



Narrating boundaries: Framing and contesting suffering, community, and belonging in enclaves along the India–Bangladesh border



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A B S T R A C T

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This paper explores the politics of community making at the India–Bangladesh border by examining the public and private narratives of history and belonging in a Bangladeshi enclave—a sovereign piece of Bangladesh completely territorially surrounded by India. Drawing on framings of political society, this paper argues that understanding populations at the margins of South Asia and beyond requires attention to two processes: first, to the ways that para-legal activities are part and parcel of daily life; and second, to the strategies through which these groups construct themselves as moral communities deserving of inclusion within the state. Border communities often articulate narratives of dispossession, exceptionality, and marginalization to researchers and other visitors—narratives that are often unproblematically reproduced in academic treatments of the border. However, such articulations mask both the complicated histories and quotidian realities of border life. This paper views these articulations as political projects in and of themselves. By reading the more hidden histories of life in this border enclave, this article reconstructs the notion of borders as experienced by enclave residents themselves. It shows the ways that the politics of the India–Bangladesh border are constitutive of (and constituted by) a range of fractures and internal boundaries within the enclave. These boundaries are as central to forging community—to articulating who belongs and why—as are more public narratives that frame enclave residents as victims of confused territorial configurations.

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How might we understand the politics of community-making in borderlands? As border studies have moved from focusing on questions and histories of producing space and mapping the border (Prescott, 1987) to qualitative explorations of those who live in proximity to it (essays in Wilson & Donnan, 1998), there has been an outpouring of writings focusing on questions of political marginalization and spatial exclusion in border zones. Such studies have greatly contributed not just to understandings of sovereignty and border politics (Chalfin, 2010; essays in Diener & Hagen, 2010), but to questions of identity (Aggarwal, 2004; Eilenberg, 2010; essays in Kumar Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007; Middleton, 2011); to the tenuousness of concepts such as security, state, and nation (Coleman, 2009; Jones, 2009b; Samaddar, 1999; Van Schendel, 2005); and to the politics of transporting both licit and illicit goods across state frontiers (Mountz, 2010; Sturgeon, 2004; Tagliacozzo, 2005; essays in Van Schendel & Abraham, 2005). Such studies have adopted widely heterogeneous theoretical approaches to the border. However, in the past decade there has been a general

convergence or clustering around a set of theoretical possibilities opened by the writings of Hannah Arendt (1968) on “statelessness,” Giorgio Agamben’s (1998, 2005) revitalization of Arendt and Schmitt (2005 (1922)) through the concept of the exception, and James Scott’s (1998, 2009) explorations of state and non-state space.¹ All of these frameworks offer compelling ways to understand the dynamics and dilemmas of exclusion for those living at the political margins of state and nation. Yet, in their primary attention to the forms of political and legal subjection (the presence or absence of particular forms of state power), they also risk reproducing narratives of expropriation that are as central to the political aspirations and claims for inclusion of those living on the margins as they are to marginality itself. As such, the problem of understanding how narratives of exclusion play into the formation of borderland communities is critical, not just for interpreting and evaluating claims of communities in borderlands, but also for understanding the ways that bordering practices produce not one political boundary, but many.

In this essay, I intend to read a set of more silent, or silenced, narratives of inclusions and exclusions against the grain of “public” histories of destitution and suffering in a particularly confused border region. My goal is not just to point out that there are hidden

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transcripts in the lives of border residents (Scott, 1992). Rather, by exploring these fractures and silenced narratives, I hope to show the ways that the broad politics of the border—in this case, the India–Bangladesh border—overlap with and reproduce particular boundaries within communities living near it. I argue that these silenced histories are themselves constitutive of the political communities of border residents, their claims to various forms of belonging, and the basis for demands and denials of forms of official intervention. As such, I make a case for complicating, which is not to say denying, narratives of exclusion that have become central to studies of those living at the margins of state and nation. In sum, my argument is that moving beyond broad categories such as “statelessness” and “exception,” which tend to flatten the experience of life in borderlands, is critical in order to understand the politics of belonging and community in them and the ways that such politics articulate with the border.

Margins and political society

I explore these questions in the context of the Bangladeshi enclave of Dahagram (See Fig. 1). The enclaves, or *chhitmahals* as they are called in Bengali, are a series of small, discontinuous pieces of Bangladeshi territory inside of India and vice versa scattered along the Northern part of the India–Bangladesh border between the Bangladeshi districts of Lalmonirhat, Panchagarh, and Kurigram and the West Bengal (India) districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. The *chhitmahals* constitute borderlands of a particular, and confused, type. They appear, and are often described, as accidents of history (c.f., Banerjee, 1966; Butalia, 2003; Karan, 1966; Sen, 2002). They are, at once, spaces scattered near the border that are circumscribed and alienated by the haphazard drawing of the

Radcliffe Line that separated West Bengal and East Pakistan at Partition in 1947 (see Chatterji, 1999; Van Schendel, 2005) and marked by the inability of India and East Pakistan/Bangladesh to resolve many basic questions about their territorial integrity. They are borderlands where residents negotiate not one, but many borders on a daily basis.

These enclaves are officially recognized by each state, but remain unadministered because of their discontinuous geographies. Enclave residents are often described as “stateless” in that they live in zones outside of official administration—since officials of one country cannot cross a sovereign frontier to administer territory (c.f., Jones, 2009c). Their residents face difficulty in actualizing rights as citizens of their “home” state and in acquiring legal and other official forms of protection from their bounding ones. As such, they are vulnerable to communal violence, crime, and disputes over land and property with residents of their bounding states. For example, in a recent property dispute that escalated to an alleged murder, an Indian enclave in Bangladesh was raised and burnt by residents of surrounding areas (BDNews24.com, 2010).

Dahagram is a complex case even amongst the already complicated enclaves. Roughly 4500 acres in size with a population of approximately 16,000, Dahagram is the largest and most contentious of the *chhitmahals*. The long debate over the Tin Bigha Corridor—a 170 yard-long swath of land through Indian Territory that offers passage to Bangladesh—has heightened tension and debates over Dahagram. The enclave is ringed by Indian Border Security Force (BSF) camps and panoptic watchtowers. To enter or exit the enclave, residents must pass through the Tin Bigha Corridor under the suspicious gaze of armed BSF *jawans* (soldiers). Dahagram’s administration, monitoring, and regulation make it nothing if not “exceptional” by even the standards of “normal” border

