

## Review of Social Studies

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Methodological Choices  
and Challenges

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## Exploring narratives and rationalising data: A study of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border

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### Abstract

The most intriguing part of empirical fieldwork lies in the experiences one gathers while traveling around the various, often unfavourable, areas of field study. But, in some respects, a bigger challenge is that of successfully incorporating the field data into a methodological framework. My experience of fieldwork along the border areas of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border is, in itself, a study in the above-mentioned trajectory. A key aspect of choosing a methodological question lies in deciding the time of choice. If one has a set methodological question in mind, one tends to format the questions for the interviewees according to the set pattern, which reduces the scope for any other type of outcome. Again, a random pattern of interaction with the interviewees, without a set methodological question in mind, has the scope for bringing out certain ideas which otherwise the researcher might not have hit upon. But at the same time, the responses are often so wide in range and nature that incorporation of the responses into a methodological question itself is difficult. Thus, being flexible in the choice of methodological framework is of utmost necessity so as not to choke the possibilities of different and interesting outcomes. In this case, it becomes comparatively easier to place the responses in the methodological question later, while still being able to accommodate other relevant discourses. The paper aims to highlight the challenges one might face in such fieldwork-based research with reference to my experiences of carrying out an extensive fieldwork along the international border between West Bengal and Bangladesh.

*A first rule should be to beware of one researcher, one method, or one instrument. The point is not to prove that the hypothesis is correct, but to find out something. To rely on a single approach is to be shackled.*  
Robert Clark (1977: 34)

### Introduction

This paper aims to highlight the importance of empirical research in understanding some of the finer nuances of a highly complex territorial and socio-cultural space of a borderland, i.e. the cartographic borderline between two states and the surrounding areas which are affected by this line. The border between India's eastern province of West Bengal and its neighbouring state of Bangladesh has been chosen here as a case study. The study of the creation and evolution of a spatial consciousness, which I have termed here as a 'border consciousness', characterised by subalternity and

subversiveness, constitutes the main research agenda in the larger version of the research work of which this paper is a part. This paper briefly outlines my interest in this research project, the methodological issues which had to be dealt with in narrowing down my choice of methods and, finally, how the fieldwork data guided me to my conclusions. The importance of the research project lies in its originality in highlighting certain issues with regard to this specific border zone and in offering certain fresh theoretical insights into these issues, not addressed in existing works on this specific borderland.

The paper begins with the background to my interest in this project, my pre-field studies literature survey and my choice of methodology. It, then, moves on to discuss my preparations for field work, gives a brief overview of my experiences during my field work, the challenges I faced while analysing the data and how the choice of experience-centred narratives as the main content of my interviews helped me find answers to the initial research questions. The paper then outlines my thesis and how the literature survey together with my field data helped me answer my research question and also helped me to see the originality of my research in the context of the existing literature. The paper, finally, concludes by emphasising the need to have a flexible approach while working towards a thesis, especially in instances relying on empirical findings, since only a flexible approach with regard to methodology and theoretical issues can tap the real potential which empirical research projects possess.

## **Background to research interest**

A year before I embarked on my doctoral journey in London in 2009, I had an opportunity to visit a village in West Bengal,<sup>1</sup> India that was situated along West Bengal's border with Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> I went on an official visit for two days to a village in the border district of Nadia (West Bengal) for a survey of the situation of violence perpetrated by the Border Security Force (BSF) on the civilian population living along the West Bengal border.<sup>3</sup> I had certain pre-conceived notions about life in the border areas, notions

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<sup>1</sup> West Bengal is a province (a state in India's quasi-federal form of government) situated on the eastern side of India and shares an international border with India's neighbouring state, Bangladesh. India shares 4096.7 kilometres of border with Bangladesh, in which the province/state of West Bengal shares a 2216.7 kilometre stretch border with Bangladesh. I use the word province for West Bengal here simply to distinguish it from 'states' meaning countries, for example state of India or state of Bangladesh. Otherwise, West Bengal is one among 30 states under the Central government of India.

<sup>2</sup> The province of Bengal was partitioned in 1947, following the Independence of India, into Pakistan and what then came to be called West Bengal. The eastern half of Pakistan (bordering West Bengal) came to be known as East Pakistan. After the Liberation War in 1971, East Pakistan became the independent state of Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup> The people who live at the border areas who are not the official border guards or who do not belong to the police/military force in any way are generally called 'civilians'. This term has become part of the everyday vocabulary of both the civilians themselves as well as the border guards all along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

pertaining to the stringency of border regulations and the patrolling of border guards. I had never been a border resident and so my knowledge about border areas was restricted to newspaper reports and a few official survey reports. Most of the existing literature on borders pertained to dealing with them as issues of international relations and bilateral affairs between the states concerned and were, understandably, a simplistic narrative of diplomacy and international relations.

The works of Avtar Singh Bhasin (2003), Farooq Sobhan (2005) and Garry Purcell (2006) constituted some of the literature which dealt with bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh at a purely diplomatic level, highlighting aspects of trade and economy which these states could pursue for improved relations. Narratives of (and from) the border between the two states were conspicuous by their absence in these literatures. While these works gave me a fair idea about bilateral ties between the states, they failed to highlight the local narratives of the people who negotiate the border – which was the purpose of my visit to the border village.

