

Economy of Exception:
A political economy of violence at the Indo-Bangladesh border areas

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This is the first draft of the paper which contains an ethnographic account of Indo-Bangladesh border. I am in an early stage of theoretical reflections on this account. I have highlighted certain points which need to be further theorised, developed and engaged with. Please do not quote or cite.

The international border between Bangladesh and India, particularly in West Bengal, is drawn over a contiguous and highly accessible terrain, running through “densely populated areas [...], where land is cultivated right up to the international boundary” (HRW 2010: 4). This border have “little geographical or ethnic logic [...]”. The populations on both sides share cultural, linguistic, religious, economic, and, crucially, kinship ties” (ibid.: 12). The border forcefully divides and disrupts the flow of population and commodities. It does not allow normal everyday trade to take place between the two countries. However, there is a difference in prices and availability of commodities between these countries and the suppressed possibility of trade is exploited by the smugglers. Seeing this way, the border divides the land into two mercantile spaces between which profit can be earned. Nevertheless, the border not only creates mercantile division, supported by the development of networks through which illicit goods flow (see Abraham and Schendel 2005), but it is *a site of production* of newer commodities (for example, house wives and adolescent girls become sex-workers, see below), deployment of labour, and monopolisation or consolidation of smuggling business by reducing autonomous groups of petty smugglers into labourers or contract workers. The presence of networks and the markets along the border facilitate this production process. The very presence of the border renders everything that passes through as illegal unless it has the stamp of approval of the state’s authority: it can mark commodities (from salt to heroin and arms) as illicit and illegal.

[Literature review of Abraham, Schendel, Samaddar, et al]

The actions of the border security forces on either side of the border are always disproportionate. The excessive use violence and fear by the security personnel and smugglers, and the illegality of goods and people create an exceptional economy which runs parallel to the ‘normal’ economy and life on the border areas. This economy can also completely subsume this normal life and reconstitute it. This division between legal and illegal can transform the moral economy of society, and at times, it careens towards criminality. In this paper, I will try to capture the dynamic of this ‘economy of exception’ which is created by the presence of border, and the actions of the state, political parties and smugglers.



Red dots on the map were the fieldwork sites for this research.

A state of exception

[Agamben on the state of exception, executive over legislative power]

The growing hyperbole of terrorism, along with the related concern for infiltration of ‘Islamic militants’, illegal immigration and fake currency notes, has given rise to a security centric approach to border management in India, converting the border area into a proto-militarised zone. Wherever possible, the border has been fenced with barbed wire and floodlights have been installed along the border. There is always a road which runs alongside the barbed fence for the easy movement of the Border Security Force (henceforth, BSF), an Indian para military force. The border is patrolled round the clock with each BSF *jawan* (sentinel) working a six-hour shift. The border is monitored during the day by *jawans* from the Border Observation Posts (BOPs). The BSF deploys one *jawan* per 300 meter of the border to patrol in the night on a bicycle, equipped with a torch and a night vision binocular (made in Israel¹). Sometimes the BSF officers also venture out to patrol on cars fitted with searchlight.

The company commander of the BSF in Charuigachhi, a border village in Bongaon block in North 24 Parganas, India, informed that the BSF has no right to issue warrant or arrest. Their jurisdiction is limited to a 5-km range from the border within which they can investigate cases related to border transgression. The BSF lodges FIR through the federal state (i.e. West Bengal state) police. Even with this relatively limited power, the BSF behaves in a feudal manner and wields unparalleled influence in the border areas. The villagers need to get down from their bicycles while crossing the gate of a BSF camp. The daily life of villagers who live right on the border are monitored by the BSF: they need to inform the BSF about the arrival of any relative, or if anybody stays in their house overnight; they are questioned if they venture outside their house after the dusk; they and their visitors are required to carry an identity card in the night and when they go to the agricultural field lying outside the barbed fence.

The BSF see local people with suspicion; the *jawans* regularly shout and scream at people. There are several reports of the BSF’s disproportionate use of force, including opening fire on farmers and smugglers and killing them (Mittal, 2011; Human Rights Watch 2010). In 2010, the then

¹ It is interesting to note that how border management techniques and tools also flow around the globe.

