

Borderlands and Migrant Workers

Byasdeb Dasgupta

Borderlands between two or more nations in many cases are the space for international migration, especially forced migration under certain political economic contexts, to take place. Now, the question is whether those who migrate from one nation to another (from one political jurisdiction to another) and those who initially settle in borderlands become stateless population who do not have any fundamental rights of the host country. Many a times (especially those who migrate under certain political reasons) the migrants get the status of refugees. And they often remain in that status for a long time. In different continents some international borders have of late been in the news for the politics over migration and the related question of the political status of the population who do migrate. Many a times such migration is forced one for variety of reasons – some of which are economic and some political. One may find such borders for long time but without any political tension (local or global) being there. On the other hand, there are borderlands which have been made to be in the news because of the migration and the ensuing politics (national and/or global) over them. The basic objective of this module on borderlands and migrants is two fold – (a) to unleash the political economy associated with migration in the borderlands and (b) to analyze how these migration fit into the existing theories of migration, that is to say, whether the current empirical observations/narrations question the existing theories and if yes, how the new abstraction will evolve. Lastly, migration and borderlands mutually constitute each other in reshaping the class relations. Once again the question is whether that should mark a departure from the existing class theories correlating the borderlands.

In this paper, we will make an attempt to delineate the important features of migration (forced or otherwise) in the borderlands. First of all we will make an endeavour to understand the different political economic contexts which drive migration and then settlement of migrant workers in the borderlands. There are varied reasons for (forced) migration and related question of borderlands. How borders become the space for migration or how the migrant workers are viewed in the borderlands? Second issue which we want to touch upon in this paper is the question of what may be dubbed as the refugee economy which generally evolves in the borderlands. Are these refugee economies different from the economies in the mainland of the host countries? Or what exactly is refugee economy in borderlands? Does it have same characteristics in every

borderlands where refugee economy has evolved? Or are there differences in refugee economy in the borderlands from place to place? The most pertinent question is whether global capitalism influences refugee economy or whether refugee economy is completely debunked from global capitalism? These are some of the questions (there may be more) relating to refugee economy in borderlands which concern us most in the present global context? Thirdly, we want to see the class question of migrant workers in the borderlands. By class questions we are very particular about the way “class” is defined. There are various definitions of class based on property relationship or ownership of means of production or in terms of power. We do not take any one of these definitions. Rather, class to our understanding should be understood in terms of the Marxian concept of surplus labour. In the third section of this paper we want to undertake an examination of class processes (as well as non-class processes) concerning migrant workers in the borderlands. Once again one important question is whether class and non-class processes in the borderlands concerning the migrant workers is different from those in the mainland of the host countries or from those from the migrant workers’ countries of origin? One of the most important questions (which has been rarely discussed in the existing literature on migration) is the question how the existing theories of migration can understand the migration in the borderlands? The theories like Lewis model or Ranis and Fei model or Harris Todaro model (which are taught in the mainstream development economics) talk about mostly one type of migration which is first of all from rural to urban areas and secondly, which is basically out of free choice or preference of the migrants i.e. voluntary migration in nature. Then, the fundamental query is if these theories can logically explain the (forced) migration in the borderlands. If not, then how one should go about theorizing the migration in the borderlands. To us it is a political economic perspective and is overdetermined (in Althusserian sense) by many processes and also shape those processes. This we try to understand in terms of our empirical study in the borderlands of Murshidabad district in West Bengal of India.

Section I: Political Economy of Migrant Workers and Borderlands:

There are two compelling reasons for inter-border migration – one is economic and other is political. There may be other reasons as well. In the mainstream economics, migration models are so construed that migration falls in the category of voluntary one from rural to urban areas. Such is not the reality. If we recall the historical facts of cross-border migration most of them

remained involuntary in nature and not necessarily from rural to urban areas. This is so in the European context as well as in the Asian and African context. The history of cross-border migration can be traced back to the age-old periods with the evolution of human civilization. In this paper we are not making any attempt to trace them once again.

Let us first concentrate on economic issues which may trigger cross-border migration. Three plausible scenarios may be there. And these scenarios may have different kinds of push factors in influencing migration from one political territory to another and also, subsequent settlements of migrant workers in the borderlands which may or may not be transitory in nature. In the first instance, the poverty of the migrants may be a deterministic factor behind the cross-border migration. A person may be adjudged poor if he/she is unable to fulfill his/her minimum basic needs or his/her basic subsistent requirements in his/her home country. As a job-seeker in his/her home country he/she may not get access to any option in his/her home country which would fulfill his/her minimum basic need. Such situation may trigger cross-border migration if the border is porous. It is poverty owing to involuntary unemployment in the home country which triggers cross-border migration. Some migration in the Indo-Bangladesh border (i.e. from Bangladesh to West Bengal in India) may be of this type. In second scenario, the economic downturn or the situation in the home country being such that it is reeling under deep depression may adversely influence the livelihood of the vulnerable or marginalized sections of the population and compel them to migrate and settle in the borderlands. This is a situation which may happen periodically in an economy which is dominated by capitalism or global capitalism. Involuntary unemployment is one of major symptoms of a capitalist economy and during economic depression in the home economy the condition of the working people (who are otherwise also vulnerable and marginalized in economic sense) may get worsened to such an extent that these segments of the population may cross border. But happening like this is an extreme situation dominated by (global) capitalism. In the third scenario, we may come across regular migration of working people to the borderlands in connection with either legal or illegal economic activities. What is said to be happening in the Indo-Bangladesh border (in the border areas of West Bengal). This is either regular migration or seasonal migration depending upon the nature of economic activities. If the concerned activity is illegal then it does not get counted in the Gross Domestic Product of the host country. This third kind of migration may be to some extent voluntary in nature or may not be (it depends on the ground reality). But there is some

resemblance between this kind of migration and the picture of migration posed by the mainstream neoclassical economic theory on rural urban migration like the Harris-Todaro Model which asserts that workers migrate from rural areas if the expected wage in the urban area is greater than that in the rural area.

