Borders and Ecotones in the Indian Ocean

Cultural and Literary Perspectives

Edited by / *Édité par*
Markus ARNOLD, Corinne DUBOIN
& Judith MISRAHI-BARAK

Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

Borders and Ecotones in the Indian Ocean

Cultural and Literary Perspectives

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Série *PoCoPages*

General Editor/Responsable de la série : Judith Misrahi-Barak

After turning a few pages, Les Carnets du Cerpac *has become* PoCoPages*, edited by Judith Misrahi-Barak. Though the term Poco may stir up in the reader's mind images of some American country rock band, or again various possession rituals associated with Africa or the Caribbean, the reference here however is to the abbreviation of postcolonial. The term in its diversity is meant to reflect the interest of* PoCoPages *for postcolonial, diasporic cultures and literatures, steeped in métissage and crossed borders.*

Quelques pages ayant été tournées, *Les Carnets du Cerpac* sont devenus *PoCoPages*, édité par Judith Misrahi-Barak. Le terme Poco fera peut-être penser à un groupe de rock country américain, ou à divers rituels de possession associés à l'Afrique et à la Caraïbe. C'est pourtant à l'abréviation de postcolonial que référence est faite ici. Le terme, dans sa diversité, reflètera l'intérêt de *PoCoPages* pour les cultures et les littératures postcoloniales, diasporiques, trempées de métissage et de frontières traversées.

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LANDS AND COMMUNITIES IN FLUX: THE CHARS IN THE GANGA-BRAHMAPUTRA DELTAIC REGION

Debdatta Chowdhury

Chars are island-like silt depositions in the lower parts of river basins.[1] They are primarily made of sand and silt and are created naturally due to the accumulation of sediment transported in water from melting glaciers and eroding riverbanks. When the amount of sediment suspended in the water exceeds the carrying capacity of the river, the sediments gradually settle onto the bed of the river, giving rise to new chars. The amount of sediment transported in water is significant. The Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers are no different and the delta that is formed by the silt deposition of these two rivers jointly is the largest delta in the world. All along the Ganges-Brahmaputra region, including the smaller rivers approaching the major delta region, *i.e.* the Sundarbans, small amounts of silt depositions have formed what eventually came to be called chars. The existence of chars is thus the result of a dynamic process of erosion and accretion. There is no solid rock structure underneath chars. Because of their sandy and silty composition and the floods they undergo, chars are extremely susceptible to erosion. Erosion may occur gradually, but it may also be sudden and remove significant portions of land in a very short span of time. These factors mean that the number of years that a char can last is highly unpredictable. In the case of chars as well as riverbanks, erosion usually occurs during the rainy season due to

1. Much of the conceptual and theoretical understanding of chars in this article is in reference to the excellent work on chars on river Damodar: See Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and Gopa Samanta, *Dancing with the River: People and Life on the Chars of South Asia*. Yale University Press, 2013.

heavy rainfall and strong currents. However, erosion is not limited to this period only; it also occurs during the dry season when the water level drops rapidly and the riverbanks collapse due to the absence of pressure exerted by water. Chars are, thus, characteristically impermanent in nature. Use of the chars, be it in terms of settling, livelihood practices or even as transit for humans and goods, has to be done keeping this impermanence in consideration. According to the Irrigation Support Project for Asia and the Near East (ISPAN), if a char survives erosion for the first four years after its emergence, it can be used for cultivation or settlement.[2]

Human identities have been tied to land and its resources, ever since the beginning of human settlement and cultivation. The relation between human and land has been mutual—each giving the other a certain identity and a certain socio-economic status. Increased use of land for settlement and cultivation resulted in land being brought under the legal system. Study of the earliest land law debates around English settlement in the Americas show the influence of John Locke's Two Treatises (Locke 1690) in the way useful lands and wastelands were being defined as a rationale behind the control of the new-found lands by the settlers/colonisers.[3] The basic premise of Locke's argument was that only those lands which are 'individually enclosed' and cultivated are of value (besides those which are already inhabited). Lands which lie unenclosed and/or uncultivated are wastelands. Enclosing lands for use in cultivation, according to Locke, was the foundation for the transition from a state of nature to nationhood and civilisation (Whitehead 2010: 83). Wastelands were understood to be common lands, used by all, without any individual proprietorship over the territory and its resources—a criteria considered to be the basis for nationhood (Tully 1993). Thus a clear equation between state of nature and non-settled cultivation was drawn in order to rationalise the doctrine of enclosure, and consequently that of dispossession of lands of thousands of peasants and original inhabitants of England and Scotland and the new Americas respectively. Traditional 'natural right' over land and its resources was nul-

2. 'Char', *Banglapedia*. [Online] Available from: http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Char.

3. See Whitehead, Judy. 'John Locke and the Governance of India's Landscape: The Category of Wasteland in Colonial Revenue and Forest Legislation', *Economic and Political Weekly* (December 11, 2010): XLV (50): 83–93.

lified in favour of colonisers and settlers taking over these lands for profitable cultivation.