Director General of BSF, Raman Srivastava, responded to a journalist, “We fire at criminals who violate the border norms.....The deaths have occurred in Indian territory and mostly during night so how can they be innocent[?].”² The Human Rights watch report attributes to this suspicion and aggression to “ [the] fact that many [jawans] are deployed to West Bengal after difficult and tense tours of duty at the India-Pakistan border” (HRW 2010:14). Almost all the jawans and officers posted in West Bengal are from different parts of India and they do not speak or understand local languages. This is a deliberate strategy of the state to distance the BSF from local people. The state also remains silent over the BSF’s excesses and protects its personnel from being tried in the criminal courts. The local police turns blind eye to the atrocities of the BSF and is reluctant to accost the BSF. The local people or even politicians and panchayat members have no control over the BSF’s affairs; they hardly resist or contest the BSF. All this makes the BSF even more invincible and a fearful force.

A former smuggler observed that smuggling depends on the BSF and the local police, who, with rare exceptions, usually indulge in accepting bribes. It was alleged that the local people are often encouraged by the BSF and police officers to start smuggling. Apparently, the BSF officers would come to Boaldaha village and ask groups of youth, “Why don’t you do something [implying some smuggling activity]? We will help you.” A few people had accepted such an offer and got involved in smuggling. Others had joined the trade without such provocation; they found an opportunity to earn some money and hence they joined the trade.

The border, however, is never tightly secure. The very nature of physical geography of substantial areas on this border make it impossible to construct such a barbed fence (Banerjee 2011). The delta area of Sunderbans, with numerous water channels, is almost impossible to surveil. Moreover, since the BSF allegedly indulges in corruption, so the integrity of the border is also compromised. The state actions therefore do not stop smuggling; such actions only bring change in the form, content, intensity and route of smuggling. Smuggling is a play with, and at the limits of, the state’s sovereignty. A tight control of the border remains unachievable.

² “Bangladesh Urged to Dismantle insurgent groups’ camps: BSF chief,” Indo Asian News Service, September 27, 2010, <https://in.news.yahoo.com/bangladesh-urged-dismantle-insurgent-groups-camps-bsf-chief.html> (accessed on 25 September 2014).

Expectedly, the state is anxious about security lapses along the border. The central government has started monitoring the activities of the BSF personnel. To curb corruption, it has incorporated the Intelligence Bureau and vigilance units within the BSF. The monthly salary of the BSF personnel is directly credited into their bank account, and the transfer of money via money-order or bank transfer by the officers and *jawans* is monitored by the vigilance unit.

*The topography of smuggling*³

While the border might now look physically impermeable, but it has not cut off the old networks of smuggling. The smugglers collude with the state apparatus and when required cunningly dodge them to create ‘pores’ in that borders. Each point on the border through which smuggling takes place is called ‘*ghat*’, and every ghat has an owner or controller called ‘*ghat malik*’. There is also a loose network of ‘line-man’ [*sic*], ‘agents’ and ‘carriers’⁴ who facilitate the smuggling of goods across the border. Generally, before any big consignment is smuggled, the smuggling parties get in touch with the ghat malik, who then organises or activates his or her network and also informs and negotiates with his or her counterpart on the other side of the border. Once the deal is struck, the ghat malik on the other side similarly activates his or her network. In smaller smuggling points, the ghat malik and the main agent can be the same person. Ghat maliks are shadowy figures, and they are obviously well connected with powerful and influential people in the locality.

The ‘agents’ clear the border and hand over consignments to the agents on the other side of the border. They act almost like any government approved clearing and forwarding agents who facilitate legal trade across the border. The actual transportation of goods is done by the ‘carriers’, many of them are women, both young and middle-aged.

The smuggling business is organised and controlled by various ‘syndicates’⁵. The big syndicates

³ It must be mentioned here that the very clandestine nature of trafficking and smuggling make it difficult to obtain information which can be presented as *hard* evidences; the information collected are often anecdotal. But, since, these are collected mostly from the former-operators, therefore they provide an insight in to the actual operation of these networks and groups.

⁴ These English words are used by the smugglers to designate the members of the network.

