

A Politics of Sensitivity: Ambiguity and Exceptionality along the India-Bangladesh Border¹

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Borders are often spaces of secrecy and violence: locations where liberal normative notions such as 'security' and 'sovereignty' are nakedly exposed as processes of regulation and control. Yet what makes them so, and why are these heavily monitored places often as confusing and ambiguous for those living within them as for those from outside looking in?

In this essay, I reflect on what I call a 'politics of sensitivity' that circumscribe both the processes of researching borders and the lives of those living there. Sensitivity, I suggest, can best be understood as a political process that both regulates knowledge about sensitive spaces, and structures actions, behaviour, and possibilities within them. Sensitivity, as such, is best understood not as a descriptive term, but rather as a process that marks sensitive areas as somehow 'exceptional', or beyond the bounds of normal practice, in both discursive and concrete ways. This argument draws on my experience conducting research on *chitmahols*, a series of enclaves along the India/Bangladesh border. These enclaves are non-contiguous pieces of land that are, nonetheless, sovereign fragments of their 'home' states. These 'exceptional' spaces have been a source of intermittent tension, and constant confusion, for India and East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) since the Partition of India in 1947.

Specifically, I focus on fieldwork in Angarpota-Dahagram (AGDH), two large Bangladeshi enclaves joined together as a Union Parishad within Upazila Patgram in the Lalmonirhat district of Bangladesh (see figure 1). AGDH is a loosely knit network of nine villages. The majority of its residents live in thatched houses, while some of the more wealthy residents reside in tin-roofed, and sometimes even brick-walled, homes. Covering approximately 4,600 acres, AGDH is largely fertile farmland. The majority of the residents make a living through small-scale agriculture, sharecropping, and forms of day labour. Primary crops in AGDH include wheat, corn, rice, peanuts, tobacco, potatoes and various other vegetables. Physically, it both resembles many other enclaves and, indeed, villages in Lalmonirhat, one of the most impoverished districts in Bangladesh.

However, AGDH is complex even within the scope of the already Byzantine history of the enclaves because of a long struggle over the opening of the Tin Bigha Corridor, a 'land

bridge' through Indian territory connecting AGDH to the Bangladeshi 'mainland'. This Corridor, originally promised to Bangladesh by India in the 1974 Indira-Mujib Accords, was the focus of prolonged political debate by both countries, and the subject of fierce and occasionally violent political action by residents of both AGDH and the surrounding Mekhliganj Thana in India. Since 1992 the Tin Bigha Corridor has been opened and maintained by India's Border Security Force (BSF); and the BSF, the area, and its inhabitants are in turn monitored by Bangladesh's border security force, the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). While initially opened for only one hour a day, the Corridor is currently open from 6 am to 6 pm (Indian time).

While a complete history of this fraught area is beyond the scope of this essay, the argument does suggest that AGDH's 'exceptional' status within both Bangladeshi and Indian national and state imaginaries is produced through this vague discourse of sensitivity – not, as is commonly understood, the other way around. Here, exceptionality is an ill-defined state of simultaneous secrecy, compromised security, and ambiguity. It is mutually constituted with a constantly shifting ground of power, interest and overlapping sovereignties within the enclave itself. For residents of AGDH, this condition allows and facilitates particular forms of exploitation at the same time that it produces an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, insecurity and confusion.



Figure 1: Patgram Upazila²

Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the Bengali State

Sociologist Philip Abrams began his essay "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State" with a canny observation. Musing on the difficulty that so many researchers face in gaining access to state records, he remarks, "Any attempt to examine politically institutionalised power at close quarters is, in short, liable to bring to light the fact that an integral element of such power is the quite straightforward ability to withhold information, deny observation, and dictate the terms of knowledge"³. Abrams' point is not so much that the various trappings of state power work diligently to protect secret information vital to national security, but rather that they serve to develop the illusion that something truly critical to state security lies underneath the veil of official secrecy. In other words, their main purpose is to forge the veil itself.

Abrams' observation describes my own research experience, which has been hampered by any number of 'official' barriers, including impenetrable bureaucratic processes, visa woes, subtle and not-so-subtle obstructions by archival and other officials, paper-shuffling games in regional and national archives (where the physical location of things as basic as land records are mysteries), and 'official' inquiries. These complications are linked to my research topic's 'sensitivity', a vague and plastic term that implies, without directly identifying, threats to national security. From the outside looking in, the enclaves remain on the periphery of understanding: sensitive spaces that emerge for most Bangladeshis as unresolved questions, symbols of an incomplete Partition, and ongoing conflict with their larger neighbour. Indeed, upon describing my research to people living in Dhaka, many say, "Ah, so you work on security issues". The notion of these sensitive areas as simultaneously security issues and tenuous parts of the nation raises disturbing questions both about those living within them (and their status as citizens of Bangladesh), and about those seeking to learn more about them.