This concept of defining wastelands and valuable lands based on the use of its resources travelled to India with the colonisers in the 18th Century. As the British colonisers gained access to land through war or political manoeuvring, the need to establish their control over land and its resources arose. This is where Locke's Treatises came in handy, whereby 'common' land enjoyed by natives, including peasants and indigenous communities, were marked as 'wastelands' by the colonial administration and put forth as the reason for dispossessing these communities from their lands. The various property laws brought forth by the British administrators in India, and South Asia at large, showed the influence of Locke's ideas on the administrators. The zamindari settlement, the ryotwari settlement, and the forest laws did not just define wastelands, but also used Lockean ideas to categorise the socio-cultural landscape of India into 'settled and savage, states of culture and states of nature, and the propertied and the propertyless' (84). The introduction of the category of wasteland into Indian law and land revenue policies can be traced back to the Permanent Settlement of Bengal in 1793 (Guha: 1984). The framers of Permanent Settlement saw secure private property rights in land as providing the best incentive for value-creating labour. This, they emphasised, would ensure political stability and increase land revenue in the process (85). At a more general and larger scale, the understanding of common land, or land used unproductively, or left idle, as wasteland, entered as a negative connotation for certain users/possessors of land in Bengal (Gidwani 1992). As Whitehead rightly points out, the concept of the wasteland began its journey in India not as a natural category applied to infertile, barren lands or rocky outcrops, but as a social category that focussed on the 'use' of the land, rather than the nature of the land itself. Hence, specific types of land-use were conflated with a singular form of ownership, 'naturalising this combination in the process' (86). This categorisation labelled certain communities as underserving of land ownership due to their specific use of the land for pasturage, hunting, gathering etc. 'Inhabitants of wastelands became people without history, property, and productive identities, inflecting class projects of dispossession with a racialized subjectivity located in a state of nature before history began' (93). At the same time, it also labelled certain communities as

'hardy' cultivating groups, who could be 'put to use' to turn wastelands into cultivated lands (Whitehead 2010).

The vague understanding of, and the uneasy relation between, deltaic Bengal and the colonial administration, meant that the administrators understood the chars, which were either uninhabited or collectively used by indigenous settlers as common land and, hence, as unproductive wastelands. In an attempt to turn these wastelands into productive lands, the colonial administrators started bringing peasants (those whom the administrators understood as 'cultivating groups) from other parts of India, especially from the tribal regions and eastern parts of Bengal, to settle on the chars, cultivate them, and turn them into productive lands. The administrators, in the process, gave these peasants certain rights and claim over these charlands, including occupancy rights, low revenue, and access to markets. The two Tenancy Acts of 1859 and 1885 somewhat legalised these benefits.[4] Such acts were not due to any utilitarian turn of colonial policy-making or any act of benevolence on the part of the administrators, but were strategic steps to turn the char 'wastelands' into revenue-producing 'productive lands'. As the peasants emerged as a community (of char reclaimers), they began coming into conflict with the local powerhouses, *i.e.* the landlords, leaseholders and owners of other plantations. In their resistance to these local authority figures, the peasants often got the 'passive approval of the administration' (Iqbal 2014: 40). 'Signs and symbols of religion, class, caste' became tools for the peasants to articulate their resistance (40), which continued as a characteristic feature even during the postcolonial phase of the lived experiences of the char settlers, to which we will come back later.

The turn of the twentieth century saw a paradigm shift in the colonial governance and the resultant policies, as aptly pointed out by Iftekhar Iqbal. With the emergence of environmental management as an area of exploration, and introduction of 'modern' technologies of cultivation like irrigation and other agro-ecological practices, the realm of land governance gradually moved from the peasants to those 'educated in modern institutions', who in Bengal were namely the *bhadralok*. (41) These newly emerging educated and influential

4. See Iqbal, Iftekhar. 'Governing the "Wasteland": Ecology and Shifting Political Subjectivities in Colonial Bengal'. In *Asian Environments: Connections across Borders, Landscapes, and Times*, Ursula Münster, Shiho Satsuka, and Gunnel Cederlöf, eds. *RCC Perspectives* No 3 (2014): 39–43.

group of people were, now, encouraged by the colonial government to take over the cultivable land, and apply their knowledge in further improving them. (41)

Lockean alternatives of production through either private property or government intervention in the making of the productive land had been, in some sense, made redundant by Marx's concept of the organised labour or the 'commons', amply exemplified by the factory structure of labour (Harvey 2011). In the case of the chars, despite the idea behind bringing peasant-settlers for cultivation being driven by the Lockean concepts, the phenomenon of 'collective labour' of the peasants towards value-added production, could, in fact, be seen as a manifestation of Marx's 'collective labour'—as the third alternative besides private proprietorship or government takeover. The irony lies in the fact, that the takeover of these collective lands by one particular elite educated class—that of the *bhadralok* in Bengal, in the late nineteenth century—marked a return to the Lockean notion of replacing collective ownership with private proprietorship.

