

Fuzzy Borders and Postcolonial Forgotten Zones: The Case of Indo-Bangladeshi Enclaves

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“Surgeons have been known absent-mindedly to leave behind in the belly they had cut open for an appendix or an ulcer, an odd swab or a towel. Sir Cyril Radcliffe chairman of the boundary commission in 1947 left a mere 123 Indian enclaves in East Pakistan, and 74 Pakistani Enclaves in India which have in recent weeks been the cause of some belligerency”

-Niranjan Majumdar, *Statesman* 1965
(qtd. by Whyte, *Waiting for Esquimo*)

Abstract and Acknowledgement

This is a preliminary pilot project that encompasses an overview on the Indo-Bangladeshi complex borderlands, focusing on the enclaves or ‘chitmahals’ that became unique stateless conflict zones between India and Bangladesh. A historic Land Boundary Agreement was signed in 2015, that officially exchanged all chitmahals of both Indian and Bangladeshi side towards incorporation and inclusion within national sovereignty, after almost seventy years since the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Yet, in 2021, the question about identity and space still remains that pose a challenge to easy resolutions within these complex borderlands. This study is divided into sub-sections that delve into a history and scholarship on the complex Bengal borderlands; thereafter, I focus on the former enclaves as zones of state abandonment, different from other conflict zones. In light of new

scholarship on the once stateless people and former enclaves, I read the enclaves as still hovering in a space of ‘abjectness’ between inclusion within national sovereignty and not yet fully there. Thus, this project asks a larger question, whether a “third identity” is possible for the people of the enclaves, and does their former statelessness itself become a unifying resistant force? The section on gender, and the focus art and cultural productions from the chitmahals all point to the instability of the borderlands, that are sometimes still narrating an alternate modality of being in these spaces. This seed project is the first step towards a larger research project, and I am thankful for the support of SASNET, Lund University for the opportunity to begin the first step towards working on these unique enclave spaces.

Introduction

The border between India and Bangladesh is one of the longest and most incredibly complex borders in the world due to the haphazard construction and arbitrary delineation of the border. Resulting from an unfinished Partition and uneven decolonization (or lack thereof) of the Indian subcontinent after British colonialism, certain hinterlands of the border became unique enclave territories. These odd constructions are called “chits” or “chitmahals” from the Bengali word “chit”, which means a tiny speck of land. They are cartographic absurdities, officially quasi resolved in 2015, but left as conflictual abandoned spaces for sixty-eight years since the independence of India from British colonialism. These chits are tiny fragments of land that belongs to one nation but is surrounded by another nation. Brendan Whyte explains that there are three kinds of enclaves in the world: enclaves in Western Europe, in the former Soviet Union and the Indo-Bangladeshi ones, which according to him face a bias in receiving attention for study (iv). These Indo-Bangladeshi enclaves make up 80% of the world enclaves in a complicated situation, and have affected 55,000 people locked in these chitmahals prior to 2015 and the present situation has not shown significant changes, as the report discusses elsewhere. Before the Partition of India, these land masses belonged to the independent “princely states” that enjoyed some autonomic freedom and were ruled by Hindu or Muslim kings who were ultimately legally bound to the British Empire. When the British under the arbitrary guidance of Cyril Radcliffe delineated the border, the princely states did not join either India or Pakistan due to cartographic complexity. At the time when the choice became imperative due to the official sovereignty of the nation-states, these dots of land found themselves situated on the wrong side of the border, and hence became enclaves. In some cases, there were even counter-enclaves, which are enclaves within an enclave. In 2015, there was a boundary commission agreement called the Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) between India and Bangladesh to exchange these disputed spaces, and yet, these chitmahals continue to be haunted by the fuzzy border between India and Bangladesh. In the last five

years, people’s identities have not completely shifted towards a consolidated national identity in the larger framework of national citizenship.