⁵ The English words ‘syndicate’ and ‘group’ are used by the smugglers.

can either play the role of a broker between the buyers and sellers, or they can be a direct party in the transaction. They are extremely well connected with the higher levels of political parties, civil administration and police, and their identities have hardly ever been exposed.⁶ The smaller syndicates and groups come up spontaneously in the border villages. These groups engage in petty smuggling. Some of the groups can also work for the bigger syndicates. On the Indian side, in Boaldaha village at one point of time, 10 to 12 small syndicates or groups used to operate. These groups had specific duties to perform, like, crossing the border, receiving goods and people, arranging facilities for people to stay in the village, provide them food, and transport them to Bongaon, storing goods until the passage (i.e. the road from Boaldaha to Bongaon) was rendered clear, and ‘managing’ the local police. These lower level members of the smuggling network do get to not know anything else; they never get the wind of the bigger sharks, almost all of whom are outsiders, operating out of nearby towns (Bongaon and Basirhat are such centres).

To get into the smuggling business, the agents and village-level groups need money to buy commodities and sell those on credit. If they do not have money, then they become helpers or facilitators—the carrier or ‘line man.’ The other way of becoming a powerful agent in the border area is to have extensive contacts with the BSF and the police and the capacity to manage these agencies to open up points on the border to smuggle goods and securing a clear passage for goods and people. Earlier, even the smaller agents of Charuigachhi had easy access to the BSF officers and they used to have a feast of chicken and alcohol with these officers. They used helped the officers and *jawans* to sell the goods that the latter used to confiscate from travellers or other smugglers.

Cattle rustling

The two major profitable engagements are cattle rustling and helping people to cross the border without passport and visa. Cattle rustling used to be one of the major activities along the Charuigachhi border. When the demand for cows from Bangladesh used to increase, the Indian agents would become active. They would ‘set up’ BSF, customs, district administration, and police departments, and simultaneously contact the suppliers in Haryana and other northern states to place order for cows. The cows were brought in trucks and their passage from north-western to eastern

⁶ At least, in the course of our research, we could not identify or approach them.

India was facilitated by a nation-wide token system of bribe. Once a ‘token’ was issued by, say, a police station, no other police station in the district would ‘disturb’ the truckers. Some cows went straight to Bangladesh as a lot (in which bigger agents and syndicates were involved), while other cows went to Bongaon ‘*haat*’—a legal market for cows, where agents would buy those on behalf of Bangladeshi customers or agents. Some Indian traders also bought cows and sold them in Bangladesh. Bangladeshis would buy cows in the *haat* and ask the agents to cross the borders for a fee. The agent would negotiate with the BSF and cross the Charuigachhi/Ghiba (on the Bangladeshi side) border. The agents used to keep cows tethered in Charuigachhi village and wait for the opportune time to cross into Bangladesh. The farmers in Charuigachhi were unhappy with the cattle-rustlers as the cows would destroy their standing crops, but they never used to challenge the rustlers because of fear. As it has become difficult to rustle cattle through the Charuigachhi border, the smugglers and agents have moved to another *ghat* (point).

Border crossing

When the smuggling activities across the border increases, then the movement of people also surges. The business of helping *any* human being to cross the border (mostly from Bangladesh into India) is known as ‘*dhur-er byabsa*’ (in 24 Parganas, India, and Jessore and Satkhira in Bangladesh), ‘*adom-er byabsa*’ (in Rajshahi, Bangladesh) (both lit. business of ‘man’), or “*dhakka-passport*” (lit. push-passport; in Mushirdabad, India). For crossing the border, the groups charge fees on a per head basis. It does not make any difference to the agents whether someone is a trafficked victim or a ‘normal’ person. However, if they suspect that someone is being trafficked or that person has come through an agent who is known to work with the traffickers (persons who traffic men and mostly women), then they can try to exploit the trafficker and extract more border crossing fees, and on very rare occasions, abuse the victim sexually.⁷ The former agents claimed that they had no idea where the Bangladeshi people used to go after crossing the border and entering India, neither did they know the identity of these people—all that they were interested in was fees per head. According to them, Bangladeshis who were willing to get into India would contact them directly, or more often as was the case, the Bangladeshi agents would get in touch with them and ask to help in crossing the border. In the heydays of late 1990s and early 2000s,

⁷ As reported by a former agent; though he could not elaborate on the exact circumstances or even cite an incidence which he personally knew about; he has heard rumours about one or two such cases.

around 150-250 people used to cross the Charuigachhi border every day.