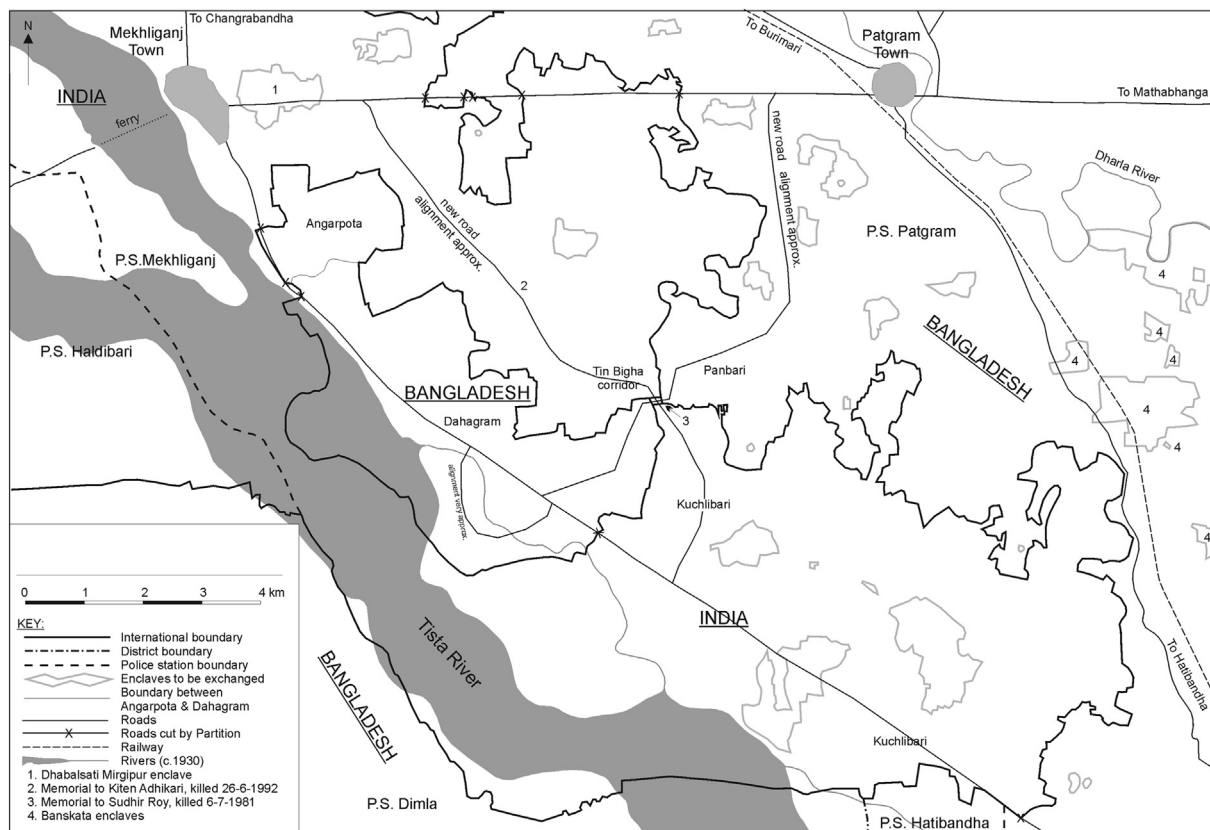


Fig. 1. Dahagram, the Tin Bigha Corridor, and other Enclaves along the India–Bangladesh border (map by Brendan Whyte).

politics. I suggest, drawing on an argument that has long been central to border studies (Aggarwal & Bhan, 2009), that the particular complexity of Dahagram as a case make it especially suggestive as a site for unpacking the problematics of community-making in borderlands more broadly. This is so in part because its history and peculiar location in space and in spatial imaginaries of nation and state have made it *especially* subject to interventions and instabilities that, as I discuss below, characterize politics along the India–Bangladesh border.

If terms such as “statelessness” and “exception” seem, *prima facie*, remarkably apt to describing Dahagram, over the course of ethnographic fieldwork in the enclave (conducted in 2006 and 2007), they also left me with a certain unease. In my first few weeks in Dahagram, I was surprised to discover a seeming uniformity of experience and outlook among its residents. People shared often remarkably similar stories of expropriations and exploitations by residents of surrounding Indian territory and by Indian Border Security Forces. As I chatted with people in homes and tea stalls, time and again I heard phrases such as *there is not one family in this enclave who has not had someone suffer in an Indian prison*. In reference to the Tin Bigha Corridor, residents repeatedly told me, *we are like chickens. During the day they let us roam free while at night they lock us in the coup*—a reference to the fact that during the time of this research, the BSF closed the gates to the Corridor for the night at 6:00 PM. It was not just these catch-phrases that were similar. Stories people told of the enclave’s history shared many similar tropes, themes, and even memories. Yet, the longer I worked in the enclave, the more they seemed to mask a more fractured, contentious, and heterogeneous set of experiences, politics, and interests. While they, on the one hand, seemed to accurately frame the problematics of life within the enclave, they also seemed to oversimplify the experience and history of Dahagram’s residents by uniformly marking its space in particular ways.

In a recent critique of new literature on exception, Butler argues: “if the language by which we describe [destitution] 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” (Butler & Spivak, 2007, pp. 42–43). This missive seemed particularly apt in relation to Dahagram, where histories of expropriation and suffering are also narrated as arguments for more intervention in the lives of residents by the Bangladeshi state. To think of the enclave residents as stateless therefore elides the ways that their lives are an ongoing and constant negotiations with the Indian and Bangladeshi state systems (Abrams, 1988). Moreover, the analytics of exception and bare life too quickly endorse narratives that seemed self-consciously constructed by residents themselves.

Part of the ongoing project of exploring margins in South Asia and beyond might be to develop lexicons and strategies for articulating understandings of other networks and other geographies of power. The outline of one such strategy is provided in Partha Chatterjee’s (2004) exploration of what he calls “the politics of the governed”. Chatterjee builds on a Foucauldian notion of governmentality to reformulate a concept of the “political” for those outside of classically defined bourgeois civil society.² As Chatterjee argues, “Most inhabitants of India [and one might add Bangladesh] are only tenuously, and even then ambiguously and contextually, rights-bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution.... But it is not as though they are outside the reach of the state or even excluded from the domain of politics” (p. 38). Chatterjee suggests a recentering of attention away from classical engagements with questions of citizenship and civil society, and instead a focus on the dynamics of, on the one hand, the governance of populations and, on the other, the processes through which communities become

identified (and self-identify) as “populations” worthy of governance. In other words, the fundamental questions of political society, for Chatterjee, are not those of popular sovereignty, but rather those of governance and the realization of claims to property and belonging.