Recent reports from the now “exchanged” chitmahals reveal that a certain kind of “chit identity” exists within a precarious dialectic of resistance against the nation-state, despite people living extremely vulnerable lives. Since 2015, not much has changed within the enclaves socio-culturally, legally or economically. For instance, a study by Deboleena Sengupta (2018) confirms that residents of these enclaves still call the territories “chits” and refer to themselves as ‘enclave people.’ Sengupta’s new study confirms that since this exchange of enclaves, chit people are still overlooking international borders and do not easily form a part of India and Bangladesh. Therefore, it is important to study how this “chit” identity reconfigures postcolonial identity defying the rooted order of the nation-state, particularly when, as Sengupta’s work shows, most narratives of the chitmahal are still situated within the narrative of the nation-state and not beyond it (Sengupta 2018).

In the past few years, there have been some research on Chitmahals, yet it has been difficult due to the problematic border space and also because going there and returning to mainland India is an arduous logistical process. The border delineated after the Partition in 1947 had anything but spatial rationality, and the Border Commission also had very little idea as to how they were dividing the land. As Willem Van Schendel explains, “The new international border was anything but a straight line, it snaked through the countryside in an irregular zig-zag pattern. And nowhere was it more tortuous and unpredictable than in the region where these enclaves were located” (*The Bengal Borderland* 120). To be sure, these exceptional spaces are fraught with multiple boundaries and borders and crossing them is not an easy task.

In this pilot project, my main aim is to study chitmahal enclaves as postcolonial forgotten zones, framed within the discourse of state abandonment which is different from other postcolonial conflictual spaces which are locked within the narratives of state

violence, displacement and rootlessness. The report is divided into subsections, each of which focus and connect towards a larger understanding of the Bengal borderlands, the current and existing scholarship on these unique enclaves, post 2015 the lack of developmental resources in various chitmahals that have been recorded, the emerging body of literary and cultural productions on the chitmahals, both from and on the enclaves. and finally, a glimpse of gendered experience and identity within the chitmahals—all of these subsections intersect towards a larger framework of analyzing whether even after five years of the official ‘ending’ to the chitmahal conflict—a “third identity” is possible for the people of the enclaves, and does their former statelessness itself become a unifying resistant force?

BORDERLANDS AND A SURVEY

Postcolonial studies has dealt heavily with the understanding and exploration of margins and “othered” subjects, but the study of borders and border spaces as a unique theoretical field has been gaining attention only in the last decade. This focus on borders is especially important for postcolonial nations that have undergone the splitting of lands and the forced displacement of people. Anthropologist Willem Van Schendel states, “The study of borders is a curiously neglected no man’s land” (2005). Schendel’s work on the highly sensitive Indo-Bangladesh border and the chitmahals helps in understanding the kind of trans-territorial identity people have in the chits. Schendel explains that these chitmahals are geographically different from the European enclaves in that they exist at the “interstices of the modern world state system” (2002:126) and challenge the nationalized hegemonic imaginary of spaces. He argues that these enclaves are “non-state spaces” which are not merely footnotes to state formation (Schendel 2002: 139) and challenge the national imaginary of contiguous spaces and territories.

The last two decades have recorded just a handful of historical and sociological perspectives on the Indo-Bangladeshi enclaves. Brendan Whyte’s historical and geographical study on the chitmahals in *Waiting for the Esquimo* (2002) provides an in-depth detail of these complex enclaves and the problems in even officially demarcating some enclaves or naming them. For the first time, Whyte charts a topographical study and map of each enclave and presents a historical study of chitmahals from the precolonial to colonial and postcolonial times. Jason Con’s work on chitmahals titled “Impasse and Opportunity: Reframing

Postcolonial Territory at the India-Bangladeshi Border” (2014) also studies these spaces as unique postcolonial territory that should not be viewed only in the purview of privileging cartography and uncertain mappings as national concerns. Instead, as Con argues, “This belies lived realities in the enclaves” (Con 2) and people in such spaces negotiate territory in lived realities daily that defy nationalist frameworks of space, but also within the same tension that marks spaces within national and communal lines. This dialectical dynamic of fluctuation is key to understanding chitmahals according to Con (3). Con’s intervention to understand these chitmahals as spaces in tension, and why the daily life of people at the borders negotiate territoriality and security in newer ways, provides a key focus to understand chitmahals and people residing in them. His study of the sensitive Dahagram chitmahal unravels the “lived experiences” of the people that reconstruct a new vision of territoriality (Con 3).