A brief survey of reports and articles prepared by government officials of India (Jamwal, 2004) and Bangladesh exposed the dearth of literature which dealt essentially with border life. These reports were primarily viewing the border areas as disorderly spaces in need of stringent disciplining mechanisms and as sites in need of strengthened security apparatuses (Samaddar, 1999).<sup>4</sup> Literature prepared by various NGOs and human rights organisations, on the other hand, emphasised more on the hapless condition of the border residents under the state machinery.<sup>5</sup> As part of a research organisation working on human rights and social justice, my visit was meant to serve a similar purpose and to take general stock of the condition of the border villages under the stringent presence of state machinery.

The visit also served a bigger purpose than initially it attempted. Apart from giving me an idea about the various instances of human rights violations of the border civilians by the border guards and the hazards associated with the daily lives of the people along the border (these formed part of my official study), the visit made me realise that the responses, perceptions and activities of the people living along the border reveal much more than meets the eye. The everyday lives and activities of the people produced a narrative which might be vastly different from the perspective of a person who lived away from the border, like myself. I was convinced that a closer study of such narratives would yield an interesting and possibly unique understanding of the border as the state's space for wielding control and as the civilians' space for negotiating such control mechanisms. Though

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<sup>4</sup> Samaddar, in his book on the India-Bangladesh border, provides an explanation on how the state (mis)reads border activities and, in fact, is one of the first of the kind of work on this border that takes note of their need to study non-official border narratives.

<sup>5</sup> Reports prepared by organisations as *Odhikar* ([www.odhikar.org](http://www.odhikar.org)) and Human Rights Watch ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)) exemplify such literature.

my ideas about these narratives were still vague given the short length of my stay in the village, I left with a wish to study them in-depth in the future.

On my return, I took to learning more about the West Bengal-Bangladesh border and the India-Bangladesh border at large, apart from surveying literature on border studies in general. Eventually, my interest led me to pursue the study of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border as a doctoral project. I realised that a study of the entire India-Bangladesh border<sup>6</sup> would be too big a project. So I had to narrow the scope of my study to enable me to analyse the border narratives in practically feasible ways without compromising theoretical or empirical rigor. The fact that I shared the same language (*Bangla*) and similar ethnic origin/cultural traits (of being Bengali) with the majority of the people living along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border acted as an encouraging catalyst behind my decision because I could grasp their socio-cultural aspects. To add to this was my western education that put me in a unique position to amplify the voices from the border to a larger audience.

### **Pre-field studies literature survey**

A literature survey gave me a broad overview of border studies from the 1960s until about 2011, which is when I visited the border areas as part of my field studies. I understood that the study of borders had moved from being primarily a theorisation of the bordering process and understanding terminologies associated with borders (Prescott, 1968), to including sociological and cultural studies of borders and the people who live in proximity to them (Donnan and Wilson, 1994, 1998, 1999; Martinez, 1994).

There has also been much writing on borders as geographical spaces of exclusion and the formation of peripheral subjectivities (Aggarwal, 2004; Kumar Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, 2007; Eilenberg, 2010), besides works studying them in the context of state and security issues (Samaddar, 1999; Van Schendel, 2005; Van Schendel and Abraham, 2005; Coleman, 2009; Jones, 2009). These works are studies of the vulnerable nature of the border as demarcations of the state's sovereignty and how these vulnerabilities are policed by the state. The other significant contribution of these works towards border studies has been their emphasis on going beyond discursive studies of borders and highlighting the importance of empirical studies as integral parts of methodological questions in studying these. The shift from studying borders as a straightjacketed political phenomenon to understanding them as catalysts for identity formations was also highlighted in some works in the second half of the twentieth century (Asiwaju, 1985; Anzaldúa, 1987; Sahlins, 1998). Of the works mentioned so far, those of Ranabir Samaddar (1999) and Willem van Schendel (2005) pertain

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<sup>6</sup> Bangladesh shares its border with West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram in India.

specifically to the India-Bangladesh border (including the West Bengal border).

The lack of a specific focus in the existing literature on the responses of the people living along the border drew my attention. Existing empirical studies either related to specific issues (mostly smuggling or trafficking) (Van Schendel and Abraham, 2005; Banerjee and Basu Ray Chaudhury, 2011) or focussed on civilians' deprivation of resources and basic facilities. The focus on such pressing issues brought out the conflicting nature of the relation between the state and its people. These works studied the active-user and passive-victim roles of the state and the civilians, respectively, as witnessed along the border – a structure which some of my own interactions with civilians in 2008 failed to fit into. The works of Van Schendel (2005) and Samaddar (1999) also fell into such categories where the victimisation narratives of the border civilians at the hands of the state apparatuses form the main concern. The conclusions that these authors reached regarding their fieldwork data had probably to do with the issues they were looking at, namely violence perpetrated by the border guards, illegal infiltration, trafficking, and so on. The choice of issues steered the responses to easy conclusions that the state is almost always the perpetrator and the civilians, *necessarily*, victims, though Van Schendel's works also talks about the other side of the scenario, especially with regard to cross-border illegal transactions. This viewpoint of the existing scholars on this borderland is precisely what caught my attention and what much of my fieldwork data will eventually question.

Most of the existing literature treated the geographic reality of the border as a pre-given condition on which such narratives were produced. But the geographical and cognitive production and reproduction of the border by the border people hardly found a place in the literature. The works of Van Schendel (2005) was, by far, the closest indicator to what I was aiming to examine, namely border narratives of the people living along the stipulated border, though my final analysis differed from his in many ways.