When I first began work in the National Archives in Dhaka, I was assured by one of the head archivists that I was unlikely to find anything of use there or anywhere else on the *chitmahols*. When I asked why not, he replied, "Because they are very... *sensitive* areas". "Sensitive" areas, of course, are abnormal, or exceptional, in their difference from 'everywhere else'. Yet this term, which had little meaning to me at the beginning of my research, quickly began to take shape when I pursued permission to photocopy documents from the same archivist. "How many pages do you need to copy?" he asked me. I told him that I wanted to copy perhaps as many as 100-200 pages that day. "Oh well, that's a problem. You are only allowed to copy 20 pages per day". Frustrated to hear this unwritten and seemingly arbitrary rule, I asked for clarification on archival procedures. The archivist told me, "You see, we always try to help foreign researchers. But, you do research on a *sensitive* topic. I am an archivist, but a citizen of Bangladesh first. I cannot provide you with access to anything that would threaten my country's security". When I countered that records of post-Partition border incidents did not seem "sensitive", he merely shrugged and said, "They are border areas". Frustrated by this circular logic, where border areas are

“sensitive” simply because they are border areas, I again asked about additional restrictions. “There are no restrictions”, he replied, “You may copy 20 pages a day. As long as they are not secret”.

“How do I determine if a document is secret?” I asked.

Smiling, he said, “I will decide”.

Sensitivity, here, serves both as a barrier to information and an organising logic that dictates what *should* and *should not* be seen. Yet, if the border is a hazy, “sensitive” zone seen from Dhaka, these same politics produce bizarre information loops, discontinuities and paths through which information is transformed in fascinating, albeit frequently disturbing, ways. Moving from the archive to the enclave itself reveals the processes and struggles involved in working and living within sensitive spaces.

One day, as my research assistant and I passed through the Tin Bigha Corridor, we spotted a BSF *Jawan* with whom we had chatted a few days earlier. He flagged us down and with a scowl and said, “Why did you lie to me?” Puzzled, we assured him that we had not. He replied, “You told me that you are here to do research, but our informants inside the enclave tell us that you are here to buy eight *bighas* of land”. We did our best to reassure him of our intentions, but he angrily continued, “What is there to research here? Living by the border there are only thieves, smugglers, and dacoits”. Refraining from asking him the obvious question of why, in that case, we would want to purchase land there, we proceeded into the enclave and continued with our work.

It is common for researchers to become the subject of local speculation and gossip. But this particular rumour, which spread through AGDH and infiltrated the BSF and BDR camps, continued to have alarming results. The following day a plainclothes BDR liaison arrived at our guesthouse in Patgram. He informed us that I, as a foreigner, was required to inform the BDR when venturing into sensitive border areas. My research assistant and I assured him that we weren't aware of this procedure, but that we had spoken to at least 40 different individual BDR members at various checkpoints in and outside of AGDH. Indeed, several of them had already taken our names and, we presumed, communicated our information back through official channels. He took our particulars and left.

That night a fully uniformed contingent of BDR *Jawans* and the Patgram BDR commander showed up, accompanied by the plainclothes ‘security official’, to learn more. Alarmed at having a paramilitary force arrive in my room late at night, I tried to explain myself. After an intimidating few minutes, during which my research assistant was berated for so cavalierly going near the border with a foreigner, and menacingly lectured on the complications he would face if I were to die while with him, tension eased. We promised to keep them informed of our future movements, and they eventually left. It is not clear exactly what was behind their late-night visit. The BDR may have been responding to a direct inquiry by the BSF, satisfying themselves about our story and purposes, or both. In either case, the introduction of a foreign researcher into “sensitive” zones seems to have raised official questions, suspicions and skepticism.