If Lockean definition of wasteland has been one of the prime factors in understanding the nature of the charlands in terms of its fruitful or wasteful use, the other legal understanding that has affected claims and counter-claims over charlands has been the way the 'law of alluvion and dilluvion' has evolved under Roman law[5]—much of which, like land reform policies, was incorporated in the land laws of the British administrators in India. According to this law, 'an island that rises in the middle of a river is the common property of the proprietors on both banks of the river; if it is not in the middle of the stream, it belongs to the proprietors of the nearer bank'.[6] Unlike islands formed in seas—claims to which depended on first occupant's right— riverine islands functioned according to the rule of contiguity, its distance to the banks deciding whom the piece of land belonged to. The Bengal Alluvion and Dilluvion Regulation (1825) is the earliest reference regarding the chars, which laid forth such definitions and regulations. It also added that if the water between the shore and the island is not fordable, then the char would be at the disposal of the government. But if the water separating the two

5. See Chakraborty, Gorky. 'Roots and Ramifications of a Colonial "Construct": The Wastelands in Assam'. *Occasional Paper 39. Institute of Development Studies Kolkata* (September 2012): 1–32.

6. See Saikia, K. N. ed. *The Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886* (Annotated). Lawyer's Book Stall, 2003.

is viably navigable, then the law of contiguity or proximity would apply, *i.e.* the char would belong to the person or persons residing on the part of the shore nearest to the island (Chakraborty 2012). The interesting aspect of the Regulation was the inclusion of the provision of resolution of disputes over claims to chars 'according to the principle of justice, equity, customs and good conscience', in cases where the provisions of the Regulations were not applicable or viable (Chakraborty 2012: 19). The Regulation also provides for the issue of land gain of the char by gradual accession, whereby the increased amount of land shall be 'considered an increment to the tenure of the one to whom the land belongs—whether the government or a person.[7] But neither the Regulation nor any other land laws dealing with islands have any provisions for dealing with re-emergence of chars at the same site (reformation-in-situ), a phenomenon quite common in the Gangetic delta. Re-emergence of chars and claims of ownership have been some of the more contentious issues which have called for certain outstanding judicial decisions—providing guidelines for other such cases. In all likelihood, the re-emerged char (whole or even the eroded part) would continue to belong to its previous owner, subject to revenue payment. If the owner continues to pay the revenue for the eroded part of the char, then the re-emerged char becomes the owner's property. But if the owner refuses to pay the revenue for the eroded part, then he is most likely to lose claim over it on its reappearance, or even lose claim over the whole of the char. The owner or the tenant's claim over the diluviated land is considered 'till 20 years of its erosion or till 3 years after the re-appearance, whichever is less' (Chakraborty 2012: 21). Being driven by such regulations and case instances, the Bengal chars are a constant hotbed of claims and counterclaims by settlers, occupiers and the State(s). And more so, in case of the borderland chars, which are of my concern here, due to their location in riverine borders between India and Bangladesh. The claim over charland and its resources is made all the more complicated in border areas, especially if chars are eroded from one side of the border and re-emerges on the other side. This explains why Bengal border chars are integral to the list of international land disputes between India and Bangladesh, along with enclaves and other adversely occupied territories.

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7. *A Study of the Land Systems of North Eastern Region*, Vol. I, Assam Gauhati: Law Research Institute, 1982; p. 51.

Chars, as landscapes of flux, lie on the borderlines of land and water. They are a perfect example of an ecotonal space where the solid and the liquid existences of the land and water merge in myriad ways, resulting in the creation of unique lifestyles and livelihood choices, socio-economic identities and everyday narratives of survival. But seamless merger of two states of existence is not what characterises ecotones. Clash and conflict of the same, often violent in nature, is also integral to such amphibious spaces. Most of the times, the chars lack legal records, resulting in complex, often violent claims over its land and resources. Charlands inhabited for decades by hundreds of men women and children with their houses, livestock and crop-lands, may be lost due to the sudden whim of the river, in a matter of days. Some chars may gradually turn into permanent human settlements along some river courses depending on the silt soil properties and river currents. While erosion leads to loss of land, new land is formed at the same time through accretion. In other words, while one portion of a char loses ground, another part of the same char or other chars in the same zone may gain land. These chars are literally on the margins of human habitation of land, and often become home to such marginal people, who use the chars as transits. Permanence in charlands, be it in terms of the chars themselves or the claims of people who inhabit it, comes undone with the chars being washed away. Studies based on time series satellite images indicate that a large majority of chars (75% according to a particular study in Bangladesh's Jamuna River) persisted between 1 and 9 years, while very few (10% according to this study) survive 18 years or more.[8] In Bangladesh alone, approximately 26,000 people lose their land due to char erosion and flooding, according to reports by International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Bangladesh.[9]

The residents of the chars are called choruas and their lives are as uncertain and, thus, nomadic, as the impermanent nature of the chars would drive them into. As mentioned earlier, the chars of the Gangetic basin were, in their initial years, populated by the colonial government by bringing peasants from various parts of Bengal and India. But the chars actually started to be populated at a much larger

8. 'Char', *Banglapedia* [Online] Available from: http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Char.