The aim of my doctoral research was, thus, to study the lives of the people living on both sides of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, including civilians and border guards, and to understand if their narratives did, in fact, reproduce and reinterpret the border. My aim was also to understand if such narratives fitted into the frame of subaltern narratives more as being alternate routes to resources rather than as narratives of either helplessness or as being essentially subversive or even belligerent narratives against the presence of the state at the borders (embodied in the border guards, border fences and surveillance mechanisms). The goal was to keep the study interdisciplinary so as not to choke the potential of the research.

A study of secondary materials in the various libraries and archives in India and Bangladesh in 2010 formed my initial knowledge of the areas which I was to study, providing an idea of the changing profile of the population (from the first census of the states in the second half of the

twentieth century until May 2010, and later census reports in the course of my field studies) and statistical information about the economic, ethnic and religious aspects of the people with whom I intended to interact during my field visits.<sup>7</sup> Newspaper reports related to the West Bengal-Bangladesh border played an important role in shaping my thinking about the chosen area of study. Both national and regional newspapers from India and Bangladesh were consulted during the pre-field visit period as well as later when analysing the field data. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, the Bengali-daily published from Kolkata, has been the most frequently cited newspaper, due to its consistency in reporting border-related issues at least in its district supplements, as well as its effort in addressing some border issues otherwise neglected by official reports or other media. The official magazines of the Border Security Forces in India, especially the ones published by the North Bengal and South Bengal Frontiers, have been a revelation in terms of my understanding of the 'official' roles allotted to the BSF by the Indian state and their own interpretation of those roles, the challenges they think the border poses and how, in the process of their negotiating the border life, they become a 'border man'. The existing literature on this border has not been seen to make use of this particular body of work, thus, providing new perspectives to my research.

That the mode of research would be qualitative in nature was, in a way, obvious from the very outset given the scope and aims of the study.<sup>8</sup> Personal accounts or 'soft' data (Cohen and Manion, 1994) would form the foundation for my research rather than statistical records, though statistical data would still be an important part of the larger scope of study. Given that the aim was to understand the attitudes, opinions and modes of negotiating the border devised by the border dwellers, a qualitative approach was the best suited for the research. Thus, conducting interviews with people living along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border was decided as the basic form of data collection, though statistical records and surveys of the border population and the border districts, both in West Bengal and Bangladesh, was also sought as a background study before conducting the actual fieldwork. A mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis methods was sought, with more emphasis on the empirical aspect of the study. Of the ten border districts in West Bengal<sup>9</sup> and 16 border districts in Bangladesh,<sup>10</sup> I

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<sup>7</sup> National Archives, New Delhi, India; National Library, Kolkata, India; Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics, Department of Planning, Government of West Bengal, India; Census of India Regional Office, Kolkata; Ramkrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, India; West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, India; Dhaka University Library, Bangladesh; National Archives, Dhaka, Bangladesh; National Library, Dhaka, Bangladesh were where I conducted my secondary data collection

<sup>8</sup> For further readings on qualitative analysis, see Robson, 1993; Flick, 2002; Silverman, 2001; Holliday, 2001; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas.

chose to focus on six border districts of West Bengal<sup>11</sup> and 11 border districts of Bangladesh<sup>12</sup> between September 2011 and March 2012. My choice was informed by the geographical peculiarities of the areas (covering land borders and riverine borders), as well as their importance in terms of strategic location and economy (covering Enclaves,<sup>13</sup> *Chars* and Border Land Ports).

Having equipped myself with a fair idea of my chosen field of study, and an aim to frame my thesis in a multidimensional approach, I set out on my fieldwork in the chosen areas along the border between West Bengal and Bangladesh. The plan was to interview the people living in the border areas, including civilians involved in a wide variety of livelihood practices, and across gender, religion and caste; border guards posted along the border outposts; public figures associated with administrative offices, mainly *Panchayat* members and heads (since most of the border areas are rural in character and, hence, form parts of local village governance) and political figures. The aim was to understand the strands of social, political and economic narratives produced along the stipulated border. Methodological questions and theoretical frameworks were only vaguely formed in my mind when I set out on this journey – a journey that turned out to be far more interesting but complicated than I had initially envisioned. The paraphernalia associated with fieldwork served as an indication of the complexities associated with studying sensitised areas such as the borders.

Borders, as territorial delimitations of a state, are spaces which mark the strongest manifestations of a state's sovereignty. Thus, they are also the spaces which witness the most visible presence of state machinery in terms of border fences, border guards and surveillance mechanisms. While the people living along the border areas negotiate such state presences in their everyday lives, the borders are virtually inaccessible, if not completely out of bounds, for a person living elsewhere but wanting to visit/study the borderlands, as in my case. My interactions with senior members of the border guards regarding my plans of field visits also indicated the sensitivity of the state towards its borders. A feeling of suspicion and apprehension was present throughout our conversation as they took note of my plans. The paraphernalia included obtaining consent from the ethics committee of my

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<sup>10</sup> Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Dinajpur, Jaypurhat, Naogaon, Nawabganj, Rajshahi, Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga, Jhenaidah, Jessore, Satkhira.

<sup>11</sup> Cooch Behar, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, Murshidabad, Nadia, North 24 Parganas.

<sup>12</sup> Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Rajshahi, Kushtia, Nilphamari, Chuadanga, Jhenaidah, Jessore, Satkhira.