Chatterjee raises two critical points that help in refiguring life at the margins of South Asia. First, the groups under investigation for Chatterjee operate in the domain of para-legality. Chatterjee’s use of this term has been interpreted as meaning “informal” (Roy, 2009) but might be as productively linked to terms that have emerged as central to studies of borders, such as illicit (Van Schendel & Abraham, 2005). As Chatterjee points out, the very fact of life on the margins necessitates an existence on the fringe of (or beyond) legal norms. As many have observed, life in borderlands often necessitates or entails such negotiations. Yet, Chatterjee’s point is that para-legality itself is the domain within which political society operates—the space within which relationships to both state and community are worked out. Second, Chatterjee argues that to be recognized as a population in need of “governance” is a central element in gaining access to state resources, aid, and protection. Yet, to become such a population itself is a project of defining the attributes and boundaries of “community.” As Chatterjee writes, “This is an equally crucial part of the politics of the governed: *to give the empirical form of a population group the moral attributes of a community*” (Chatterjee, 2004, p. 57, emphasis in original). In Dahagram, the tension between these points emerges in a disjuncture between a popular narrative that situates residents as overlooked “victims” in need of redress by the Bangladeshi state and more masked and ongoing histories of the violent forging and maintenance of community boundaries by often illicit, or odious, means.

Chatterjee’s arguments are grounded, largely, in a discussion of politics in Kolkata’s slums and rail colonies, and have, as yet, gained little traction in border studies. Yet, they pose critical questions for investigations of borderlands. They suggest that while the claims for particular kinds of exclusions and inclusions for marginalized groups may be, ostensibly, “legitimate”—in that they describe real and urgent forms of expropriation and exploitation—they are also narratives in need of disentanglement. Moreover, they hint at a methodological perspective on margins—one not deployed by Chatterjee himself—that re-centers ethnography as a critical strategy for moving beyond formal and occasionally formulaic claims by marginal populations to more inclusive rights, access, and belonging. In addressing these questions, I join with others who argue for an ethnographic approach to border studies in order to tease out the ways that the political geographies of borders and communities living near them are mutually constituted (Doevenspeck, 2011; Megoran, 2006). In the remainder of this essay, I propose to explore this complexity of community-making in the context of Dahagram. First, I outline the history of Dahagram and the ways that this history is narrated as a claim for inclusion in nation and state. I then explore a series of counter-histories to this narrative. I argue that while these events puncture the cohesive histories and claims offered by residents, they are just as fundamental to understanding the construction of Dahagram’s community, its ongoing politics, and the ways that broader debates over the India–Bangladesh border are reflected and refracted in communities living along it.

Official histories

Prior to Partition in 1947, the *chhitmahals* were discontinuous land-holdings dating back to the pre-colonial Mughal incursion north from Dacca (Dhaka) into the kingdom of Koch (Cooch) Behar in the late 17th century.³ Though the existence of such territorial

ambiguities caused confusion for administrators during the colonial period, projects and proposals to “solve” the *chhitmahal* issue seldom were successful. With the drawing of the Radcliffe Line separating West Bengal from what was then known as East Pakistan at Partition and the accession of Cooch Behar to India shortly after, roughly 200 *chhitmahals* became territorial enclaves completely bounded by another sovereign state. The enclave residents’ status as nominal citizens of one state living in a territorially bounded space within another initially posed only minor problems, as, in the period immediately after Partition, the border was, to a greater or lesser extent, open (Chatterji, 1999; Rahman & Van Schendel, 2003; Van Schendel, 2005). Yet, as tensions between India and Pakistan increased in the period following Partition, enclave residents, and border residents more generally, frequently found themselves in complicated and compromising situations that often led to disputes, violence, and arrest by border security and police forces on both sides of the border.

Passport and visa rules, officially established in October 1952, regulated, at least legally, travel into and out of the enclaves. Yet, the addition of bureaucratic regulation served more to confuse an already complex situation in the enclaves rather than to resolve residential and national ambiguity. This was further complicated by India and Pakistan’s tacit claim of citizenship status for populations both inside and outside their borders. Muslims living in India were nominally entitled to the same rights as East Pakistani citizens. India made a similar claim of “proxy-citizenship” for Hindus in East Pakistan (Van Schendel, 2002). In the religiously divided enclaves, this policy effectively offered dual citizenship to some, affording proxy-citizenship in their bounding state and legal citizenship in their “home” state. At the same time, it doubly alienated the rights of others, requiring that they illegally cross two national borders simply to obtain legal permission to go to market. The uneven enforcement and application of such policies in the *chhitmahals* meant that for some enclaves residents, life remained more or less “normal” while others were subject to multiple exploitations by their neighbors, local governmental officials, and members of border security forces.⁴

This seemingly untenable situation was to be officially rectified in 1958 with the Nehru-Noon Accords between India and Pakistan, which made provision for the absorption of the enclaves into their bounding states. Yet, this treaty met fierce political and legal opposition both in India and in Pakistan. The question remained unresolved until the Liberation War in 1971, which marked the independence of Bangladesh and a sea-change in political relations between India and the territory formerly known as East Pakistan. In 1974, the question of the enclaves was again raised in the Indira-Mujib Accords that called for the exchange of all enclaves with the exception of Angorpota–Dahagram (henceforth Dahagram), two conjoined Bangladeshi enclaves that were to be linked to Bangladesh by the Tin Bigha Corridor.

The 1974 Accords initiated a prolonged political struggle carried out at both national and local levels. Dahagram and the fate of the Tin Bigha became central issues in questions about the relationship between India and Bangladesh and sticking points in other debates over territory, such as the question of water sharing in the Ganges (Jacques, 2000). As forces in the Congress Party in India and President Ershad’s administration in Bangladesh began to take more active steps toward realizing the Corridor in the 1980s (including a visit by Ershad to Dahagram in 1986 and 1988), opposition to its existence was taken up by the Bharatyā Janata Party (BJP) and the Hindu Right in India and publicized as an issue of national territorial integrity. In and around Dahagram, competing groups struggled to realize or block the Corridor and, with it, Dahagram’s full-fledged “membership” in Bangladesh. The enclave, which was roughly evenly divided between Muslim and Hindu residents,

played host to a pitched battle over territorial belonging. Within Dahagram, the Muslim dominated *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti* (Dahagram Movement Committee, or DSS) advocated for the opening of the Corridor by constantly petitioning local and national politicians and by mounting several public demonstrations for the Corridor. Opposing the DSS and drawing broad membership from within the enclave and areas surrounding Dahagram in India, the Hindu-dominated *Kuchlibari Shangram Shomiti* mounted similar campaigns (Cons, 2012).

Amid protests by the BJP, including a plan to mount a “death march” that was ultimately blocked by local police, the Corridor was finally opened in 1992, though not under the terms that had been originally agreed. Far from being leased in perpetuity to Bangladesh, as the Accords had stipulated, the Corridor remains under sovereign control of the BSF. Initially, it was only opened for one hour per day. This time was gradually increased to 12 h a day, where it remained for over a decade. In October of 2011, the Corridor was finally opened for a full 24 h a day. The opening of the Corridor triggered demographic and political shifts within the enclave. The vast majority of Hindu residents fled the enclave for India while a number of Muslim landless people from elsewhere in Bangladesh, locally known as *Bhatiyas*, moved into the enclave in their place (see below).

