

Several Aspects of Life and Community in the India- Bangladesh Border Area of West Bengal: Specifically after the Independence of Bangladesh in 1971

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1. Introduction

Bangladesh became independent on 26th of March 1971. The independence of Bangladesh was declared by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It needed to be pointed out that, Bangladesh did not exist as a nation prior to its independence; rather the nation was the one of the five provinces of Pakistan after the partition of 1947. After partition, the present day Bangladesh got separated from the mainland of Indian nation. However, the particular province which came to be known as Bangladesh after its independence was known as East Bengal, at the time of Partition in 1947. In a later point of time, it was renamed as East Pakistan, according to its location on the eastern side. But Eastern Pakistan was separated from the other four provinces of Pakistan by 1800 kilometers of Indian Territory. Thus the governance of East Pakistan was not as strong as in comparison to the other four provinces of Pakistan. Governing that particular portion became a fundamental aspect of inconvenience and inadequacies followed as a consequence. People, of East Pakistan, as it was known before the independence of Bangladesh, faced tremendous injustice and obscurities regarding activities. Thus, the rule from a distant part failed to provide necessary amount of adjustments and comfort to these people. Thus, a revolt for freedom was necessary at that point of time to separate the country from such kind of rule and establish own set of rule and government. This revolt ultimately resulted in the freedom of that country under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1971. This general fact of history would always make us aware of the nature of independency of the country Bangladesh. But, what followed afterwards needed to be discussed. The close proximity of the Bangladesh border with West Bengal resulted in various sort of transactions and communications. The close proximity of West Bengal and Bangladesh, which was previously known as East Bengal, affected the living pattern of those people living on the border area. At the time of the fencing of India and Bangladesh for defining their territory, that particular situation became lot worse for the people situated in those places of fencing. While dividing these two nations, many a house and areas of people were also divided into two halves. One part of their property fell into Bangladesh and another part of their property fell into Indian Territory.

This particular aspect gave birth to a lot of ambiguity and contradictions among the people living on the Bangladesh-India border. People living in these places were left stunned

as they had to share boundaries with both the nation. And the mode of life and community took a different shape and mechanism. Life in these areas became much more different and in times difficult in comparison to other parts of India. Thus the lifestyle and society in these areas cultivated different aspects in living because they had to face several peculiarities and obscurities in their day to day life. People in these areas adapted a different path and mode of living in the field of economy, politics, education, sports, transportation. Thus the socio-economic picture of such territory projects a different view point. And because of such peculiar conditions in the socio-economic fields there arose a different set of practices and cultural activities, often shared characteristics and often differed significantly. Their economic pattern and way of earning money, as well as business activities were very much different from other parts of the nation for both these countries. The gender roles differed in these places and the man-woman relationship in the society were also different from other parts of these two nation and particularly of Indian territory situated near the Bangladesh border. Other chief and primary social practices in cases of religion had a different role and activity all together. The language of such places also differed. And the issue of caste happened to be also a chief concern for this people.

Keywords: border, migration, fencing, inconveniences, obscurities, peculiar circumstances

Thus this article would try to trace the history of people living in the border area Bangladesh-India and this article would look at their lifestyle and social activities, which were much more different and peculiar in nature. This present study would also focus on the economic patterns and activities in these places. This study would also analyze a major shift of these people from agriculture to business profession. This article would also focus on the uneasiness and living odds of these people because of border area circumstances and certain rules and regulations, which they had to follow in their day to day basis. This paper would also project the communal unrest and communal tolerance of these people. The article would also highlight the gender role of such inhabitants and also their man-woman relationship. The article also intends to bring out the major intricacies and tendencies of language usage in the socio-economic context, specifically under such a political bond and its oddities. This article would also focus on the association of the Border Security Force with the local

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society member. And by doing this, the present study under concern would try to project the smuggling issues and activities in these places. Thus this paper would try to project a complete picture of the socio-cultural, socio-economic picture of the people living in the border area after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