9. HAQ, Naimul. 'Bangladeshi 'Char Dwellers' in Search of Higher Ground'. *IPS News Agency*. [Online]. Available from: http://www.ipsnews.net/2014/10/bangladeshi-char-dwellers-in-search-of-higher-ground/ [Last accessed: 3 April 2019].

scale much later during the Partition of India in 1947, when refugees started making these chars, many of which were located across the newly-formed Bengal border, their transits or long-term settlements. The refugees who settled on these chars were also, like the earlier settlers, mostly peasants, unlike the refugees who settled on the mainland, in and around the urban settlements—working class and middle-class professionals. By the time the peasants migrated to West Bengal as refugees, cities and the surrounding areas were already populated, making it difficult for them to settle there. The chars, still under-populated, were some of the remaining resort for settlement, like the islands of Sundarbans, which were mostly populated by the later peasant migrants from East Bengal. Thus, residing in the chars has rarely been the first option for the choruas–most of whom were either late migrants forced to settle down in the chars or were rendered stateless while in transit from Bangladesh to India. Officially, a char on its first appearance, should belong to the government, which later settles the possession issue as per the Land Settlement Policy Resolution. But in reality, char occupants rarely ever wait for official settlements, and promptly occupy chars as and when they appear or they deem fit. As a result, the occupiers, in most cases, are labelled as encroachers, till an official resolution is reached or till the char gets submerged again. Legal settlements in chars have also, often, been neglected or overlooked due to the 'illegal migration' issue haunting the officials and political establishments, as also due to opposition from the 'mainlanders'. Land regulations, policies and political concerns, thus, come together in myriad ways to give to the occupants and settlers of chars a certain socio-economic and, often, negative, characteristic.

Char lands, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, are fertile grounds for cultivation, with a cropping intensity between 150 and 185. Despite that, charlands are also seen to be less productive than adjacent mainland areas, the major reasons being unfavourable soil conditions and uncertainties of erosion and frequent floods. Infrastructural under-development is also a major reason behind the potential of the charlands remaining under-used. Irrigated crops are scarce in chars, despite availability of both ground water and river water. Forestry and fishing are the other livelihood options for choruas, the latter more so due to the perennial availability of river water year-round. Many chars have extensive grasslands, used both for cattle grazing as well as for thatching purposes. Sand-mining can be an

important livelihood opportunity for choruas, if put to benefit, to be used as construction material.[10]

While agriculture remains the preferred occupation of the char residents, the uncertainty of the effect of the river on the landmass forces them to resort to other options, like agricultural labourers in others' fields or labourers in other chars or even the mainland, if one can manage to. Livestock farming and fishing are the other available options for the choruas and, in fact, have increasingly become as important as agriculture, or even a replacement in some cases. The impermanent nature of the land on which they live is compensated by the permanence of the water they are surrounded with. This explains their growing dependence on water-driven occupations, like fishing. But even the changing course of a river followed by drying up of a part of it or the construction of dams in the upper basin areas affect their water-dependent livelihood options. This pushes them not just into destitution and dependence on the neighbouring chars or mainland for resources, but also to resorting to illegal means of earning a living. Through innovative ways, char people create new forms of livelihood, often combining two or more forms, to create livelihood opportunities for themselves—creating, in the process, new forms of *economic citizenship*, often beyond the understanding and control of the State.[11] Flooding and erosion often leads to choruas to start afresh their lives on chars, and it is during these times that 'indigenous agricultural practices' come in handy.[12] Such economic identities are often premised on the most fruitful use of charland by a particular community of choruas, and is often cited for a reason for rightful claim over the charland on which one settles.

But the impermanence of the chars forms a common ground of concern for all categories of char dwellers—ensuring the stateless nature of existence that the choruas constantly live with. While this stateless existence has been a major crisis for the legal and/or official claimants of charlands, it has turned out to be beneficial to

10. 'Char', *Banglapedia*. [Online] Available from: http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Char.

11. 'Char', *Banglapedia*. [Online] Available from: http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Char.

12. HAQ, Naimul (2 April, 2019). 'Bangladeshi 'Char Dwellers' in Search of Higher Ground'. *IPS News Agency*. [Online]. Available from: http://www.ipsnews.net/2014/10/bangladeshi-char-dwellers-in-search-of-higher-ground/. [Last accessed: 3 April 2019].

illegal settlers, or those involved in illegal cross-border trading. The invisibility provided by char-life has given them safe shelters and livelihood opportunities, outside the vigilant eyes of the State.

Kin and neighbour networks are common among char dwellers, to the point where one often finds entire villages composed of migrants who are related to one another, and where one such migrant person or family helps others from same families or villages to migrate and settle in chars. This becomes a cause of concern for the States, not just in terms of migrant population but of cross-border population flows, in cases of riverine border chars. The chars act, in a way, as an entry point to 'official' citizen status for those who wish to move ahead from statelessness and be recognised as citizens. Local authorities help the migrants in their transition from illegality to legal recognition. The 'informal chain of local political leaders, panchayat members, and community development block officials' provide these illegal char-settlers with 'valid' documents they require to claim citizenship status, like voter identity cards or ration cards. The migration pathways in the chars are rather complex. Migrants rarely move simply from one point to another. Rather, their movements are complex systems of circulation between two or several destinations. The movement from one area to another takes place through a network rather than as individual cases, as mentioned earlier. Migrants coming directly often do so on the reliance on strong kin relations already settled in chars and with the willingness and ability to arrange work and shelter for the new arrivals. In most cases migrants have left home establishing connection with one contact person, like a next-door neighbour or villager who migrated earlier, and gave them some sort of shelter in the chars. In this, the chars also become part of the border culture of being the transition zones between illegality and legality.