Now there is the another possibility of cross-border migration in the borderlands owing to political reasons. There are plethora of instances of migration because of political factors. It is still continuing in the present era. One of the most notable migration of this type is the migration of millions of people from erstwhile East Pakistan or West Pakistan to India and from India to East and West Pakistan owing to Partition in 1947. Such instances are many in Europe and in other parts of Asia in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

Whether workers migrate to borderlands due to economic or political reasons the borderland economy and also society are shaped by many overdetermining factors behind such migration. Many migrant workers fall under the refugee status officially or unofficially and the resulting economy may well be dubbed as refugee economy – the discussion of which is taken up in the following section.

Section II: Economy of the Borderlands and Refugee Economy:

One of the most successful means as enunciated by the neoliberal global capitalism in recent time is informalisation of the space of labour which helps to make labour as cheap as possible. And refugee economy or the influx of refugees at the heart of the market helps to sustain this process of informalisation. Hence, refugee economy is not something abnormal which is shaping today. Rather, it is something normal which is happening inside the very heart of the global capitalism today.

Neoliberalism is an ideology based upon the *laissez faire* concept of the market. Market under neoliberalism is at the centre of all economic activities and accumulation and circulation of capital take place through different markets here. Market is panacea. It is held that market can cure all economic ills and can bring in the much-coveted harmony in the system which is essentially global capitalism induced.

With welfarism waning out in this age of neoliberalism, many social securities which used to be provided to the citizens of many welfare state-oriented countries in the fifties, sixties and seventies has also wanted out. So, what can one expect for the protection of refugees generated since the nineties with the dismantling of the erstwhile socialist block? At this stage it is a difficult question to answer. Before we answer this question let us take a look at global capitalism and then the refugee problem as they have evolved in the last thirty years.

By the end of the decade of sixties inside the capitalist system there emerged some crisis. By the beginning of the seventies it became very clear that Keynesianism was not working to solve the problem of rising unemployment and inflation together. So, gradually all the countries of the West which till then adhered to welfarism started shading off Keynesianism as a policy tool. And slowly the passage to neoliberalism was set in.

Global capitalism received immense boost with the advent of neoliberalism, although the period immediately after WW-II was coined by some scholars as the golden days of capitalism. The West adopted neoliberal economic policies, rendering the state a mere facilitator of market and at the same time forced the Third World to the path of neoliberalism. The basic features of neoliberalism are the following:

- (a) Market will replace the state as the most significant socio-economic institution in the functioning of capitalism – both locally and globally.
- (b) Anything private – especially entrepreneurship – will be favoured replacing public investment and state-aided social security system. Private investment (read investment by the giant multinational corporations) will thus replace public investment. Even social sectors like health and education will be taken care of by the private entrepreneurship and not by the state anymore.
- (c) Foreign capital or global capital will be the determining factor of economic growth and development where development signifies large MNC-led industrialisation thus increasing the degree of what is dubbed as primitive accumulation of capital and also, creating huge reserve army of labour. Thus, labour of any sort became the risk-bearing factor for the ascent of (global) capital.
- (d) Free Market is so idealised as the essence of neoliberal doctrine that free and perfect

competition has been theoretically set as the shape and structure of this market. It is held that the market is a level playing field and harmony always prevails and the market cannot fail but governments can fail. So, for this competition to take place and for the entrepreneurs to strategise their survival cost cutting became the strategy of every private entrepreneur (even for the public sector where any remnant of such public sector still prevails) and in this cost cutting practice the onus should fall upon labour. Thus came the notion of flexi labour.

- (e) The basic idea of labour flexibility rests upon four types of flexibility – numerical flexibility (easy hire and fire and no voice representing the right of labour), wage flexibility (wages can be revised up and down as and when required), functional flexibility (a labourer should be skilled with multi levels of skills as opposed to the Fordist notion of specialisation) and temporal flexibility (this is numerical flexibility over time or it can be dubbed as seasonal flexibility).

Given the above features of neoliberal economic policies since the eighties global capitalism actually has operated through various circuits of capital globally as well as locally and in so doing it has contacted with various types of class processesⁱ – some of which are essentially capitalist class processes and some are not. Some might have remained outside it. From the point of view of performance and appropriation of surplus labour (which is a Marxian concept) one can distinguish between six different types of class processes. These six class processes include (i) Independent or self-appropriative class process, (ii) Sole proprietorship which may be serf-based/feudal/capitalist class process which is essentially exploitative where exploitation is as conceptualised by Marx, (iii) Communitic class process-I where one person performs the surplus labour but the appropriation of that surplus is decided by the whole community jointly where the performer of surplus labour is also included, (iv) Communitic class process-II where the entire community performs the surplus labour but its appropriation is decided by a one person who is representative of that community, (v) Capitalist class process where collective of labourers performs the surplus labour say within a factory but its appropriation is done by the owner or share-holder capitalists (the latter resembles corporate capitalists), and

(vi) Communistic class process where the collective of labourers performs as well as appropriates surplus labour.

With global capitalism playing the hegemonic role in the socio-economic system all over the world all these class processes may exist simultaneously. And a global capitalist enterprise or an MNC may have connection with these various class processes taken together.

