

*Histories of Belonging(s): Narrating Territory, Possession, and Dispossession at the India-Bangladesh Border**

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Abstract

This paper offers a history of belonging in Dahagram, a sovereign Bangladeshi enclave situated within India but close to the India-Bangladesh border. I recount Dahagram's post-Partition history, focusing particularly on the long and localized struggles between 1974 and 1992 to open the Tin Bigha Corridor, a land bridge through Indian territory that links Dahagram to the Bangladeshi mainland. Drawing on the memories and experiences of residents, I examine Dahagram's past(s) as narratives of postcolonial belonging: to fragmented conceptions of state and nation, to surrounding areas, and to the enclave itself. I focus on the overlapping tensions between national and local struggles to 'claim' Dahagram as Bangladeshi or Indian territory, and uneven processes of political inclusion within and around the enclaves and within the Bangladeshi State. I use 'belonging' as a double-entendre, as these tensions are all intimately linked to possession of land/territory, goods, and access to markets. The notion of belonging(s) helps to illuminate Dahagram's historical and contemporary cultural politics and political-economy, as well as its articulations with broader events in postcolonial South Asia. Yet, belonging is also an analytic for understanding how history is remembered and articulated as a claim to territory, rights, and membership in unstable places.

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Introduction

The 26th of June 2007 marked the 15th anniversary of the opening of the Tin Bigha Corridor, a narrow strip of land running through Indian territory that connects the Bangladeshi *chhitmahal* of Dahagram¹ with mainland Bangladesh. Dahagram is the largest of a series of *chhitmahals*, or enclaves—literally, pieces of India inside of Bangladesh and vice versa—scattered along the northern part of the India-Bangladesh border.² These enclaves have emerged as persistent problems in the relationship between India and East Pakistan and later Bangladesh.³ Situated at the margins of both state and nation, they are at once symbols of an incomplete and ongoing Partition⁴ and are spaces that complicate easy equations of nation, identity, and territory.⁵ Within the broad complexity of the *chhitmahals*, Dahagram is particularly marked (see Figure 1). Its peculiar history, especially the long and acrimonious debate over the Corridor, has marked it as an exceptionally unstable and sensitive space⁶—one where people

¹ The official name of the enclave is 'Angorpota-Dahagram, denoting two separate but conjoined enclaves. By shortening the name to Dahagram, I am following conventions adhered to by residents.

² This paper deals primarily with the history of Dahagram. The literature on the *chhitmahals* is limited, but for more on enclaves beyond Dahagram see Van Schendel, W. (2002). *Stateless in South Asia: The Making of the India-Bangladesh Enclaves*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, **61**: 1, 115–147; Whyte, B. (2002). *Waiting for the Esquimo: An Historical and Documentary Study of the Cooch Behar Enclaves of India and Bangladesh*, University of Melbourne School of Anthropology, Geography, and Environmental Studies, Melbourne; Butalia, U. (2003). 'The Nowhere People' in J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta. *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in East India*, Stree, Kolkata; Jones, R. (2009). Sovereignty & Statelessness in the Border Enclaves of India and Bangladesh, *Political Geography*, **28**: 373–381; Jones, R. (2010). 'The Border Enclaves of India and Bangladesh: The Forgotten Lands' in A. Diener and J. Hagen (eds). *Borderlines and Borderlands: Political Oddities at the Edge of the Nation-State*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, New York; and Sen, A. 2002. *The Insiders Outside*, *Humanscape*, November.

³ See, for example, Ahmed, I. (2006). Bangladesh-India Relations: The Context of SAARC and the Emerging Global Scenario, *Asian Affairs*, **28**: 2, 46–62 and Ahmed, I. (2007). The Indo-Bangla SAARC Puzzle, *Himal South Asian*, 14 July, who identifies the enclaves as one of the seven persistent barriers to amicable relations between India and Bangladesh.

⁴ See Chatterji, J. (1999). The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947–1952, *Modern Asian Studies*, **33**: 1, 185–242.

⁵ See Van Schendel, *Stateless in South Asia*, especially pp. 117–128.

⁶ By 'sensitive', I mean a political process that both regulates knowledge about sensitive spaces and structures actions, behaviours, and possibilities within them. The 'sensitivity' of the enclaves has tangible effects not just for residents of these fraught areas, but also for government officials, security forces, and researchers seeking to

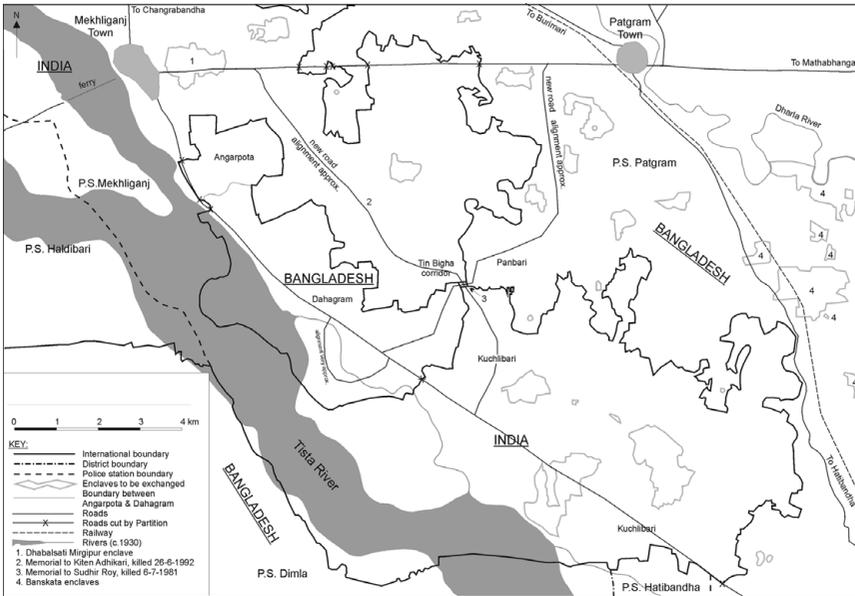


Figure 1 Dahagram, Patgram, and Tin Bigha Corridor, Map by Brendan Whyte

continually struggle both for forms of belonging and to maintain their belongings. The instabilities of life within Dahagram are contingent on a range of shifting relations—the political climate between two countries, the vagaries of policing and securing the border, and local communal politics and struggles over territory. The history of the enclave, seen from the ‘ground’ level shapes, articulates with, and differs from, national histories of struggle over space and territory in postcolonial Bengal. It is this complexity and the local histories of claiming various forms of belongings that will be examined here.

The celebration by Dahagram’s 16,000 residents on 26th June commemorates the long political struggle over the opening of the Corridor. Friends had been telling me for months about the festivities that would accompany the ‘Corridor Open Day’. *You must come. There will be music, sweets. Indians will parade in the Corridor to protest and we will also protest back, demanding a full opening of the Corridor.*⁷ Travelling to the

understand them. See Cons, J. (2011) *The Fragments and their Nation(s): Sensitive Space Along the India-Bangladesh Border*, Doctoral Dissertation, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

⁷ I use the convention of italicizing quotations and discussions from my fieldnotes. Quotations from recorded interviews are not italicized.

enclave from Patgram—a busy market town in Northern Lalmonirhat district in Bangladesh—in a light summer rain, I was looking forward to this spectacle of territorial belonging. As I arrived, there was a crowd of Indian protesters in the Corridor itself, yet there was no corresponding crowd from Dahagram. Curious, I proceeded directly to my friend Tariq's⁸ tailoring shop to find out what had happened. As it turned out, the celebrations had fallen victim to the ban on political gatherings put in place by the Emergency Administration, which had come to power after the collapse of Bangladesh's Interim Government in January 2007.⁹ 'We spoke to the UNO [Upazila Nirbahi Officer]',¹⁰ Tariq sourly told me after whisking me away for a cup of tea, 'and decided that because of the Emergency, this year we wouldn't have any celebrations'. And so, while activist groups from the surrounding Indian village of Mekhliganj protested the existence of the Corridor, and indeed, the enclave itself—shouting slogans of 'United we stand, united we fight', and 'Leave *Bharat* [India]!'—Dahagram residents gathered in tea stalls and grumbled.

This discontent marked more than a lost holiday, or inability to counter the taunts and jeers of Indian protesters. The 26th June Anniversary, even with the paltry media coverage it usually draws, is an annual opportunity to reassert the enclave's claim of belonging to Bangladesh. This is so critical to enclave residents because, despite 60 years of struggle, such claims remain highly partial and, at moments, debated. The Corridor was only open during daylight hours and enclave residents were effectively 'locked in' at night.¹¹ The Corridor

⁸ I have changed the names of my informants to protect their identity.

⁹ The Emergency was declared after months of political chaos leading up to the general elections. On the Emergency Administration's goals see M. Ahmed. (4 April 2007). The Challenging Interface of Democracy and Security, *The Daily Star*. On the suspension of democratic liberties during the Emergency, see See Odhikar Report. (12 March 2008), *Due Process of Law Must be Followed*, Odhikar: www.odhikar.org/documents/14monthsofstateofemergency.pdf [Accessed 20 October 2011] and Freedom House. (29 April 2008). *Freedom of the Press 2008—Bangladesh*, UNHCR Refword: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4871f5ee2.html> [Accessed 20 October 2011].