<sup>13</sup> The West Bengal-Bangladesh border enclaves are examples of a unique territorial configuration, not to be found anywhere else in the world, not just in terms of the background to their creation, but also in terms of the legal and political limbo that they are in. The people dwelling the enclaves have been thrust into statelessness with the Partition of Bengal in 1947 into West Bengal and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) and have remained so ever since. Their uniqueness also lies in the fact that these enclaves occupy considerable amount of territories (over 24,000 acres) and concern a large number of people (52,000).

university for conducting field studies and convincing them of my plans for handling possible risk hazards; preparing the Questionnaire, Consent Form and Participant Information Sheets ; obtaining permission from the Headquarters of the border guards of BSF and the Border Guard Bangladesh for visiting the border areas and talking to border guards (written permissions were not available); contacting key persons and field assistants in the areas which I planned to visit; arranging my accommodation and travel around my field areas and chalking out the dates for my visits. The process of setting up the scene for the actual field work to take place was tedious and bothersome. This also, in a way, made me realise the gap between institutional research procedures and actual field studies. The formalities associated with institutional research procedures often fail to address or gauge the complexities of lived reality, especially when it comes to sensitised places like the borders. They often fail to see the everyday survival negotiations from their straightjacketed viewpoints. These gaps became visible to me even before I started my field visits. My experiences during my field visits only confirmed my apprehensions about the gap. Having gone through the ordeal of preparing for my field work, I finally set out on the much-awaited experience. Equipped with a recorder, a notepad and the pertinent field documents, I went about interacting with the people living along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.

### **In action**

The idea was to cover as many categories of people across caste, religion, gender and livelihood as possible so as not to restrict myself to a particular strand of narrative. Accordingly, I did not chalk out focus groups for my interviews and deliberately kept the questionnaire open-ended. Apart from some fundamental questions related to the identity (name, age, religion, caste, gender, profession) of the person, the conversations were left to follow their own path, though roughly centring on certain larger issues I had planned beforehand. The aim was to provoke various kinds of outcomes from the conversations and not restrict them to a set pattern of responses.

The experience of carrying out the actual field work was far more exciting and challenging than I had imagined it would be. Getting access to the border areas, interacting with the local people (sometimes as individuals, sometimes in a group), interacting with the border guards, staying in the residences of local civilians or in a tourist lodge in the border area, moving from one area to another in the private vehicles of local people (mostly motorbikes and sometimes bicycles) and sometimes in hired cars as well: none of these activities turned out to be trouble-free. To travel around the border areas alone and as a woman, to be ferried around the place on a bike/bicycle driven by a man,<sup>14</sup> having to answer the border guards every

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<sup>14</sup> This was often a cause of considerable embarrassment for the man doing it, given that I was not a family relation.

now and then about my identity and purpose of visit,<sup>15</sup> being prevented from visiting certain areas of the border by them on the grounds of 'security issues', and getting them to speak to me were some of the recurrent troubles throughout the visits. To add to that was the expanse of area that I had planned to cover on both sides of this border within a limited period of six months.

Carrying out fieldwork in sensitised areas such as the borders, especially international ones, posed several challenges in not just interacting with the local civilians or the border guards, but also on deciding the ways of data collection, since organised settings for carrying out interviews were often not available.<sup>16</sup> Recording every response or using recorders was often not possible or even welcomed. This made the process of data collection and data storage difficult. Field dairies played important roles in filling in these gaps. Besides being used for noting down the details of the places and circumstances of the interviews, they were often used for jotting down entire interviews as well.

Briefly put, the fieldwork enriched me not simply as a researcher but, more importantly, as a person as it helped me to know myself better. My capacities, incapacities, stamina or sometimes the lack of it were revealed to myself during the process. I returned with a huge amount of field data and a larger amount of questions than I had with me before the study. If exploration, description and explanation are some of the larger aims of research in general (Walliman, 2005),<sup>17</sup> my field studies served some aspects of all three. It sought to explore some of the non-explored aspects of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border and contexts which produce the border narratives, describe the socio-cultural, political and economic aspects of the narratives and, finally, explain the spatial uniqueness of the border narratives. Random sampling was chosen as the preferred method of data collection due to its capability to represent all the elements/cases in a population, in terms of class, group, person etc. in a population (Walliman, 2005: 276). Since the border population I aimed to study consisted of a wide variety of people belonging to a wide range of classes, castes, professions, the non-random sampling mode would have made it difficult to generalise the aspects I aimed to explore.

The method of cluster-sampling (Walliman, 2005: 277) made it easier for me to locate the one overarching theme of the study, namely the spatial specificity of the borderland, in the midst of the heterogeneous characteristics of the respondents in terms of age, sex, profession, social

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<sup>15</sup> The border guards often did not seem to be satisfied by my answers and continued being suspicious of my purpose.

<sup>16</sup> Situations were often not conducive for a formal set-up of the interviews or going through the formalities of Consent Forms, Participant Information Sheets, etc. Many of the interviews were impromptu and quick. Some of the informal conversations turned into interviews eventually, with no prior preparation.

<sup>17</sup> For detailed understanding of the larger aims of research in general, see Bryman, 2004; Seale, 2004; Aldridge, 2001; Keats, 2000; Peterson RA, 2000.

status, and so on. Cluster-sampling, or area sampling, to be more precise, was the preferred mode of sampling given the common geographical area of interest (border) across the varying socio-economic profile of the population to be studied. The area to be studied was categorised into a number of non-overlapping areas, representing the unique features witnessed along the border, like Border Land Ports, riverine borders, fenced and unfenced border, *Chars*, *ghoj*, and enclaves. Almost all the units or elements of the people dwelling in these clusters (across age, sex and socio-economic standing) were then interviewed. Area-based cluster sampling made it easier for me to interview as many interviewees at each location as I could manage to. Since understanding spatial narratives formed the foundational research question, geographical/area cluster sampling helped me study a wide range of socio-economic narratives in the context of the spatial question.