The stateless status of the char residents also complicates their relation with the mainland people. Coupled with that is the suspicion of the mainlanders regarding the choruas in terms of fear of theft and/or loot of resources like grain, vegetables, cattle from the mainland due to the lack of the same in the chars. But the irony is in the usefulness of the chars for the same mainlanders who, themselves, are involved in cross-border activities—the chars being safe havens for stocking of contraband items to be smuggled across the border, away from the vigilant eyes of the border forces.

Chars are peopled by migrant population—border chars even more so, conspicuously by migrants from across the border—pressed by various reasons—livelihood opportunities, natural disasters, and minority persecution being the more obvious ones. The population profile and responses of the residents of the border chars between West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh, point equally towards economic reasons and persecution fears as factors which led them to cross the border and settle on chars. Religious and political identities of char people, often, influence the regional politics—the chars of Brahmaputra in Bangladesh being useful examples. Most of the innumerable chars along the riverine border on Brahmaputra river are inhabited by Bengali-speaking Muslims—seen by most of the mainlanders as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, whose presence arouse suspicion among the locals and affects, in the process, the politics of Assam.[13] These, in turn, become national security issues given that the chars in question are situated along and across the international border, between India and Bangladesh.

The description of life on chars as provided by Lahiri Dutt and Samanta are indications of how the convoluted terms and arrangements of the Tenancy Acts, continue to be a matter of concern for the choruas. They have identified, through the lived experiences of the char dwellers, complications arising out of the 'convoluted legalistic language of the land documents, the difficulty of proving ownership of char lands by its residents and acquiring such documents, continuation of rent payment for a lost land/eroded char, difficulty in accessing the land document officials and finally establishing rights over resurfacing chars' (Lahiri-Dutt, Samanta 2013). Since physical possession is of utmost importance in case of claims over charlands (with official documents rarely helping the possession claims), the choruas are often seen to maintain their own local armies of lethels (people trained in stick-fighting). The constant existential flux and anxiety over imminent loss of land, makes them 'some of the most desperate people in the country' (Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta 2013). The productive/wasteland binary forms the undercurrent while official/government documents combine with nature to decide the making and unmaking of chars—keeping its residents in a constant state of flux. The border chars like those in West Bengal border rivers

13. Roshan, Nikhil. 'The River Between: The Bengali Muslim Community of Western Assam'. *Caravan Magazine*, 10 April 2016. [Online] Available from: https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/the-river-between-dhubri-bengali-muslims-assam.

Padma, Jalangi, Mathabhanga, add to the complexity with its spatial specificity, as mentioned earlier—by making claims of possession doubly complicated. Claims over a piece of land could, in case of border chars, affect one's claim of citizenship and nationality.

Char-life creates a milieu akin to borderland culture but has its own unique features. It is almost a subculture within the larger rubric of 'border culture', characterised by uncertainty, vulnerability as well as a desperation to survive. The fluidity and uncertainty associated with char life aptly translates into a term that the choruas use themselves—the land of *Allah Jaane* (land of 'God knows what')—a 'no-man's land' by all means.[14] The issue of being fenced out is also unique to border chars, unlike chars in other places. India's border fencing regulations of not permitting any construction to be made within 150 yards of the actual borderline or the zero-point, has left a substantial amount of land and a number of inhabited villages outside the fencing, which now technically acts as the border, despite being constructed 150 yards before the actual borderline. The villagers living in these fenced out villages and agricultural labourers going to these fields from the fenced in parts face the ordeal of crossing the fence gate at particular times of the day, on production of valid identity proof documents at the BSF check-posts (Chowdhury 2018). Severe restrictions on carrying agricultural products or tools, or even items of daily use like salt, spice, food products are a regular call for the choruas imposed by the BSF posted at the fence gates.[15] This makes these villages doubly marginalised. The chars, then, are a degree worse than this. They are often not just detached but also excluded from access to the mainland. Even if the chars are attached, being 'left out' of the mainland is a persistent feeling among the choruas, rather than being any cause of relief. Negotiating the fence and its accompanying paraphernalia every day is just as bad for the choruas of the attached chars as it is for the detached ones. Char Meghna, Char Parashpur, Nirmal Char in the Nadia/Murshidabad districts are studies in such daily hazards of a char-life. With little or no edu-

14. Roshan, Nikhil. 'The River Between: The Bengali Muslim Community of Western Assam'. *Caravan Magazine*, 10 April 2016. [Online] Available from: https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/the-river-between-dhubri-bengali-muslims-assam.