Once the people are in India, the agents would carry them in van-rickshaws and take to Boaldaha for night halt, and later transport them to Bongaon. The ‘halting stations’ are always close to the border. These halting villages are not necessarily outside the jurisdiction of BSF (i.e. within the range of 5 km from the border), but they are far away from the BSF camp, and the agents would at least get some time to move the victims out these villages or hide them, if their line-men informed about an imminent raid. The raid is carried out by a group of BSF personnel under the command of an officer, hence any movement of a contingent of BSF personnel will raise the alarm.

One of the *majhis* [boatperson], who was into ‘black marketing’ in Rajshahi, Bangladesh, described the *modus operandi* of smuggling and ‘*adom-er byabsa*’ over the Padma river. The physical geography of the riverside border is such that *kharis* or canals from the river branch out in various directions, including a wide and deep one that goes into India. The Border Guard Bangladesh⁸ (henceforth, BGB) had established a camp near this *khari* to monitor the border. The *majhi* used to carry people in boats through bushes and lead them to the *khari*. The villages on the ‘*char*’ [riverine island or beds] were used as halting stations. There was no fixed time for crossing the border; he informed, ‘Whenever the border was open, we would take people across. Everybody will pretend that they are going to work, and they will dress down. Men will wear lungi, with one farm implement in their hand and carry least number of belongings rolled into a plastic bag.’ He used to charge Taka 7000-8000 per group (that he could fit in the boat) of people for crossing the river and the border.

Though crossing the border and cattle rustling remains lucrative activities, however it is the regular smuggling of commodities like rice, salt, onion, Phensedyl (cough syrup used as intoxicant) etc. which keeps the ‘black market’ alive and the village-level groups, agents, carriers and lines-men employed. These petty smuggling keeps the ground level network functional. These grassroots-level smuggling networks are used by other smugglers and traffickers for bigger consignments. Char Asariyadaha in Rajshahi (in Bangladesh) looks like a normal village, on the banks of river Padma, but it used to be an active centre for smuggling and was a halting village. Earlier it was an

⁸ Earlier it was known as Bangladesh Rifles (BDR).

important point through which cows used to be smuggled. Most of the people in the village do not own land; the landless people are dependent on labour work or sharecropping in others' land. Petty smuggling helped people to earn a supplementary income. One villager informed that they would ask their children, "Go and get 5 kgs of salt [from India]." Then, they would sell it in the local [Bangladeshi] market and make an instant profit of a few takas. Children got involved in the black trade, doing petty activities for the elders, and did not attend schools. The villagers claimed that the border management had become quite strict and people can no longer easily slip into India; their smuggling business has suffered and "now people are back to hard work", and "children have gone back to the schools."

The smuggling *ghats* (points) on the border are never static. The changes in the physical structure of the border, intensification of vigilance of the BSF and the discourse of terrorism has changed the political economy of the borderland. As the border has become 'harder', the petty smugglers find it difficult to negotiate with the incumbent security personnel. There is a tendency to consolidate the hold of bigger syndicates who can strike deals with the BSF officials to open the border at a specific date and time. Since the openings are infrequent, so the bribes offered are also substantial, which gives the bigger syndicates an upper hand. They can dispatch much larger consignments and use the earlier autonomous petty smuggling groups as their contract workers. Sometimes, the bigger syndicates respond to the changing security practices of both Indian and Bangladesh and shift their base from one place to another due to strict vigilance in certain border areas, the grassroots-level networks in those areas collapse. Boaldaha village in Bongaon is a case in point.