What the chitmahal enclaves suggest is a kind of a “postcolonial spatial anxiety” borrowing the term from Ranabir Sammdar who calls the tension in the Bengal borderlands a “postcolonial anxiety.” Political scientist Ranabir Sammdar in his book *The Marginal Nation* (1999) focuses on the post-partitioned Bengal border, and explores the influx of refugees in both East and West Bengal. Sammdar views the encounter between the state and the people at the borders as a contest reflective of a “post-colonial anxiety: of a society suspended forever in the space between the ‘former colony’ and the ‘not yet nation’” (*The Marginal Nation* 108). If Schendel’s work situates the borderland as a unique fluid space that also delimits the territoriality of the nation, Sammdar highlights the biopolitical power of the nation that uses certain border security measures that privilege land over people. Paula Banerjee’s *Women in Indian Borderlands* (2011) also emphasizes that the South Asian borderlands have not received much attention after the violent splitting of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh from colonialism. Her work extends from both Schendel and Sammdar, and argues that borderlands are sites of “exclusion and inclusion” where the realm of “national” is really played out (Banerjee 1). She turns to the border as a site of violence especially for women subjects, and tracing the migrancy flows across the border, argues that women and their relationship to the border is increasingly marked through different discourses of violence from precolonial, colonial to present times (Banerjee 2). *Border as Method, Or, The Multiplication of Border* (2013) by Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson brings a significant realm to the chitmahal study,

in their investigation of the border as sites of complex heterogeneity; they argue that such shifting spaces of borders can enable possibilities of new political subjectivities, which is especially important when it comes to fuzzy borderlands like ‘chits.’

As briefly mentioned earlier, in 2015 India and Bangladesh exchanged 162 chitmahal enclaves between each other, to mark “an end” to the chitmahal conundrum in a historic border agreement; however, since then not too much has changed within the enclaves. More importantly, a recent-most study from September 2018 confirms that residents of these enclaves still call the territories “chits” and refer to themselves as “enclave people”. Deboleena Sengupta’s new study confirms that since this exchange of border spaces, chit people are still overlooking international borders of the two sovereign nation-states and do not easily form a part of India and Bangladesh. This historic land-swap, which occurred in 2015, in fact led to splitting families even more. 2016 saw problems among families not adhering to the stringent border controls that the latest state inscriptions have led to, post-land-exchange. It is a harkening-back to the brutal Partition memory where millions of people were forced to leave their home due to religious splitting of lands. Just a few days before the enclaves were directed for a statist exchange, Shafiqul Alam writes about a family’s decision: “So on Thursday, just a day before their enclave was due to be handed over to Bangladesh, Srichandi and his brothers rushed to the district town of Debiganj to try to cancel their applications to move to India” (Alam 2015). All this determines one sad conclusion in the historiography of chitmahals: that is, for seventy-three years since independence, the arbitrary borders created havoc in people’s precarious lives that were rendered stateless after the newly-constructed nation-states. And yet, after the re-imposition of statist borders in such enclaves, the problems of identity and citizenship have hardly been solved. Instead, a curious problem of resisting statist borders or a confusion of identity is reflected post-2015.