15. Chakraborty, Gautam. (31 March 2019). Kar Koto Noon Dorkar, Boley Daye BSF. *Anandabazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: https://www.anandabazar.com/state/lok-sabha-election-2019-char-balabhut-a-village-where-the-rays-of-development-is-yet-to-reflect-1.973301. [Last accessed: 4 April 2019].

cation or health facility available within the chars or nearby chars, char residents of all ages and conditions need to cross the long miles of sand across the chars (which are either extremely hot during summers or submerged during monsoon), reach the mainland, provide valid documents to the border guards to prove their Indian identity, cross the border gates and then travel another few miles to get to the nearest schools, colleges, health centres, government offices, proper markets etc.[16] Flood centres along the borders meant for sheltering the char dwellers during floods are often converted into Border Outpost (BOP) by the officials of the Border Security Force (BSF), for border surveillance—preventing the choruas from taking shelter in times of calamity. The char dwellers see the taking over of their shelters and the use of glaring electric lights in these shelter-turned-outposts—a wonder that most of char dwellers do not experience in a lifetime. For the border guards, disdain is all that there is from the char dwellers. 'We have seen the wrath of the river Padma, the charity of it too. But when it comes to the BSF, all they have to offer is the kick of the bayonet', says a resident of Nirmal Char in Murshidabad (West Bengal).[17] Electricity, metalled roads, drinking water and such other basic necessities has started coming to some of the chars in recent times, post-2000,[18] though the sense of insecurity or being fenced-out persists in the border chars and has, in fact, been heightened by political tensions in India, Bangladesh and their respective border areas.

As 'fracture' or 'shatter' zones of the States, brought about by partition and state-making processes at large, chars along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border question the all-pervasive omnipresence of the State machinery at the State margins, where the materiality of the State's sovereign power is at its most tangible version. Stringent vigilance mechanisms are common in the chars, given the constant

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16. Pramanik, Kallol, and Sujauddin. (11 March 2018). Char-er bali theley kal madhyamik-e. *Anandabazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: https://www.anandabazar.com/district/nadia-murshidabad/after-a-lot-of-struggle-girl-to-appear-madhyamik-examination-1.768997?ref=nadia-murshidabad-new-stry. [Last accessed: 22 March 2019].

17. Staff Reporter (1 August 2018). Fushchhe Padma, Raatjaga Nirmal Char. *Anandabazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: https://www.anandabazar.com/district/nadia-murshidabad/padma-river-is-approaching-to-erosion-at-bhagabangola-1.840965?ref=-nadia-murshidabad-new-stry. [Last accessed: 4 April 2019].

18. Pramanik, Kallol. (18 April 2018). Unnayaner Path Cheye Thake Char Meghna. *Anandabazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: https://www.anandabazar.com/district/nadia-murshidabad/undeveloped-char-meghna-hopes-for-development-1.788354?ref=nadia-murshidabad-new-stry. [Last accessed: 4 April 2019].

threat of these pieces of lands being inhabited by illegal immigrants from across the border. Being labelled as 'D'-voter (doubtful voter) is a usual occurrence across border chars. It is not simply the relation between these fracture zones and the respective States which is at stake in the chars or other such 'non-state' regions, but also the subject-status of its inhabitants, as the citizenship issues of their residents would clearly indicate. Transitional spaces or ecotones, as one of the most vulnerable yet subversive spaces, have always been of concern to authoritarian powers of States. And the Ganga-Brahmaputra deltaic chars are apt examples of such subversion-repression discourses between the state machinery and the people who inhabit them. The geographical peripheries of the State act as a litmus test for the identities of its residents—putting their loyalty to question every day. This explains why these communities of char dwellers 'share a sense of being different from the majorities, a sense of geographical remoteness, and a state of marginality that is connected to political and economic distance from regional seats of power' (Michaud 2010: 206). It is this sense of remoteness that gives the choruas a common ground for integration, despite the contrast and heterogeneity in their socio-cultural and economic constitution.

The scene briefly changes during elections, when prospective electoral candidates come all the way to the chars to interact with its residents and leave behind empty promises of development and legal citizenship documents—promises which are quickly forgotten once the elections are over—pushing the char dwellers into resorting to illegal means of attaining legal documents in order to deal with the lack of infrastructure. One of the demands of the char dwellers, like the residents of the fenced out villages in other parts of the Bengal border, has been to move the fence towards the actual border so as to include the chars within the fenced jurisdiction[19], rather 'keep out' Bangladesh from the Indian chars[20]. Responses from a number of char residents testify to this demand, when they talk about feeling exposed

19. Pramanik, Kallol. (17 March 2019). Protisruti Puroner Opekhhaye Char Meghna. *Anandabazar Patrika*. [Online]. Available from: https://www.anandabazar.com/district/nadia-murshidabad/lok-sabha-election-2019-hogalbaria-is-still-awaiting-for-the-promises-to-be-fulfilled-1.966973. [Last accessed: 22 March 2019].