My point in calling attention to these experiences is not to express shock or outrage at impositions on my research. Indeed, any foreign researcher working in a “sensitive” area might and should expect similar things. Rather, I wish to shed light on the dynamics of ‘sensitivity’ and ‘security’ that structure the lives of enclave inhabitants in oppressive ways. Abrams suggests “the state is not the reality that stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents us from seeing political reality as it is”⁴. As such, the politics of sensitivity in the archive serve to obfuscate and misdirect, veiling documents and data that might not even be there. Such documents may or may not contain *sensitive* information on a *sensitive* topic. The concept of sensitivity draws power from this very ambiguity. Its ties to equally vague concepts of national ‘security’, however, forge implicit links with more concrete notions of citizenship, national pride and job security. These in turn structure relationships between, among others, archivists and researchers. Sensitivity is a self-policing and structuring concept based not only on tangible security threats but equally, if not more, on the possibility that they *may* exist. The discourse of sensitivity, as such, also defines sensitive spaces as exceptional: places outside the bounds of ‘standard’ political practice, places occupied by criminals and others who threaten state security, and places where knowledge must be regulated and limited for the good of the state. Thus, if ‘sensitivity’ is part of a mask that prevents us from seeing political practice as it really is, it is also a process that marks and produces spaces in particular ways.

This marking has tangible effects not just on researchers but, even more so, on security forces and citizens at the border. My encounter with the BDR hints at a number of different relationships at play within sensitive spaces: the dynamics of information and rumour between the BSF and its ‘informants’, the protective yet watchful relationship between the BDR and enclave residents, the relationship between the BSF and BDR in their antagonistic but mutual task of policing the border, and, of course, the presence of a researcher with seemingly ambiguous intentions, into a *sensitive* border area. Yet, the question of why these areas are ‘sensitive’ remains vague. AGDH is populated largely by poor farmers and landless labourers. It is a politically active area and cross-border smuggling certainly occurs, but my research suggests that these activities take place in no higher volume than elsewhere. The lands themselves are fertile, but AGDH’s overall contribution to Bangladesh’s economy is miniscule.

The seemingly careless identification of all border residents as thieves and smugglers seems, on first inspection, to be a cruel generalisation and my alleged intent to purchase land a laughable misinterpretation. Yet they also point to the ways that politics of sensitivity produce a space where everything is uncertain and unstable. The generalisation of criminal activity in the enclaves creates economic realities that frequently make ‘criminal’ activities, such as illegally crossing a border to get to market, critical for survival. The processes of securing the enclave produce insecurity for enclave residents. The jurisdictional ambiguities of the enclave create areas where multiple individuals and organisations claim sovereign control of both spaces and resources to their own benefit, without providing collateral services to their constituents.

Securities and Insecurities

One of my informants, a woman who grew up outside the enclave and married a resident of AGDH shortly after the Tin Bigha Corridor opened in 1992, described life in AGDH as a constant feeling of instability and transience. “For the first few days of our marriage”, she said, “I would feel sort of breathless during the night. A sense of insecurity. What would happen if we were not allowed to cross the Corridor anymore? I would stand in the yard of my in-laws’ house and look eastward towards where my parents’ house lies”. This sense of *in* security stands in stark relation to the intense monitoring by two state security apparatuses. AGDH is surrounded by BSF camps and watchtowers. This panoptic observation is punctuated by the heavily militarised passage into and out of AGDH through the Corridor, which involves crossing the paths of two BSF camps, two BDR checkpoints, and an additional two BDR camps (see figure 2).

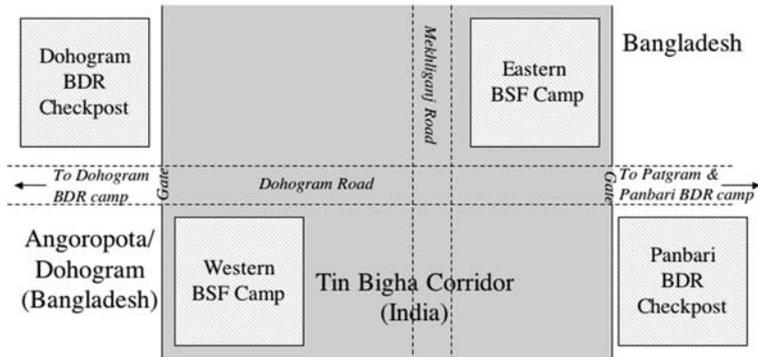


Figure 2: Tin Bigha Corridor (not to scale)

Rather than routinising and normalising life for AGDH residents, this attention and surveillance, combined with the border politics of the enclave, produces new sets of ambiguities at the same time that it allows various forms of spatial exploitation and corruption. Over the past 60 years, this has made cattle rustling (across the border in both directions), raids and thefts of property, kidnapping, random arrests, harassment by BSF officials, and forcible subscriptions during Hindu holidays and festivals everyday realities for AGDH residents.⁵ Yet it would be a mistake to understand such complications as simply coming from outside in. Rather, the complexities of these forms of spatial exploitation are always bound up with internal politics and individual strategies and tactics. During the summer of 2006, for example, the BSF announced that they were placing a 10-cow ceiling on the number of cattle that could be taken out of the enclave on *haat* (market) days. In a Union Parishad of approximately 16,000 people, many of whom possess few assets beyond their cattle, this placed a severe imposition on enclave residents’ ability to raise cash to cover land purchases, dowries, production shortfalls or various other forms of asset shocks.