CHITMAHALS AS SPACES OF ABANDONMENT

The study of the chitmahals brings in a shift of direction within postcolonial studies—firstly, it helps in understanding the notion of statelessness and citizenship in a newer frame within postcolonial discourses. This is a slightly different kind of statelessness—born out of colonialism, it directly led to abandonment of people residing in the enclaves. Thus, this project has the larger thrust to reshape our understanding of enclave territories and the postcolonial condition that

emerges from such anomalous state abandonment. My project bases itself on these works, and extends the thinking to a study of border zones that not only became conflictual spaces, but as spaces of abandonment (as in the case of the chitmahals), that not only question the construction of seamless postcolonial nation-states, but also raise the question of how to understand state-produced abandonment. These enclaves are spaces of abandonment, different from other conflict zones that have rightly gained a currency in postcolonial studies in recent times. Conflict zones from colonial pasts such as Israel-Palestine and Kashmir, are “spaces of exception” (borrowing Agamben’s phrase). However, these chitmahals present something different – they are a different kind of “exceptional spaces,” where abandonment is the keyword that marks them. Thus, I am interested in looking at these ‘exceptionalized’ spaces as zones of abandonment versus occupied necropolitical spaces, that create ‘death worlds’ (Mbembe 2003) using maximum violence over certain subjects to establish sovereignty of the nation-state.

Hosna Shewly’s incisive work on chitmahals as spaces of exception also refer to these conflictual spaces as “zones of abandonment” (2013: 23). Shewly’s work highlights the vulnerability and “trans-territorial” existence of people in the chitmahals from 2009, before the enclaves were officially exchanged. As mentioned before, spaces of exception, the term coined by Giorgio Agamben reflects spaces that are beyond normal state law, suspended, where the “state of exception” becomes the rule of law. But these spaces are also outside normal order in which the subject’s legal status is usurped and state violence with impunity is often carried out. However, chitmahals are an anomalous exceptional space which are characterized by state abandonment and not state violence. Shewly’s work also emphasizes the significance of rethinking Agamben’s ideas— she discusses the unique modification of Agamben’s concept of bare life, a subject reduced to its bare-naked life, stripped off value, legality and rights. According to Shewly a nuanced, “multiple form of bare life” is possible within the chitmahals that rethinks Agamben’s notion. As she notes, “bare life is not produced by excessive sovereign power but rather by a state of abandonment, and modifying Agamben’s formulation for a deeper understanding of the multiple forms of bare life” (24) exist that point to how social vulnerability and gendered identities enable varied productions of the homo-sacer. Another important distinction Shewly points to in Agamben’s idea of the space of exception and chitmahal enclaves

is that the camp becomes a representation of the exceptional space, where a state of emergency is proliferated at all times. Instead, in the chitmahal enclaves, “the performativity of the border [between India and Bangladesh] widens the extent of the barelife to the border crossers” (Shewly 26). Shewly’s work also cautions a homogenizing tendency towards chitmahal residents understood as bare-life; rather, as she states, “not every life is produced as bare life” in the chitmahal, but they are “producible as a barelife” at any time because of abandonment that becomes an operative keyword. Chitmahals, thus, are exceptional spaces because sovereign law does not operate in the same way in these spaces.

Interestingly, prior to the 2015 historic exchange of chitmahal enclaves between India and Bangladesh, both sovereign nations had abandoned these spaces—in terms of paved roads, electric supply, gas, water, medical institutions and education (Shewly 27). Without any national sovereignty, these spaces of exception are marked by state abandonment. What becomes interesting, though, is the post 2015 time period in the last five years and how are these enclaves still framed within abandonment. In the summer of 2015, thousands of chitmahal residents were given the option to choose their citizenship status, either of the home country, or the host country in which they happened to be trapped in. Md Azmeary Ferdoush explains that, “overwhelmingly the residents of the chitmahal chose to stay where they were” instead of the nation-state they belonged to (Ferdoush 83). Ferdoush calls this an “act of belonging” that was predicated upon several different discourses of regional and spatial identity for the chitmahal residents (83). Prior to 2015, a chitmahal resident meant, a citizen of Bangladesh trapped in an Indian enclave or vice-versa, with both nation-states providing no rights to them socially-legally as citizens of any country. Ferdoush’s ethnographic study and in-depth interviews with many chitmahal residents reveal that most of them chose a citizenship that was based on “belonging” in social spaces that connected their subjectivities to memories, marriages within the host enclave, plot of land or simply the familiarity of spaces and places within the host country. Most defied even familial connections, even if their parents lived in the home country and that could even mean the children would end up being a different nationality from their natal families. Ferdoush’s interviews with several of such people showcase this tug of belonging to the host country despite a home country nostalgia (86-88). The official exchange of enclaves to their original countries