As shown above, not all these six class processes are exploitative. Marx defined exploitation as an economic category and as appropriation of surplus labour by the non-performer(s) of surplus labour. Note that under capitalism surplus labour becomes surplus value through market exchange. Market plays the role under capitalism by commodifying every single object meant for economic exchange including labour power. Class process (i) (Independent Class Process), (iii) and (iv) (Communitic – I & II) and (vi) Communistic are non-exploitative class process. The remaining two (Class Process ii and v) are essentially exploitative class process. A capitalist class enterprise (including the global one) essentially is signified by class processes (ii) and/or (v) above. At the main centre or hub of a capitalist class enterprise (including global capitalist enterprise) the class process has to be exploitative – otherwise generation of surplus value and accumulation of capital cannot take place. But as we have said above in this age of cost-cutting-based upon competition among the capitalist enterprises the main target is to go on cheapening or devaluing labour so as to intensify surplus generation and capital accumulation many-fold. So, the networks or circuits of global capital are created by joining various types of class-process based enterprise with the main centre of the enterprise. In today's virtual world may be there is no centre! But the circuits are there connecting various capital and non-capital enterprises including the independent class process-oriented enterprises with the global capitalist enterprise. Two things are justified thus which we find in our concrete real – (a) labour flexibility in the form of casualisation and contractualisation and (b) outsourcing and subcontracting. Network between different varieties of class enterprises (including self employed mode) by the global capitalist enterprise is built in order to cheapen and control labour as far as possible.

Inside global capitalist system or rather the global capitalist networks there are plethora of nodes of informal enterprises. In fact, if one critically assesses the existence of informal enterprises in the context of global capitalist system one may come across two different types of

informal enterprises – one that is linked with the global capitalist chain and the other that is not linked. We may call the first type as Informal Sector – I and the second type as Informal Sector – II.

That an informal enterprise (which may be a one man show) is linked with the global capitalist chain does not mean that the class process within the enterprise will also be capitalist. But they are essentially exploitative. So, Informal Sector – I (even signifying class process different from capitalist class process) is very much inside of the global capitalist system. Informal Sector – II (which mostly cater to the needs of the local economy) is outside the global capitalist chain, but is in some way or other related to global capitalist system by fulfilling some of the needs of global capitalist economic system.

The process of outsourcing and sub-contracting an informal enterprise in the Informal Sector – I is inside the global capitalist system. On the other hand, through market exchange an informal enterprise in the Informal Sector – II is related or connected with the global capitalist system in this neoliberal age. Neoliberalism has in fact accepted the existence of informal enterprises and talks in terms of providing social security to the workers in the informal sector which is a façade in the name of inclusive development.

Of late, one of the distinctive characteristics of global capitalist system is the process of informalisation. According to some scholars, some informal spaces are the space of non-capital. But even if some informal spaces are of non-capital, the very space is hegemonised by the global capital. One particular reason for this rapid growth of informalisation all over the world is to make way for cheap labour so as to contain the labour cost of production or variable capital *a la* Marx. Another way of cheapening or devaluing productive labourⁱⁱ is to create mass reserve army of labour as far as possible in the present socio-economic context. And one way to do this is by generating refugee influx for some political or economic reason or other. While the capitalist system is global, the problem of refugee influx at first instance may look like a local problem for the host economy where the refugee inflows have taken place. However, particularly in the recent European context we find that the refugee flows are cutting across international borders and sometime has called for some sort of global protection system but in vain.

While global capitalism is an economic issue, refugee influx is mostly viewed as a

political issue. However, if one closely evaluates the global circuits of capital and also, generation of refugee flows both have political as well as economic underpinnings, which we discuss in the following section.

Section III: Class Questions, Borderlands and Refugee Economy:

Global capitalism needs the political domination of a space to spread its circuits including the web of informal networks. On the other hand, influx of refugees has economic bearings on the host economy. A refugee is always envisaged as an anathema to the working population in the host economy and political atmosphere is built generally around that sentiment of local citizens. The rise of extreme populist rightist political parties in recent time in many parts of the world, particularly in Europe and USA is a great example of that. The slogan “America is for the Americans” has of late gained popularity against providing global protection to refugee groups.

The above political is a ploy in recent context of global capitalism which is quite comfortable with these refugee flows as the reserve army of labour expands by this. It turns out to be more and more easy to control and devalue productive labour in various class processes mentioned above. Such is the hegemonic role of global capital.

We need to mention here that “the origin of global capitalism”, characterized by original or what is dubbed popularly as primitive accumulation, “is a continual moment of creation-destruction-recreation of labour power through violence over the conditions of existence” of third world societies.ⁱⁱⁱ And the origin of the creation of refugees to a certain extent is inter-related to what is referred to above as original accumulation. If the latter is a continual process for global capitalism, so is creation of refugees through political turmoil, war and other reasons as continual generation of refugee flows in a sense signifies displacement of local population from their means of subsistence and also from their land without which original accumulation or what David Harvey described as accumulation by dispossession cannot take place. So, refugee creation which goes to expand the global reserve army of labour and original accumulation from where the refugees have been displaced or dislodged goes hand in hand. And in this sense, the refugee who is foreclosed in the discussion of global capitalism being envisaged as an abnormal subject in the host economy is a very much *normal subject* to be hegemonised by the

global capitalist system. Generally, global capitalism as a philosophical order forecloses what it finds abnormal from its own perspective. A refugee in the host economy is abnormal in the sense that (s)he lacks what a natural citizen in the host economy has a right to. And in this sense, any concern for the refugee population is framed outside the workings of global capitalist chain. In the political sphere, it calls for special attention including the question of statelessness of the refugee population in the host economy.