Questions around the Corridor continue to dominate discussion of life and (largely agricultural) livelihood in the enclave. Today, the Tin Bigha Corridor is a site of intense scrutiny and anxiety for residents (Cons, 2008). Though the Corridor has established formal access to Bangladesh, it has also, undeniably, increased surveillance and scrutiny and made Dahagram a focal point of various forms of nationalist struggles and security debates. As such, the public history of pre-Corridor times remains a vivid part of the way contemporary life in the enclave is narrated.

Local articulations

Within Dahagram, there is a collective remembering and narrating of the enclave’s pre and post-Corridor past. Residents express the uncertainty and instability of life before the opening of the Corridor and the ongoing tenuousness of life since. At the same time, they stake claims to a right to belonging within Bangladesh through narratives of possessing the enclave in opposition to Indians who, they argue, would otherwise have claimed the land as Indian territory. Most residents, when asked, recount experiences with various forms of exploitation at the hands of border security forces, Indians from surrounding areas, or Hindu residents living within the enclave. Often these memories are linked to moments of collective expropriation and violence within the enclave, such as the 1965 Dahagram War, in which a number of Muslim homes were burned and large portions of the enclave residents were forced to flee. As I conducted fieldwork, I often heard statements along the lines of *Dahagram would not be here were it not for us* or *we have survived years of torture at the hands of our neighbors to join this Bangladesh*. While such remembrances are often linked to the struggle to open the Tin Bigha Corridor, they also refer to a stoic defense of Dahagram over time. In short, Dahagram residents narrate a history of what Donald Moore (2005) has called—in his analysis of Kaerezi, a region of Zimbabwe whose history and struggle for belonging resonates with that of the enclaves—“suffering for territory,” an idiom that at once encompasses both a framing of identity and a claim of entitlement in the context of nationalist histories of belonging.

This is not to say that Dahagram residents simply superimpose their own history onto a broader nationalist one. The broad story of Bangladeshi national history tends to be framed around Partition in 1947 and the Liberation War in 1971 (Feldman, 1999). In Dahagram,

the Liberation War factors much less into historical narratives (though people do occasionally refer to the period before 1971 as the “East Pakistan period”). Rather, salient historical periodizations and narrations are oriented around events specifically related to the enclave’s history, such as the 1965 Dahagram War, the 1974 agreement to open the Corridor, and the struggle for and eventual opening of the Tin Bigha Corridor in 1992. Indeed, enclave residents tended to mobilize their claims to inclusion and belonging in Bangladesh as narratives of patriotic suffering for territory around and in relation to the Corridor, even as such narratives resonate with broader Bangladeshi nationalist histories (Samaddar, 2002).⁵

These narratives are not in any sense “false.” They describe real sets of abuses, expropriations, anxieties, and struggles over Dahagram’s contentious space. Yet, they also map directly to broader sets of rhetorics and nationalist logics about the India–Bangladesh border. As such, they paint particular pictures of the enclave’s history. Not surprisingly, most enclave residents style themselves as Bangladeshi patriots. Yet, their narration of the enclave’s patriotic history is one that identifies with the practices of law-abiding and deserving citizens. Former members of the *Dahagram Shangram Shomiti*, for example, still take pride in their principled refusal to take subscriptions or hand-outs from others during their struggle. Rather, they celebrate having mounted the campaign on their own initiative. Again, this struggle for the Corridor is most often claimed as an act of national, not personal, defense. As one member recalled to me, “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... the DC would pay attention to me, extend his hand to shake with me, and say, ‘Sit down my son.’” Such framings at once position Dahagram as a site of national territorial import and an area populated by loyal and long-suffering members of the Bangladeshi nation. The struggle for the Corridor is thus not remembered or told innocently, but rather as a conscious assertion of Dahagram’s centrality in contemporary debates over the border and the history of establishing territorial space for the Bangladeshi nation.

As important as the question of citizenship in the Dahagram narrative of suffering for territory is that of religion. The story of the India–Bangladesh border has been and continues to be communal—a narrative that imagines the border as dividing not just Indian space from Bangladeshi, but crucially Hindu from Muslim. This communalism marks the stories of Dahagram residents. Many recall the struggle over the opening of the Tin Bigha as a question of whether Dahagram men would wear *lungis*—cloth skirts popularly worn by Muslim men throughout rural Bangladesh—or *dhotis*—cloth skirts more traditionally worn by Hindu men. Moreover, the different struggles for space are often spoken of as active infringements of religious practice. For example, at several points in the enclave’s post-Partition history, residents of surrounding areas in India have blockaded the enclave for weeks on end. Dahagram residents regularly recall these periods as times of extreme want when, as many told me, those who died *had to be buried without any cloth or with old clothes*. The emphasis of such claims is not just on a lack of access to basic needs, but also on an infringement of religious funerary rights, an inability to shroud the dead in *kafan*. As such, these narratives claim a specifically Muslim identity as a form of membership in Bangladesh here imagined as a specifically Muslim nation.

These histories make multiple claims, but all of them articulate with the construction and representation of a moral community worthy of inclusion in the Bangladeshi nation (Chatterjee, 2004). Dahagram’s residents have, throughout the enclave’s post-Partition history, struggled together to claim a right to political, social, civic, and religious membership in a nation-state that has, only

intermittently and contextually, cared about the welfare of enclave residents. It is thus not surprising that the narratives of belonging within the community tend to reflect such a similar contour of experience. These self-conscious narrations of sufferings for territory are not just a way of thinking about the enclave’s history, but an urgent and ongoing concern for the welfare of the enclave and the survival of its residents. In Moore’s (2005, p. 2) words, they are ways that “subjects who are not self-sovereign nonetheless exercise agency”. Such narratives, readily on hand for the occasional government officials and short-term researchers who visit the enclave, position Dahagram residents as, among other things, marginal members of the Bangladeshi nation and as a unified community excluded from the rights of full membership in the state, vulnerable to human insecurities, subject to exploitation by their neighbors, and more. They reflect real anxieties, experiences, and concerns. But they also mask a more complex process by which Dahagram is forged as a community. This process only began to emerge as I spent more time within Dahagram and got to know its inhabitants better.