Boaldaha which used to be a hotspot for various smuggling activities has seen a steady decline in its 'business' due to the development of a 'hard' border in Charuigachhi. The former smuggling agents are all—apparently—engaged in *legitimate* businesses. A few of them buy and sell, or supply rice from villagers to local rice mills, dealers or stockists. Others make cotton pillows and quilts and sell in those in the market. A few make diaries at home and supply those to the markets in Kolkata. Many of them have moved out of the village and are engaged in Kolkata's informal and unorganized sector as daily wage labourers; some work as truck drivers.

Fabricating a market for women

The need see beyond the border, and locate the specificity of border in this wider economy.

The trafficking of adolescent girls and young women from Bangladesh to India is a high-risk, high-profit business. A vast population of poorer people on the either side of the border and the degraded status of women in the Indian sub-continent create a happy hunting ground for the traffickers. The border erects a steep legal and bureaucratic wall, and once the victims cross into India, it becomes quite difficult for them to return home or to rescue and extradite them. The existing smuggling networks provide necessary support, and brothels near the border offer an immediate market to the traffickers.

It is very common for people in rural Bangladesh to migrate to various countries of the world to work, and particularly in the western side of Bangladesh, both men and women go to India in search of work. Since India does not allow the immigration of labourers, so people face the problem of social capital deficit and information asymmetry: they have no idea about how to find a job, the destination of workplace, how to go there, and where to live. So, they are dependent on their friends, relatives, neighbours or *dalals* (agents) to help them to migrate. During the interview process, I found that the trafficked victims and their family members had trusted the would-be traffickers; trafficking rarely takes place without the involvement of people whom one trusts, like close relatives or acquaintances. The agents or potential traffickers can live in the villages itself; they do various kinds of small businesses, they work as day labourers, etc., and they slowly establish relationship with the potential victim's family, gain their trust and make an offer.

When the girls (or their family members) contact the *dalals* (agents) seeking jobs in India, they know that they are willing to go to a foreign country adopting illegal means, and as a result they would often hide their plan to migrate from their neighbours or the entire village; their plan is not made public. The deficit in social capital, information asymmetry and illegal status together place the girls (and in some cases their family members) in a weaker **bargaining** position vis-à-vis the agents, which lead them to completely submit to the authority of the agent.

When the traffickers or their agents are incapable to establish relationship with the families, then

they hire others. A study by ACD-Rajshahi (1995), a Bangladeshi NGO, found that *dalals* [agent] from India would come to Bangladesh during Eids. They would get in touch with local agents who would have already recruited a *ghatak* [intermediary] or ready to recruit one. All the ‘*ghataks*’ were women. They would visit villages and scout for vulnerable families. She would arrange marriage of the girl(s) with an Indian groom, and in most cases the girls’ family would not have to pay any dowry. The marriage would take place within a short span of time and the bride would be taken away to India immediately (mostly to Uttar Pradesh). The family thereafter would lose contact with their daughter, and in most cases, would never be able to trace her or know her whereabouts. ACD found that many of these Bangladeshi women in India live a ‘slave-like’ life. Sometimes, their Indian husbands also force them into prostitution or sell them to brothels.⁹ Increasingly in Bangladesh, the garment factories have become a magnet for trafficking—young girls are promised jobs in the garment factories, and instead of taking them to the factories, they are taken to the border and then to India.¹⁰

In absence of any (governmental) welfare support, the poorer parents find it difficult to offer their girl children adequate food, clothing and education. Due to child marriage, divorce and the practice of polygamy, women can find their position to be extremely vulnerable within the family. In certain cases, husbands desert them. The traffickers target these women. A large number of people are dislocated and displaced every year due to natural disasters or the erosion of river-banks; the officials of ACD-Rajshahi informed that these displaced people too become the victims of trafficking.

[TO ELABORATE: Focus on tropes of marriage and job; use of vulnerability, desperateness, deception, trust. The optical field and the capability of the state might have expanded, yet trafficking is high—why?]

The trafficking of adolescent girls and women takes place only after the development of specific

⁹ It is also puzzling to find that most of the rescued victims are adolescent girls, while women of various age groups are trafficked on the premise of marriage or they are deserted /sold off by their husbands. So this might indicate that there is a pool of missing Bangladeshi women in India, whose whereabouts and being are not known to us.