¹⁰ *Upazilas* are Bangladesh's second smallest administrative unit in Bangladesh above the Union *Parishads* [councils] and below Districts. In this case, Patgram *Upazila* is a sub-district in Lalmonirhat District. The UNO is the *Upazila's* chief executive officer.

¹¹ On 8 September 2011, the Governments of Bangladesh and India signed a protocol to keep the Corridor open 24 hours a day. On 19 October 2011, as this paper was going to press, this protocol was put in place to a great fanfare within the enclave. See *The Daily Star* 8 (September 2011): 'Dahagram Celebrates While Other

itself runs through sovereign Indian territory and is controlled by the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF), who many believe might close the Tin Bigha for good at any moment. What is more, Dahagram residents know that the enclave itself plays a largely symbolic role in concepts of state, nation, and territory within Bangladesh. The enclave is more important as an *idea* of territory 'saved' from the clutches of a 'spatially greedy' Indian state, than as a material geographic reality that is complicated, problematic, and economically and socially marginal from the perspective of the central government. Belonging is a question, as such, that is rarely taken for granted within the enclave.

The problem of understanding life in areas such as Dahagram is one that has recently re-emerged as a central issue in social science and historical research. The outpouring of literature on borders and frontiers has highlighted the importance and the possibilities of engaging borders as 'privileged site[s] for assessing the power and limitations of the nation state'.¹² As many of these studies show, life for borderland residents is often one of tenuous negotiation.¹³ At the same time, debates over rights and sovereignty set against the backdrop of the global war on terror have fore-grounded the contingency of membership within nations and states, thus reviving

Enclaves Unhappy'; Habib, H. (2 November 2011), 'Freedom from Virtual Captivity', *The Hindu*.

¹² Aggarwal, R. and M. Bhan. (2009). 'Disarming Violence': Development, Democracy, and Security on the Borders of India, *Journal of Asian Studies*, **68**: 2, 519–542. especially p. 521. I draw from concerns within this exhaustive literature on ways to understand the relational production of state, society, security, and identity in borderlands. See Baud, M. and W. Van Schendel. (1997). *Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands*, *Journal of World History*, **8**: 2, 211–242; and the collections of essays in Wilson, T. and H. Donnan (eds). (1998). *Border identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, especially pp. 1–30; Donnan, H. and T. Wilson (ed). (1999). *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation, and State*, Berg, Oxford; Kumar Rajaram, P. and C. Grundy-Warr (eds). (2007). *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis; Diener, A. and J. Hagen (eds). (2010), especially pp. ix–xxxix. *Borderlines and Borderlands: Political Oddities at the Edge of the Nation-State*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, New York; and Zartman, I. W. (ed). (2010), especially pp. 1–33. *Understanding Life in the Borderland: Boundaries in Depth and in Motion*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, especially pp. 1–20.

¹³ And not one that need necessarily always be cast in the negative. See Walker, A. (1999). *Legend of the Golden Boat: Regulation, Trade and Traders in the Borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, pp. 5–17.

Arendtian¹⁴ concerns about the tenuous link between rights and statelessness.¹⁵

Despite these critical interventions, the methodological and linguistic approaches to understanding and describing life in unstable and sensitive border areas like those of Dahagram are often over-determined by broad and abstract concepts such as citizenship, statelessness and, in the wake of Agamben's influential *Homo Sacer*,¹⁶ exception and 'bare life'. Though such concepts have been productive in thinking through the processes and practices of securing border areas,¹⁷ they do not necessarily clarify the ways residents of such spaces frame their own struggles, histories, and concerns. In a recent critique of the paucity of language for exploring such conditions, Butler argues: 'I think we must describe destitution. . .but if the language by which we describe [it] presumes, time and again, that the key terms are sovereignty and bare life, we deprive ourselves of the lexicon we need to understand the other networks of power to which it belongs, or how power is recast in that place or even saturated in that place'.¹⁸ As Butler suggests, the reliance on such tropes limits our ability to describe complex conditions of statelessness and the ways that people who live in such conditions forge their own claims to rights and resources and also in the way they frame their own conditions, histories, and political possibilities.

What, then, is the grammar through which we should begin to reconstruct such histories and claims for those who live in places like Dahagram? My modest response to this question is that a critical starting point is to explore the ways that such issues are framed by those who live in such conditions themselves. In exploring histories of belonging(s) within Dahagram, this paper sheds light on how people frame particular claims to membership—in communities, in nations,

¹⁴ See Arendt, H. (1968). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt Brace, New York, pp. 240–303.

¹⁵ See, for example, essays in Hansen, T. B. and F. Stepputat (eds). (2005). *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*, Duke University Press, Durham.

¹⁶ See Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto.

¹⁷ See Basaran, T. (2008). Security, Law, Borders: Spaces of Exclusion, *International Political Sociology*: 2, 339–354; and Jones, R. (2009). Agents of Exception: Border Security and the Marginalization of Muslims in India, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 27: 5, 879–897.

¹⁸ Butler, J. and G. C. Spivak. (2007). *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, Seagull Books, Kolkata. pp. 42–43.

in states—and how they seek to actualize their rights. The landscape of Dahagram is historically sedimented with histories of belonging.¹⁹ Citizenship, displacement, security (both national and personal), and rights, are all subsumed within a range of notions of belonging and indeed belongings (material goods). Movement and the ability to hold and dispose of possessions—land, clothing, houses, crops, livestock—are central to my exploration. Yet belonging is more than purely a question of possession. It is also one of community and identity. Who has the right to belong and why? I explore history from within the enclave, examining the intertwined political economies and cultural politics of belonging(s) in Dahagram largely as its residents related them to me. Rather than establishing the ‘facts’ of Dahagram’s history, I argue that these narrations are both the memories of possessions and disposessions and the bases for ongoing claims to belonging. These claims, in turn, structure particular notions of nation and community that govern *who* is a legitimate member and what such membership means.

My opportunistic adoption of the homonym ‘belonging’ is intended to draw attention to the ways that the politics of membership within the enclave are inseparable from debates over, and claims of, ownership. Enclave residents would occasionally use Bengali words and phrases such as *ami oi barir lok*, *gamer lok*, or more often *chhiter lok* [I belong to that household, village, or enclave] to denote belonging (membership) and *jinishta amar* [that is mine], *dokhol kora niechi* [I (forcefully) took] to denote belonging (possession). The limited usage of these terms *per se* is not what interests me here. Rather, I am suggesting that broadly exploring ways that membership and property are linked in narrations of Dahagram’s history is a more productive way to understand the dilemmas of life in unstable and sensitive spaces than more narrowly defined problematics such as ‘statelessness’ or ‘citizenship’.

Tensions of belonging

Prior to Partition in 1947, the *chhitmahals* were discontinuous landholdings dating back to the Mughal incursion north from Dacca (Dhaka in contemporary spelling) into the kingdom of Koch (Cooch)

¹⁹ Moore, D. (2005). *Suffering for Territory: Race, Place, and Power in Zimbabwe*, Duke University Press, Durham, p. 2.

Behar in the late seventeenth century. According to Whyte,²⁰ Mughals were unable to dislodge a number of powerful chieftains from the lands around Boda, Patgram and Purvabhag—areas on the frontier between Koch and Mughal rule—that were granted to them by treaty in 1713. These lands remained officially part of the kingdom of Koch Behar while becoming enclaves within the Mughal empire. Similarly, Mughal soldiers had occupied lands inside Koch Behar, lands that became a discontinuous part of Mughal territory. During the colonial period, many of these enclaves were spread along the border between Rangpur district, under direct colonial administration, and Koch Behar, an indirectly ruled ‘Princely State’. Though the existence of such territorial ambiguities caused confusion for colonial administrators,²¹ projects and proposals to ‘solve’ the *chhitmahal* issue either ran into administrative complications or simply came to no fruitful end. Roughly 200 *chhitmahals*²² became state enclaves—in the sense of being completely bounded by another sovereign state—at and shortly after Partition in 1947 with the accession of Cooch Behar to India in 1949.²³ Of these, Dahagram was the largest, both in terms of land and population. Situated on the banks of the Tista river, it is, at its closest point, roughly 170 meters from what became the official border.

While the Partition boundary in West Bengal, known as the Radcliffe Line, was nominally drawn by separating majority Hindu districts from majority Muslim districts, this process was much more complicated on the ground. As Van Schendel argues,²⁴ very little of the border actually separated majority Muslim and Hindu districts and, in practice, the border more frequently ran through areas where there was a majority of the same religious group on both sides. Furthermore, ‘the clear

²⁰ Whyte, *Waiting for the Esquimo*, especially pp. 30–34.

²¹ Cons, *Fragments and Their Nation(s)*, especially pp. 85–96; Whyte, *Waiting for the Esquimo*, especially pp. 50–66.

²² Numerous other enclaves, particularly those falling between the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar—both districts within West Bengal, India—posed few administrative problems and were eventually simply absorbed into their bounding district.