The BSF's stated reason for introducing such measures was to combat cattle smuggling. There is some truth to the claim that AGDH served as a conduit for cattle from India to Bangladesh. These cattle are illegally brought across the border both for use in agriculture and for slaughter. Many residents told me that it was (or had been) common practice for Indians from surrounding areas to enter AGDH with their cattle, strike an arrangement with a local broker, and wait for the broker to return with proceeds from sales. Indeed, particularly before the opening of the Corridor, such petty smuggling was a common and critical livelihood strategy for enclave residents. This profitable cattle trade became a key method for local elites to acquire wealth, and raised money for political campaigns. Indeed, the BSF's 10-cow ceiling was in direct response to a sharp increase in cattle passages. During the previous Union Parishad administration from 1997-2002, I was told that BSF records showed 7,000-8,000 cows passing through the Corridor. During the first three years of the current administration, however, as many as 18,000 were recorded.

If the BSF's strategy was to cut down on smuggling, their ceiling also served to centralise and enhance corrupt practices that paradoxically decrease the security of many AGDH residents. In fact, this particular exercise of sovereignty served not only to prevent residents from accessing markets to sell critical goods, it also placed the responsibility for deciding *who* could take cattle to market in the hands of the local political establishment, the individuals most accused of causing the ceiling in the first place. The cattle ceiling, as such, has created another layer of corruption, nepotism and favouritism, and afforded new powers to individuals who both create and exploit AGDH's 'exceptional' status.

Recent studies of sovereignty draw inspiration from political theorist Carl Schmitt's famous dictum that the "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception"⁶. As Schmitt argues, "What characterises an exception is principally unlimited authority, which means the suspension of the entire existing order. In such a situation it is clear that the state remains, whereas law recedes. Because the exception is different from anarchy and chaos, order in the juristic sense still prevails even if it is not of the ordinary kind"⁷. Drawing on Abrams, one might ask what, indeed, constitutes order of an "ordinary" kind. However, the processes of sensitivity that I argue produce exceptionality in AGDH do facilitate confused yet rigid practices of ordering and control. Indeed, residents of a sensitive space seem to face an *exceptional* amount of ordering. This exceptionality in many ways mirrors Giorgio Agamben's now famous articulation of the exception as simultaneously forcibly included and excluded from political and social order – as that which "*cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot be a member of the whole in which it is always already a part*"⁸. The ambiguity that emerges in sensitive spaces extends beyond the circumscription of access to knowledge. It both unsettles and regiments life within and around these spaces in a variety of ways, marking residents as outside the bounds of "ordinary" legal regimes, yet within a rigid system of observation and control.

Yet, what makes the sensitive space of AGDH so fraught, I suggest, is not a single "sovereign" exclusion, but rather the multiple complications and ambiguities of sovereignty

that are especially prevalent in such zones. While Schmitt, Agamben and those who draw on their work often think of the “sovereign” and *his* decision as singular, much of the complication of life in AGDH stems from the fact that its residents are the subject of *multiple* sovereigns – the BSF, the BDR, conservative religious institutions, rigidly patriarchal family structures, the local Union Council, the Thana and district level administrations, various different NGOs operating and not operating within AGDH, the civil administrations of both India and Bangladesh, and more. These sovereignties overlap in uneven and constantly shifting ways. What is notable about AGDH, then, is not a single sovereign power that marks it as exceptional, but rather a discourse of sensitivity that masks the fragmented and multiple individuals and organisations that rely on the ambiguities of rule in AGDH for personal, political, and organisational gain. There is no such thing as a unified ‘state’ at work within or on the boundaries of AGDH. Rather, there is what Abrams would refer to as a state system: loosely affiliated regulatory bodies, working with more or less communication, cooperation, and antagonism, to incompletely and unevenly administer this troublesomely sensitive area.