The open-ended interactions brought out certain responses which I had least expected and which provided new dimensions to my thesis. The themes that I eventually categorised my thesis into, namely livelihood, enclaves, caste and gender – are common to sociological literature. In the course of the field work, they fell into thematic clusters reaffirming not just the resilience of analytical categories in contemporary sociological discourses, but also the fact that these themes reflected the border narratives in their most spontaneous forms. Conversations around those themes seemed to emerge, almost automatically, in every interaction. Likewise, the process of categorising my data into chapters became easy, with some of the recurrent themes forming the topics for each of the chapters – themes, rather certain aspects of the themes which did not find any resonance in earlier work on the West Bengal-Bangladesh border.<sup>18</sup>

### **Making sense of the data**

I noticed a pattern in the responses of my interviewees that was characterised by the overwhelming presence of the reality of the border in their lives. Many of the issues which formed parts of the interviews were no more unique to the border than to any other non-border area, either in Bangladesh or in India. However, what was noticeable was the recurrence of the border in the responses to such issues and, more importantly, how the same issues seen elsewhere in India and Bangladesh went under a modification in the context of the specificity of their operation along the border. The responses also suggested (a hint of which I had borne with me right from my first interaction with the border people) that the people living along the border have their own ways of perceiving and interpreting its reality. The (re)interpretations are neither necessarily engineered by the

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<sup>18</sup> Aspects related to some of the themes such as gender, caste and livelihood practices (besides illegal cross-border practices) along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border have not been studied by Willem van Schendel, Ranabir Samaddar or Paula Banerjee – researchers who have worked extensively in this area.

state, nor are they necessarily signs of the victimisation of the people. This is not to suggest that victimisation is absent along the border, but rather it draws attention to the complex relation between the state and the border people which might not always be addressed through the straightjacketed binaries of the perpetrator-state and victimised-civilians.

Such re-interpretations of the space of the border formed a binding factor among the people living along the border which, surprisingly, included the border guards as well. In fact, the responses of the border guards and their spontaneous answers to some of my random curiosities revealed the irony of their situation—uncomfortably wedged between their duties as representatives of the state at the borders and their everyday negotiations with the reality of border life. In the process of living along the border over a period of time (ranging from six months to a few years depending on the terms of their posting), the border guards undergo similar hazards as do the civilians, albeit in different versions. But the reality of surviving the border is true for both. *Border life*, thus, makes the border guards more a *border people*, often overshadowing their roles as representatives and spokespersons of the states concerned. It is the overarching presence of the spatial uniqueness of the border and the everyday negotiations of the civilians and the border guards which form the fundamental content of what I call *border narratives*.

Border narratives also contribute towards the understanding of the negotiations between the border people and border laws and regulations. Many aspects of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, including the undercurrents of violence and cross-border smuggling practices, have been consequences of the very laws designed to contain and control it. Having been affected by partition and the border culturally, historically, linguistically and economically, the border people have devised ways of negotiating the laws and regulations devised to control them – through violation, re-interpretation and reproduction.

While the basic idea and knowledge about the West Bengal-Bangladesh border was premised on the existing secondary materials (census reports, survey reports, newspaper reports) and literature, my understanding of this border as a socio-spatial process required me to look at the border lives myself as an active observer and as a direct communicator with the border people. Analysis of the interviews cleared my thoughts with regard to the re-interpretation and reproduction of the border space by the people who negotiate it every day. It also highlighted the pattern of psyche or a particular mind-set or mental make-up in the people that expressed itself spontaneously but persistently, in their responses. Newspaper reports were used in support of some of my arguments as well as in highlighting the recurrence of some of the border-related issues in the narratives. In the process of understanding the responses, some of my pre-conceived ideas about the West Bengal-Bangladesh border changed considerably. The more difficult parts of analysing the data were:

- Narrowing down the relevant data and deciding the importance of one set of data over another, largely because of the overwhelming amount of data collected.
- Interpreting and analysing contradictions in the responses of the interviewees in support of my argument.

Methods of tackling such difficulties were, interestingly, found in the data themselves. I could recognise that there was an internal logic to the narratives. This logic bound the smaller socio-cultural narratives into a larger spatial narrative, though some of the responses in the narratives seemed contradictory on the surface. In fact, this ambiguous nature of border narratives, itself, turned out to be one of the more important aspects of the kind of spatial consciousness I was intending to understand. Eventually, thus, this ambiguity became a 'finding' rather than a challenge for me.

Theoretical discourses dealing with spatiality and subalternity in the context of the omnipresence of the state machinery vis-à-vis the marginal people (geographical marginality as seen from the state's perspective) seemed to form the basic tools of analysis. While the works of Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Edward Soja (1989, 1996) provided me with the tools to understand spatial reproductions, James C. Scott's (1986) concept of everyday forms of resistance helped me realise the rudimentary (and ambiguous) nature of such border narratives. Works by scholars of subaltern studies (Guha, 1988, 1997; Amin and Chakraborty, 1996; Chatterjee, 2004; Chakravorty et al, 2006) provided the necessary understanding of subalternity in the context of Indian social, political, economic and cultural discourses.