¹⁰ We were informed about this new trend by the Bangladesh National Woman Lawyers Association officers. But I could not get access to any case study on trafficked garment factory workers.

networks for trafficking. By “specific networks for trafficking”, I mean that a network of people and infrastructure which connects the source, route and destination. This connection is important as the victims are transported from their village to the destination along this ‘chain’, which is either remotely supervised by agents or agents are embedded in the process, who take the trafficked women to specific addresses in India and elsewhere.¹¹ The traffickers or their agents at the village level in Bangladesh are all connected to brothels (understood in the broader sense: neighbourhood or cluster of houses or dispersed flats in various location) either in Bangladesh or mostly in India directly or through some intermediaries. Without this connection, they cannot operate. The traffickers are helped by their trusted transport owners, drivers and helpers, along with people who offer safe accommodation *en route*. These places where the victims are sheltered are known as ‘*rakhi*’, ‘*tabu*’ and ‘*store*’. Dhaka is a major ‘*aarot*’ [collection point] for the victims, and from there they are brought to the border districts (Jessore-Satkhira border areas are the primary route). Apart from private cars or hired vehicles, the traffickers also use public transport, particularly the night coaches which operate between Dhaka and the border towns.

However, it is not just smuggling network or the physical infrastructure that facilitate the traffickers, but the traffickers have established relationship with various levels of the state apparatus. While the brothel owners remain almost invisible and untraceable, the traffickers are relatively visible faces, as they need to visit villages to collect girls. Yet the traffickers seem to carry on with their business with a certain sense of impunity. The agents are well connected with the *thana* (local police station) and Union Parishad (or Union Council, decentralised grassroots-level administrative unit) in Bangladesh, and panchayats (local governance unit) and police stations in West Bengal, making it difficult for villagers to exercise social pressure on them.

If the trafficker and the victims are detained by the police or other governmental agencies, the victims do not divulge any information due to their trust in the trafficker, ignorance about trafficking or intimidation, and they repeat what they are taught by the trafficker. As a result it becomes difficult to differentiate and distinguish trafficking from migration, and identify the cases

¹¹ It must be again mentioned here that there is no hard evidence to support this statement. The presence or the supervision of traffickers’ agents during the process of trafficking was informed by the victims and the local agents. It is also difficult to discern what happens to women who are not trafficked in this way, yet enter India via illegal means.

of trafficking, arrest or prosecute the trafficker. Even when the victims are rescued, they do not want to lodge a case or stand as witness; they are afraid of the traffickers. Due to lack of evidence or witness, the case cannot proceed and therefore the number of cases lodged in the police station or court is quite less. The traffickers can also be local people, and most of the time related or are close to the victim. Sometimes, the cases of trafficking are settled within the family or village. The traffickers threaten the family members of the victim. The victims are also influenced by panchayat, Union Parishad and sub-district level politicians, by lawyers and the public prosecutor. The police do not register cases or cooperate with victim's family. The panchayat and Union Parishad sometimes decline to issue letter identifying or supporting the claim of the parents or NGOs that the girl has been trafficked, but police demands such letters without which they do not lodge any case.

The traffickers also brutalise and intimidate the victims. Phakre Alam (1999) reports that some of the trafficked girls were raped strategically by the traffickers or their supervisors (not the agents who facilitate in crossing the border or those who house these victims) during the transit. If any girl realised that she was being trafficked and raised an alarm, then she could be raped in front of other girls so as to set an example and warn the rest of victims, or even just to silence the girl. The trafficked victims were also raped to 'break their shyness' and to make them 'extrovert'—apparently, such 'extrovert girls' fetched higher price from brothel owners.

The traffickers are vigilant and they change their tactics and route quickly and continuously. They are always better informed about the route and border crossing points, and choose points which are safer for them. They take victims via a convoluted route; for example, people from south are taken via north to confuse them, to avoid being questioned, or confronting acquaintances. In 2008, 265 people were detained in Chapai Nawabganj; the traffickers immediately changed their route, and avoided those points.