A refugee is very much inside of the global capitalist system, not outside it, due to two concerns. The first one is related to the continual process of original accumulation. The second one is in terms of the absorption of the potential refugee labour force in the informal enterprises (be it in Informal Sector – I or Informal Sector – II). As a refugee lacks the basic rights of citizenship in the host economy he/she cannot be absorbed in the formal space of the economy which cannot absorb a stateless person by law. So, a refugee has no other option left but to get absorbed in the informal space – most of the time at a monetary return or necessary labour value which is much less compared to a citizen in the host economy. Moreover, this absorption is not without violence – contest with the local working force and also, contest within the refugees themselves. The productive labour of a refugee is much devalued which in a way facilitates the cheapening of labour or variable capital. Since refugees (particularly the working population of the refugee community) lack most of the basic rights of a citizen in a modern nation state, their capacity to represent themselves remains quite weak. It helps the productive capitalists to control labour much more easily. As is well-known in Marxian tradition, more is the control of productive capital, more will be the generation of both absolute and relative surplus from different exploitative class processes which we have noted above. Informal labour space helps global capitalism to absorb the refugee population and thereby, further devaluing productive labour. This once again vindicates our claim that labour is the risk-bearing factor in neoliberalism. So, is the productive labour of a refugee in general. And hence, global protection for refugee population is far cry.

Let us understand the global protection of refugees as some sort of social security to them. This social security as global protection may include income security, job security, workplace security, skill security, voice representation security and some financial security (other than income security). However, as shown below, this very idea of global protection system for the

refugee as a subject under global capitalism is a much contested issue. This can be explicated in terms of the Marxian concept of production and social surplus as delineated below. In fact, in a society total surplus generated from various class processes is distributed as production surplus and social surplus.^{iv} We can write

$$\text{Total Surplus (TS)} = \text{Production Surplus (PS)} + \text{Social Surplus (SS)}$$

Production surplus here means subsumed class^v payments to meet the conditions of the existence of Fundamental Class Process, where Fundamental Class Process consists of performance and appropriation of surplus labour. On the other hand, social surplus is spent to meet various socially determined needs which are in no way connected with the condition of existence of Fundamental Class Process. Socially determined needs may include needs for poverty alleviation, environmental protection, unemployment, needs of the old, children, physically handicapped etc. It may also include the need for global or local protection of refugees if society at any point of time feels the need. But not that the need for global or local protection of refugees is quite different from the other socially determined needs mentioned above. The socially determined needs for poverty alleviation, environmental protection, unemployment, needs of children, old and physically handicapped etc. constitute those particular needs of a society at a particular point of time which may be dubbed as developmental needs. On the other hand, the need for global or local protection of refugees cannot be considered as a developmental need. And there may arise a contest between payments for global/local protection of refugees and payments for different developmental needs.

In a political democracy, which we observe today in many parts of the world, developmental needs do not just have economic significance but also political significance. Whether payments for the protection of refugees from social surplus will be made or not depend to a great extent on the political climate in the host economy. Suppose social surplus along with socially determined developmental needs also includes the protection of refugees. Then, we can write:

$$\text{Total Surplus (TS)} = \text{PS} + \text{SS} = \text{PS} + (\text{SSD} + \text{SSA} + \text{SSP}) + \text{SSR}$$

Where PS = Production Surplus, SS = Social Surplus, SSD = Payments for needs for the old, children, physically handicapped etc., SSA = payments for environmental protection, SSP = payments for social need of poverty and SSR = payments for the protection of refugees.

It is clearly discernible that there is a contest between production surplus (PS) and social surplus (SS). In fact, $SS = TS - PS$ which implies social surplus is the residual amount left from the total surplus (TS) after meeting the class-based needs in terms of production surplus.

Both production surplus and social surplus are in over determined and contradictory relation. If the class needs are quite pressing at any time in a society then it is expected that a large share of the total surplus generated in that society is distributed as production surplus. Therefore, little is left for payments as social surplus. On the other hand, if the political compulsion warrants meeting the socially determined development needs then, it may be expected that a greater share of total surplus will be distributed as social surplus. Further, there is a contest between social surplus as socially determined development needs and global/local protection of refugees. In fact, we can write:

$$SSR = SS - (SSD + SSA + SSP)$$

So, the protection of refugees as social surplus payment is residual from the total social surplus after meeting all the socially determined development needs. And as we have noted above, the protection of refugees in the host economy always becomes a political question. If and only if the political climate is favourable for the protection of refugees then and only then such payments from social surplus will be made. Otherwise, not.

Now, coming to the question of global protection of refugees one may come across further complexities in the above distribution of social surplus for refugee protection. If we consider the total surplus globally generated at any point of time then its distribution between production and social surplus is also global. For example, total surplus may be generated in country A, B and C whereas their distribution as social surplus (after meeting the class needs in the form of production surplus) may be in country D, E and F. Now suppose country F is in need of refugee protection. Whether the global surplus will be distributed as social surplus for the

protection of refugees will always be contingent upon the global political conditions and the international economic relations between country A, B and C on the one hand (from where surplus is generated) and country F on the other hand (where refugee inflows have taken place). So, for a meaningful global protection of refugees a global struggle for surplus for the needs of the refugees has to be there. And this struggle is a political one.

Summing up our main arguments in this paper we can assert that the generation of refugee inflows and global capitalist system are compatible with each other both economically and politically, especially under neoliberalism. Refugees swell the ranks of reserve army of labour (both productive as well as unproductive in the Marxian sense). Generally, a refugee economy is built up on the basis of continual informalisation of the production space. And refugee generation and original accumulation are overdetermined and both are continual processes under global capitalism. Refugees are generally absorbed in the informal enterprises – some in the Informal Sector I (linked directly with the global capitalist chain) and some in the Informal Sector II (not linked directly with the global capitalist chain but may be hegemonised by global capitalism). In this sense, the refugee as a subject is very much inside of global capitalism. But when it comes to the question of protection of refugees in the host economy it is visualised as a local problem and distribution of part of the social surplus for refugee protection becomes a politically contingent issue. And there are several layers of contest for the claim of social surplus for refugee protection. First there is contest between the class needs (production surplus) and socially determined development needs. And then as far as the claims of social surplus are concerned there is political struggle between the claims of socially determined development needs and refugee needs. Note that socially determined developmental needs are concerned with the citizens of the host country whereas refugee protection is necessary for those who mostly have become stateless. Finally, the very idea of global protection for refugees is contingent upon global political needs along with the global economic needs of global capitalism which is very much related in overdetermined manner with various class and non-class processes which are generally observable in a refugee economy in the borderlands.

