed) an ASI. The incident took place in Badkulla Bazar in Taherpur thana on 7th of this month. This suspended officer is Prabir Halder.”⁵¹

Sometimes the focus is on the corruption in the ranks of BSF. In one such news it was stated that in the Jalangi area the BSF was not allowing Indian fishermen to fish at night. As a result Bangladeshi fishermen were coming and poaching on Indian waters.⁵² It has to be remembered the Bengal-Bangladesh border has large stretches of water bodies. So fishing is an important occupation. After this news came out within a few days the district magistrate of Murshidabad ordered the SDO of Jalangi to investigate the matter.⁵³Then there are news where the entire administration is considered as complicit such as regarding theft of soil from the river banks of border rivers to feed the demand of brick kilns that have mushroomed near the border.⁵⁴This series of news also points out to the tension between the bureaucracy, police and paramilitary in the border areas which is hardly ever reflected in national print media.

As we had pointed out before the newspapers produced from the border areas might be concerned with infiltration, or communalism but their focus is largely different. The news produced from this area shows that their security concerns or protection concerns are not so much about extremism or fundamentalism but about the corruption of their own protection agencies and institutions that are there to serve. Whether it is the far right Writer’s Guild or the more centrist Rupantarar Pathe, the newspapers also show concern about their own institutions. One of the reasons is that most of these newspapers know the personalities involved intimately. They know how deep the corruption runs who are involved in it. Some are concerned about militancy but far more people are concerned about illegal activities such as production of false passports and voter ID’s. For example, they know that nefarious Mintu is producing false documents and nobody dares to catch him because he has friends in high places.⁵⁵ This is a different place from the border when seen through a gaze from the capital city. These newspaper reports reflect the multiple layers that makes the border and the personalities who form the border.

Women in the Border

The counter public discourse is much more nuanced about the border personalities than the public discourse. These newspapers often carry news about women in borders, women and the border and women who form the borders. One of the most common newsworthy issues seems to be the

trafficking of women. This is something that is consistently covered by all border newspapers. Such news usually proceeds in the following way:

There is a category of lusty traffickers whose job is to traffic poor hapless women. They take advantage of teenage girls from poor families and entice them by promising good jobs. But ultimately they force them to sell their bodies. This once again portrays the tragedy of poor families when their girls like Shefali, China, Anura, Jyotsna put one step forward into a life of lust and indulgence. To begin with they may find it distasteful but at the end they have to succumb to it. They trafficked from Kolkata to Bihar to Mumbai...Even though sometimes the police is able to rescue some of these girls but the traffickers remain at large.”⁵⁶

Such coverage marks the border as both the source and the transit point of women traffickers. But most importantly the article reflects on the intimate nature of such trafficking where women are trafficked by family members. These reporting allude to the fact that even when women are rescued, they return to the “forbidden” places because they find it preferable to a life of poverty. These news items also portray that trafficking of people does not always eternally victimise the trafficked. Often the trafficked might consent to be trafficked. The reason for that can be found in another report on the inauguration of a special office of minority board in Murshidabad. In this case the reporter contends that even though this commission is sitting over a lot of funds they should realise that these funds are not just for new Madrasas and NGOs. “The Commission should remember that in this district there is a 14 year old Tuntuni Bibi who was victimised by the village council for not being able to pay Rs. 15. In this district there is a Saima Bibi who is victimised by a lawyer who could not save her from the talaq and as a result she had to lose her husband, household and a safe haven. They should get the support of the Commission to become self-sufficient.”⁵⁷

The institutional targeting of women in general and the minority women in particular by the court system and the Panchayats find space in these newspapers. There are reports on how men, mostly men who work as migrant labour in other states after a few years of marriage and birth of one or two children try to divorce their wives. There are a few unscrupulous lawyers who aid these men for money. The impoverished women have to access the courts if they want maintenance for themselves and their children. The courts also disappoint them as they do not deliver speedy justice but keep extending their cases. The only thing these women get are new dates and not justice. By the time they might get their maintenance their former husbands are already happily married again.⁵⁸ In most court systems women find it difficult to navigate and more so in the border areas as this is a region of endemic poverty. Also, as the article points out even in the courts Muslim women find it more difficult because the talaq can only be challenged by article 498. Hence, these women lack equitable legal options. Thousands of men from the border travel to other parts of India and abroad for jobs. So potentially this problem pushes many women further into poverty.