### **Experience-centred narratives**

The border narratives obtained in the course of the interviews have themselves been powerful texts and foundations for my thesis. The subaltern nature of the narratives has been amply reflected in the resistant or rather re-interpretive nature of the narratives, as expressed in the interviews. The narratives bear possibilities of questioning the sovereign nature of the state, though the narratives themselves are open to interpretations in various different ways. The narratives obtained through the interviews have been mostly *experience-centred* (Andrews et al, 2009: 5), though *event-centred* narratives have also been recorded from time to time. *Ethnogenic* studies based on such experience-centred narratives often provide the most authentic accounts and arguments for peoples' actions. 'Found on the belief that human beings are plan-making, self-monitoring agents, who are aware of goals and deliberately consider the best ways of achieving them' (Cohen and Manion, 1994: 205), *ethnogenic* and *experience-centred* studies, such as the ones I conducted, successfully bring out the ways people negotiate their

spatial specificities to the best of their benefits. This was precisely what my field studies aimed to explore.

Even then, the vast scope of interpretation created by the narratives, often made it difficult for me to logically interpret or analyse the data. Yet I sincerely believe that the everyday life experiences of the narratives (which is what the narratives mostly consisted of) have been the nearest credible expressions of reality—as constructed by the narrators—the border people themselves. Experience-centred narratives often ‘vary drastically over time, and across circumstances within which one lives, where a single phenomenon may produce very different stories, even from the same person’ (Andrews et al, 2009: 5-6). This explains the challenge I faced in accommodating contradictory responses while, at the same time, baring their spontaneous nature. But despite such challenges, the choice of experience-centred narratives of the border people was driven by their human nature and their capacity to ‘re-present experience, reconstituting it as well as expressing it’ (Andrews et al, 2009: 48). Their capacity to ‘display transformation’ has helped me highlight the evolution of border narratives expressed by the border people over a period of six decades. Observation has been an integral part of the survey, not just in terms of the daily activities of the respondents but also in studying the subtle reactions/gestures of the respondents to the questions I placed before them.

### **The thesis**

My thesis argues that spontaneous and everyday forms of negotiation which the border people produce over the years crystallise into a pattern of consciousness characterised by a common psyche among the people which is not always necessarily consciously designed. The consciousness is spatial in character in being a result of, and tied to, the specificity of the borderland. The border consciousness thus produced constitutes other social, political or economic narratives, which might also be witnessed in other non-border spaces within the territorial limits of a state. Yet these smaller strands of narratives get engulfed by the larger spatial narrative of the borderland producing, in the process, a unique psyche – a border consciousness.

The term ‘border consciousness’ has been adapted from Gloria Anzaldua’s (1987) concept of ‘Mestiza consciousness’, which she describes as a specific form of consciousness resulting from hybrid ethnicities of people born out of mixed parentage between the US and Mexico.<sup>19</sup> While people belonging to such hybrid ethnicities can mostly be found along the US-Mexico border, she uses the Mestiza or border consciousness as more of a social consciousness – born out of social marginalisation that these people of hybrid ethnicities (and also alternate sexualities) face. I have used the concept of border consciousness as more of a spatial consciousness in

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<sup>19</sup> For further understanding of Anzaldua’s concept of Mestiza consciousness, see Feghali, 2011; Aigner-Varoz, 2000.

analysing how the specificity and the reality of surviving the border bind all those who live along it.

Spatial consciousness in the context of the border differs from spatial consciousness witnessed elsewhere, such as in spaces where a specific social/ethnic/religious/gendered community comes together. In such instances, it is the coming together of the community in a specific bounded space that eventually produces the spatial consciousness. But in the case of borderlands, as exemplified by the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, it is the specificity of the space itself that produces the consciousness and not the other way around. Moreover, few other spatial psyches are seen to affect such a wide variety of people across age, class, caste, religion, gender and economic position, as those seen to be affected by the spatial psyche of the borderland.

Since this study is primarily based on empirical study, the methodological challenge lay in justifying such claims purely through the process of analysis of the field data. The recurrence of the spatial disposition of the borderland in the responses of my interviewees, including the border guards, helped me give shape to my understanding of the border consciousness. In fact, the varied nature of my interviewees in terms of their socio-political, economic and professional locations helped me realise that the spatial specificity of the borderland engulfs all those living along the borderline into forming the border culture. Some of the more recent works on the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, as well as some of the contemporary debates on state sovereignty and globalisation, helped me give shape to my ideas.

### **Post-field studies literature survey**

Debates on globalisation have emphasised the imminent possibilities of a borderless world (Ohmae, 1990; Shapiro and Alker, 1996), especially in the context of economic interaction between states and the increasing flexibility of border rules in some parts of the globe. These literatures have focused on the need for states and business corporations to adapt to globalisation and the borderless world (Ohmae, 1990, 1995). Yet studies by some scholars have, in fact, emphasised the significance of borders amidst such debates on borderlessness (Agnew et al, 2002; Newman, 2006; Newman and Paasi, 1998; Paasi, 1996, 1998; Van Houtum et al, 2005; Yeung, 1998). While it is a fact that the blurring of boundaries has, indeed, been a significant feature of economic interaction around the world from the mid-twentieth century, it is also worth keeping in mind that such economic interaction has found more relevance in certain parts of the world like Western Europe, where inter-state borders increasingly became irrelevant with the free movement of the inhabitants of the European Union (Newman, 2006: 171-186). While the borders of the EU became much more interdependent and integrated, that of others like India and Pakistan (also Israel and Palestine) hardened and

became increasingly alienated (Van Schendel, 2005: 372). Moreover, the increasing stringency of immigration regulations highlights a contradictory trend – that of making the borders of states non-flexible like never before. Movement of people across a border has been far more problematic than the movement of wealth around the globe.