Local heroes

The articulations of Dahagram’s residents as law abiding citizens worthy of inclusion within the Bangladeshi state often occlude the long and frequently violent history between Partition and the opening of the Corridor in 1992. In this period, Muslim residents of the enclave were more than simply passive victims of violence and exploitation by Indian neighbors. Indeed, just as Hindu residents of the enclave worked to establish their own claims of belonging to India, Muslim residents of Dahagram worked to shape their peculiar belonging to Bangladesh, occasionally through violent acts of possession. These narratives speak of the uncertainty, gendered vulnerability, and lack of access to “official” services that characterized life in the enclave before the opening of the Corridor. But they also spoke to a different set of histories beyond the public narrative of suffering for territory. While these narratives sit uncomfortably with the public framing of enclave residents as suffering for territory, they also summon memories of pride and active resistance. This tension in framings manifests in multiple ways. One such way is through the gendered memorialization of those who resisted Indian oppression as folk heroes who dared to reclaim enclave pride.

Many residents tell stories of Jamal Shadu, a quasi-mythical figure who operated beyond and outside of the law to combat Indian oppression in the absence of intervention by the Bangladeshi government in the 1970s and 1980s. Many claim familial relationship with Shadu, as if to stake their own claim to the active defense of Dahagram. I first heard of Shadu from a frail old man named Abdul Manan.

He was my *bhai* [brother, but also friend]. He was my maternal cousin [*mamato bhai*]. He was very brave. The Indian government wanted him to side with them. They asked him to shift his allegiance, and in return, they would give him anything, money, land. He refused, saying, “I can’t leave my country for a better life elsewhere.” He would continue to defend the enclave, attacking those who made our life difficult, stealing our crops and livestock back from Indians. Later, near the Tin Bigha, a flag meeting [parley between border security forces and border populations] was being held. A BSF officer shouted to the crowd, “Who is that bloody Jamal Shadu who attacks our people?” Jamal Shadu sprang up and snatched that BSF officer’s revolver and pointed it at his head.

Shadu represented a spirit of violent resistance to Indian oppression, an unruly and untamable force that demanded, and

received, respect. His brazen defiance of the BSF's authority and his willingness to use violence in the defense of territory marked him not just as a hero, but as a symbol of repressed anger within the enclave. What others dared not do, Jamal Shadu would. Where others suffered for territory, Shadu seized it.

Shadu fit into folk narratives of banditry as popular resistance to despotic authority—of brave, if unscrupulous, *mastans* (gangsters) who defy authority through hyper-masculine action.⁶ He was, at least in popular memory, ruthless, unpredictable, brave, loyal, and violent. His acts did more than simply counter Indian aggression: they exceeded them. As one informant told me, “Jamal Shadu and Mota Izer [Shadu's companion and co-conspirator] responded to this well. If Indians attacked one Muslim house, they would have replied by destroying four or five Indian houses. If they abducted [*churi*] one Muslim woman, they would have brought four or five Indian women.” Shadu personified a fantasy of escalating violence and retaliation, a fantasy that stood in stark relation to both the realities of life in the enclave before 1992 and the narrative of life in the post-1992 moment. Yet more to the point, Shadu embodied a dangerous masculinity that defied the emasculating humiliations of life in the pre-Corridor period.

Katharyne Mitchell (2006) argues that those living within spaces of exception are feminized by differentiation from the universal construction of the modern [male] individual. One might add that the self-conscious construction of exceptionality (suffering, as opposed to fighting) is also a feminizing act, one that leaves little space for celebration of the actions that Shadu represents. This (consciously repressed) masculinity was marked by a voracious sexuality that employed rape and kidnapping as a logical strategy of defending the community and making counterclaims of belonging. Men who described Shadu to me regularly discussed him in the context of sexual violence. Shadu simultaneously cast-off unjust rule and offered a liberation through sexual assault. Indeed, Shadu's very presence seemed to sanction such actions. More than a mere perpetrator of such acts, he also provided license to others to articulate similar claims to belonging on the bodies of Indian Hindu women. As another informant once told me, “Some drunken Indians abducted Lothibor Munshi's wife, and released her after molesting and assaulting her. With the aid of Jamal Shadu, we also kidnapped an Indian girl and took her here. She was released after a nightlong torture.”

The folklore of Shadu formed a counterpoint to narratives of stoicism and suffering that characterized tellings of Dahagram's history. It also reasserted, albeit in a mythical way, a history that is much more in line with the history of contestations over the border. In the period following Partition, such back and forth incidents, where local cross-border disputes quickly escalated in violence, were common (Van Schendel, 2005). Such incidents, covering questions over the ownership of paddy or cattle, smuggling, and various other kinds of border transgression, continue to be regular features of border life today—often made doubly violent by the intervention of border security officials (Jones, 2009b; Van Schendel, 1993). If the Shadu narrative reasserted a kind of violent agency for enclave residents, an agency that simultaneously normalized gender-violence, it also described a more quotidian violence of life along the border, particularly in the period before the opening of the Corridor.

Managing it “ourselves”

Though the Shadu narrative offered a window into a more complicated history of territorial defense, it seemed somehow unthreatening to the broader question of suffering for territory. More dangerous to these claims were stories of organized violence enacted by Dahagram's *matabors*, local leaders and

political elites. Sometimes, such acts directly opposed the BSF and Indians in surrounding areas, others were acts of complicity with them. These acts were particular kinds of negotiations for power within the enclave and with those who sought to govern it. While hosting me at his house with several other village elders, Monir Patwari, a former enclave leader who had retired from village politics, told me one such story from the early days of his political life.

It was maybe in '74 or '75... There was a man who was an older member [of the local Union Parishad] named Manudin Mia who was very shrewd. ...At that time, there was tremendous pressure from India. In retaliation, Manudin Mia began sheltering a band of robbers based here who used to loot Indian households. They would provide him with some share of their spoils.... Indian authorities pressed us, saying, “If you don't punish these robbers, we will not allow any Muslim to live in Dahagram.” One day, we surrounded the house of the ring-leader. We took him out of the house and we sat in a place near Noyarhaat. I and another member, Mr. Lolit Babu, wanted to listen to him.... But Manudin Mia, that shrewd man, anticipated that if this man was allowed to speak, his position would become complicated.... So, he struck the ring-leader with a big stick on the head. The man died instantly. We dug a ditch and buried him. In those days, there was no administration [*proshashon*] here. So we managed it ourselves.

There were a number of strains in Patwari's story that complicated the narrative of oppression often shared by those reflecting on Dahagram's past and making claims for its present and future belonging. First, there is a suggestion that not only Dahagram's residents but especially its political elites were involved in criminal and retaliatory acts of claiming space through theft, looting, and other forms of violence—though such acts were constrained and limited by their territorial vulnerability. Such stories reframed the politics of belonging within Dahagram as not simply about being *taken from*, but also about *taking*. Moreover, these leaders were ready to administer their own forms of justice and self-preservation in the absence of more formal institutions of rule from the Bangladeshi state. In Patwari's words, *matabors* “managed it themselves.” Such management was more linked to opportunity than to abstract formulations of law and order. These kinds of narratives complicated the past and ongoing constructions of Dahagram as a moral community worthy and deserving of inclusion in the Bangladeshi state. It further emphasized that the project of framing Dahagram as part of Bangladesh was exactly that—a project that involved elisions and selective narrations of suffering for territory in the absence of administrative protection.