One of the most problematic news that can be gleaned from the border areas is how Adivasi women are made vulnerable. News from this area testify to the fact that these women do not accept their victim nomenclature and fight hard for their survival. Often the local newspapers carry stories about their victory over the society and system that testify to their strength. One such news that has been covered by newspapers is on Sharmila Murmu. Sharmila is an Adivasi woman of 30 years. She passed the Madhyamik (School leaving exam) examinations and works as an Asha worker. Her husband, Jishu Hasda, had a government job in Kolkata and so had to be out of his home for practically the entire day. They were Christians and had three daughters of whom one was a thalassemia patient. In early 2016 Sharmila’s husband told the authorities that she was often gibberish and restless. The village people told him that she is becoming a *daini* (witch) and needed to be

chained. He chained her but felt remorse and so instead of going to the tribal guru he went to the church. They informed the state administration who contacted the Vigyan Manch. The members of the Vigyan manch staged an intervention on 26 April and counselled both Sharmila and her husband. When Sharmila received treatment, it was found out that she was suffering from severe dehydration and malnutrition.⁵⁹

This was not a single incident where Adivasi women were being labelled as witch and tortured. It was reported that in 1993 from the same village six people were marked as witches, tortured and killed at the instigation of elders in the village.⁶⁰It is not just Sharmila but there are other women also who are labelled as witches and tortured. Around the same time another 50 year old woman Mirta Baske was branded as a witch and the villagers tried to kill her. Her husband and son were migrant labour and she used to look after their land. Her brother-in-law was suffering from ill health and poverty. He and other villagers said it was because of Mirta's evil eye. On the evening of 19 February 2016 people tried to kill Mitra. But miraculously it was reported that she escaped the assault.⁶¹In these remote areas where there is land scarcity these Adivasi women who own some land are named daini and attacked. Violence against them remains subsumed within the violence that is commonplace in this border area. But women often rise above such victimisation and assault. Sharmila is a case in point. It was reported that Sharmila ultimately became the face of the fight against labelling of Adivasi women as witch.⁶²

The border also brings forth some happy news. The news of 17-year-old Selina Bibi is one such news. She was a resident of Kumilla in Bangladesh. She had come to her relative's place in the border. She was mentally unstable. Apparently, she had come to have a bath in the border river and then she was lost. The security forces from the Indian side found her in the border area on 13 October 2014. Instead of police custody they sent her to a women's home where after one and a half years of treatment she could recall her address and names of her parents and husband. The BSF and the warden of the Women's home with the help of Chaitali Sarkar handed her over to the Bangladesh authorities. Sadly, her family did not come to the border to receive her, but she was successfully repatriated. There were questions about how Selina found herself in Malda. There were speculations that she could have been trafficked. At least after arriving in the home she found safety and humane behaviour.⁶³The story of Selina bibi is evocative of stories of women during partition. Once they were lost from their families they were always lost to their families. It was surprising that even after almost 69 years of partition the situation of women remains same.

It is apparent that the newspapers from the borders made a concerted effort to gather stories, news and reports on women. In that way at least they were more gender sensitive. In most of the newspapers there were reporting on women's every day lives, their struggles and their achievements. Not all reports were on women's victimhood. These newspapers clarified that these women were not a homogenous lot and were divided by religion, ethnicity, caste and class. There is however a sense of instability and violence that remains a constant. This increases the level of violence faced by these women. What makes it even more problematic is that they might be victimised by the very people who are meant to protect them. Even institutions such as the court system do not assist them but place obstacles. But they survive and sometimes they overcome all obstacles placed before them as Aparna Bag and Sharmila Murnu.

Burdwan to Basirhat

At 12 noon on 2 October, Gandhi Jayanti day, an explosion was heard from the first floor of a two storied building that was owned by a political leader in Khagragarh in Burdwan. The leader was

Nurul Hasan Chowdhury from the TMC and he had rented part of this house to one Shakil Ahmed from Karimpur. After the blast happened the neighbours informed the police and other authorities. When the police came to investigate there were two women who stopped from entering in gun point and tried burning all the books and papers that were there in the apartment. The two women were arrested, and the police discovered over 50 explosives, SIM cards, and passports and other false IDs. They also found literature on Islamic fundamentalism and other propaganda material produced by militant groups. The news first exploded in the vernacular media. One of them reported, “among the allegedly guilty there were two young women Amina Bibi and Rajira Bibi alias Rumi who were arrested by the police. After questioning them the police ascertained that Amina bibi and Rajirabibi were respectively from Murshidabad and Nadia. From school lives they had learnt how to make bombs.”⁶⁴ There were speculations that Shakil Ahmed and his cronies were militants from Bangladesh. One initial report stated:

The two militants killed in the October 2 Burdwan explosion and their acquaintances are said to be associated with the Bangladesh-based terror group Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). One of the militants killed, Shakeel Ahmed, hailed from Bangladesh.