Despite the often heavy-handed forms of regulation and ordering, there remains a marked shortage of services that could improve the lives of individuals living in AGDH. Most residents complain of a lack of jobs and reliable political representation. Government relief programmes are prevalent, but rife with notorious corruption. There is a police investigative unit in AGDH, but it does little to serve the immediate needs of residents. Indeed, one informant quipped, “At times of [border] tension, girls will cross [the Tin Bigha] wearing police uniforms and the police will cross wearing *saris*”. Residents often look to the BDR to address their problems and, indeed, most report that since the BDR entered the enclave in 1995, harassment by Indians and Indian officials has decreased markedly. Still, the BDR is limited in their ability to help residents by their mandate to work/negotiate with the BSF and their lack of jurisdiction in matters pertaining to the day-to-day lives of residents. At best, they play a mediating role.

This is particularly critical in the case of health care. The lack of facilities inside the enclave pose serious problems in the cases of medical emergencies that take place during the night, when the Corridor is closed, making the enclaves a particularly dangerous place for pregnant women and young children. A BDR officer in charge of handling frequent local negotiations with the BSF highlighted this issue: “Yesterday morning, just after the morning prayer [before dawn], my sentry knocked at my door to inform me that there was a critical patient with a baby who needed to go to Patgram. I ordered two *Jawans* to take her up to Tin Bigha and make a request to the BSF. They allowed her to pass. These sorts of necessities frequently occur and we have to play our part. The problem happens during the night. If it is 9 pm or later, the BSF has many formalities. They call here and there to their company headquarters or somewhere else. And these processes swallow one hour or more of time, which is critical for a patient or someone in medical emergency or labour pain”. Even after crossing the Corridor, it is still over an hour by cycle-rickshaw to the nearest medical facilities in Patgram. There are no formalised processes that guarantee this

passage. The decision to cross ultimately lies with the BSF. Speaking with bitterness, the officer continued, "They dilly-dally and sometimes they just don't allow. They don't categorically deny passage because they may be condemned for violating international law. But they pretend to talk to other authorities, and after some time come out suggesting, 'Our company commander isn't available now, so we can't allow you...'"

The uncertainties of life are further compounded by constant rumours about what will and will not happen with the precarious status of AGDH as a whole. While most agree that life has become more stable since the opening of the Corridor, residents constantly worry and hope for changes in status of the Tin Bigha. As a farmer told me, "We get everything like other people – the sun, rain, air. Still we cannot move like others. This Corridor is our main problem. It opens at 6:30 am and closes at 6:30 pm. Those who live in Dahagram are like chickens in a cage when the gate closes... The *chitmahol* is a poor area. There is uncertainty, always. What will happen and what will not? We are always occupied with the thought of how to live. We have no time to chat".

Though my informant's comment was meant to illustrate the immediacy of uncertainty in AGDH, and also to convey a particular message to a researcher of whose intentions he was not quite convinced, it is untrue that residents have no time to chat. Indeed, the outcomes of various different changes in power dynamics within and around the enclave, and speculation on their implications for those living there, is the central topic of discussion for tea-stall customers in AGDH. Currently a new rumour, linked to a series of recent meetings held in the Tin Bigha Corridor, is circulating throughout AGDH. After 15 years of opening the Tin Bigha for only part of the day, the BSF and BDR, this rumour claims, are negotiating to finally open the Corridor around the clock. Whether or not this rumour proves true, it is the latest stage in the ongoing ambiguous debate over sovereignty and sovereign control in this exceptional space. While a mood of cautious optimism can be felt in the enclave, many remain sceptical.

Sensitivity in AGDH is inexorably bound up in issues of security and insecurity, hope and fear, sovereignty and control. Ambiguity permeates everything about the enclave, from its internal political workings to its very status as a part of Bangladesh.⁹ The politics of sensitivity at play in the enclaves both constitute and are constituted by this ambiguity. The notion of "sensitive" areas regulates knowledge of and about AGDH and governs the lives, actions, and aspirations of its residents. At the same time, sensitivity complicates and facilitates the multiple overlapping of sovereignty and jurisdiction both within and linked to the enclave as a whole. As one of my informants put it, "AGDH folks are always in tension. They are concerned about what will happen next. Though maybe nothing will happen, in fact, but this sense of insecurity is really suffocating". The multiple ways that AGDH and its residents are marked as exceptions to normal political rule constitute the essence of this politics of sensitivity.

Notes

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2. Source: http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/Maps/MP_0109.GIF
3. Philip Abrams. "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State". In *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1(1), pp. 58-88, at 62 (1988).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
5. These complications did not stop altogether with the opening of the Corridor. However, the entry of the BDR into AGDH provided new formal processes for addressing and adjudicating complaints.
6. Carl Schmitt [1922]. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2005, Chicago), p. 5.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
8. Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1998, Stanford), p. 25. Italics in original.