also came with a migration of many people who wanted to leave and join the home country; for this, intermediary camps were built for settling the relocated families (Coochbehar district in India, has had three resettlement camps for two years operative after 2015). It is also important to point out that before 2015’s decision to officially exchange the enclaves towards a finality of citizenship rights given to people, the chitmahal residents were all stateless without any legal rights in either land.

Using Yael Navaro Yashin’s term, chitmahals as post-colonial forgotten zones become spaces with “abject quality” in which the two institutionalized national narratives, even after “sorting” out the conflicted nature of enclaves, give rise to more “confinement, immobility and entrapment” (Navaro-Yashin 2012). In the book, *The Make-Believe Space*, Navaro-Yashin focuses on the Turkey-Cyprus conflict and the intersections between space and materiality and affect, in the postwar aftermath of Northern Cyprus. Her work is an ethnographic account of the unrecognized space of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus poses the larger question of how to understand “make-believe spaces” that have a tug between materiality of sovereignty and the phantasmic and how do people exist in such spaces. I draw her ideas to the chitmahal enclaves in order to understand the varied notions of citizenship in such “imagined spaces” like chitmahals that are remain in a phantasmic liminality of borderlands zones, not yet ‘fully’ appropriated within the mainland sovereignty, yet not officially under the territoriality of the nation-states of India and Bangladesh, they remain phantom spaces, conveniently left in the forgotten but “solved” status. Within the pandemic year of 2020, no media coverage was possible of the Indian or Bangladeshi chitmahals. The only news that has come on the Indian Independence Day of last year, on 15th August, is from a Bengali newspaper *Bartaman*, which covered forty-eight refugee families residing in the Mekhliganj camp located in India, since 2015. These families have been incorporated from erstwhile chitmahal enclaves that finally came into Indian territory, but have been living in temporary camps set up for five years in utmost deplorable conditions. The newspaper report states that many residents of the chitmahals have been spread out in three rehabilitation camps of Mekhliganj, Dinhata and Haldibari, all located in the Cooch Bihar district in India. It also explains that forty-eight selected families obtained keys to a two bedroom flat given by the Indian state in 2020. Most of these families are large with six to eight family members, hence the allocation of a flat has not ceased

their problem of settling into a 'home.' Furthermore, *Bartaman* also notes that the families made claims to the central government for having apartments close to schools, colleges or medical facilities which are at the present time far away. That request has not been heeded by the state yet. What is tragic in this report is that five years since the LBA, many families are still in refugees in temporary camp conditions and there was no mention of the pandemic and its effect on the people (*Bartaman* Aug 15, 2020).

BEYOND CITIZENSHIP—"CHIT- IDENTITY"?