Some of the recent works on the West Bengal-Bangladesh border have studied the distortive nature of the border narratives of the border people in the context of the various cross-border practices that they practice. According to Reece Jones (2012), some of these border practices challenge the state sovereignty by refusing the existence of either India or Bangladesh along the border and where the presence of either India or Bangladesh is disregarded by the border people. My understanding of the border narratives of the West Bengal-Bangladesh border differs from Jones' understanding in terms of the perception of the border residents about the bordered spaces. My field study suggests that these border narratives do indeed challenge the sovereignty of the states concerned, namely India and Bangladesh, at their boundaries. The nature of the contest is not through the blurring of the border through cross-border practices but, in fact, by making it more visible and real. The border, thus, becomes a space where both states meet, a space of *both* India and Bangladesh rather than the 'neither India nor Bangladesh' discourse suggested by Jones (2012). Moreover, Jones' idea of borderlands as spaces of 'refusal' indicates a conscious decision on the part of the border people to refuse, and in the process, challenge the state. My study suggests that the everyday forms of re-interpretation and reproduction of the border space are not an organised or planned narrative of refusal of the state, but rather rudimentary narratives of survival well within the hegemonic structure and model of the state machinery (as suggested by Scott) (Scott, 1986).

It is to be remembered, though, that Jones' argument has been used in the context of this particular border which is being discussed here, rather than a general theory of borderlands everywhere. It is true that he does not necessarily suggest that all border residents refuse the state at the border, but he also makes a broad generalisation about his claim. My argument is that my field studies and understanding of the practices of the border residents along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border suggest that rather than a refusal of the presence of the states, the practices of the border residents suggest a convergence of both the states along the border. The residents do not function outside the realms or structure of the state systems. They see themselves as part of the state structure. What they do is create a space along the border that suggests that the border, as a centre, brings the two states together. This, I re-emphasise, is a bigger challenge for the states rather than a refusal, because the border, especially in the case of West Bengal and Bangladesh, is the basis of their existence and the foundation for their efforts to keep their population separate, despite the similarities in the culture, language, and customs. Both Jones' and my arguments are somewhat based

on broader generalisations (given my sampling procedures). But the point of departure is whether the border refuses the presence of the states or whether it brings the states together and makes the presence of the border even more pronounced but on a different playing ground than what the states set out.

The engagement of scholars like Reece Jones (2012), Jason Cons (2008, 2012a, 2012b) and Cons and Sanyal (2013) with empirical research along the India-Bangladesh border are, in fact, more in sync with my kind of engagement with the same, namely trying to look for responses which could question the existing framework of perpetrator state-victim civilians. Both Jones and Cons highlight the varying interpretations of the borderland by the people who negotiate it every day. In doing so, they rely heavily on their fieldwork experiences while also grounding these experiences and the responses of the interviewees in secondary sources. My methodological choices and my engagement with the responses of my interviewees closely resemble Jones' and Cons' engagement, although, I re-emphasise, often with different conclusions.

The significance of the engagement with fieldwork by Cons, as also by scholars like Megoran (2012), Van Schendel and Baud (1997), lies in the understanding of the dynamics of borders with regard to the evolving nature of borderlands. The recent works of these scholars have highlighted, once more, and in very explicit ways, the fact that borderlands are not such spaces where the role of the state and the civilians are pre-ordained, but are themselves evolving spaces where social, cultural, economic and spatial identities "materialize, rematerialize, and dematerialize in different contexts, at different scales, and at different times" (Megoran, 2012: 477).

The dominant presence of the state at the West Bengal-Bangladesh border is highlighted in the official journals of BSF where one comes across 'suggestions to improve border domination' along this border.<sup>20</sup> In the context of this border, the border people's act of re-interpreting the border as the meeting point is a bigger challenge for India and Bangladesh since territorial imperatives formed the basic premise for partition. In re-interpreting the border as a meeting space for states, the border people question the foundation of partition as well as the role of the 'state as a container' (Brenner et al, 2003: 101). The borders of the states act as the separating line between the state's 'inside' (internal political interactions) and the 'outside' (international relations), making the state a self-enclosed container of political territory within a nested hierarchy of geographical arenas (Walker, 1993). But border practices, including cross-border ties and linkages as seen along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, question this role of the state. Such 'horizontally articulated rhizomatic linkages among states' put the vertically scaled 'hierarchical conceptions of political spaces' to the test (Brenner et al., 2003: 14-15).

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<sup>20</sup> *Uttar Vang Prahari Samachar Patrika* (March 2012).