²³ Princely States were nominally given a choice as to which state—India or Pakistan—they wished to join at Independence. In practice, this choice often boiled down to territorial contiguity. On the accession of Cooch Behar, see Ghosh, A. G. (1993). ‘Problem of the Integration of Coochbehar State with Indian Union’ in N. R. Ray. *Dimensions of National Integration: The Experiences and Lessons of Indian History*, Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, pp. 407–419.

²⁴ Van Schendel, W. (2005). *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, Anthem Press, London, pp. 44–48.

lines that appeared on the maps used by colonial officials, including the Bengal Boundary (or Radcliffe) Committee, did not correspond with anything visible 'out there'. There was no way unequivocally to recognize the new border on the ground'.²⁵ In practice, the border was worked out through lengthy and often contentious legal and political negotiations between India and Pakistan. Many of the ambiguities resulting from this process, including the enclaves themselves, continue to plague border residents and are the source of ongoing conflicts.

Though punctuated by moments of violence and open conflict, the history of Dahagram during the East Pakistan period (1947–1970)²⁶ is perhaps best described as a story of uncomfortable belonging to both India and Pakistan. From Partition, or more specifically from the accession of the Princely State of Cooch Behar to India in 1948,²⁷ the complicated border configurations in the Patgram/Mekhliganj region meant that residents of Dahagram had to illegally cross one, and often two, borders simply to take their goods to market. In the years following Partition, and even after the introduction of the official passport system in 1952,²⁸ movement across the border was not heavily regulated.²⁹ There was regular back and forth travel along the length of the Bengal border, as many border residents had lands and even families bifurcated by the haphazardly-drawn Partition boundary. Yet, as tension between the two countries grew, the number of border

²⁵ Van Schendel, W. *The Bengal Borderland*, pp. 55–56.

²⁶ In other words, in the period following Partition, in which Bengal was split into West Bengal (in India) and East Pakistan and before the Liberation War in 1971 in which East Pakistan gained independence from West Pakistan and became Bangladesh.

²⁷ Cooch Behar, like other indirectly ruled Princely States during the colonial period, had a nominal choice as to which state (India or Pakistan) it would join following Partition. After a brief period of political struggle and indecision, Cooch Behar opted for India. For more on this process in Cooch Behar, see Ghosh. *The Problem of the Integration of Cooch Behar State*.

²⁸ Indeed, the passport agreement made specific provisions for Enclave residents, though in practice this freedom was short-lived. See Whyte, *Waiting for the Esquimo*, Appendix 1–22.

²⁹ See Chatterji, *The Fashioning of a Frontier*, pp. 232–233; Murayama, M. (2006). *Borders, Migration and Sub-Regional Cooperation in Eastern South Asia*, *Economic and Political Weekly*: 8 April 1351–1359; and Rahman, M. and W. Van Schendel. (2003). 'I Am Not a Refugee': Rethinking Partition Migration, *Modern Asian Studies*, **37**: 3, 551–584.

incidents skyrocketed.³⁰ Regulation and control along the border became more intense and the border itself more formalized through the establishment of boundary commissions to settle territorial controversies and the creation of paramilitary organizations to patrol and secure the border such as the *Ansars* in East Pakistan and the *Bangiya Jatiya Rakshi Bahini* [West Bengal National Volunteer Force] in West Bengal.³¹

This gradual formalization ossified an asymmetrical relationship of rights and power inside the enclave drawn along communal lines. Van Schendel argues that notions of citizenship in the post-Partition period had a general character of *transterritoriality*. 'Both states saw themselves as being in charge of the populations living in their own territory, but also of a [religious] category of people living in the territory of the other state'.³² Dahagram's population was roughly divided between Hindus and Muslims. As movement across the border became more and more legally precarious, the ability of Muslims living within Dahagram to freely and safely travel to market in surrounding areas decreased. Such informal or unstated policies meant that Hindus in Dahagram were residents of India in all but address. At the same time, Muslims were doubly alienated from membership within Pakistan, legally residing within sovereign East Pakistani territory, yet hemmed in by another state and residing side-by-side with others who effectively held more rights than they. While Hindus in Dahagram were able to live largely as though they were actually residing in India, Muslims had to negotiate the vagaries of paramilitary forces, police, and often-hostile neighbours simply to buy and sell goods.

As with Indian enclaves in East Pakistan, daily navigation of such issues posed intermittent problems. When disputes arose over ownership of livestock or crops, Muslim residents had little recourse, as those who could legally represent and protect their rights were situated across an international border. With the 1958 Nehru-Noon Accords that made provisions to exchange the enclaves—provisions that were fiercely challenged and, ultimately, never implemented—these situations became more precarious. As tensions rose, Dahagram

³⁰ See numerous accounts in the Home Political Confidential Records from 1948–1960 in Bangladesh National Archives: Home Political Office Confidential Records (CR) List 119 bundles 1–52.

³¹ Van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland*, pp. 87–117. These paramilitary groups were the predecessors of and were eventually superseded by the East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) Rifles in East Pakistan and the Indian Border Security Forces (BSF).

³² Van Schendel, *Stateless in South Asia*, p. 127.

became a zone of contention, and monitoring of and hostility towards its residents grew. An Indian border security camp was established near what is now the Tin Bigha Corridor,³³ and both residents of the surrounding Indian Thana of Mekhliganj and border security *jawans* [soldiers] began to patrol its perimeter.

Dahagram residents characterize this period as one of suffering, where the act of going to market was fraught with risk and life within the enclave was one of extreme instability. As residents recall, it was common practice for the border patrols to require a payment or bribes for passage to move into or out of the enclave. As Akkas Ali, a small-holder farmer living in the north of Dahagram, described it, 'Whenever we crossed into Indian territory, we had to go through BSF scrutiny.'³⁴ The BSF would note our name, put some mark on our shoulder, such as branding cows. They even compelled us to do work for them, doing such chores as cleaning their lavatories, cutting their lawns, sawing wood for them, etc'.³⁵ Whilst residents in the south of the enclave, closest to Bangladesh, frequently dodged security forces to reach the East Pakistani mainland, others residing in the north would more frequently make the trip into India. This trip was more risky as it made travellers vulnerable for longer. Many were arrested in the *haat* [market] in Mekhliganj.³⁶ Enclave residents frequently reminded me, *there is not a single family in the enclave who has not suffered* [koshto] *while a household member was detained in an Indian jail*. Beyond the problem of moving into and out of the enclave, Muslim residents faced vulnerability from looting by both Indians in Mekhliganj and Hindus living within the enclave.

The Dahagram War

Such tensions of belonging characterized life for (Muslim) Dahagram residents both before and after the Liberation War in 1971. Indeed,

³³ Though I have not been able to verify the exact date that this camp was put in place, residents agree that it was before 1965 and after 1958. This suggests that the camp was initially established by the West Bengal Rifles, before they became incorporated into the new, national border security force, the BSF, in 1965.

³⁴ No residents of Dahagram that I spoke with made any distinction between the BSF and the various paramilitary groups that preceded their formation.

³⁵ Interview, Dahagram, 8 February 2007.

³⁶ As Whyte notes, residents of the enclave could frequently get a better price for agricultural products in East Pakistan as prices in India were fixed. As such, there was a double incentive to make the crossing to Patgram Thana.

this situation only substantively changed with the opening of the Tin Bigha Corridor in 1992. However, this is neither to say that the difficulties of life within and movement out of the enclave were unchanging nor that they were purely reflections of local struggles over the status of the enclave and its residents. Certain moments in agricultural cycles—during rice harvests, for example—were more violent than others. Conflicts regularly arose over the exact location of the border and raids were carried out on both sides of the border to carry off freshly harvested paddy. Moreover, the politics of belonging within the enclave were indexed to broader debates and struggles over territory, sovereignty, and space between India and Pakistan. In moments of tension, for example during the debate over the Nehru-Noon Accords, daily practices of regulating movement periodically resolved themselves into moments of crisis and open violence. In such moments, residents of the enclaves, and indeed, residents of the border region more broadly, were more likely to experience expropriation, thefts, and various forms of organized communal attacks.

Perhaps the most vividly remembered of these incidents within Dahagram occurred in the spring of 1965 and resulted in the destruction of much of the enclave. This incident, which came to be known as the Dahagram War continues to resonate in enclave politics today. The war was set against the backdrop of increasing tension between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. As the dispute intensified, there was a marked build-up of Indian and Pakistani troops along border regions in both the east and west.³⁷ Beginning in January, the Indian Border Security Forces began to amass troops and dig trenches in the area along the Tin Bigha, by far the closest point of the enclave to the mainland. This effectively cut off Dahagram residents from Patgram Thana in East Pakistan and forced them to make a more risky³⁸ crossing into Mekhliganj in India to buy and sell goods.³⁹ Tension in Dahagram reached a dangerous height following India's build-up along the Rann of Kachchh—another space that had been contentious and sensitive in the relationship between India and

³⁷ For a detailed exploration of the 1965 war, see Gupta, H. (1967). *India-Pakistan War 1965, Vols. 1 and 2*, Hariyana Prakashan, Delhi.

³⁸ Risky because residents could be arrested at any point while at market as opposed to only during the border crossing.

³⁹ See *The Pakistan Observer*. (20 March 1965). 'India Deploys Dogras, Jats, Rajputs Along Ranpur [*sic*] Border'.