The scenario of the Bangladesh-India border projects a different set of pictures in comparison to other parts of both of these countries. The division of border, especially after the independence of Bangladesh needed to be defined in order to have a clear definition of the territories of both this countries. Even after the separation of borders and identification of boundaries there were such oddities which could not be answered properly. Places were divided and identified in such a way that many villages were separated by the boundaries, in most cases these were not fenced in the initial period after the independence of Bangladesh as a nation. Thus in the South Dinajpur district of West Bengal there were places where a person had to cross the fencing to go to the other part of his property. Houses, forest, tree groves and buildings were separated by the border. In these situation people would have lunch in India and would rest or gather in a close vicinity of his house in the evening. Such were the situation. Not only that, people in these places also posses different set of identity cards of both the nation by changing their name or surname. Thus people of these localities in the first instances could be a citizen of Bangladesh in a part of his property and could be a Indian for his other side of the property. Thus, the situation was a mixed situation. People could not even identify their own nation. This was evident because in those situations, specifically in the decade or the decade after the independence of Bangladesh there were no such restrictions and strict policies being applied to these people. And thus these people could roam freely in Bangladesh and in India also. The confusion created by such division impacted the national balance and maintenance of the circumstances in the border area. And it needed to be mentioned that the relationship between Bangladesh and India, right after the independence of Bangladesh was not a friendly relationship.¹ But the border area people because of living in

¹Ishtiaq Hossain, *Bangladesh India Relations: Issues and Problems*, Asian Survey, p.1115. 1981.

Because Bangladesh is historically and geographically close to its big neighbor India, the "India factor" is an important variable in the making of foreign policy. Bangladesh governmental leaders from Sheikh Majibur Rahman to Lt. General Ziaur Rahman, have never failed to emphasize the maintenance of friendly relations with India. The Indians, too, have time and again expressed similar sentiments. Unfortunately the history of Indo-Bangladesh relations since 1971 presents a dismal picture. A number of issues have not only clouded their relationships but have also led to the exchange of fire between the two countries' border security forces over disputed territories. Indo-Bangladesh relations began as downward slump in March 1972 when grumblings were heard among political circles in Bangladesh over the just concluded Indo-Bangladesh Trade Pact. As the decade of the 1970's rolled on, more issues- e.g., the dispute over the maritime belt, Indian support for the pro-Mujib guerrillas, the sharing of Ganges waters, and disputes over the Muhurir Char (an islet on the river Muhuri, the boundary between Bangladesh and the Indian state Tripura) and Purbasha island in the Bay of Bengal- have seriously undermined friendly relations between India and Bangladesh.

close proximity for generations had no malice against each other, even after separated by national boundaries.

Thus at the end of the twentieth century, fencing and identification of zero point became much more crucial than any other thing in case of border settlement. But the introduction of the fencing caused a upset on the people living across nation, in other terms living on the both sides of the nation. And for the settlement of this ambiguity of their nationhood, strict rules and policies were applied. These people in the latter half of the twentieth century needed to have a proper Indian identity card to get access to come to India. Not a single people was allowed to cross the fencing without showing the government of India approved Identity card, such as voter ID card, driving license or any other card approved by the government of India. Thus, a situation of unrest and uneasiness could be very easily perceived in these people. They had no other option but to present their identity cards before entering into the Indian Territory. Even, there could be places where the inhabitants had to show identity card to go outside their houses and they were not permitted to cross the borderline if they had no identity card with them. They would be very easily denied access to their own home even if the border security force recognizes the person as a daily passer of the border. Such were the restrictions introduced by the Government of India to reduce the amount of trespassing in the border areas. Apparently it was also a fact that, even in the present day all the border areas of India and Bangladesh, which could be found in a scattered manner, have not been fenced yet due to certain oddities. Thus coming out of their houses for work or any other work was not easy and hustle free, they faced tremendous amount of uncertainty and delay for such activities of checking and inquiring about their purpose of visit. Thus, these people had to go through such things, which impacted their lives on the day to day basis. In comparison to the peoples living far away from the border or had nothing to do with border area, they would find it much easier to roam freely without having to worry about carrying their identity card or being enquired about their purpose of visit.