20. Pramanik, Kallol. (18 April 2018). Unnayaner Path Cheye Thake Char Meghna. *Anandabazar Patrika*. [Online] Available from: https://www.anandabazar.com/district/nadia-murshidabad/undeveloped-char-meghna-hopes-for-development-1.788354?ref=nadia-murshidabad-new-stry. [Last accessed: 4 April 2019].

and hence vulnerable to activities by Bangladeshi miscreants who might use the chars for illegal cross-border transaction. This stands in contrast to responses of those who think that being located outside the direct jurisdiction of the border guards helps in their playing the invisible when it comes to their involvement in cross-border transactions or local power plays over land possession. Chars, through their geographical uniqueness and a fluidity in terms of ecological and sociological transition—redefine not just how appropriation of space and use of its resource affect identities, but also pushes one to think about one's understanding of borders, boundaries—what it means to be bounded and visible vis-à-vis being invisible and beyond State control. It also questions given notions of mainland, periphery, inclusion and exclusion.

In a densely populated region like Bengal, including West Bengal and Bangladesh, the relationship of the people with the land has always been important, in terms of optimum use of land and its resources. The relation becomes all the more complex when it comes to borderlands, because the significance and sensitivity of the use of land and resources takes a new turn. Appropriation and use of land and resources along the borderlands of the States often questions the States' role as the sovereign power and challenges the integrity of the States at spaces where the States are most vulnerable territorially, culturally and politically— its borderlands. Chars have aptly been called 'environmental borderlands' by Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta, in not just being located at peripheries of the mainland but also for being the 'grey area of legitimacy'. They are political units but which also cut across fixed socio-political categories. Hence they become what Scott describes as ungovernable borderlands or 'non-state spaces', characterised by an anarchism in terms of existing beyond State control. Lives and livelihoods in chars point simultaneously towards contradictory narratives of inclusion and visibility on one hand, and invisibility or the practice of what Scott calls the 'art of not being governed'. Both restrictive State mechanisms and autonomy of indigenous innovative life hacks are built into the everyday narratives of char dwellers. Consequently demands for both inclusion and recognition, and attempts at evasion of control mechanisms are seen to be operative in these non-state spaces that have come to be termed 'zomia'—that remote space belonging to States but outside the scope of state-formation and expansion (Scott 2009). As Van Schendel rightly points out, peripheral geographies are not just

marginal spaces due to their physical distance to an imagined core area, or mainland, 'but also in terms of perceived relevance to the main concerns and problematiques that animate the study of the area' (Van Schendel 2002: 652). This theorisation of zomia explains why existential questions and concerns in such ecotonal spaces as chars are related to the mainland concerns yet different in their uniqueness of perception and negotiation.

Zomia as a non-state space, as imagined by van Schendel, is primarily a social space—'the physical intent infused with a more liberal dose of social intent' (649). Though inaccessibility was a primary feature of the nature of zomia as initially envisioned (the foundational physical feature of zomia), it increasingly became a social space of discomfort and subversion for the State and the government (the social intent). With modern technologies of accessing remote regions—both physically and virtually—inaccessibility became less relevant as far as such 'non-state spaces' were concerned. But what, still, retained the greyness of these areas were their people, their use of these spaces, and the nature of the State's intervention (or lack of it) thereof. The idea of zomia, in understanding such ungovernable spaces applies more as a 'theoretical problematique than as an object of inquiry' (650).

This also pushes us to look at the current debates around 'security studies' and securitisation concerns of States. That environment is at the heart of the current national security debates is aptly seen in the char discourses, affecting in the process, the nature of what we now understand as social construction of security. Unless the primacy of environment as being at the root of migrations and hence security issues is recognised, security studies remains flawed, untenable and politically irresponsible. And here, the study of borderland chars have much to offer in terms of understanding not just the interaction between nature and people and the identities which emerge out of it, but also a lot of other issues which are embedded in the borderland areas yet mighty important in understanding how the State-building mechanisms operate, at large.

While understanding chars simply as ecological cases highlights the anarchist, non-state nature of chars, understanding how char residents understand their lives throws light on the social aspect of such fluid spaces. Contrasting, and often contradictory responses from char dwellers helps us understand that ambiguity and uncertainty does characterise not just their responses but their existences at large. And here I come back to what I briefly mentioned in the beginning

as the char dwellers' symbolic use of cultural indices in voicing their concerns and protests.