Pakistan situated on India's West Coast—in early March,⁴⁰ and a series of incursions along the East Pakistan border.⁴¹ Violence seemed inevitable to residents of Dahagram.

On the morning of 13th March, a small herd of goats was rustled by a group of Indians from Mekhliganj. Such back and forth rustling was a common occurrence, particularly along Dahagram's northern border.⁴² Yet in periods of tension, disputes could quickly escalate to overt violence. Bachao Miah, the goats' owner, crossed the border to demand their return and was shot in the leg by a man who was repeatedly described to me as a 'BSF officer'. Miah, assisted by his sons, retreated back into Dahagram. That night, Indians surrounded Dahagram on three sides. With the support of the Border Security Forces, they began moving from the border in towards the enclave's centre, burning Muslim homes as they went.⁴³

For most, the memory of the outbreak of the war is one of confusion and chaos. Kolim Hyder, who was a boy of eight in 1965, tried to explain the confusion and rupture of that night to me.

It was around eight in the evening. We saw people North of the village crossing the road. Everybody was carrying bundles, gripping their children, and walking fast. . . . People were carrying pillows, quilts. . . . I remember we hadn't taken our evening meal, though usually we ate earlier. My father took the rice pot [*bhater hari*]. A few days earlier, we had harvested *mashkalai*

⁴⁰ There is a marked link between the Rann of Kuchchh and the enclaves. Both were areas of political and geographical ambiguity that emerged out of the post-Partition reshuffling of the Princely States. Both are areas of continuing ambiguity and intrigue. The ambiguous space of both the enclaves and the Rann have led to frequent violence both between border security forces and the communities living on either side of the border. Indeed, on 20th March, six days after the outbreak of the Dahagram War, fighting broke out in the Rann between India and Pakistan. The two regions are further similar in that they have both been the focus of intense negotiations over the meaning of space, identity, and nation and are critical sites in the construction of contested borders. For more on the Kachchhi frontier, see Ibrahim, F. (2009). *Settlers, Saints, and Sovereigns: An Ethnography of State Formation in Western India*, Routledge, London.

⁴² See *The Pakistan Observer*. (18 March 1965). 'Pakistan Warns India Vacate Aggression in Dahagram'.

⁴² For a classic study of communal social conflict in Bangladesh around livestock, see Roy, B. (1996). *Some Trouble with Cows: Making Sense of Social Conflict*, University Press Limited, Dhaka.

⁴³ It is worth noting that there is some controversy over what exactly happened during the Dahagram War. Indian papers reported that Muslim residents burned Hindu residents' homes, forcing them to flee the enclave. These reports claimed that the BSF entered the enclave in defence of or retaliation for this attack. See Whyte, *Waiting for the Esquimo*, pp. 113–115.

dal.⁴⁴ Our yard was filled with *kalais*. Do you know how to collect *kalais* from [the] field? The roots come out, not just the plant. Kalai bunches were lying scattered in the yard where during the day ten or twelve people laboured to husk them.

My father rushed to the cow-shed and untied all of the cows, so that they could save their lives and also eat the *dal*. In those days, we used to grow plenty of *kalai*. We had vast plots of land [*anek jomi*] near the *char*, which have now gone under the river. My father took hold of the rice pot. We kids were walking alongside my mother. We reached Tin Bigha.

When we arrived at the Tin Bigha, the BSF weren't allowing us to pass. . . . BSF was firing to prevent people from crossing Indian territory, but we were desperate and by 10 PM, we passed Tin Bigha and reached the mainland. Not everyone could pass. Others had to wait until the next night. . . . We went to Patgram. We took shelter in a school and we had no food that night. My father threw away the rice pot he carried in the rush across the Tin Bigha, as he had to grip us children. There was a huge crowd. My father threw the rice pot when the BSF fired in Tin Bigha. I walked all the way to Patgram [11 kilometres]. My mother took hold of my young sisters, while my father looked after the elder pair. During the crossing, my father held tight so that I would not be lost in the crowd [*Par howar shamoi, abba amar hat dhore rhakse, jano ami harai najai*].⁴⁵

The themes of chaos shared in Kolim's vivid remembrances were echoed by almost all who recall the war. Only a few were able to escape through the Tin Bigha on that first night. Most were held there for another 24 hours in terror of an attack from the front by the Border Security Forces or from behind by the same villagers who had burned their homes.

Perhaps what are most vivid in Kolim's narrative are the loss of means to eat and the trauma of separation from places and belongings. His description highlights the stark contrast between the bounty of the *dal* harvest and the sudden loss of even a pot to cook rice in. Indeed, the story of rescuing a rice pot from a burning house only to lose it in the panic of flight was repeated, in various ways, by many people. Some simply could not carry their cooking pots in their mad dash south. Some report saving their pots only to have lost the rice that was in them. Some remember a fortunate and generous few, mostly those with homes situated close to Tin Bigha, who were able to salvage some rice and share it with those huddled together in hunger and fear, waiting for more than a day for clearance to cross into safety. These collective memories symbolize and encapsulate the loss of homes and

⁴⁴ A breed of lentils grown widely in North Bengal.

⁴⁵ Interview, Dahagram, 22 March 2007.

the physical flight from the enclave. For Kolim, the forced discarding of the pot seems to mark a stripping away of belongings, reducing the residents of Dahagram to refugees dependent on the hospitality of others. The loss of the pot presaged the difficulties to come.

The large influx of refugees into Patgram dangerously stretched the town's resources. Refugees from Dahagram were billeted in impromptu camps set-up in Patgram's schools and railway stations. The day after residents fled, fighting began between the East Pakistan Rifles post in Panbari and the Indian Border Security Forces post near the Tin Bigha in Mekhliganj. Heavy fire was almost continually exchanged for the following two weeks.⁴⁶ As demands for a withdrawal of aggression were swapped between India and East Pakistan,⁴⁷ troop build-ups continued in the border regions around Patgram, along the length of the Rangpur border, and around other border districts such as Kushtia and Sylhet.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, waves of Muslim refugees living in the Indian district of Cooch Behar began moving across the border amidst reports that they were being forcibly expelled by the Indian Border Security Forces.⁴⁹

On 1st April, a ceasefire agreement was reached and Dahagram residents began to return to their homes from Patgram.⁵⁰ As part of the agreement, the Indian government would provide basic compensation for victims of the attack. These included essentials such as a small amount of rice and cooking oil and a cow for every family who had lost their home so that they could re-till their fields. These meagre supplies were inadequate to carry most residents through the next harvest cycle. Many had lost not only their homes and possessions, but also their stores of rice and *dal* necessary for both income and household self-sufficiency. What is more, many of the fields planted

⁴⁶ Though none of the newspaper coverage of the War that I was able to locate reported any casualties.

⁴⁷ See *The Pakistani Observer*. (28 March 1965). 'India Sternly Told: No Talks Without Restoration of Status Quo;' and *The Pakistan Observer*. (18 March 1965). 'Pakistan Warns India Vacate Aggression in Dahagram'.

⁴⁸ See *The Pakistan Observer*. (20 March 1965), 'India Deploys Dogras, Jats, Rajputs Along Rangpur Border;' *The Pakistani Observer*. (19 March 1965). 'Intruders at Kalirhat Driven Out;' *The Pakistani Observer*. (18 March 1965). 'Indian Forces Fire on Sylhet Border;' *The Pakistani Observer*. (25 March 1965). 'India Deploys More Troops Along East Pakistan Border;' *The Pakistani Observer*. (28 March 1965). 'Indian Troops Deployed Along Kushtia Border;' and *The Pakistani Observer*. (29 March 1965). 'In Patgram-Baura Sector: Indiscriminant Firing By Indian Troops'.

⁴⁹ See *The Pakistani Observer*. (25 March 1965). 'Fresh Influx of Refugees: Evictions from Cooch Behar'.

⁵⁰ See *The Pakistani Observer*. (1 April 1965). 'Cease Fire at Dahagram'.

with rice for the *boro* harvest in mid-summer had been burned or damaged.

Tensions along the border remained high. The declaration of war between India and Pakistan in June caused a further military buildup along all of East Pakistan's boundaries. Though there was no further direct military action against Dahagram, residents of the surrounding Mekhliganj Thana blockaded the enclave, preventing Muslim residents from travelling to either Mekhliganj or Patgram markets. As one resident bitterly recalled, 'We used to wait for rain or darkness so that we could rush through [the Tin Bigha] to Patgram to buy essentials. Life was very hard in those days. There was nothing human in that vast India'.⁵¹ Others remember sifting through the dirt and remains of their burned homes to recover even tiny amounts of rice. Many families were forced to slaughter the cows provided as compensation for food. Most supplemented insufficient diets by fishing the Tista river.