People in this area face severe difficulty if there agricultural lands or any other land would be placed in the other side of the fencing and just before the zero point or the neutral zone. It could be very easily seen that, peoples of this areas were not prepared for such division from the earliest introduction of border area fencing. Before fencing of the borders men could very easily cross borders in order to go to their agricultural lands lying beside the border. People did not need to care much about their agricultural land as there was no fencing in the initial phases after the independence of Bangladesh. But after the 1990's fencing were placed in most of the areas because of illegal transactions and smuggling issues. In such cases, there were lands placing on the other side of the fencing, then the Indian peoples had to show identity card to grant access to their own land only for agricultural purposes. They were not allowed to built houses or any kind of infrastructure nearby the border area fencing. Thus people were deprived of their privileges in possessing particular lands. In such scenarios many people sold their lands in half a price because of their inability to access lands without any hustle. And it was a matter of fact that, doing

agricultural work on the other side of the fencing proved to be costly and thus there was a general reduction of agricultural activities in these areas. This phenomenon resulted in the shift to business from agriculture. Thus, people who could not adapt themselves with border area restrictions and rules had to sell their lands or lease them to some other person. In the border areas of South Dinajpur, many people shifted to transport business and track business. Rice transportation and several other goods transported through the track became a prominent source of business after the liberalization of trade with Bangladesh.

Migration was one of the chief concerns for both the nation. A huge number of people migrated to India from Bangladesh after the independence war of Bangladesh in 1970. Many people left their homeland to settle into another nation. The rate of migration was higher in the initial phases after the independence because of no such restrictions in the border line as it was not defined and maintained with particular strict rules and policies. The migration rate increased in the following decades after the independence of Bangladesh. People left their homeland for better job opportunities and in the hope of a better life in India. It needed to be mentioned that, in the early phases there were no such visa restrictions or check points to reduce the number of immigrants from Bangladesh. But the people emigrating from Bangladesh or the people emigrating from India towards Bangladesh had their own concern. Few people had religious unrest and many a Muslim people left for Bangladesh because of religious unrest or communal unrest in India. Hindu people from Bangladesh left for India because of communal unrest. Many of the Bangladesh inhabitants left for India because of the environmental destruction in Bangladesh and many of the Indian people left for Bangladesh in the initial phases after independence of Bangladesh because of ethnic conflicts in India.

In this way an amalgamation of culture could be very easily apprehend by any person. Mixed identity was also a reason for cross cultural interactions and communications. People sharing the same locality bound to take elements from other community or village. The close proximity of the inhabitants of Bangladesh and people living in India was also a reason for a mixed group of people. Their manner of communication and the manner of clothing were almost equal in the early phases of border area living. People were of same locality and even from the same village and thus quite naturally inhabitants of these places shared same kind of ethnicity. But there were differences also in these peoples after the fencing and restrictions applied to these inhabitants they were separated. These people had limited access and communication with the people living next door or in other terms in the opposite side of the fencing. In the initial phases when there was no fencing or fixed boundaries these people had similarities in customs, dresses and in various social activities.

The introduction of the fencing separated these people from each other and gradually the customs and traditions started to differ gradually. The intervention of the fencing also caused these people to lose touch with their fellow village members with whom they once shared food and other things. Not only the intervention of the fencing but also the

intervention of the communal unrest separated these people from each other. Hinduism and Islam had been two different set to communities with various kinds of differences among them. In a interesting note, it could be said that, the various differences among these people never incurred any kind of religious animosities. These people, though from different nations shared a brotherhood among themselves because of their close proximity and the sameness of language also intimates them even amidst several differences in religious beliefs and also separated by the Bangladesh-India border. In fact it could be said the fencing of the border not only separated this people, who once shared the same locality, in terms of physical distance but also separated this people in terms of cultural practices and activities.