Section IV: Migration in the Borderlands – An Empirical Submission to negate the mainstream economic theories of migration:

The standard neoclassical economic theories of migration (particularly rural-urban migration) like the Lewis Model or Harris-Todaro Model envisage migration as a voluntary activity in search of a better expected wage earning in the urban areas compared to the rural areas. Such is generally not the case if we look at migrant workers and the concerned borderland economy and society. Migrant workers in the borderlands and the evolved economic activities are not the outcome or product of some voluntary action taken by the migrant workers in the borderlands of the host economy. Let us make an attempt to understand migrant workers and borderland economy (rather, economic activities) in terms of an empirical study in the borderlands of the Murshidabad district of West Bengal in India where influx of migrant workers from Bangladesh is a regular phenomenon.

This work is on a monetised economy which is in general different from a standard monetised geographical space. Here we will discuss the economy of some border area of West Bengal – the district of Murshidabad which has an international border with Bangladesh. The river Padma divides the district of Murshidabad from Bangladesh. Eastern portions of six blocks of Murshidabad border with Bangladesh with Padma making the dividing line. The economy of these areas is monetised like the economy of other parts of West Bengal in a sense it is a predominantly market-based economy. However, the nature of the economic activities here has certain uniqueness which distinguishes it from other parts of West Bengal.^{vi}

Before we start describing the economic lives of people here let us first take a look at what we mean by a monetised economy and economic activity therein. Money is what money does. Money is medium of exchange. Money is unit of account. Money is means of payment. Lastly, money is store of (exchange) value. A market economy survives through monetary circulation. This circulation may be thought of either one of the three following circuits: (1) C-M-C, (2) M-C-M' and (3) M-M' where C signifies commodity and M money. The concepts of these three circuits are described by Marx in Capital (Volume I). The first circuit relates to the money as medium of exchange as well as unit of account while the second and third circuits indicate money as capital – the capital form of money which is the salient feature of an economy based on capitalistic mode of production *a la* Marx. The surplus value, which is the difference between M and M' (where M' > M), is generated through commodity exchange in the market in an economy predominantly characterised by the capitalistic mode of production processes. So, in a

monetised economy market based exchange is a necessary condition. In fact, a good takes the form of commodity only through market based buying and selling viz. exchange. In any economic system (irrespective of whether monetised or not, whether market based or not) there are three main economic activities or functions – production, consumption and distribution. Social relations of production get characterised around the fact whether an economy is monetised or not, market based or not. However, the modern concept of market remains incomprehensible sans money as unit of account (of exchange value), medium of exchange, means of payment and store of value. Market based exchange in a typical capitalistic production based economy helps to generate and accumulate capital, where capital as envisaged by Marx exists in liquid form as money and the continuous monetary circulation determines the generation of surplus value ($M' - M$) and thus, accumulation of capital. Given this standard notion of a monetised economy, let us now look at the economy of the border areas of Murshidabad which has both some similarities and dissimilarities with the standard notion of mainstream economy. Note that in these areas the standard capitalist commodity exchange circuit $M-C-M'$ is not prevalent.

In the mainstream economics an economic activity is defined as one which generates monetary income or return. Unless an activity (irrespective of the fact that it uses labour power to produce the good or service) is meant for earning nominal income or return it is not regarded as an economic activity in the mainstream economics discipline. Therefore, the service provided by a housewife is not an economic activity whereas the service provided by a domestic maid is an economic activity.

Before we proceed, we need to clear a misconception with regard to this border economy which is often described in the existing literature as the economy at the margin or economy of the margin. It is held as an economic space which is “abnormal” – the abnormality being defined with respect to the space of “normal” monetised economic space where market based exchanges and production are prevalent. Looking thus the economic space of the border areas of Murshidabad is also normal, not abnormal as market based exchanges do exist here too as it exists in the “normal” space of a monetised economy.

In mainstream economics, production is an economic activity which creates utility or use values by transforming the natural resources or manufactured goods in marketable commodities. A good or service becomes commodities when they are marketable. The transformation which in

other words implies production for the market may be of various types – physical transformation, temporal transformation and spatial transformation. In each one of these transformations new use value is generated which makes the commodity for the market.

The principal productive activity of the border economic region is agriculture. However, much of the agricultural activities here are not commercial. They are mostly subsistence agriculture. Marketable surplus generated here from cultivation of land is not much compared to the total agricultural produce. Land here mostly is a means for subsistence, not means of production. The principal crops which are produced here include paddy, vegetables and some pulses.

Apart from agriculture, the other occupation which is prevalent in the areas covered by us is biri binding. Biri is a cigarette like tobacco product. We can say this is perhaps the only manufacturing activity which we could find existing in the area as there is hardly any modern manufacturing activity and follows the M-C-M' circuit. Some portion of population is engaged in informal services – mostly vending, van pulling and like in the adjacent urban areas. Migration is common in the area in the dearth of availability of adequate job or (money) income earning opportunities.

Following observations merit our attention regarding this agricultural and other production here in these river erosion affected border areas of the district of Murshidabad:

- (a) Most of the produce here is meant for self-consumption viz. for subsistence and hence, very little portion of the gross produce is sold in the market. Hence, the agricultural activities here are subsistence activities meaning in turn existence of non-capitalistic production processes. Surplus labour generated in this production process is rarely converted into surplus value as very little is sold in the market. In fact, this is mostly the case in many developing countries of the world – particularly those which are located in Asia (mainly South Asia) and Africa. Land here is not means of production as it is in any capitalistic farming.
- (b) Land in these border areas of Murshidabad is both a property and means of subsistence. Unless in distress agriculture based families here do not want to dispose of their land. Rather, there is competition between the families to grab more and more land whenever such possibilities emerge naturally.