The loss proved to be one that many families were unable to recover from. Jasmine Begum, now an elderly woman living in a run-down home built on the site of her family's original property, bitterly recalls the war as the beginning of her family's long descent into poverty. They had been moderately wealthy, with livestock, enough rice to run a self-sufficient home, and jute to sell in the Mekhliganj and Patgram markets. 'During the fire, we were unable to take anything away with us. We survived on whatever relief we got. We have never recovered from the fire. We learned fear then. Fear has been part of our life since'.⁵²

The Dahagram War marked a moment of trauma that lays bare the vagaries of life for enclave residents in the years before the Liberation War. In memories of this moment, the stakes in imagining forms of belonging within nation and state as linked to possession are clarified. The inability of the East Pakistani state to protect residents in their own homes; the loss of the very means to cook food; and the meagre recompense for loss of homes, crops, and livestock all speak to memories and experiences of instability, uncertainty, and anxiety that were part of daily life within the enclave. Yet, it also marked the way that questions of territorial belonging resonated both within and in relation to Dahagram. Not only were the stakes of national belonging high for enclave residents, but the space of the enclave itself

⁵¹ Interview, Dahagram, 4 April 2007.

⁵² Interview, Dahagram, 13 April 2007.

was imbricated in broader questions of territory. While it may be an exaggeration to claim, as many enclave residents do, that the 1965 India-Pakistan War broke out first in Dahagram, it is certainly true that the fate of enclave residents and their ability to live within and move into and out of the space of Dahagram were intimately linked to broader conceptions of national space. Such conceptions were to form the basis of future claims for inclusion and membership.

Belonging to Bangladesh

If the 'East Pakistan Period' was characterized by periodic violence and territorial uncertainty, the period after Bangladesh's independence in 1971 leading up to the opening of the Corridor in 1992 was the most unstable and contentious period in Dahagram's postcolonial history. During this time, the lines of belonging and exclusion were starkly drawn and the complications that shaped lives of residents during the East Pakistan period more frequently became open conflicts. Though not far from areas that saw intense fighting during the Liberation War, Dahagram escaped direct involvement. In any case, the Liberation War, at least initially, led to significantly relaxed conditions for Dahagram residents. Following India's military and humanitarian interventions in the Liberation War, a climate of cooperation emerged between India and Bangladesh. During this period, residents moved more freely, both across the border to trade in Indian markets in Mekhliganj, and to the Bangladeshi mainland to trade in Patgram.

This relaxing of tensions, effectively, began to end with the controversies surrounding the Indira-Mujib Pact in 1974. The Pact, also known as the 'Land Boundary Agreement', conceived of a range of longstanding territorial disagreements between the two countries as fundamentally linked to animosity between India and Pakistan, as opposed to between India and newly independent Bangladesh. In the wake of the Liberation War—when the border had been effectively, if temporarily, erased—the Pact sought to address these issues. Among the range of agreements reached in the Pact were provisions to resolve outstanding disputes over demarcating the border and the exchange of all the enclaves with the exception of Dahagram and Berubari Union, a disputed area along the border with Jalpaiguri. To address these two contentious spaces, the Pact proposed to cede the disputed area of

Berubari to India in exchange for the leasing of the Tin Bigha Corridor to Bangladesh into perpetuity.

The Pact transformed Dahagram into a focal point and symbol of territorial tension and political dispute between Bangladesh and India. In Bangladesh, the Mujib Administration fell under immediate criticism for failing to address the question of the Farakka Barge and water sharing on the Ganges—a longstanding dispute and issue of pressing concern for Bangladesh residents living downstream of India.⁵³ Moreover, opposition parties cited the decision to hand over Berubari as a ‘serious attack on the national interest of the country [that] chopped Bangladesh’s interest with an axe’.⁵⁴ A writ to block the Berubari handover was turned down by the Supreme Court and the disputed territory was handed over to India shortly thereafter.⁵⁵ In India, a similar dispute emerged over the legality of leasing land to Bangladesh. As the representative of Cooch Behar argued in the *Lok Sabha*, ‘This type of gift of Tin bigha to Bangladesh must be stopped at all costs. Certainly, we want friendship with Bangladesh, but not at the cost of our motherland. No more appeasement. No more surrenders. No more cessation of our motherland’.⁵⁶ While the Berubari issue was resolved by constitutional amendment within Bangladesh that allowed for the acceptance of the conditions of the Pact,⁵⁷ the leasing of the Corridor remained both politically and legally problematic and unresolved in India.⁵⁸

⁵³ See *Ganokantha*. (18 May 1974). ‘*Ae Porajoyer Glani Dhakben Keamon Korey* [How Will you Cover Up the Same of Such Defeate?]’; *Ittefaq*. (18 May 1974). ‘*Jukto Ghoshonay Vashanir Protikriya* [Vashani’s Reaction to Joint Decision]’.

⁵⁴ *Ganokantha*. (19 May 1974). ‘*Shimanto Chukti o Jukto Ghoshona Proshongay JSD-er Oveemot: Desh ke Noya Uponibeshe Porinoto Korar Padokkhep* [JSD on Border Treaty and Joint Declaration: Attempts to Turn the Country into a New Colony]’.

⁵⁵ *Ittefaq*. (21 May 1974). ‘*Berubari Shongkranto Reet Aebondon Nakoch: Apeeler Onumoti Daan* [Writ Petition on Berubari Dismissed: Appeal Approved]’; *Shangbad*. (21 May 1974). ‘*Berubari Shomporke Injunction Aabedon Supreme Court-ey Utthapito* [Berubari Injunction Appeal Placed Before Supreme Court]’; *Ganokantha*. (30 May 1974). ‘*Berubari Mamlar Churanto Shunanir Din 14-ey June* [The Final Hearing Date of the Berubari Case is on the 14th of June]’.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Jacques, K. (2000). *Bangladesh, India and Pakistan: International Relations and Regional Tensions in South Asia*, St. Martin’s Press, New York. p. 45. Of particular concern to the representative was that the leasing of the Corridor to Bangladesh stood to potentially create an enclave of the village of Kuchlibari with Mekhliganj Thana.

⁵⁷ See the ‘Constitution (Third Amendment) Act, 1974, 27 November 1974’, reprinted in Whyte, *Waiting for the Esquimo*, Appendix 1–42.

⁵⁸ For a full description of the legal battle in India over the Corridor, see Whyte, *Waiting for the Esquimo*, pp. 133–148.

As legal disputes over the Corridor began to grow, movement again became complicated for Dahagram's Muslim residents. The Border Security Forces imposed a five-kilogram ceiling on goods moving into and out of the enclave. This effectively meant that residents could not sell enough crops to purchase household essentials. Residents, moreover, describe being forced into positions of compromise as it became harder to access markets without negotiating with border security forces. Yet, for many residents, memories from this period are also framed as claims of stoic resistance to territorial aggression. As Bashar, who grew up during this period as a member of a politically influential, though comparatively less wealthy family in the enclave, put it:

BSF would come, demand mangos, wood, or timber, and take anything away they wanted. Anything. A goat, a hen. We had no way to say no. They would bring in their labourers with them. If we said no, the next day they would punish [*shasti*] us on our way to Mekhliganj. Believe me, we were just like prisoners [*ashami*]. Worse than prisoners. A prisoner is not in want of food or medicine. We had want of everything. Moreover, we had no freedom to move. The period from 1982–1992, we were in a condition that is not describable in any language [*bhashai bola jai na*]. For example, if you take Ethiopia, though they are in want of food or medicine, they at least have the freedom to roam around. We had nothing. No freedom, no essentials. Children died of diarrhoea. They were buried without clothes [*kafoner kapor chara*]. . . . But brother, still Dahagram people did not give their allegiance to India [*India ke kono chhar die ni*]. They didn't surrender. Even after such severe torture and blockades.⁵⁹

The equation of life inside Dahagram to that of being in a prison was a frequent analogy I heard during my research. Here, this metaphor is extended to suggest that Dahagram was worse off than a country beset by war and famine. Though hyperbolic—male residents did regularly leave Dahagram to access both Mekhliganj and Patgram—the narrative's ultimate claim to belonging is clear: despite deprivation and suffering, Muslim residents persevered and refused to surrender their land and allegiance to India. Their communal claim to belonging repeatedly positioned residents as stoic sufferers holding their land in the name of a Muslim Bengali state.

The challenges posed by these regulations of movement led to increased 'illegal' border crossings by often-desperate residents. Many tell stories of men waiting for dark, rain, or fog to cross the Tin Bigha to

⁵⁹ Interview, Patgram, 9 February 2007.

reach Bangladesh. Others tried their luck in the Mekhliganj markets. Both these activities had a risk of arrest, for which the standard penalty was a fine and one month in jail, though many claim they were detained for longer. During this period, detainees had no way to communicate with their families to inform them of the arrest, leaving their households in states of anxiety until their release. If the position for men was complicated, women were in an even more vulnerable and compromised position. Movement into and out of the enclave was markedly gendered. While men would periodically risk crossing to India or Bangladesh—frequently returning with boastful tales about near misses and bold evasive ploys—women rarely left Dahagram. Their movements were confined not only by religious prohibitions on their leaving the home, but by the added belief, much repeated by men, in their inability to flee from pursuers. During this period, many women died of complications related to childbirth, as access to medical facilities was impractical if not impossible. The threat of violence from hostile neighbours and security forces created further arguments for the cloistering of women within the enclave.