The role of religion in holding a particular nation or community had been very important since the very beginning. This same phenomenon also resulted in keeping men separated from other community members. The religion which chains and binds a community also becomes the reason for friction and communal unrest.² Hindus and Muslims lives side by side in the border areas. These people seemed to be having no such trouble in dealing with other members of the community or with the other members of a different community. Temples and Mosques can be seen laid side by side. The Mohammedans prayer at one point becomes a alarm bell for the other community members to know the exact time of the day. People would start their day at the early morning prayer of the Muslims and Hindus would start or function their work accordingly. Such is the coexistence of the Hindus and Muslims in the border areas of West Bengal. The brotherhood between the two communities and other communities can be seen very easily.

A close look at the border area would indicate that, the traditional gender role also shifts in these places. Men and women acquire separate position of their own. Each of the gender be it male or female seemed to be shifting their roles in occasions which demands them to do so. In the border area of West Bengal women plays significant roles in earning livelihood either by labor or any other work, such as involvement in business activities concerning with the border area's activities. In fact female persona in these

²Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion, and Politics in North India*, iuniverse, 2005.

Language and religion have been among the major symbols of group identity in South Asia during the past century. They have competed with each other for the loyalties of the hundreds of millions of peoples of the Indian subcontinent and Srilanka, with the narrower loyalties of caste, kinship and locality, and with the broader loyalties to the developing states of the South Asian region. Language and religion have been used both to broaden men's identities in the South Asian countries and to undermine the sovereignties of existing political units. The evocation of Islamic unity in the pre-independence period in India led to the development of a powerful mass movement behind the demand for the creation of Pakistan, causing the formation of two successor states to the British Empire instead of one. The unity created in the state of Pakistan by the bond of Islam was in turn broken by the movement of Bengali linguistic-cultural group toward regional autonomy and ultimately toward sovereignty. India too has experienced since independence a succession of regional linguistic and religious movements which have sometimes seemed to be on the point of breaking the unity of the country.

places acquire a typical role also in smuggling goods, clothes, cough syrup and several other things. Women in these places could be found active in agricultural lands, business, work from home and several other tasks. Thus it could be said that women living in such border areas cultivated their own work force and individuality. Women in these areas found to be joining hand with their male counterpart in order to earn money for their livelihood. However, women in such border areas also found to be doing their household works. The reason of such force and activities carried by women in the border areas of West Bengal might be their circumstances which demands extreme measurements. Women here could be found not as meek and tender in comparison to the other parts of the nation. These women had to be fearless in order to tackle the extreme circumstances which they might face such areas. Thus the traditional gender role of women seemed to be shifting in a different way.

Border area of West Bengal, specifically where the distance between the Bangladesh inhabitants and Indian inhabitants are lesser, there increases the amount of smuggling rate.³ It is very unfortunate that many a border area people rely on the smuggling of several goods and products to earn their livelihood. People in these areas choose this option because of the scarcity of any other work. And smuggling being the easiest form of earning makes it worse for a comfortable living in such areas. From the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the rate of smuggling increased in leaps and bounds because of the exchange rate of currency and also because of the price difference of goods and other things between these two countries under consideration. Smuggling of cattle and other animals specially cows and buffaloes are very prominent in the border areas of West Bengal. Even after strict rules and regulations in addition with extra border security force, the smuggling of cows has not ceased. Though, these arrangements reduced the number of smuggling of cows and other animals. Smuggling of smoking weeds, cough syrup, electronic products are very popular in the border area of West Bengal.