Intelligence sources said many militants often come to Burdwan — a location of great strategic importance given its proximity to both Bangladesh as well as the North-east — to lay low and prepare for assignments. More worryingly, the arrests brought back top JMB operative Maulana Saidur’s confession from last year that the group had established a network in three districts of West Bengal.

Security officials stress that the state government needs to urgently implement a proper review mechanism along the border and inspect residents in the area carefully before equipping them with photo identity cards.

“The state government must develop a joint mechanism to review and interrogate people in a proper way before giving them identity cards. We have found that a number of Bangladeshi immigrants have Indian voter ID cards, which makes it difficult for the Indian security agencies to filter them out,” a senior BSF official posted at the South Bengal Frontier said.⁶⁵

The Enforcement Directorate that was working on the case reported that they, “will be working closely with the NIA, though the focus of its probe would be tracking the money trail and funding of the ‘bomb industry’ in the region. ‘The bombs in the 2009 case were not the same as in the recent blast. However, in both, country made bombs were used. In Kharagarh, these bombs were sophisticated with several types of chemicals which cannot be procured in the open market. We have to identify the supply chain for these raw materials and the finances,’ said an official.”⁶⁶

The case remains active and a special NIA court has sentenced on 9 September 2020 four terrorists of the banned Jamat-ul-Mujaheedin of Bangladesh (JMB) terror group to seven years imprisonment and imposed a fine of Rs.5,000 each for their involvement in the Burdwan blast case of 2014. From the time that this case happened Indian national media was concerned only with the cross-border nature of its crime and vilifying Bangladesh. They followed the familiar trope that this was something that originated from across the border. It also served the interest of the new right-wing nationalist government that had come to power in India. The media speculated endlessly how the suspected militants were entering West Bengal thereby admonishing the state government for its pro minority stand.

For the local media however, the concern was different. The query that had real urgency was who allowed the culprits to have Indian passports. It was reported that, “recently in the

Burdwan blast the three people involved were given permission to get their passports by the Murshidabad police. The NIA got this information in the process of investigation. How could these people be given the permission to have passports questioned the investigating team of NIA.”⁶⁷ Another newspaper published an investigative report on how after the blast the BSF continues to aid smuggling in cows. Only now they are doing it in the darkness of night.⁶⁸ Here then once again we see that for the border newspapers the concern was with their own protection agencies. Their anxiety was related to the people that they were closely in touch. If any blame was to be apportioned, it was the Murshidabad police department that needed to be blamed. It was the BSF that was reneging its duties. These were the institutions that needed correctives. They were not concerned with the battle between BJP and TMC. They were concerned with institutions that had direct power over them. To most of these counter public discourse producers the audience was much more intimate than that of the national media.

As for the trouble in Basirhat that was also a major event that happened within our time frame. On July 2, 2017, two Hindu boys, friends, in the Basirhat town of West Bengal in Baduria in the North 24 Parganas district that is around 12 kms from the Bangladesh border, had a falling out that would arguably lead to ramifications of epic proportions. One of the two had earlier made a Facebook profile with the help of the other, who therefore knew his password. When the falling out happened, the latter changed the password of the former, forcing the former to make a different account, whereupon the latter then posted an objectionable morphed photo targeted at inflaming passions (of the Muslim community) on Facebook from the first account and tagged the second account. *Prima facie*, the blame wholly fell on the first friend.⁶⁹

The morphed photograph was a lit match to an already existing sleeping melting pot of communitarian tensions existing subliminally in the Basirhat region. The targeted inflaming of passions absolutely worked. Communal clashes broke out in large chunks in the North 24 Parganas district. As tensions ran amok in the sub-region of Baduria, shops were shut down as a violent mob started stalking the streets attacking people of the opposite religious community, putting up road barricades and setting fire to shops and vehicles. Slowly, the creeping fingers of the horror moved to adjacent areas like Keosha market, Banshtala, Ramchandrapur, and Tentulia.