Despite the official institutionalized nature of state citizenships ordained to or chosen by the enclave residents, my interest in this seed-project is primarily a more defiant consciousness amongst the people of chitmahal who create spaces that question easy belongings even after 2015. As previously stated, Deboleena Sengupta's work highlights this uneasy terrain of fixed nationalities even after people chose to be a citizenship of a specific nation-state after the official enclave swap. Sengupta's encounters and conversations with residents of chhit-Bangla, emphasize the fact that for some 'chitmahal people' "overlooking borders become more natural, than abiding by a Westphalian idea of state sovereignty" (Sengupta 2018). For Sengupta, the question of a "chhit-space" becomes an interesting one as she interviews a woman resident of Chhit-bangla, a tiny speck of land (char or riverine island) separated from the mainland Bangladesh by international waters, that also make the boundary fuzzy and constantly shifting in no-man's land. This speck of land became a part of West Bengal, India after the exchange of enclaves, and when asked Kaushinmoi said, she lived in "Andie" and not India. Interestingly, Sengupta argues that this unique name change offers a deliberate non-state-space where the grammar and language is not fixed in the way of the "nation's imprint" (Sengupta 2018); thus, the change "Andie" from India to denote where Kaushinmoi lives. This leads to the third space, an identity for the chitmahal residents, as "enclave people" – a term coined by Sengupta.

This "chhit-identity" became important, also as an "act of belonging" using Ferdoush's term—when the choice of selecting India or Bangladesh was not always a cause of rejoicing or easy. For instance, Shafiqul Alam talks to various families at the cusp of the historical land swap between the two nation-states and reveals that for many families from stateless existence it became a further divide and agony, a second Partition to leave behind families to adopt

a new nation. As Alam states, despite the fact that for many the choice of citizenship means access to some state infrastructures of education and health, but "it has also meant choosing between staying put and adopting a new nationality or leaving the homes where their families have lived for generations" (Alam 2015). Such stories of remembrance of violence from war of Independence of Bangladesh (1971) and Partition displacement in the minds of the Hindu and Muslim people across the Indo-Bangladeshi enclaves also denotes a fear and struggle to choose based on religion, and the home countries hegemonic policies towards one religion.

Elizabeth Povinelli in her work *Economies of Abandonment* discusses abandonment has one which allow decay and neglect to happen to certain people. Her work spans how abandonment happens to people who are left to die in larger liberal economies, but also shows the everyday endurance in these zones of abandonment reflect a radical thing in itself, what she calls "living otherwise" that can sometimes become a challenge or claim for alternative modalities. Chhitmahals, even after 2015, still remain indeterminate spaces that are given to decay and abandonment (as studied in the next section). Within these liminal spaces, the people residing in them, or those who have moved to claim citizenship rights become "subaltern counterpublics," who challenge easy fixed notions of ontological frames, as seen in such "chit-identity."

READING GENDER IN CHITMAHALS

Arpita Chakraborty's ethnographic work on chitmahal's uncovers an important gap in the "lack of gender sensitive reading" (Chakraborty 159 2020) in the chitmahals, and she argues that that women's agency in these chitmahals depend to a large extent on how they are contributing to the familial resources. In the case of women from India married into the enclaves, their agency in terms of providing access to resources like education, health services or public distribution schemes can be pivotal in changing the social and economic position of the family within the enclaves. However, a larger segment of women have been born, brought up, and married inside the enclaves. In an earlier interview, Chakraborty states, "The life they lead are vulnerable, harsh and unimaginably challenging. Most have no access to education, are married off at a barely legal age, and with most enclave families being below poverty scale, suffer from malnutrition" (My interview with Chakraborty, *Cerebration* 2016)

Chakraborty further states that In the Bangladeshi Chitmahals, “the lack of access to health services hit women the hardest. Childbirths are mostly done at home. In cases of complications, the quacks from surrounding Indian villages are consulted. If, as a last resort, they do manage to reach the nearest Indian subdivisional hospital in Dinhatra, they adopt a false name and with an Indian citizen sign the bond as their husband. After childbirth, they leave the hospitals without the birth certificate, since it is of no use to them. If by agency, one understands the basic ability to lead a meaningful life, most of the enclave women are denied all aspects of it” (*Cerebration* Interview 2016). But what sets the Indo-Bangladeshi chhitmahals apart is the unique role women play in mediating the interaction of the enclave residents with their host countries (India for the residents of Bangladeshi residents, and vice versa). So how these small acts of dismantling the statist boundaries are adopted by these women become crucial in understanding their lives in the enclaves.