Chatterjee (2004, p. 64) asks, “How can the particular claims of marginal population groups, often grounded in violations of the law, be made consistent with the pursuit of equal citizenship and civic virtue? To produce a viable and persuasive politics of the governed, there has to be a considerable act of mediation”. More often than not, enclave leaders and elites actively performed this mediation—claiming a particular history for enclave residents through memories of the struggle for the Corridor, representations of stoic suffering, and claims to possessing the enclave as an act of specifically national defense. Yet, these same leaders were also complicit in a history of rule that involved often-violent acts carried out at the margins of legality—acts that were clearly as much about personal gain and the consolidation of power as they were about territorial defense. These *matabors*, then, were more than just mediators of intra-village conflict (Van Schendel, 1993), they were also leaders who used their position as mediators between community and state institutions to their advantage (for a similar framing see Tsing, 1993).

As Patwari relayed his story, the other guests in his household—all members of the small circle of *matabors* involved in enclave governance—shifted nervously and grumbled. One finally scolded Patwari, arguing that these kinds of stories should not be shared with an outsider. Patwari dismissed the objection, saying, “He has come to write our history, what danger is there in telling him these things.” Yet, there was indeed a perceived danger in sharing stories of political violence that contradicted the framings of Dahagram’s moral community.

Belonging in crazytown

Perhaps the most secret of these moments, that I heard, was an incident that occurred in a small hamlet called Pagaltari in the 1980s, on the banks of the Tista. I heard of it first from an informant named Riaz as he was correcting a misconception that the residents of the enclave had all settled there before Partition. In fact, Riaz told us, there had long been a small, but growing, population of a group locally known as *Bhatiyas* in the enclave. *Bhatiya*, as a term, meant “outsider” (Das Gupta, 1992; Ghosh, 1993) but in practice, it reduced to a particular kind of classed and ethnicized identification. *Bhatiyas* were impoverished Bengalis who had migrated from river communities and *chars*—siltation islands—along the banks of Bangladesh’s major rivers. The term was used locally to refer to those who had moved following the loss of their ancestral homes to river erosion. It had no specific religious connotation, and there were both Hindu and Muslim *Bhatiyas*. But it did have derogatory overtones, intimating a background of poverty and criminality, tinged by the fact that most of these more recent migrants were darker in complexion. *Bhatiyas* were thus seen as inferior to the *Bangals*, the original residents who had (supposedly) lived in Dahagram before their arrival.

According to Riaz, in the late 1980s, when the tension over the opening of the Corridor was reaching its height, the BSF gathered a group of Hindu *Bhatiyas* from India and, during the night, moved them and their livestock across the Tista into an uninhabited area known as Pagaltari. The *Bhatiyas* established a small settlement and began to till soil to plant crops. This was seen by many as the first move in a land-grab by the BSF to reclaim Dahagram as Indian territory and settle the issue of the Corridor themselves. As Riaz told me, “We decided that this new settlement should be abolished. So we collected some of our own *Bhatiyas*, armed the with bows and sticks, and told them, you march forward, we are covering you, we will come.” Muslim *Bhatiyas* were sent into the camp as a vanguard and began attacking the Hindus with these “primitive” weapons. Other residents followed. “Within a few hours, we destroyed the settlement. A Hindu inhabitant who had been shot by an arrow died from his injury. We confiscated forty-one of their cows.” After violently expelling the settlers and confiscating their livestock, Dahagram residents began a vigil awaiting retaliation from the BSF. After several days, a flag meeting was held to discuss the situation. According to Riaz, the BSF was forced to concede the point because the settlement had clearly and deliberately been made on Bangladeshi territory.

This story surprised me, and I asked Riaz to tell us more about the incident, but in contrast to his usual talkative self, Riaz became quiet on the subject. For several weeks after this interview, Riaz would avoid me when he saw me. I began to ask other informants about the Pagaltari incident. Most would stiffly deny that such a thing had ever happened, or become evasive and quiet upon being asked about it. Of the informants I spoke to, few were willing to talk about the incident. One was Patwari, who was not averse to sharing more complicated versions of Dahagram’s history. He told us:

Yes, they moved some people on the bank of the Tista. They were *Shantals*. People of that tribe don’t shave or cut hair. They

were claiming that they were inside Indian territory, and one day, they abducted two villagers who were tilling their own land. *Shantals* claimed that those were their lands. So a fight broke out, which forced them to retreat.

Pagaltari, which translates as “crazy neighborhood,” sat uncomfortably within the narratives of belonging that long-time Dahagram residents had constructed for themselves. Whether or not the routing at Pagaltari happened (I did eventually track down an oblique reference to the incident in a debate in the Indian Parliament collected in Bhasin (1996)), there are several interesting points that stand out in narratives about it. The first is the clear ethnic and class differentiation central to the story. Riaz’s telling of the event was explicitly positioned to explain the cultural inferiority of *Bhatiyas*, who have become a prominent part of Dahagram’s demographic make-up, political-economy, and cultural politics (see below). In a sense, the Pagaltari story positions the original residents of Dahagram—“proper” and patriotic Bangladeshi Muslims—in hierarchical relation to another group. *Bhatiyas* are culturally inferior in this vision. In this sense, the notion of *Bhatiya* is deployed as a category of practice (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) to differentiate “proper” members of Dahagram’s community from outsiders. *Bhatiyas* are positioned as itinerant, homeless (as their ancestral homes have been washed away), less firmly rooted to the land that *Bangals* (apparently using *Bhatiyas* as proxies) have fought for. Another informant, Yahiya made this clear to me in his description of the *Bhatiyas*:

An Indian security personnel told me, “Whether Hindu or Muslim, these people are very unruly [*abhadho*]. If you ask one, ‘where is your house,’ you will get an answer: ‘Assam.’ If you go to the address given to you, you will see that no person of that name or identity is there. If we inquire there, you will hear that, ‘yes, he has shifted to Char 72.’ If you unfold the map, you will see that no Char 72 is visible, that it has never been in demarcation. So these people are everywhere.