- (c) Possibilities do emerge to grab more and more land and it is due to the natural phenomenon of river erosion and consequent emergence of “char” land in the river bed. In Jalangi block where the most river erosion is at present going on we met the government officials at the Block Office. We found that there is no regular land survey in the area which would tell us how much land got eroded and as a result of which how much arable land was lost. Similarly, there is no official information regarding the emergence of “char” land in the river bed and hence, we cannot tell exactly how much “char” land is there at present and how much is occupied by the local population in the Indian side. We will discuss later about the physical violence with respect to the grabbing of land in the “char” area.
- (d) There is hardly any big or large farmer in the area. Most of the farmers is either small or marginal as per the stipulated official definition in this regard in India. The farming is based on family labour mostly. Family members (mostly women) provide their (unpaid) labour in the land belong to their families. Land is *in general* as private property belongs to the male members of these families. Very few farms hire daily wage labourers in their farms and that too mostly at the time of harvesting. Since family labourers are unpaid workers they are not considered in the working population either as main workers or marginal workers in the Census. Actually, these family labourers are unpaid in monetary term. They are paid in kind their necessary labour equivalent. Following the definition of economic activity in a modern monetised economy the activities or work performed by the family labourers are not considered as economic activities. In fact, we speak with some women folk in the areas affected by river erosion. They told us that there is nothing wrong to work as monetarily unpaid workers since the lands belong to their families (as private properties of their husbands, or brothers, or sons) and they consider working like that as their sacred duty. They are the performers of surplus labour in Marxian sense and the class process attached with these labour processes are either self-exploitative (or independent) or feudal meaning non-capitalist class processes. In those lands (which are quite small in terms of size) which are cultivated by the owner of the land himself without either hiring daily wage labourer or without engaging the men and women of the concerned family the class process is self-exploitative or independent as the owner cultivator of the land only performs the surplus labour and also appropriates the surplus

irrespective of the fact whether the produce is wholly or partly marketed or not. On the other hand, in the land where the owner cultivator engages the family labourers the class process may be feudal or communitic. It is feudal if the particular class process involves non-performance of surplus labour by the owner of the land (which is rare in the area) and appropriation of the surplus labour by him. We prefer to dub the class process as feudal (or semi-feudal) in this farm where the owner of the land employs wage labourers since the surplus labour is not converted wholly into surplus value through market based exchange. The particular class process in our rendition is communitic if the owner of the land also cultivates the land (implying that he is also performing surplus labour) along with the family labourers and/or hired wage labourers. Communitic here does not signify a non-exploitative class process. It is very much exploitative as exploitation as a Marxian category implies appropriation of surplus labour of the direct producers by the non-performer of surplus labour. But in this communitic class process the owner of the land also himself performs surplus labour. It is exploitative communitic class process mostly as the owner of the land appropriates surplus labour performed by others. In case, he also along with the family labourers and/or hired workers performs surplus labour then the particular class process is non-exploitative communitic. We have come across some class processes in the region where the owner of the land gets his land cultivated by the hired wage workers; however, the produce is not marketed. This is therefore non-capitalist exploitative class process. Only commodity exchange that takes place in such class process is the exchange of living labour or labour power. This class process is not feudal either, as there is some monetised exchange (exchange of labour power) and also, the social relations of productions between the direct producers and the owner of land are not based on personalised bondage.

- (e) Another important feature of the labour processes in the agricultural production processes in the border areas of the district Murshidabad is rampant engagement of child workers as family labour. May be this is not a feature which is unique and distinguishes these areas from other parts of the district or state or the country as a whole. However, gender disparity in this regard is worth our attention. We found that mostly the girl children are drop outs from the school as they are required in both in the farmland and in the domestic chores which is not the case with the boy children in general. The villagers told us that

girls are born to work like this and they consider working of the girl children as their sacred duties as if the girls (and also to some extent some women) are *natural resources personified*. We will come to this point later in this paper.

- (f) Raring of domestic animals like cows and goats etc are generally performed by the women folk of the household including children. Also, the women of the households collect fuelwood and water. They do all the domestic chores apart from working as monetarily unpaid family labourers in the farmland of the family which is, as indicated above already, is private property possessed in the name of male members of the family.
- (g) Apart from agriculture, biri binding is an important economic activity in the area. It is done by home-based workers who are mostly female. The resources for biri binding are provided by the middleman (in local parlance *munshi*) who intermediates between these home-based workers and the biri making capitalists. When we surveyed the areas during 2011-13 the official wage rate was around Rs. 75 per 1000 biri bound. This implies the wage rate paid is piece wage rate and exploitation is more when compared with a daily wage rate of Rs. 75 per day for doing the same activity. In the areas covered by us we found that the actual (piece) wage is much below this official rate. In some villages, which are far away in terms of geographical distance from the main biri production urban centres, it is less than Rs. 50 per 1000 biri bound. A woman *in general* is involved in several paid and unpaid economic activities during a normal day. She is responsible for all the domestic chores including raring of domestic animals, collecting fuelwood and water, working as unpaid family labour in the family's farmland and working as a paid (piece) wage (home-based) worker in biri binding. The money income they earn is mostly appropriated by the male members of the family (husband or father or brother or son). In no economic activity, which an average woman in the areas concerned performs daily, the concerned woman has any decision-making power which is enjoyed by the men of the families. Most importantly, in the production processes (agricultural or non-agricultural) an average woman is never an appropriator of surplus labour or surplus value. We know that the question of appropriation of surplus labour or surplus value is quite significant because it is ultimately the appropriator of such surplus who takes the decision of distributing the surplus and therefore, who will receive the portion of the surplus depends

primarily on the appropriator. In these areas while men dominate women in appropriating the surplus (both in private and public domain) the nature and quantity of distribution of such surplus is determined traditionally by the men. When we talked to the women regarding their decision making power within and outside their own families they feel that any decision should be taken by their men as “men are the best judge”. Some commented that if men do not take decision and if women take decision then what for men are there?