Chakraborty’s recent work on gender and chitmahals (2020), also raises the following significant questions: “what happens when women are the mediators of citizenship for the rest of the community? Did their access to citizenship alter the position of these women within the family?” (155-156). According to Chakraborty, cross border marriages usually between women having Indian citizenship with an enclave dweller lead women to having more access to state resources, and thus, they hold crucial roles negotiating between the family and state that defines their significant roles in these spaces. This also has large ramifications on the patriarchal family structure, and a “dislocation of patriarchy, not completely dismantled [but] resources like education, healthcare and food rations are accessible only through women” (162 2020). Although, not entirely wrenched free from the hierarchies of patriarchy within the family, the election of women leaders within enclaves and their roles as negotiators between state and families signal towards another kind of gendered “subaltern counter publics” emerging in the spaces of abandonment that also question gendered national belongings.

My own study on the gender question in the ‘former’ chitmahals is framed within the cultural productions coming out from and on the enclaves. Selina Hossain’s novel *Bhumi o Kusum* (in translation: *The Land and Kusum* 2010) is adapted from a true story about a woman named Monjila and her life in one of the Bangladeshi Chhitmahals in Indian territory. It is the first historical fiction that focuses on Chhitmahals

and has a vast span from pre Partitioned India, to the Partitioned subcontinent where Bangladesh is mentioned as East Pakistan till the war of independence in 1971 with the construction of Bangladesh. The novel is particularly interesting in its focus and exploration of the women residents of these trapped, highly sensitive borderlands. In a brief synopsis, the story begins in pre-partitioned India, with the protagonist Monjila, a Muslim young woman who is left by her husband, because she cannot have a child. She returns to her father, Kazim’s house, only to be tricked by an Indian border police and eventually finds herself pregnant. She is outcasted by the entire chitmahal residents, and finds shelter with the village “witch”, and gives birth to her daughter. Hossain highlights the women characters in the Dohagram chitmahal, and I study her work to show how a certain strategic agency is enacted by them for their daily modes of survival. Hossain’s work represents the precarious gendered life (using Butler’s phrase from *Precarious Life*) in Chitmahals and argues for a reenvisioned mode of nuanced agency in the nationless bodies of the women and shows how a certain resistance towards statism and border policy is possible through such women figures who cross multiple borders of state and gender. The title of this work also becomes a testimony towards indicating that the hope for liberation or change in the future for these exceptional spaces perhaps lie in the hands of women. “Bhumi” is Bengali for land, and “Kusum,” the grand-daughter of Monjila, who is born towards the end, becomes the symbol of the land and its promises. Hossain’s text creates a space for the women from enclaves and provides possibilities of solidarity, understanding, boundary crossings that perform critical moments of resistance against the patriarchal-statist hegemony.

POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT AREAS IN CHHITMAHALS:

An exhaustive study by Anindita Maitra and Kathakali Bandopadhyay, three years after the Land Boundary Agreement of 2015 that was instrumental in the act of enclave exchange, notes several lacks in any real development towards uplifting the lives of the erstwhile enclaves, now adopted into the mainland nations. The study from 2018 is indicative of a failure in allocating basics like, a school (by the Indian state in the former Bangladeshi enclaves that were now under Indian territory officially), former Bangladeshi enclaves have potable drinking water scarcity, unemployment is very high in these enclaves, lack of proper transport and communication channels and lack of sanitation

and hygiene facilities throughout the enclaves reveal a grim situation and mishandling by both nations (Mitra and Bandopadhyay 127). The study also reveals that there has been some effort to provide ration and identity cards for enclave residents, along with a voter card that led to voting with Indian elections for the first time in 2016. However, specific chitmahals still have no proper educational facilities, or a hospital—this was especially a major problem in the chitmahal of Poaturkuthi where people have to go to some other outside town for medical treatment. A quantitative survey within this report by Mitra et al. show extremely deprived conditions of everyday life, unsafety and crime, and most importantly 90% of households do not have a proper sanitation and toilet system in this particular enclave. One of most telling things that this study also reveals is that the status of the present-day chitmahals is hard to determine as these enclaves are outside of “normal spaces” and still perceived as “no-man’s land” despite being within national territory (Mitra, Bandopadhyay 137). This goes back to the larger question of how ontologically and socio-politically, can the resident of the chitmahal exist in a transition from seventy years of abandonment, to claim a rightful citizenship within the sovereign nation; and yet the spaces of neglect and abandonment continue in manifold ways till the present time in the former enclaves.

CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS AND CHITMAHALS

There is an emerging rich body of literary works in the form of novels, short stories and poetry from both sides of the border in India-Bangladesh. A close study of these works will provide an insight into how they remap and re-envision understandings of postcoloniality, borderlands and the unique statelessness. As briefly discussed, Selina Hossain’s first historical novel *Bhumi O Kusum* (2010) on the enclaves, series of short stories, poetry by writers, namely, fiction by Rochelle Potkar (2017), poetry by Saubhik De Sarkar (2017), Amar Mitra’s novel, *Kumari Megher Desh Chai*, (*A Country for a Maiden Cloud* 2018; in translation by me, approved by author), a new anthology of short fiction titled *Stories from Chitmahal*, edited by Barindra Mandal, and a new book of short stories, *New Stories of Chitmahal* (2019) by Rajarshi Biswas—all uniquely represent these cartographic anomalies in literature.

In 2017, Dhaka based artist Mahbubur Rahman started a project titled “Counter Enclave,” which resonates with the larger question of fixed citizenship and how to understand ontology in this shifting of

national identity. It is a massive multimedia project collaborated with Tayeba Begum Lipi about the lives of the people in the chitmahals, in their journey from stateless abandonment to the present time. As Dilpreet Bhullar notes, “Their work significant seeks to challenge the very idea of citizenship as permanent truth” (Wire.in Aug 2020). In one of the exhibits titled “Replacement,” the story is about two brothers who were separated in the Land Boundary Agreement of 2015. One continued to live in the Bangladeshi enclave of Dasiar Chhara, and another moved to India and is allotted a space in the camp at Dinhat. It is one more poignant story how from 1947 till now, the idea of belonging and home is a fraught one that remains unresolved despite hegemonic practices of separating sovereignties and territories. British photographer Luke Duggleby’s photographic documentary “From No-man’s Land to the Unknown” on the people of chitmahal also gives a glimpse of such fraught notions of nostalgia and home. In one photograph, he presents seventy-year-old Dhonobala Rani who weeps at the cusp of losing his son in Bangladesh, when she takes up Indian citizenship and has to leave (2015-16). Stories like these are reminders to rethink easy notions of home, citizenship, boundaries and border crossings and how they impact human ontological modalities of existence.

CONCLUSION

This seed-project spans some of the most important scholarly works on Indo-Bangladeshi enclaves, a topic that does not capture the academic discourses usually. Within the mainstream national imaginary, chitmahals are seldom talked about, and when they are, they become a concluded chapter in the larger arc of national sovereignty of India and Bangladesh claiming the exchange of chitmahals as of 2015. This report focuses on two things—first, it has delved into how the chitmahals can be understood as unique spaces of abandonment and the emergence of a potential chit-identity consciousness that goes beyond the fixities of the nation-state, rather challenges it. Secondly, it also carves out spaces to present glimpses of current conditions from the enclaves, where the lived, everyday life of people negotiate their ontological existences from stateless people to people struggling and “living otherwise” (Povinelli). As a literary and cultural studies scholar, I finally turn to art and the cultural productions and the lived experiences of the residents of the ‘former’ chitmahal enclaves—some of the new literature, art, documentaries and recent photography reflect possibilities and means towards

solidarity, understanding, boundary crossings that perform critical moments of resistance against the patriarchal-statist hegemony.

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