Yet there were more complications and dangers of living in the enclave than just the restriction of movement. Kidnapping and rape were common features of life in Dahagram during this period. Women from within the enclave were periodically taken by villagers from surrounding areas and ‘tortured’ for days before being allowed to return. Men within the enclave also engaged in the kidnapping of women from Mekhliganj. Indeed, these kidnappings were occasionally remembered as celebrations of resistance by Muslim men who had been regularly humiliated by Indian Border Security Forces tolls on movement, insults in Mekhliganj *haats*, and Hindu neighbours who accentuated such insults through the very freedom of their own movement. The gendered violence involved in territory-making in the post-Independence and pre-Corridor years marked the bodies of women both as belongings (objects within the political and spatial economy of territory) and belonging (symbols of nation and community in need of protection, preservation, and purity).⁶⁰ Women

⁶⁰ On the violent and gendered politics of nation-making and territory, see Saikia, Y. (2011). *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971*. Duke University Press, Durham Mookherjee, N. (2006). ‘Remembering to Forget’: Public Secrecy and Memory of Sexual Violence in the Bangladesh War of 1971, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 12: 2, 433–450; various other essays in Chatterjee, P. and P. Jeganathan (eds). (2000). *Subaltern Studies XI: Community, Gender, and Violence*. Permanent Black, Delhi; Menon, R. and K. Bhasin. (1998). *Borders & Boundaries*:

in Dahagram were thus regularly caught-up within multiple and violent politics of possession and inclusion.

The Dahagram Movement Committee

If the Bangladesh period saw an increase in projects seeking to forcibly exclude Muslim residents within Dahagram, it also saw a renewed interest in claiming Dahagram as part of Bangladesh. This movement was intimately linked to the political shift away from secularism in the wake of the assassination of Mujib in 1975 and the assumption of the presidency by Ziaur Rahman in 1977.⁶¹ This period saw an extension of the communal politicization of territory signalled in the debate over the Indira-Mujib Pact in 1974. In 1977, the Zia Administration issued 16 'Civil Guns' to Dahagram. These guns, nominally for use in 'defence', were given to the enclave's unofficial Union *Parishad* governing body and, in effect, seem to have been distributed to wealthy and politically influential Muslim families within the enclave. This endorsement of violent defence marked, for many, the first concrete step in Bangladesh securing the enclave as a part of its national territory. If, from the perspective of the administration, the distribution of these guns marked territorial sovereignty over Dahagram, for residents, they signified a political acknowledgement that Dahagram belonged to Bangladesh and could be defended as such. While it is not clear how, or if, the weapons were used (many residents told me stories where the guns played significant roles in intimidating Indians, though none shared stories of their being fired), the guns are spoken of almost reverentially as critical symbols of belonging. While representatives of the state could not directly 'administer' the enclave, they could encourage residents to claim and defend their own territory.

Women in India's Partition, Kali, New Delhi; and Butalia, U. (1998). *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Penguin, New Delhi.

⁶¹ In 1977, after a period as 'chief martial law administrator', Ziaur Rahman became president. On 22 April, he pushed through a marshal law ordinance to amend the official principles of the Bangladesh state by removing 'socialism' and 'secularism' from the constitution and substituting them for 'economic and social justice' and 'trust and faith in Almighty Allah' See Anisuzzaman, A. (2001). 'The Identity Question and Politics' in R. Jahan. *Bangladesh: Promise and Performance*, University Press Ltd., Dhaka, pp. 45–46.

Zia's awarding of the 'civil guns' presaged a series of events in the early 1980s that would bring the questions of belonging and the issues around the Corridor to a head. In July of 1981, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics attempted to conduct a census in the enclave as a first step in negotiating the terms of the Tin Bigha Corridor's lease. For Bashar Hassan, this census was a catalyst for galvanizing the political elite in the enclave into broader advocacy and protest for realization of the Indira-Mujib Pact. At the time, he was one of the privileged few within the enclave whose families could afford to send them to school in Patgram. Bashar's memories position the census as a focal moment, both of suffering and of resistance.

Dahagram's first census happened in 1981. If you hear the stories, you will simply tremble. Bangladesh decided to conduct a census to show the world that 'Dahagram is ours and we are controlling it [*Dahagram amader neontrone*]'.

We who were studying here [in Patgram], were trained as enumerators. . . . However, we were blocked on the way in. Indians came with bows and arrows. . . . Indians were saying that though the enclave belongs to Bangladesh on paper, they would not allow the possession of it. Then the two DCs [District Commissioners] of the neighbouring districts sat again. Indian politicians suggested that 'If you have to do a census, then go through Changrabhanda [far to the North of the Tin Bigha]'.

Three census officials entered Dahagram by that round-about way. We, however, were instructed by the Bangladesh authorities to do our fieldwork earlier, going through the Tin Bigha in the night as we used to when going to and coming from Patgram. However, after the census, Indians [who were maintaining the blockade] only allowed the officials to return. We fieldworkers had no way to come back. They were on guard on all corners of Dahagram with bows and arrows. They imposed a total blockade which lasted for a long 22 days. These days were the most sad and helpless days of my life. None was able to get out of Dahagram. During these 22 days, 26 of our people died from a scarcity of medicines and other essentials. We had to bury them without any cloth or with old clothes.⁶²

⁶² Interview, Patgram, 9 February 2007. This assertion was echoed in a *Bangladesh Observer* report that claimed that people in Dahagram had died due to blockades which prevented medical assistance and food from moving into the Corridor. As the report claimed, 'Equipped with guns, arrows, *lathis* [clubs] and hand bombs, the Indian nationals are patrolling around these enclaves preventing helpless Bangladeshi nationals of Dahagram and Angarpota to come out and enter Bangladesh main soil to purchase essential commodities'. Quoted in Bhasin, A. S. (ed). 1996. *India-Bangladesh Relations 1971-1994: Documents, Volume Two*. Delhi: Siba Exim Pvt. Ltd. p. 808.

As Foucault has argued,⁶³ modernity is characterized by a political paradigm primarily concerned with the management of populations through technologies of governance. The census is one strategy through which governments make populations 'legible' and 'manageable'.⁶⁴ As such, it is both a technology of governance and a tool of inclusion and incorporation.⁶⁵ In Dahagram, the very process of conducting the census became a battleground of belonging. To mark residents of Dahagram as members of Bangladesh through enumeration would be to solidify their claims of national inclusion. Bashar's narrative emphasizes this. The purpose of the census was to officially claim that, 'Dahagram is *ours*, and we are *controlling* it'. In this same sense, the protests and attempts to block the census offered a counter-narrative. As the *Bangladesh Observer* reported at the time, 'What happened on July 6 when Bangladesh officials in their third bid went to conduct census inside these enclaves was a naked attempt by India to foil the census and show the world that people of these enclaves no more want to remain with Bangladesh'.⁶⁶

Following the census, the group of students who were trained as enumerators decided that direct political action was needed if the enclaves were to be claimed for Bangladesh. To this end, they formed what came to be known as the *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti* (Dahagram Movement Committee). All these students were from elite and powerful families within Dahagram—families that had been involved in the enclave's politics for a long time. The link between the census and the Movement Committee is striking. Cohn points out that the census in British India was perhaps most significant for politicizing its enumerators.⁶⁷ Though the politics were different in Dahagram than they were in nineteenth-century colonial India, the stakes in classification and inclusion and the political significance of the census were no less apparent to the enumerators who formed the *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti*. Indeed, for this group of students,

⁶³ See Foucault, M. (1991). 'Governmentality' in G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller. *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 87–104.

⁶⁴ See Scott, J. (1998). *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale University Press, New Haven, especially pp. 11–52.

⁶⁵ See Markowitz, F. (2007). Census and Sensibilities in Sarajevo, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 49: 1, 40–73.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Whyte, *Waiting for the Esquimo*, p. 134.

⁶⁷ See Cohn, B. (1987). 'The Census, Social Structure, and Objectification in South Asia' *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, pp. 224–254.

the census and the blockade following it offered a clear message that spurred them on to find other ways to forcefully assert their inclusion in Bangladesh. As Bashar recalls: 'We proceeded with the demand that we should be given back our territory, the territory which belonged to us according to the '74 treaty. After the formation of the committee, Bangladeshi administration began to evaluate us. Prior to that, we were just like dogs and foxes.'⁶⁸ In other words, through the actions of the Committee, residents of Dahagram would not only reclaim their territory, but also achieve the status of belonging within Bangladesh and its residents would be recognized as rights-bearing citizens as opposed to marginal people beyond the bounds of the state.

The *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti* began to raise public awareness of the situation in Dahagram. Mohammad Yusuf, another member of the committee, described their activities to me as claims not just for membership in Bangladesh, but also for the dignity of the residents of Dahagram. It did not simply argue for implementing the Indira-Mujib Pact, but also that residents were deserving members of the nation. In Yusuf's words:

We didn't take any subscription or monetary help from anybody outside the committee. We did it on our own [*ja korsī, nijera korsī*]. One day, three of us were on our way to Ishwardi Junction to stick handbills over a train there that was headed to Chittagong. We only had three taka with us and no tickets. It was our decision that we wouldn't extend our hand, as no movement can be run with money earned by begging. What a movement needs is self-confidence. While returning, the ticket collector found me. I began showing our handbills and saying, 'You see, we are from Dahagram, we are running our movement'. He was convinced. He fed us *pao rutti* [toast]. I realized that whoever fights for his country gets respect. Those were good days. A kid like me, who was just in his 10th grade, would go before the DC [District Commissioner] and say, 'Sir, I am from *Dahagram Shangram Shomitti*. We are fighting to realize the '74 Treaty'. And the DC would pay attention to me, extend his hand to shake with me, and say, 'Sit down my son'.⁶⁹

Yusuf's description tells a story of both inclusion through struggle and the recognition by other Bangladeshis of the righteousness of their cause. Moreover, it narrates a decidedly local negotiation with institutions of government's interactions with the enclave. As this local history illustrates, renderings of populations and territory engendered dynamics within Dahagram that would prove integral to the shaping of

⁶⁸ Interview, Patgram, 9 February 2007.