Globalisation and capital flows perform a similar function of blurring borders and questioning the role of the 'state as the container'. But the movement of people across states (mostly with official documents as passports and visas) and the flow of capital through investments, and the everyday movements of people and goods across the border mostly through illegal means, must not be confused (Glassman, 1999). While there has been an increasing flexibility of borders in some parts of the world and a growth of global money through computer and telecommunication technologies, which hint at an apparent blurring of borders, the reality hints at a re-interpretation and reproduction of the border (rather than blurring or even refusal), making it all the more visible and significant in the backdrop of debates regarding a borderless world. Gearoid O'Tuathail rightly observes: 'The development of borderless worlds does not contradict but actually hastens the simultaneous development of ever more bordered worlds' (1999: 143). Border narratives provide discerning ways of analysing cross-border practices which are neither universal nor planetary, despite constituting long-distance networks across borders (Cooper, 2001: 189). They also provide hints to questions as to who are the benefitters and promoters of borderlessness. They reveal that the people who survive along the border and depend on it for their livelihoods rarely, if at all, are champions of borderlessness.

The nature of questioning the sovereignty of the state by the border people is not through a 'refusal of the state-imposed border' but rather through a re-interpretation and reproduction of the border – producing what Soja (1996) calls a *thirdspace* of lived reality in the process. It becomes the space that the people construct, characterised both by confusion and clarity, direct experience and conceptual elaboration (Brenner et al., 2003: 85). Re-interpretation of the border poses a bigger discomfort and challenge for state sovereignty since it is the borders which mark the strongest manifestations of the sovereign nature of the state.

Involvement of the border guards (as embodied representations of the state) in the creation of border consciousness together with the civilian border population is integral to the understanding of the subaltern nature of border narratives. The role of the border guards is often plagued by deceptiveness. While it seems that, as representatives of the state, they administer and control the border space 'in practice, however, they substitute another space for it, one that is first economic and social, and then political. They believe they are obeying something in their heads – a representation (of the country). In fact, they are establishing an order – their own' (Brenner et al., 2003: 87). And it is through this *re-ordering* of the border that the border guards re-interpret the border differently from the order of the state.

Borders always have been seen as a space of expropriation, peripheral subjectivity and a platform for claiming inclusion – which is not always the case (Cons, 2012b). It has also been a space for redefining certain statist

definitions like belonging, citizenship, legal, illicit and so on. The spontaneous and free-flowing nature of the interviews during my field study contributed towards such unique revelations regarding the creation of border narratives and their gradual evolution into a border consciousness.

### **Conclusion: A flexible approach**

My attention towards the spontaneous narratives of lived experiences of the border people and my flexibility with methodological and theoretical questions, have helped me understand the complex nature of border life at the West Bengal-Bangladesh border. They have helped me reveal the multi-dimensional narratives which are produced by the border people – narratives which accommodate religious, social, political and economic factors and yet cut across all these strands to create a psyche that has its foundation in the unique spatiality of the borderland. An interdisciplinary approach towards the analysis of the narratives, bringing together discourses on state theories, space, geography and subaltern studies, have helped me in explicating the complex yet interesting web of relations laid out along this border. That the fruitfulness of a piece of research lies not in ‘proving the correctness of a hypothesis’ but in ‘finding out something’ (Clark, 1977: 34) has been amply qualified by my own research trajectory. A flexible approach has helped me find some unique aspects of the border narratives created along the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, hitherto unnoticed.

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#### Website/online material:

Hammarberg, Thomas (2008) No one should have to be stateless in today's Europe. In *Council for Europe website* [Online, 13 June 2008].

Available at: <http://www.nationalityforall.org/news/-no-one-should-have-to-be-stateless-in-today-s-europe/> [accessed: 25.09.2014].

Yildiz, Guney (2014) Kobane fighting: IS meets its match in Syrian Kurdish forces. In *BBC News* [Online, 9 October 2014]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29556005> [accessed: 20.10.2014].

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- All articles submitted to the *RoSS* will undergo a peer review process: this is a critical element of scholarly publication in ensuring the appropriateness and quality of research. The review process will be conducted confidentially and anonymously. Recommendations from the reviewers will be provided to the author. Editors will use review recommendations in making decisions on the publication of any manuscript.
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### Book Review Submission Guidelines

Those interested in writing a book review should email Dr. Latif Tas at [l.tas@socialstudies.org.uk](mailto:l.tas@socialstudies.org.uk) for a list of selected books available for review.

Reviews should involve both a non-evaluative overview of the content and a critical assessment. Please note that the publication of reviews submitted to *RoSS* is at the Book Review editor's discretion.

The name/s of author/s of the book should be quoted at the top of the first page followed by the full title and subtitle of the book, the publisher, year of publication, number of pages and price (paperback/hardback) as follows:

**Tas, Latif**, *Legal Pluralism in Action: Dispute Resolution and the Kurdish Peace Committee*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, 222 pp., £70).

The reviewer's name and institution should be placed at the end of the review on the right hand side of the page.

- Reviews for edited and non-edited volumes should be between 1,000 and 1,200 words.
- Submissions must be double-spaced. Margins should be at least one inch on all sides and the text should be no smaller than 12 point font.
- Footnotes should not be used in reviews. Instead, please include a citation in the text itself, followed by a full reference at the end of the review in the Harvard style.
- Quotations should be enclosed within double quotation marks. Any alteration in a quotation should be acknowledged, for example: (Tas 2014: 75, emphasis added). Long quotations, for example more than 40 words, should be avoided. All quotations from the book reviewed should be followed by the page number from which they have been taken; for example, (p. 34).
- Foreign language text should be italicised. Only British spelling should be used and spelling practices should be consistent throughout the review. Authors for whom English is a second language are strongly advised to have their manuscript professionally edited before submission.
- The full name of a person, organisation, or programme should be used when mentioned for the first time, and titles and explanatory phrases should be provided when appropriate.
- Dates should be given in the form '1 July 2014'.

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