So, there is not much diversity in paid and unpaid economic activities in these areas. While the working population here is mostly dependent on agriculture for their survival the river erosion makes this subsistence agriculture uncertain. The household class processes are mostly feudal and they are based on standard gender oppression. Even in the public domain gender plays a major role as women workers here are in majority family labour who are always unpaid i.e. do not receive any money wage (but they receive their necessary labour equivalent in kind being the members of the family). The village women themselves in some cases are like natural resources which can be exchanged at some exchange value as their bodies personify some use value for the outside world – the world completely unknown to them. The region although is pre-dominantly agricultural there are other means of earning money through pure economic exchanges, not production.

In any monetised economy, economic exchange implies selling and buying commodities through money in the market. Anything can be commodity. It may be a good like paddy. It may be the labour power of a labourer. It may be a human body as is the case in human trafficking. All these forms of commodity are present in the border areas of the district of Murshidabad. The foremost exchange which is related with the abject income poverty in the area is the existence of C-M-C circuit.

Marx described C-M-C circuit in volume I of Capital to explicate the role of money as medium of exchange. The first C objectifies commodity in the use value sense which has an exchange value in the market – the exchange value which need not be related with the concerned use value. The seller of the commodity gets M amount or quantity of money by selling the commodity in the market at some price or exchange value. With this M she then purchases another commodity or groups of commodities (C) which has different use value

than the initial use value of the initial commodity (C). Note that the total exchange value of the later C (a commodity or collection of commodities) is equal to the exchange value of the initial C. Hence, in this exchange no additional value in the form of surplus value is created. The total exchange value in the form of M (the quantity of money) remains unchanged from the beginning to the end of this circuit. In the areas which are hit by river erosion in the district of Murshidabad there are few households (mostly single member family and this single member is mostly woman without any land property) who sells fuelwood or some vegetables which are naturally grown in the region and which are not produced by conscious human labour or some fish (which these women catch in small quantities from the river). With the money (M) which they obtain by selling the aforesaid commodities they purchase commodities of subsistence from the nearby urban markets. This resembles the typical C-M-C circuit as described by Marx. If for example a woman gets Rs. 50 by selling some vegetables they can purchase some rice, salt and other spices and sometimes some food items for their small kids or some cloth. Of course, they retain for their own consumption some food items which they sell in the market. These women are not selling their labour power to any production process in the region. In a monetised economy they simply procure some commodities which are available in the nature as free goods to sell them in the market. One may say that such cases are absent in a standard/normal monetised economy. One may hold that C-M-C circuit does not exist in a standard/normal monetised economy. This is not true empirically. In a developing country even in metropolitan city we may come across instances of C-M-C whatsoever small are there proportion in all kinds of market-based exchanges in such city. These sellers in the market may be dubbed as marginal sellers given the smallness of their capacity of selling and buying. Mostly they sell or vend goods which are free commodity found in the nature. They do not produce these commodities.

The prevalent economic exchanges in the area involve which is popularly known as smuggling or illegal trade. This exists as there is international border and certain commodities which are traded are not allowed to be traded. Hence the issue of smuggling or illegal trade comes. Commodities which are illegally exported include some food items, medicines (some of which are used for addiction purpose) and cattle - mainly cows. Imported items include clothes, some spices and fish. As these transactions of goods are illegal – not permitted by the law of the two neighbouring countries – physical violence erupts between

the traders or the agents of the traders and the law-enforcing authorities at the borders of the two countries – India and Bangladesh. These types of exchanges involve an initial money in the form of merchant capital which through commodity exchange in the market becomes a larger sum of money M' (where $M' > M$). A portion of the surplus ($M' - M$) constitutes profit of the main merchant or trader. A part of this surplus is distributed as commissions or payments for the agents who physically carry these goods across the border. A part is distributed as bribe to the border authority personnel in the area. A part of the profit is again used to procure the goods to be smuggled by the main merchant or trader. And the remaining profit constitutes the money wealth of the main merchant which these days find resting place in non-producible assets (like real estate in the main district town Baharampure or elsewhere) *a la Keynes*. The capital accumulation from the merchant capital circuit $M - M'$ can reproduce the circuit and therefore more capital accumulation again and again as the distribution of the surplus provides the necessary fundamental conditions of this reproduction. In fact, the main trader or merchant apart from paying bribe to the border authority does also pay sometime booties to the local political chieftains.

Apart from this smuggling-based merchant capital circuit, there is another such circuit here whose vivid descriptions one can find in Banerjee and Basu Ray Chaudhury (2011). This involves human trafficking. We do not have any official estimate or data of how many women are thus trafficked. Banerjee (2011) provides some ideas regarding this type of economic exchange where the commodity is the women who are trafficked. This is particularly an issue in the Bengal Bangladesh border which includes the border areas of the district of Murshidabad. “As concerns over the new nation state were translated into concerns over women’s security, the same way concerns over women’s security in the borders were reduced to concerns over women’s trafficking for sex.” (Banerjee 2011: 29)

Border areas of Murshidabad which we have surveyed during 2011-13 are afflicted with abject poverty. In the words of Banerjee (2011: 32) this “is a region of endemic poverty, social imbalance and political violence, particularly against vulnerable groups of whom women form a large part. Each part of this region is undergoing certain social and political turmoil where more and more women are getting marginalized.” And this marginalized position of women within their families as well as outside them facilitates the economic

exchange of women as commodity in the form of human trafficking. In *bad* capitalism even human body and mind like labour power is commodity whenever such opportunities exist and border region of Murshidabad is no exception in this regard.