³ Shudhakar K. Chaudhari, Cross Border Trade Between India & Bangladesh, NCAER, Working Papers, 1995

The flourishing nature of smuggling in this part of the subcontinent flows from differences in development between India and Bangladesh. Near total absence of industrial infrastructure in general and that of consumer goods in particular, up to early 1970s left Bangladesh's economy underdeveloped. Prior to the 1970s vigil on the Indo-East Pakistan border was strict and smuggling was at a low ebb. The interests of West Pakistan were well protected via aforesaid two pronged strategy. After the 1970s the situation changed in favor of smuggling. Consequently Bangladesh economy was saddled with growing demand for consumer goods which had to be made through imports. While suffering from rising BOP deficit on the current account. Bangladesh could hardly meet this demand wholly through legal imports. According to a recent study until recently, "import trade in Bangladesh operated under a severely controlled regime in a restrictive environment. A wide range of import control measures in the form of high tariffs, quotas, total or partial ban, licensing, etc., left the market prices of imported goods higher than the true landed value of smuggled goods" (Bakht, 1994). These conditions provide ripe environment for rampant smuggling, more so with regard to consumer goods, from across the borders of the large neighboring economy.

This sort of border area activities increases tension among the peace loving people living in the close vicinity of the border. In most of the days the shouting of border security force and chasing of smugglers are seen in these places. Smugglers very often take shelter in a nearby house and border security force would enter into the houses to search for such smugglers. The area of such activities becomes troublesome for a healthy living and people would never relax in such places if there has been a terrorist trying to trespass the border. Thus people in such areas had to be always on their toes. It is also a bitter fact that, a person living in this area knows the loopholes of the security system and they never keep themselves away from manipulating such loopholes for their own advantages.

The caste practices and systems in these areas are also prevalent and not without any prejudice. Though people living in such areas offer brotherhood for the different community members but the matters of caste remains to be an obstacle for this kind of areas also. The Dalit people living in the close vicinity of the border are also disadvantaged because of their caste. This category of people, as Dr. Ambedkar observed, are given the least kind of treatment from the upper caste people. Border area Dalits are also treated in a similar fashion like the other dalit peoples in India. These people are however rising in stature in their social hierarchy because of Government intervention to help this people out of their grievances and poor circumstances. These border area people of West Bengal are also rising in the political field like the Mahars of Maharashtra. However, caste practices have been always a debilitating aspect of the human society and it should cease to operate and men should be treated equally. People in the border area, specially the Dalits are recognized by their works and way of living. Dalit women has been the most neglected lot of being throughout the history and getting proper justice has not been a easy task for this dalit women of India and also of Bangladesh.

2. Conclusion

To sum up on the discussion of the several aspects of the border area living, it could be said that, the border area people faces certain inconveniences due to their close proximity with the border. Some people are doubly unfortunate because of the scattered distribution of Bangladesh-India border and also because these people's property and houses falls in the midway of the border. There are certain peculiarities in living in the border area as already explained in the discussion. People of these areas have to deal with a lot of things such as smuggling. People living in this areas faces trouble because they had to carry identity cards in order to go out of their houses to do their work such as for business matters, job purposes, school and for playing. The religious unrest might be a traditional aspect from the time of the partition but in the Bangladesh-India borders people though belonging from the different communities shares a mutual brotherhood and respect. The cooperation and understanding of these two communities were also possible because of the medium of language and the difficulty of existence being almost of the same kind. The female sexes in such areas are much more active and individualistic. Woman in these places share the work of

their male counterpart for earning their livelihood and these women, as already mentioned earlier, cultivate much force in their character as they had to go live in such a different situation.

To conclude on the discussion of the several aspects of living in the border area of West Bengal after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, it could be said that, the existence of this people faced different ambience in different decades after the independence of Bangladesh. There has been a general shift from the chaos and inconveniences of the people to a permanent settlement of their comfort. But the introduction of fencing severed their troubles as they get limited by certain rules and regulations in order to stop the smuggling occurrences. But the activities of the border area people have been severely impacted by the introduction of fencing in their doorway or between their agricultural land and their houses. Thus it could be said that, living in border area introduces a new set of social pattern and living ways which could be noticed in the gradual transformation of the way of living after the independence of Bangladesh till to the present day. Much change has been introduced by both the nation's government to settle down the inconveniences of these people and introduce a tranquil condition for living.

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