The police acted extremely rapidly. The boy from whose profile the picture had been issued, was imprisoned. However, there was a significant issue with due process in judicial procedure in the case; even though the boy was a minor and just in class XI, the police entered the age of the boy in the official records as ‘18- plus’, which meant the child could not be produced just before a magistrate or given bail. Meanwhile, the rampaging mobs acted just as promptly as the police. They torched the boy’s home.⁷⁰ Overall, at the larger level too, the horror continued. According to a senior Border Security Force officer, the state government of West Bengal had to deploy 400 troops of the force’s Southern Bengal frontier in Swarupnagar, Baduria, Deganga areas and ultimately the whole of Basirhat major in order to get them to try to assist the state police in controlling the utter chaos.⁷¹ Try they might have, but the violence did not end. On the contrary it got more and more widespread, bigger, and tougher to contain or manage. It temporarily suspended internet services in the four police station areas of Basirhat, Baduria, Swarupnagar and Deganga, in a bid to check the flow of rumours on social media/networking sites. A sixty-five-year-old man died of stab wounds in the exchange of hostilities that were happening. Mobs attacked a dargah and vandalized shops and houses belonging to Muslims in retaliatory attacks. A huge team of policemen struggled for hours trying to disperse this crowd with caning and firing further tear gas shells.

The area continued to be under prohibitory orders and internet services remained suspended. The Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, meanwhile made an appeal to all

political parties in the state to refrain from visiting the riot affected zone until peace had been restored, asking them to cooperate with the government.⁷² The BJP accused Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and the ruling TMC of inciting communal passions for electoral benefit. Leaders from the BJP seemed to blame Chamberlain-ian appeasement policies by the TMC for the situation, suggesting that there were instructions for the police not to act for a long period since Muslims were a minority community. Mamata Banerjee did admit that the state government wasted a fair amount of time trying to convince the rioters to back off. She claimed in her defence however that she was concerned about the many that might die once the police opened fire. It was several days before Banerjee ordered the crackdown that finally brought a peace again in the region. The West Bengal government said the mayhem was a retaliatory measure spearheaded by unscrupulous business interests following the ruling government's previous crackdown on the lucrative cattle smuggling racket generating anywhere between Rs 40 and 50 crore a day along the 100 km border in the North 24 Parganas district.⁷³ It is a fact that the scale of the violence seen to have been unleashed in this flare up left even many of the Muslim leaders of the area shocked and surprised. These local leaders spent a great deal of time trying to convince the marauding crowds from their own community to retreat, but failed signally and totally to persuade them to do so. They separately confirmed the suggestion that some external force seemed to have organised a lot of young and illiterate Muslim youths in order to launch attacks on Hindu households.⁷⁴

It is true that the state government had ordered a crackdown on traffickers and cow smugglers. Local newspapers reflect on this. Even before the belligerents took to arms the local media reported on the actions taken against cow smuggling. A few days before the communal tensions began it was reported in the local media that the entire Basirhat town was to be secured by CCTV camera. The CM Mamata Banerjee had announced on 30 May, while on a visit to Basirhat that nefarious activities of the cow traffickers must be forcefully dealt with. Therefore, the police and local administration promised to leave nothing to chance.⁷⁵ Starting from 5 July onwards the local people including the local intellectuals and artists marched for peace. Even local politicians such as Mrinal Chakraborty, the leader of the Left Front took part in these marches.⁷⁶ In an editorial within a week of the Hindu-Muslim clashes, a local newspaper reported that, "Basirhat proves that people from outside can create trouble only when there are seeds of discontent within us. Otherwise, how can communal tensions spread so quickly and easily and how come to can calm down so quickly? What is important is that the trouble showed that thousands of people has taken to the streets for peace."⁷⁷

After the clashes died down the District Magistrate Antara Acharya announced that the situation in Basirhat will be normalised soon. From 17 July Basirhat will have normal internet facilities. The police made the announcement that they will keep a watch on social media. The police distributed leaflets in every household in Basirhat requesting the residents not to listen to rumours and act hastily. There was also a critique of Khariji Madras as (Madras as that did not have government recognition). The newspapers reported that among 6 thousand madras as in the region over 90 percent were Khariji madras as over which the government had no control. They might be a source for misinformation.⁷⁸ In the case of Basirhat too the local newspapers addressed local audiences and local issues of protection. They were not concerned with the meta narratives of philosophies of Indian nationhood. They were far more interested in mitigating the crisis through local initiatives.

Conclusion

A reading of the public and what can be loosely termed as the counter public discourse presented by the print media shows that both these media cater to what can be termed as their base. The national and international media are both responsive to bigger stories. They are also more interested to present and respond to the sensational. The national newspapers relate more to the rhetoric of the major political parties. The border to them might be polarised but within the two poles it is homogenised. There is a fairly unproblematic discourse on Muslim and Hindu thoughts about the border. Militancy is hardly ever considered as home grown and usually it is a product of the neighbouring countries. Women in and of the borderlands hardly ever have a presence in the national print media's borderland narratives. In that context the national media is largely insensitive to plurality. Their brush strokes are always thicker, catering to their power base. From reading the narratives presented by the national media on the borderlands the gaze is not only from outside but also from afar. Such a gaze makes the border reductive. The ambiguities, anomalies and contradictions disappear. The border loses its liminality and therefore its multiple shades.