Like any monetised economy the economic cartography of the border areas of the district of Murshidabad contains risk and uncertainty. This uncertainty is with regard to the economic life as well as physical life of the population here. Money in Keynesian sense creates uncertainty in general as holding money today implies holding generalised purchasing power for the future while production in any capitalistic economy becomes more and more specialised. The uncertainty that we talk about here is not this typical Keynesian one. It is related with the natural events in the areas as well as with the nature of economic activities in which working men are generally engaged. By risk we imply simply the following –

People know what the probable outcomes of an economic activity pertaining to their economic and physical life are. But they do not know with certainty which outcome will exactly take place at the present time.

On the other hand, the concept of uncertainty is related with the future time. Uncertainty implies *future is not known and that is why at present time people do take to certain actions which may endanger their own physical lives or the socio-economic lives including the physical lives of the others. In the case of uncertainty the probable outcomes of some actions are not known to the economic agents. Hence, there is always a tendency to procure as much money as possible (by any hook and crook) and hold the procured monetary wealth in some non-producible liquid assets where liquid assets mean those assets which can be converted into money at times of need in future.*

In the border areas of the district of Murshidabad one can find two distinct causes of uncertainty – one is natural and the other is socio-economic (which is endemic in the socio-economic structure of any South Asian economies with this region being no exception). The natural is the continuous erosion in the river bank resulting in loss of arable land (the means of subsistence, not means of production) from time to time. Local population knows that they have to lose land. But they do not move away from the area for three reasons: Firstly moving to a new area means succumbing to new forms of unknown and hence, risk and uncertainty. It is therefore better to live with known devil than unknown one. Secondly, if they move

away to other distant areas permanently it will take time for them to register themselves as the citizens of that area and unless they succeed in proving themselves as the sons of that soil they would not get any benefits which the state offers to them as being poor and vulnerable. This does not mean no one from the area does migrate. They do. But they do not migrate permanently and do not take the whole family with them. In fact, a significant forced migration in the form of daily labour or construction labourers is taking place. Except the women who are trafficked most who migrate are male members of the family and do so seasonally. And hence, they can legally claim any benefits or doles which the Indian state confers periodically in the region through different state funded poverty eradication or employment generation or rural development programmes. And this is a tactics which the local populace who are poor and vulnerable does employ to mitigate risk to some extent. Thirdly, they generally do not leave the erosion affected areas and do stay close to the river in the hope that one day new *char* land may emerge in the river bed and they may succeed in grabbing those lands for the purpose of cultivation.

The future of these people in this type of market economy is uncertain in typical Keynesian sense. This prompts them like animal spirit to adapt to any type of economic exchanges including smuggling and human trafficking to make money and this is a continuous process which has its influence on the local political despite the enormous risk of getting caught or even getting killed.

Border economy of Murshidabad is shaped with the history of Partition. Which used to be legal economic exchanges have now become illegal trade. The river erosion and losing of arable land did not lead to massive exodus of people to other areas permanently in search of livelihood. Money does matter along with the class and non-class processes. There is nothing called non-neutrality of money as the mainstream non-Keynesian economists claim. Since the scope of making money through smuggling or human trafficking exists despite these economic activities enormously risky and despite the fact that physical violence on a mass scale does recur from time to time the local population do not move away from this area. Migration from this area and to this area is a constant fact of macroeconomic scenario of the region. But with this migration the families do not get totally out of touch with the locality. The economy of the area is a certain pocket of capitalist economy of India which has its

unique features. Nonetheless it does not signify it is the space of abnormal. Rather, the people behave and engage in the particular economic activities in their own rational way given the alternatives of making money through illegal trade and human trafficking. This at the same time also spells out why there is violence including the violence against women. The general economy of this borderland is a subsistence but with alternative of making money through illegal trade and human trafficking.

ⁱClass is a process of performance, appropriation, distribution and receipt of surplus labour. Performance and appropriation of surplus labour can be dubbed as Fundamental Class Process while distribution and receipt of surplus labour as Subsumed Class Process. Both Fundamental and Subsumed class processes mutually constitute each other or are overdetermined where overdetermination is an Althusarian concept. See Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, *Knowledge and Class: A Marxian Critique of Political Economy*(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

ⁱⁱ By productive labour we mean labour which performs surplus labour in any class process. We are not using the word productive labour as Adam Smith used it. Rather, we use it following its Marxian connotation.

ⁱⁱⁱAnjan Chakrabarti, Anup Dhar, and Byasdeb Dasgupta, *The Indian Economy in Transition – Globalisation, Capitalism and Development* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press; 2015), 65.

^{iv}Anjan Chakrabarti, Anup Dhar, and Byasdeb Dasgupta, *The Indian Economy in Transition*, 297-298.

^v Subsumed class process consists of distribution and receipt of surplus labour.

^{vi}The present work is based on some field surveys in the six blocks of Murshidabad viz. Raghunathgunj-II, Suti-II, Raninagar-II, Bhagwangola-II, Lalgola and Jalangi. What is written here is on the basis of comments and narrations of the local people in the selected villages in the area during 2011-13. We have visited the villages in these six blocks where people have lost arable (even dwelling) land due to river bank erosion. One important natural phenomenon which has afflicted these blocks of Murshidabad is the continuous erosion of the river bank of Padma. To understand the economy of these areas one needs to keep in mind this natural phenomenon which has menacing impact on the social and economic lives of people here. Some holds the erection of Farakka Barrage responsible for such erosion. May be or may not be since the history of this erosion is more than a century old.

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