Women as gift

Smuggling and sex are intertwined.¹² Therefore it is not surprising that there is a high volume of trafficking of women through the borders. The state of exception that exists at border, the sense of impunity of the security personnel and scariness of smugglers, where violence and daringness are celebrated, make the border a space of hyper-masculinity. This possibility of primordial form of masculinity in the border creates an anxiety of validation of (masculine) power of the dominant: the security personnel and the smugglers need to demonstrate their power by controlling and commanding women and their body. Women's body become a gift to the security forces (and often to politicians) through which obligation are created.

[ELABORATE THIS SECTION, gendered form of domination and violence; foreign bodies – exotic, point of no return, extradition treaty etc. movement from one juridical order to another. rights, bare bodies (Agamben)? Commodity control – scarcity state regulation and control, high risk and hence higher profit and mark up. Exchange – bribe and gift; normal market transaction. Border as masculine]

The smugglers regularly send women to the BSF and BGB personnel to facilitate the passage of goods, and apparently, sometimes, men do not hesitate to offer their own wives for this purpose. In cases of women smuggler groups, one member of the group would offer herself to the security forces on either side of the border; the group members offer themselves in rotation so that others can carry on with their smuggling activities or their work as a carrier. The BGB personnel would sometimes ask the agents in Rajshashi, '*Pakhi khawao*' [lit. "feed us with 'birds'", i.e. good-looking young girls]. The agents would then search for good-looking young girls and take them by boats to the BGB camps. Sometimes, they also send women from Bangladesh for BSF, along with a group of people.

Subsuming the social

The condition on the border is not homogenous; not all the *ghats* (points) are of equal importance to the smugglers or permeable to move commodities and people easily. Itinda (in North 24

¹² We must warn the readers that they might find the next few paragraphs to be voyeuristic; however we did not want to distort the style of presentation of information by the local people.

Parganas district in India) is one of the exceptional villages on the border where the impunity of the security forces converges with the brazenness of the smugglers. This creates a condition where the village no longer fits into the normal/normative idea of village with its traditional social hierarchies, control of social and political institutions, and the concept of family. The excessive play of power and the tight grip of the security forces and smugglers over the village have subsumed the society and reconstituted its structure and morality.

Itinda is a Muslim majority village; most of the people being marginal farmers or are landless. Apparently almost everyone here is involved in the 'black market' trade—they have become agent of everything; everybody smuggles goods, acts as carriers, and gradually well-established networks have emerged. Many men marry Bangladeshi women and as a result there is a strong bond with villages on the other side of the border. As the mobile signals spill over the border, so the Bangladeshi families can use Indian SIM to make local calls to their relatives in India, and vice versa.

Some women¹³ of the village are also involved in sex trade. It is said in this area, that if any BSF officer likes any girl or woman in the village, then she will not be spared. He would offer money or gifts to that girl or woman; he would collect their mobile number and call her up; and finally she would give up and sleep with the officer.¹⁴ Once violated, many of these women end up working as 'flying sex workers'¹⁵, or work as part-time sex workers.¹⁶ They entertain their clients either at the clients' place, which can be in a lodge or hotel in the truck-parking area near the (Itinda) border, or they go to (hotels in) Basirhat and elsewhere. Others serve the clients at home, when there's no one in the house or other family members intentionally stay away from the house. Sex trade offers the opportunity to quickly and easily earn a good sum of money; a few flying sex workers have made and saved money and invested that in jewellery and have built houses. The social norms and values are open to negotiation in the domain of power. After any initial hesitation

¹³ Though the flying sex workers who were interviewed claimed that many women in the village are involved in the sex trade; however, they could not provide an exact number or percentage of such women vis-à-vis the whole village.

¹⁴ The BSF also tortures women sex workers; some Bangladeshi sex workers do not even get money after servicing their BSF clients.

¹⁵ Flying sex workers work when they want; they usually work when good monetary offers are made.

¹⁶ Exactly how they entered into the sex trade, other than being influenced by the BSF personnel, could not be discerned.

or rift, the family no longer contests the profession or the source of income—be it sex trade, trafficking or smuggling. The husbands know what their wives are into, and have accepted the change in power relationships within the family. Some women claimed that they feel more independent after starting to earn money; they run the family and do not depend on their husbands.