The local print media from the border is much more intimate in tonality than the national media. The reporters seem to know its small audience and therefore the pulse of the region that it caters to. Sometimes the small picture that the national media misses can be found if one reads the local papers from the border. These papers might be irregular in production and not genealogical, but it has an intimate knowledge of the people that it reports on. This familiarity with their subjects sometimes makes them almost prophetic. As a case in point the border papers started reporting on ultra nationalist interest on the border around the time when this narrative began. A newspaper from Nadia reported prior to the completion of the 2014 elections about how future PM Modi and his party was trying to whip up awareness about the border. They commented that, "Bengali culture is not commensurate to Modi's communal cry of 'push out the Bangladeshi's' and the future will tell us how much harm this will cause. What can be said is that a slogan of this kind has not been uttered by any BJP leader till date. Or even if they uttered such slogans, they did not affect the Bengali emotions. But this time Modi succeeded."⁷⁹

All through 2014 the reporters wrote about the growth in the number of enthusiasts of BJP. Many newspapers reported on how CPIM supporters are joining BJP en masse.⁸⁰ "Even disgruntled members of Trinamool are joining BJP. Disagreements over who will guest posts in TMC is at its highest. Whoever gets a post acts as if they have become great and their family also acts similarly. The others keep looking at them askance."⁸¹ Progressively there were news that if any ambitiously TMC members were not given a suitable post they were joining BJP. In the Bongaon municipal elections in 2015 the TMC SC ST cell representative joined BJP. He said he was influenced by BJP's principles, but people contended that his ambition to become the mayor influenced him.⁸² These reportages were fairly prophetic. The border newspapers were correct in their deductions that Narendra Modi's utterances were given credence by Hindu's in the border areas. There was a communal churning going on that found in Modi a symbol for their angst. They came to believe that in Bengal Muslim's were being appeased by any party that was calling itself secular. In 2014 that was not something that people from the urban centres thought was possible. This showed an intimate knowledge of the people that local newspapers possessed.

A comparative study of the media portrays a slow evolution of communal thinking in the border area that culminated in the Basirhat incident. The Burdwan incident first made people aware that there are deep rooted mistrust among communities that any parties could utilise. The far right found it something that they could manipulate. Much later people in the centre realised how the

border was being communalised. Basirhat exposed that movement. But it also made people realise that there is hope. Because the communal strife could be reigned in. This was possible because people living in the area had an intimate knowledge of each other. The border newspapers is a reflection of that knowledge. So the divisions that national newspapers were foregrounding did not matter to the people living in the borders as they were concerned about their protection that could be delivered by their protection agencies. So they were rather acting as the watch dog for those agencies. The movement across the border was something that did not perturb them until their security was threatened.

Notes

¹ This paper is an homage to my dear friend Ramen Moitro who left us suddenly much to our grief. I am also grateful to Ekalavya Chaudhuri, Payel Dutta and Ayanagshu Moitro for all their help. All translations from Bengali to English are done by me.

² "Teenage girl, Felani, killed by the BSF firing at Anantapur border under Kurigram district," A Fact Finding Report by Odhikar, <http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Felani-killed-BSF-Fact-finding-report-2011-eng.pdf>, accessed on 23 May 2013.

³ Madhuparna Das, "The girl who died strung on the Bangla border fence may finally get justice," The Indian Express, 23 August 2013, <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/the-girl-who-died-strung-on-the-bangla-border-fence-may-finally-get-justice/1159016/> accessed on 18 June 2018.

⁴ Rajashri Dasgupta, "With SC Set to Hear Petition, Killings at Bangladesh Border Back in Focus," The Wire, 5 March 2020, <https://thewire.in/rights/felani-khatun-killing-bangladesh-border-supreme-court> accessed on 30 May 2020.

⁵ Interview with Kiriti Roy, Secretary MASUM, 10 December 2020.

⁶ Shutapa Paul, "Illegal Immigrants: East Bengal in West Bengal," *India Today*, 14 January, 2011, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/east+bengal+in+west+bengal/1/126587.html> accessed on 14 October 2014

⁷ Zulfikar Ali Kanan, "The Barbed Divided Countries But Not The Hearts of the People," *Meherpur.com*, 24 October 2012, p. 1.

⁸ Mitzi Waltz, *Alternative and Activist Media*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005) p. 2.

⁹ Christopher Atton, *Alternative Media*, (London: Sage Publications, 2002) p. 27

¹⁰ Here frames allude to Goffman's framing theory.

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