⁶⁹ Interview, Dahagram, 26 March 2007.

belonging and life both within it and, more broadly, within the nation-state. As Chatterjee argues, a central strategy in the negotiation between populations who are, at best, contextually members of the nation state and the institutions that seek to govern them is to *give to the empirical form of a population group the moral attributes of a community*.⁷⁰ Yusuf's emphasis on the dignity of the movement's activities, made through earnest appeal as opposed to through begging, stakes out this territory, both for movement members and for the residents they represented. He emphasizes Dahagram residents not as downtrodden burdens on the state, but rather as active political citizens, ready to struggle for their territory and their belonging. In other words, he asserts their belonging in the nation as a means of making a claim for administrative inclusion in the state.

The *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti* began to draw the notice of authorities in both Bangladesh and India. In Mekhliganj, the police mounted an active effort to locate and arrest its members, whilst the existing *Kuchlibari Shangram Shamiti* in India, which opposed the opening of the Corridor, and its companion organization, the *Tin Bigha Shangram Shamiti*, began to increase their own protests and activities.⁷¹ Tensions rose and blockades and arrests became more frequent. As the activities of the *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti* became more and more visible, their Indian counterparts in the *Kuchlibari Shangram Shamiti* expanded their campaign by reaching out to the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Jananta Party (BJP) to help re-nationalize the question of the Corridor. In response, the *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti* contacted the Jatiya Ganotantri Party [JAGPA] in Bangladesh, an ardently nationalist party led by Shaiful Alam Prodhon.⁷²

⁷⁰ Chatterjee, P. (2004). *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Permanent Black, Delhi. p. 57, emphasis in original.

⁷¹ The *Kuchlibari Shangram Shamiti* was not simply opposed to the opening of the Corridor on ideological or communal grounds. The Corridor, if leased to Bangladesh, would have effectively enclaved Kuchlibari, a district of Mekhliganj. Kuchlibari is bordered in the East by Bangladesh and on the West by the Tista river. Residents feared that if the narrow strip of land connecting them to the rest of Mekhliganj was closed, they would be in the same territorially dislocated situation as Dahagram. Though the terms of the Tin Bigha Lease proposed in 1982 (see below) and the eventual agreement to open the Corridor made it clear that sovereign control over the Corridor would remain with India, the *Kuchlibari Shangram Shamiti* and *Tin Bigha Shangram Shamiti*, with the support of the BJP and the break-off Forward Bloc in West Bengal, aggressively opposed the opening of the Corridor until its actual opening.

⁷² JAGPA regularly participated in and organized protests in relation to a range of border controversies throughout the 1980s. See documentation in Bhasin, *India-Bangladesh Relations*.

In 1984, with JAGPA's support, the committee organized its most dramatic and visible protest, which it called 'The Long March'. Riaz, another member, described the march to me.

Twenty-two youths from Dahagram joined JAGPA members in a procession wearing funeral robes [*kafoner kapor*]. First, we performed a *Janozah* [funeral rights] prayer in Dhaka. Then we began the Long March. We said that by any means necessary we would march through the Tin Bigha, as it should have been Bangladeshi land according to the treaty. Our march got huge attention because of JAGPA's participation. At Lalmonirhat, more than 100,000 people⁷³ got out of their homes to join us. It was a huge procession, looking like it was just waiting to explode.⁷⁴

Riaz's description highlights the symbolic import of the march. Cut off from the Bangladeshi mainland, Dahagram residents were slowly dying. By formally conducting funeral rights and marching with the intent to pass through the Tin Bigha, *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti* members were intent to force both an international event that would highlight the debate over the Corridor and emphasize their willingness to confront death in defence of territory, rather than a slow starvation at the hands of the Indian Border Security Forces and residents of Mekhliganj. In other words, the Long March drew attention to Dahagram not simply as a moral community in Chatterjee's sense of the term, but also as a moral obligation to the Bangladeshi state and nation.

Opening the corridor

The activities of the *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti* coincided with the rise to power in Bangladesh of General Hossain Mohammad Ershad following the assassination of Zia in 1981. Ershad, whose controversial tenure as head of the Bangladesh government lasted from 1982–1991, radically curbed democratic liberties and persistently blocked efforts to overturn military rule and restore Parliamentary Democracy within Bangladesh. Furthermore, his regime continued the move initiated by Zia away from secular Bengali nationalism and moved towards a more overtly Islamist Bangladeshi state. Against this backdrop, the political relationship between India and Bangladesh remained strained. This relationship was further stressed by the increasingly virulent rhetoric

⁷³ Such numbers seem likely to have been exaggerated.

⁷⁴ Interview, Patgram, 25 January 2007, p. 212.

of the BJP in India against the threat of illegal immigration from Muslim Bangladesh and pressuring of the Congress Party to take action against it. This pressure led, among other things, to the 1986 Indo-Bangladesh Border Roads & Fences Project.⁷⁵

In 1982, in a conference to resolve border issues, technical experts and security forces from both India and Bangladesh reached an agreement on lease terms for the Tin Bigha. Contrary to the agreement reached in the Indira-Mujib Pact, this new agreement stated that sovereignty over the Corridor would remain in the hands of Indian officials. Despite this clarification, no direct action to open the Corridor was taken, though an active debate re-emerged in India over the legality of the creation of Tin Bigha.⁷⁶ This debate was deployed in different ways by different parties. The Left Front in West Bengal, and notably Amar Roy Prodhan, pressed for the full exchange of all the enclaves, as opposed to the partial solution of just addressing Dahagram.⁷⁷ The BJP enthusiastically adopted the cause of opposing the opening of the Corridor on nationalist grounds. Claiming to defend a country marred by Partition and betrayed by its political leaders, the BJP began to use the Tin Bigha issue as a whip to beat both Congress and West Bengal's Left Front government.⁷⁸ As a pamphlet published in 1992, mirroring much of the rhetoric deployed in public and in the *Lok Sabha*, claimed, 'BJP... [was] not there in 1947 [at Partition] to resist that evil design, but today, in 1992, things have changed. Today we, the general people, refuse to be a mute party to the sinister design

⁷⁵ See Van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland*. On BJP rhetoric over 'infiltration' from Bangladesh, see Gillan, M. (2002). Refugees of Infiltrators? The Bharatiya Janata Party and "Illegal" Migration from Bangladesh, *Asian Studies Review*, 26: 1, 73–95; and Ramachandran, S. (1999). Of Boundaries and Border Crossings: Undocumented Bangladeshi 'Infiltrators' and the Hegemony of Hindu Nationalism in India, *Interventions*, 1:2, 235–253. For details of the debate over fencing beginning in 1983 between India and Bangladesh, see Bhasin, *India-Bangladesh Relations*, especially pp. 823–835.

⁷⁶ For details of this lease, see Whyte, *Waiting for the Esquimo*, Appendix 1–42.

⁷⁷ *Ittefaq*. (28 September 1991). 'Tin Bigha Corridor Hostantore Forward Blocker Tibro Apotti [Strong Objection by Forward Block in Handing over the Tin Bigha Corridor]'.
⁷⁸ For a discussion of the ways in which the BJP deployed rhetoric over the sundering of national territory throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, see Krishna, S. (1996). 'Cartographic Anxiety: Mapping the Body Politic in India' in H. Alker and M. Shapiro. *Challenging Boundaries: Global Flows, Territorial Identities*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

of transferring Tinbigha Corridor to Bangladesh by Roa Govt.—Jyoti Basu combined'.⁷⁹

Nationalist claims to territory and territorial defense were no less prevalent in the Ershad government. Ershad, originally from Rangpur himself and a notorious supporter of *Uttor Bongo* [North Bengal] championed the cause of Dahagram and the Tin Bigha Corridor as a nationalist issue around the securing of territory, using the 1982 lease as a basis to pressure the Indian administration over Dahagram. As the *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti's* activities gained increased attention, Ershad began to bring the debate over the Corridor to a head. In 1986, and again in 1988, Ershad made personal visits to the enclave. These visits remain amongst the most celebrated and fondly remembered moments in Dahagram's history. Sharif Udin Talukdar, who was a member of the *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti*, a prominent political player in the enclave, and future Union *Parishad* Chairman, remembers the visit as a moment of extreme emotions. 'He was the first high-profile leader to step into Dahagram. He came here by helicopter. After Ershad's arrival, we were quite speechless. It was as though we helpless folks got our father. We began weeping before him'.⁸⁰

Ershad's visit did indeed mark a turning point in enclave politics. During his visit, he distributed over Tk. 25,000 worth of goods to needy households. He also made Angorpota and Dahagram into an official Union *Parishad* within Patgram Upazilla, giving it formal political standing within the Bangladesh administrative system, despite its territorial dislocation from the Bangladeshi mainland. He further allocated funds for the development of both schools and medical facilities in Dahagram. Moreover, Ershad began actively advocating for a solution to the Corridor problem, proposing, among other things, the construction of a fly-over bridge for the Tin Bigha, so that residents could effectively pass from Dahagram to Panbari without ever having to touch Indian soil. Yet his visits also increased the tensions over belonging within the enclave. As Riaz explained it to me,

Seeing the emotional outburst on our part at Ershad's visit, Indians understood our true desires and where our commitments lay. After realizing that we were truly Bangladeshi, Indians escalated their tortures. Earlier, they believed that some day we may be India-minded. They hoped that there

⁷⁹ Pamphlet reprinted in Whyte, *Waiting for the Esquimo*, Appendix 1–45. The political reference here is to the Narasima Roa-led Congress Party Government and the Jyoti Basu-led CPI(M) government in West Bengal.