The Panchayat (local governance unit) does not have any clout in the area and they do not bother to intervene into the affairs of people; instead, as a flying sex worker informed, panchayat members solicit sex from them. The police never enter the villages and they remain contented with the ‘cut’ or ‘*hafta*’¹⁷ that they regularly receive. The villagers on the other hand seemed to care less about the local politicians or the police as they know that they can fall back on the BSF or smugglers to help them to ‘sort out issues.’

Due to this reconfiguration of the village, Itinda remains a hot spot for free passage of migrants and trafficked victims. It is not accidental that North 24 Parganas has the highest number of brothels [REF] in West Bengal. Matia market is not too far from Basirhat town and about 18 kms away from Itinda. It has a few thriving brothels, which are like reservoirs of trafficked victims. The adolescent girls and young women who are brought into India through Itinda are mostly taken there. One of the pimps in Matia informed, ‘No one can satiate (the demand of the brothels for younger girls)’ [*‘keu testa metate parbe naa’*], implying that this demand is the main driver of trafficking. According to him and another commercial sex worker, who works in Matia, ‘Almost 70% of the trafficked victims [those who are trafficked via Basirhat and Matia] are minor. The brothels can absorb whatever number of girls is supplied to them [*‘joto meyei ashuk, era niye nebe’*]. This system survives on the supply of fresh blood [*‘taja rokto chaay’*], and there is no limit to the amount it can consume [*‘kono sesh nei’*]. The clients also want young girls [*‘babu-rao natun meye chaay’*].’ A network has developed in Matia to send girls outside (to Kolkata, Mumbai, etc.) to work as sex workers, though some girls stay in the local brothels, mostly “not-so-good looking” ones. The pimp and the commercial sex worker informed that this ‘sorting’ and dispatching of girls is controlled from the brothels.

The brothels in Matia look like hotels; these are multi-storey buildings, whose ground floor lobby

¹⁷ As informed by the flying sex workers, when asked why the police did not intervene.

is occupied by a few youths, a big refrigerator is stocked with cold-drinks, a poster of alcohol indicates that customers can avail alcoholic drinks, small posters of Bollywood stars and Hindu gods and goddess adorn the walls. A few teenage girls wearing heavy make-up and colourful clothes roam around the lobby, leaving no doubt that they are ready to serve the clients. The everyday business affairs are looked after by young boys or men, most of them are under the age of 25 years. They approach the clients; take 'order',¹⁸ fetch girls, and collect money. And of course, they are there to violently resist anyone trying to upset their game. The landlords and landladies remain in the background or underground. They bring girls via agents and put them in the trade. All the girls in these hotel-like brothels, guessed from their looks, are under 18 years old, though most of them would be around 13 to 15 years.¹⁹ The new girls are made to sleep with clients at least nine times a day—as new (virgin) girls bring more 'business'; good looking girls fetch higher rates and frequency. If the girls decline to sleep with the clients, then they are beaten up. The new girls are never left alone; no outsiders like NGO workers, let alone the police, would have access to them; there is always some young men guarding them. The trafficker or the brothel owner would say to a new girl, "If you don't listen to us, then we will inform the police, who will torture you and send you back to Bangladesh." The trafficked girls fear that their family might not take them back, villagers might be vitriolic and ostracise her family; hence there is a fear psychosis and they remain within a shell and do not always open out or inform about the traffickers. After going through this routine of torture and bullying, the girls have no choice but to accept the profession. Consent is not the right and helpful concept to understand their involvement in the trade.

CONCLUSION:

1. My methodological point: shift from network and flow to site of production and power.
2. I have demonstrated or dwelled upon:
 - a. Border produces a spatial and exceptional economy
 - b. Border as a state of exception
 - c. Border is not static
 - d. Consolidation of bigger smugglers and appropriation of smaller ones
 - e. Border is hyper masculine; women as gift.
 - f. Borderland is not homogenous; certain areas can completely reconstituted.
 - g. Need to locate border in the wider economy.
 - h. Juridical order and creation of bare bodies.

¹⁸ This English word is used, which has semblance with the terminology used in restaurant business.

¹⁹ There are older women who serve clients outside these hotel-like brothels in their shacks.