The Char Chapori literature/cultural productions of Assam—one of the major deltaic regions to house innumerable chars—in the form of poetries, songs, folktales, performing arts, rituals, have been at the centre of much controversies in recent times. Known, in local parlance, as Miyah poetry, these Char Chapori (riverine geographies, mainly indicating the sandbars or chars) songs, has become integral to the debates around the National Register of Citizens (NRC) Bill, that plagues Assam at the moment. Among many other indices used by the current government in India for targeted disenfranchisement of thousands of Assamese residents, char-settlement has been one. The chars, as home for migrants—whether in transit or as settlers, has a long history, as mentioned earlier. But with the increasing hostility against the migrants, especially the Muslim migrants believed to have migrated from East Bengal/Bangladesh, by the indigenous Assamese (leading to one of the worst genocidal massacres in 1983), the Muslim migrants have been subjected to targeted violence and repressive measures. Protest, resistance, and assertion of their Assamese identity has, consequently, been a part of the lives of these migrants, who constantly strive to prove that they are as Assamese/Indian as any other. In the case of the char migrants, their ethnic, religious, economic and spatial identities come together in an ominous nexus that threatens their claim to citizenship rights, livelihood, and life at large. Signs and symbols of resistance against such violence and targeted exclusion has been used by these char dwellers, in the form of cultural output, including Char Chapori songs or Miyah poetry, which talks about not just the difficult lives which the choruas have, but also their effort at self-integration into the larger fold of Assamese and mainland identity. Though Miyah poetry emerged from the chars of Brahmaputra (Assam), its essence stands for the char dwellers at large, across the Bengal delta, and especially the borderland chars, given the threat of their inhabitants being labelled as infiltrators and being pushed back to the side that they are thought to have come from. The ethnic and religious identities of these char dwellers become manifest in their creation of Miyah poetry where—the effort to harmoniously place the Bengali-Muslim identity beside their Indian/Assamese identity is conspicuously omnipresent. The use of the term Miyah by the non-Muslim/Assamese mainlanders to talk about these poetries/songs has a negative connotation—that of labelling the creation and its creators as Muslims, from the 'wrong'

side of the border (*i.e*. Bangladesh), which translates into labelling them as 'outsiders' and unlawful residents of Indian/Assamese territories (chars). The Miyah poets, now, play it around, by reclaiming the very word to give shape to their identity and the uniqueness of their creation.[21] The incorporation of contemporary issues like citizenship, migration, infiltration driven by ethno-religious identities, by these Char Chapori poets (as they preferred to call themselves before the Miyah term took over) besides the age-old narratives of erosion, flooding, livelihood hazards is a sign of how the geographies of uncertainty and politics of exclusion shape the lived experiences of the char dwellers. The shift from Bengali to Assamese language of the Char Chapori creations, notably from 1980s (with the anti-Bengali-Muslim agitation becoming violent) is another indication of the effort of the Miyah poets to assert their integrative qualities,[22] while the Char Chapori dialect (a mix of Bengali and Assamese, practiced predominantly in the chars) gives the poetries a unique essence. More than being agendas to create their own language/dialect-driven identity, Char Chapori creations are about protests against the exclusion and criminalisation of the choruas. Accusation of divided loyalties and affinities between India and Bangladesh is what the Char Chaporis mostly protest against.[23] The expansion of this 'Char Chapori movement' into a larger cause, with new poets writing Miyah poetry, and these productions taking the social media by storm, shows how the char narratives have been integrated into the larger identity politics of Assam, and India at large. A number of Char Chapori terms have made their way to Hemkosh—the authoritative Assamese dictionary—arranged under the category 'Char Chapori'.[24]

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21. Bhattacharya, S. (Miyah Poetry: How Assam's Bengali-Muslims Used Words to Capture a Lifetime of Oppression and Abuse. *Firstpost*. 2019 [Online] Available from: https://www.firstpost.com/long-reads/miyah-poetry-how-assams-bengali-muslims-used-words-to-capture-a-lifetime-of-oppression-and-abuse-6798391.html.

22. Bhattacharya, S. (Miyah Poetry: How Assam's Bengali-Muslims Used Words to Capture a Lifetime of Oppression and Abuse. *Firstpost*. 2019 [Online] Available from: https://www.firstpost.com/long-reads/miyah-poetry-how-assams-bengali-muslims-used-words-to-capture-a-lifetime-of-oppression-and-abuse-6798391.html.

23. Hussain, Shalim M. (2 May 2016). 'Changing the Narrative: "I Beg to State I am Not a Bangladeshi, I am an Assamese Asomiya!". *The Citizen*. [Online] Available from: https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/2/7587/Changing-the-Narrative-I-Beg-to-State-I-Am-Not-a-Bangladeshi-I-Am-An-Assamese-Asomiya.

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Despite the heterogeneity among the choruas themselves (resulting in the fact that not all communities of choruas engage themselves in such cultural productions), Miyah poetry has increasingly become the foundation on which these communities could come together to protest the precariousness into which they have been thrust, and to call for the necessary changes that need to be made.[25] While researchers, geographers, planners, political leaders, journalists, government officials try to grapple with the amphibiousness of chars, the choruas get together to sing *Char Jaganiya* songs (songs to evoke the rise of chars) and recite Miyah poetry—hoping the mess that is their lives will, somehow, be cleaned.

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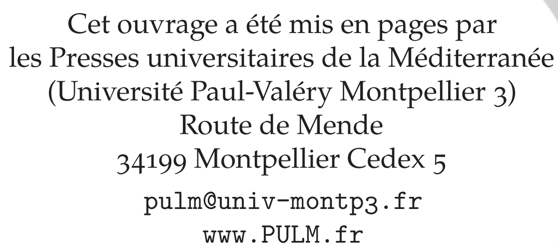

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