⁸⁰ Interview, Dahagram, 10 February 2007.

would be a new generation in Dahagram that was pro-India. After Ershad came, those hopes were gone.⁸¹

As such, while Ershad's visit brought renewed hope to residents, it also marked an increase in tensions with Mekhliganj. Residents spoke of numerous blockades from the mid 1980s onwards. Indeed, many echoed Bashar's comment on the impossibility of even acquiring *kafan* cloth to shroud dead bodies in accordance with Islamic funerary rights. *We had nothing to bury our dead in and were forced to cover them in banana leaves.* Along with an increase in violence between Muslim residents and surrounding areas, Hindus living within the enclave began an active campaign to demonstrate that Dahagram residents 'desired' to be part of India. Muslim residents recall that they were often forced or extorted to sign petitions and documents claiming allegiance to India by Hindus living within the enclave, themselves formulating their own claims of belonging to India.

Tensions between the *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti* and the *Kuchlibari Shangram Shamiti*, as well as the regular blockades and increases in arrests, continued throughout Ershad's presidency. Yet in 1991, the relationship between India and Bangladesh again briefly thawed with the collapse of the Ershad regime under joint pressure and activism from a coalition of parties and public protests within Bangladesh.⁸² As the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) assumed power and a series of court cases blocking the Corridor in India were resolved, the possibility of opening the Corridor became real. On 26th June 1992, amidst protest by both the *Kuchlibari Shangram Shamiti* and the BJP, the Corridor finally opened.⁸³ Whilst seen, almost uniformly within the enclave, as a major and important victory, the Corridor has also created new and complicated configurations of sovereignty, sensitivity, and belonging within the enclave. Furthermore, the opening of the Corridor has served to ossify the borders of Dahagram. Travelling to

⁸¹ Interview, Patgram, 25 January 2007.

⁸² Though this did represent a return to democratic rule, it did not necessarily mean a move back towards a secular pan-Bengali political stance. For more on the opening of the Corridor, see Cons, *The Fragments and their Nation(s)*, pp. 129–132. For more on Bangladesh's emergence from Ershad's rule, see Van Schendel, W. (2009). *A History of Bangladesh*, Cambridge University Press, New York, p. 199.

⁸³ A report collected in Bhasin, *India-Bangladesh Relations* (pp. 937–938), claims that more than 3,000 anti Corridor activists were arrested in Cooch Behar and adjoining districts and that at least one death resulted from skirmishes between Indian activists marching to stop the opening of the Corridor and members of the local police and the BSF.

Mekhliganj in India is now unambiguously illegal and to get there one must negotiate frequent border patrols and the panoptic watchtowers of the Indian Border Security Forces that now surround the enclave. Access to Bangladesh is now similarly restricted except through the Tin Bigha Corridor, which until 19 October 2011, remained open only during daylight hours.⁸⁴

Many members of the *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti* feel that the partial and contingent fulfilment of the Indira-Mujib Pact is a betrayal to those who fought and struggled for the Corridor. As Riaz told me,

The [BNP] government, did it wrong to receive the Indian suggestion [that the BSF would control the Corridor]. What could we people of Dahagram do? We had no options. We were helpless. We have no political representation at the national level. We have no strong lobby. We have no strong voice to raise the issue at some international level. In 1982, President Ershad said to India, 'Give me my territory'. What Khalida Zia did in 1992 was cheap politics [*shasta rajniti*].⁸⁵

Riaz's claim marks both a frustration at the partial fulfilment of the Indira-Mujib Pact but also another statement of inclusion within Bangladesh. Riaz speaks of heads of state claiming 'their' territory. A failure to defend the rights of enclave residents is a lack of commitment to 'national' interest. At the same time, the 'cheap politics' of the BNP administration highlight that despite the long struggle, belonging in Dahagram remains partial, contingent, and contested.

Understanding the politics of belonging

The opening of the Corridor transformed the landscape of politics in Dahagram in many ways. Yet, the enclave remains an unstable place where the stakes of various forms of uncertain belonging remain high. The Corridor, when opened in 1992, remained open for only one hour a day. Since 1992, the amount of time has increased and until recently the Corridor remained open during daylight hours, a reality that posed a range of uncertainties and anxieties for residents—among them, complications with accessing urgent medical care at night. Inside the enclave, the political fault lines have shifted. Following the opening

⁸⁴ For more on the current state of Dahagram and the Tin Bigha Corridor, see Cons, J. (2007). *The Tin Bigha Corridor 15 Years On: Official and Unofficial Views, Forum: A Monthly Publication of the Daily Star*, **October**.

⁸⁵ Interview, Patgram, 25 January 2007.

of the Corridor, the majority of the Hindu families within Dahagram left, leaving a glut of land that residents had little money to purchase. Much of this land was snapped-up by *bhatiyas* [outsiders] moving from elsewhere in Bangladesh. If the pre-Corridor history is remembered largely along communal lines, many of the contemporary political struggles in the enclave are between long-term residents and these newer migrants, many of whom were able to purchase large amounts of land and have become prosperous small-holder farmers. The opening of the Corridor has allowed for the Bangladesh Rifles (Bangladesh's border security force) to establish several camps within the enclave. It has also led to the establishment of a range of Border Security Forces' camps around Dahagram's perimeter and the construction of ten panoptic watchtowers staffed by armed Indian Border Security Forces *jawans*. Despite, and in part because, of such changes, the question of belonging remains acute for residents.

It is no surprise, then, that the enclaves' history itself is remembered and narrated as a claim to both membership and to the right and ability to hold and possess belongings. The ways that Dahagram's pre-Corridor past is remembered and talked about constitute both stories of possession and dispossession and ongoing claims that the partial belonging afforded by the Corridor is inadequate and insufficient for those who have struggled, persevered, and suffered for Bangladeshi territory. This is not to claim that such narratives are uniform, or that they constitute and encompass all of Dahagram's fragmentary narratives and pasts. Rather, it is to say that the history of Dahagram, as it is told by its residents, is thus an ongoing and unfinished project of transforming and redefining Dahagram's ambiguous and liminal position within the Bengali state and nation—of asserting Dahagram as a moral community worthy and deserving of inclusion within Bangladesh. *Chhitmahal* residents are frequently referred to as 'stateless'.⁸⁶ Yet their history has also been an ongoing negotiation with what such a term might mean. If residents are 'stateless', their lives are also over-determined by the Indian and East Pakistani/Bangladeshi state and the tension between symbolic and more grounded forms of belonging within and to them. The histories recounted in this paper are both narrations of Dahagram's past as well as projects to claim a national belonging as a means to actualize political membership within the Bangladeshi state. These claims and

⁸⁶ C.f. Van Schendel, *Stateless in South Asia*; Sen, *The Insiders Outside*; and Jones, *Sovereignty and Statelessness in the Border Enclaves*.

negotiations go beyond, as they partially encompass, liberal normative notions of 'rights' and 'citizenship'. At the same time, they cannot be understood solely from the perspective of statelessness or bare life.

In sensitive, unstable, and contentious zones such as border regions, upland areas, and enclaves, such histories of belonging(s) are more than simple narrations of the past. They also form the basis of ongoing struggles over how such spaces, and their residents, fit or do not fit into constructions of nation and state. Attending to such histories, and taking seriously the ways that residents of these zones frame them, can provide critical insights into the terrain of negotiation between states and groups and spaces who only imperfectly fit into categories of 'citizen' and 'national territory'. These emic understandings of the past are thus critical in rethinking the politics of inclusion and exclusion and broad networks of power within which they are inscribed.

Seen in this light, discontent over the inability to celebrate such anniversaries as 'Corridor Open Day' in Dahagram acquires a different meaning. Residents rarely have the opportunity to publically articulate their histories of suffering for territory or their ongoing demands for full inclusion in Bangladesh.⁸⁷ Belonging for residents of Dahagram determines their ability to move into and out of the enclave, the ability to go to market to sell and purchase essentials, and the constant spectre of violence and fear that haunts those who lived through the long struggle to gain substantive, as well as formal, membership in the territory of Bangladesh. The stakes of articulating claims to belonging are thus more than symbolic—they are about the ongoing negotiation of life in a sensitive, contingent, and unstable space.

⁸⁷ Moore, *Suffering for Territory*, especially 1–5.