This hierarchy of belonging was reiterated in the other tellings of Pagaltari. Patwari characterizes the Pagaltari residents as *Shantals*, *Adivasis* (indigenous peoples) who neither shave nor cut their hair. Such descriptions seamlessly fit hierarchies of colonial ethnotyping and notions of the primitive and the civilized. While Riaz and Yahiya’s description of *Bhatiyas* certainly encompasses class and caste differentiation, it is even more starkly drawn in the context of *Adavasis*, marginal members of a nation consciously constructed around a Bengali ethnic and Muslim religious identity (Anisuzzaman, 2001). This ethnicized positioning is echoed in the relegation of the attack on Pagaltari to a “primitive” violence. Riaz characterizes the “civilized” inhabitants of Dahagram as following behind their “own” *Bhatiyas* who use “bows and arrows.” Such a characterization bespeaks a disdain for *Bhatiya* life at the same time that it reasserts racial hierarchies and a violent possession of land. If the Pagaltari incident sat uncomfortably within the public narrative articulated by and through Dahagram’s leaders, its various retellings also articulated and reasserted a claim to inclusion through exclusion. Dahagram’s *Bangal* residents were *more* appropriately part of the Bangladeshi nation than those who they “used” for their own defense.

Moving to unstable spaces

The Corridor and the politics of movement into and out of the enclave appear to be the focal points of political tensions inside of Dahagram, particularly within the narratives that residents regularly share with outsiders. Yet, as the Pagaltari incident suggests, the tensions between, and differentiation of, *Bangals* and *Bhatiyas*

are also central to the political workings of the enclave. Throughout the late 1980s and in the period leading up to the Corridor there had been increasing pressure from Hindu residents for Muslims to side with them in pushing for India's absorption of Dahagram (Cons, 2012). With the opening of the Corridor, there was an exodus of Hindus from the enclave. This movement created a glut of land. However, few remaining Muslim residents were able to capitalize on low prices after decades of economic marginalization. This opened the way for a large in-migration of families, grouped together as *Bhatiyas* by older residents, who purchased the land at exceptionally low costs. Many in Dahagram told me that, through intermarriage, there was no longer a divide between groups. Yet, stories such as Riaz's, the internal politics of the enclave, and the political economy of land continually served to ossify what otherwise might have emerged as a more fluid category of identity within Dahagram.

The prejudices had economic bases as well as an ethnic ones. While there were *Bhatiya* families spread throughout the enclave, the majority lived in the South, closer to the Corridor, clustered near an area known as Guchogram, while the majority of *Bangals* lived near the center and in the north of the enclave. The soil in Dahagram became more and more alkaline toward the north, which meant that many of these newer migrants owned land that could grow and support a greater variety of crops. Tobacco and vegetable production was thus higher in the South. Many *Bhatiya* families also were beginning to introduce peanuts and maize. The soil in the Northern parts of the enclave was far from infertile. Most smallholders were multi-cropping as well as producing three harvests of rice. There was, however, a greater need for urea fertilizer. While this made farming in the North more expensive at the best of times, in both 2006 and 2007, Bangladesh encountered urea shortages, putting additional pressures on many *Bangal* farms (The Daily Star, 2006, 2007). As such, while I was conducting fieldwork, there was a dramatic difference in both crop kind and yield between the largely "*Bhatiya*" South and the more "*Bangal*" North.

This divide between North and South was further complicated by an intensification of border security around Dahagram with the opening of the Corridor. The growth in the number of camps, watchtowers, and patrols of the enclave's border made moving into and out of Dahagram except through the Corridor difficult and dangerous. Residents at the northern tip of Dahagram now have to travel a long distance to get to market (22 km to Patgram in Bangladesh as opposed to 1 km to the Mekhliganj *haat* [market] in India where residents used to take their crops). This imposes additional costs, as well as time, for many of the enclave's "original" residents, while many newer migrants enjoyed greater prosperity associated with both better soil and relative proximity (11 km) to the market in Patgram. This split was speeded by the consolidation of land amongst many of the more newly arrived farmers, who continued to purchase land as it became available.

The divergent histories of belongings between residents who had lived through the period leading up to the opening of the Corridor and newer migrants also led to a different relationship to the Corridor itself. In conversation, newer migrants tended to phrase their complaints with the Corridor in slightly different terms than *Bangals*. Many view the enclave favorably, suggesting that in Dahagram they have found relative stability. While the Corridor remains a looming issue, many highlighted economic development as an equally central concern of the enclave residents. Others assured me that the opening of the Corridor had made Dahagram an acceptably safe place to live. Salma, who had married into a *Bhatiya* family from the nearby district of Dimla observed, "When the marriage was first discussed, my family was concerned, but living here now, things are fine. People are much better off than they were ten or twelve years ago." If the concerns expressed by

newer migrants about Dahagram can be characterized as practical issues with living within the sensitive space of the enclave, other residents' relationship to the Corridor were haunted by the ghosts of the past. As Riaz told us when we first met him, "we live in terror that the BSF will close the Corridor for good. We know that they can do this. Bangladesh has reached an arrangement with India, but this is temporary."

Yet, more immediate than differing views of the Corridor were the political divides that the migration had caused within the enclave. This rift centered on discrimination against these new migrants in local politics. When I first spoke with Tariq, a *Bhatiya* who runs a tailoring shop and had stood for Union Council Chairman in several previous elections, told me that historically there had been a division between *Bhatiyas* and *Bangals*, but that this no longer played a major factor in politics in Dahagram. Moreover, he told me that unity was essential in order to secure further support from the Bangladesh government. Yet as he got to know me better, Tariq shared more and more of his bitterness about the discrimination. "When I first met you, I did not want to tell you such things, to show you rifts in our community. But these people, these *Bangals*, still they treat us differently."

Many newer migrants shared this sense that they were viewed as political and social inferiors within the community. While many were more profitable farmers than their neighbors, most of the powerful families and *matabors* in Dahagram were still *Bangals*. These few families continued to dominate in Union Council elections. Most *Bhatiyas* charged that, subsequently, the Union Council meted out favors, programs, and initiatives to *Bangals*. In many ways, while those who migrated into the enclave after 1992 may have found more economic belonging, they are still marked as marginal outsiders within the social fabric of the enclaves themselves.

While political favoritism marginalizes these new residents within Dahagram, stereotyping of these "outsiders" further marks them as beyond of the community of "true" enclave residents. As a local farmer told us, *These Bhatiya folks who shifted here after 1992, they tend to be quarrelsome* [jhograitta]. Before '92, most Dahagram folks didn't know what a court or a lawsuit was. Now there are plenty of cases in the Lalmonirhat court involving *Bhatiya* parties. Yet, those marked as *Bhatiyas* also appropriated and reconstructed their own narratives of belonging to both the enclave and to Bangladesh. One day, in a tea stall in a largely *Bhatiya* neighborhood, we overheard an interesting debate about whether *Bangal* residents of the enclave were "true" Muslims. Some were arguing that the original residents, who had lived amongst Hindus for so long, were made better Muslims by the presence of new migrants. One commented on the *Bangal* lack of modesty, saying, *I have seen people here wearing nothing but a sheet of a cloth over their genitals. I saw these guys taking baths as their wives, daughters, and sons were all around. How can you term these people Muslims?* Another, questioning the *Bangal* association with Hindus said, *I have even seen marriage ceremonies dominated by sindur* (a vermilion paste central to Hindu wedding ceremonies). Then another began to relate a story from the midst of the Liberation War.

Once there was a raid by *Khan* [Pakistani] soldiers. They encountered some locals and asked about their religion. When the men said, 'I am a Muslim,' the soldier asked, 'then who are those people, living in those huts?' He said, 'those are *Bhatiyas*.' The *Khan* soldier took *Bhatiyas* to be people of some other religion, and ordered all the villagers to stand in lines, *Bhatiyas* on one side and Muslims on the other. Then they charged one after one, 'what is your religion?' The answer was always "Muslim." Then they were ordered to recite some verses from

the Koran. Most of the *Bhatiya* elders did so. But when the *Bangals* were asked, they failed, though they had introduced themselves as Muslims. Then the Pakistani soldiers beat those *Bangal* folks mercilessly.

As we listened, a bearded man that we had never met but had been quiet up to that point, turned and with a smile clarified the intent of discussion. *Whenever you come here*, he said, *we gather around and have the most interesting conversations*. The newer migrants gathered in the tea-stall had made an express counter-argument to what they saw as slanders from their neighbors. This argument was targeted at me as a researcher, undermining the stated and unstated claims of the *Bangals* within the enclave. The implicit argument was that these newer migrants, as good and faithful Muslims, rightfully belonged to Bangladesh as much or more than their neighbors. While the debate was held in jest, and there was little intent for us to take the discussion seriously, the point that newer residents of the enclave reappropriate the category of *Bhatiyas* to stake their own particular claims to belonging, both within Dahagram and Bangladesh, was clear.

Conclusion

As Migdal (2008) argues, the formation and maintenance of boundaries relies as much on the construction of virtual checkpoints and mental maps as on the physical presence of armed and secured borders. Boundaries, as Migdal points out, “include symbolic and social dimensions associated with the border divisions that appear on maps or, for that matter, other dividing lines that cannot be found on any map at all” (p. 5). In Dahagram, there is a constant articulation between such boundaries, the physical border which clearly, if nominally, divides a presumed Muslim space of Bangladesh from a presumed Hindu space of India and the community divisions within the enclave between “*Bangal*” and “*Bhatiya*” that just as starkly seek to sort out insider and outsider. This articulation rests on a range of different claims: who is a deserving member of the Bangladeshi nation, who is a rightful member of the community of Dahagram, and what such membership means in terms of security, access, and livelihoods. These boundaries and the histories of their construction and negotiation continue to form the basis for Dahagram’s political society, the space within which relations to community, state, and nation are worked out.

As I have argued, the narratives that Dahagram residents articulate as claims for more active attention from the Bangladeshi government tend to overwrite histories of para-legal and often violent negotiations for survival with a narrative of suffering for territory that stakes a moral claim for community membership within Bangladesh. My argument here has not been that such claims are false, but that they mask often more complex practices of boundary production. The exploration of these alternative narratives of community-making does not in any way overwrite the presence of the border. On the contrary, the border continues to overdetermine life for Dahagram residents. Rather, it reveals that the politics of the border reflects and refracts on communities living near it in ways that belie simple narratives of exception, statelessness, and belonging.

The implications of this point are as much methodological as analytical. A recent symposium in *Political Geography* (Johnson & Jones, 2011) charts an agenda for border studies focusing on the interconnected themes of place, performance, and perspective. Attention to the community-level construction of narratives of belonging in borderlands contributes crucially to an understanding of such themes. A focus on the political society of border communities complicates understandings of life in borderlands and shows

the interplay between urgent claims against the state-system and the silencing of particular, and often problematic, pasts. Yet, attention to the various practices through which political society is produced also suggests a different kind of “rethinking” of the border as well. Indeed, as Chatterjee (2004) argues, the projects of constructing political communities that articulate with modern forms of governance are anything but unique to border zones. Such constructions are a central part of politics, as he puts it, in most of the world. As such, attention to such practices both re-centers and de-centers the border in explorations of places like Dahagram. On the one hand, it exposes how the confused postcolonial history of the border is central to the conceptions and productions of community in the enclave. On the other, it highlights the ways that Dahagram speaks to other marginal spaces where framing particular forms of supplication to the state are central to daily life and to survival.

Finally, attention to such formations of community highlights the difference that ethnography can make in studying seemingly coherent and spatially bounded communities living in borderlands (Megoran, 2006; Wolford, 2006). Such communities have a stake in formulating particular representations of themselves to government officials and researchers concerned, however nominally, with their welfare. Extended time and exposure to such communities yields a more productively complicated vision of life within them and of politics in relation to the border. In Dahagram, the gap between narratives of suffering for territory and histories of para-legal negotiations and defenses of rights and territory reveal a landscape fraught with competing visions of belonging and membership. Taking such entanglements seriously brings us closer to understanding the complex politics of life in borderlands and in other geographies at the margins of South Asia and beyond.

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Endnotes

¹ A recent (2010) meeting of the Asian Borderlands Research Network in Chiang Mai focused on Scott’s (2009) formulation of “Zomia,” while numerous authors have productively drawn on Agamben to understand the politics of exclusion central to marginal populations (c.f., essays in Das & Poole, 2004; Doty, 2007; Jones, 2009a; Salter, 2008).

² Chatterjee’s argument has been justly criticized for reproducing an overly simplistic distinction between “civil” and “political” society. As Roy (2009) argues, such a framework presents “informality” as an extra-legal domain in need of integration into “normal” economic and political frameworks, as opposed to a system that is characteristic of postcolonial urban life in general. While fully sympathetic to this critique, I hear wish to use Chatterjee to call attention to the often stark tensions between para-legal activities and projects of community-making at the border.

³ As Van Schendel (2002) points out, the enclaves were an expression of decentralized forms of rule and visions of territory in the pre-Colonial period. For an account of the encounter between colonial and indigenous visions of territory in South Asia, see Zou and Kumar (2011).

⁴ It is worth noting that there was an East Pakistani police station in Dahagram in the years leading up to the Liberation War, though residents derided its effectiveness in helping to address cross-border conflict whenever it came up in discussion (Cons, 2012).

⁵ As such, I treat the mobilization of nationalist histories within Dahagram as different from the mobilization of Dahagram within broader nationalist discourse. For a discussion see Cons (2012).

⁶ On masculinity in South Asian popular culture (particularly in relation to Bollywood cinema) see Chopra (2006) and Mohammad (2007).

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