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## From Stateless People to Citizens: The Reformulation of Territory and Identity in India-Bangladesh Border Enclaves

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Anthropology

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes nation-building in hitherto ungoverned territories of two Indian *chhitmahals* in Bangladesh and explores the transformation of their residents from stateless Indian nationals to citizens of Bangladesh. *Chhitmahals* comprised nearly two hundred enclaves located along the Bangladesh-India border that belonged to one country but were located inside another's territory. *Chhitmahals* came into existence with the partition of India in 1947; their non-contiguous locations kept them without state administration and citizenship rights. People developed political councils and adopted illicit practices to survive in the absence of the state, but the impossibility of exercising sovereignty in *chhitmahals* led Bangladesh and India to swap enclave territories in 2015. Ensuing nation-building projects reformulated the sociopolitical landscape while ordinary individuals embraced citizenship as a tool to realize diverse aspirations. Citizenship fuelled a sense of empowerment to normalize previously illicit everyday practices, contest local hierarchies, confront powerful neighbors, cultivate political connections, and make claims on the state. Access to boundaryless opportunities broke down the façade of common interest that prevailed in the stateless era. Viewed from a legal perspective, citizenship in *chhitmahals* might conjure images of a nation with paved roads, police stations, and other administrative services and infrastructure. An anthropological lens, however, reveals a reconfigured community that no longer finds normalcy and affluence in the traditional practices of livelihood, ethics, and leadership that were dominant before the merger with the enveloping state. Instead, clientelist party politics set the terms for the realization of aims. The implications of this reconfiguration were mixed and differed according to gender, generation, access to new media, and party affiliation. The emerging significance of these factors enabled citizenship's cultural and political effects to gradually overshadow its legal meaning. Citizenship is now a malleable concept in *chhitmahals* that has departed from the originally egalitarian goals of normalization.

Keywords: Bangladesh, *Chhitmahals*, enclaves, statelessness, nation-building, *Bhatiyas*, citizenship, India-Bangladesh border, clientelist politics

## SUMMARY FOR LAY AUDIENCE

The colonial process of partitioning India in 1947 created nearly two hundred enclaves across the new border between India and Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan). These enclaves were territories (*chhitmahals*) that belonged to one country but were located inside the other's borders. Neither country could administer and provide necessities to the enclaves because of their non-contiguous locations. This failure eventually led Bangladesh and India to swap enclaves in 2015. This dissertation explores the changes new citizenship has brought about in two formerly Indian enclaves that had been deprived of state services since the partition. Prior to the swap, enclave residents developed their own administrative councils to improve their living conditions but could not completely eradicate the hardship of statelessness. They also gradually built informal socioeconomic relations with the surrounding Bangladeshi state and its citizens. These connections were important to local subsistence but still could not ensure life and livelihood security in the absence of law and civic administration. These shortcomings ultimately strengthened the ground for the enclave-swap between India and Bangladesh. Based upon fieldwork in two former enclaves, I examine post-swap government programs in these enclaves and show that residents' new citizenship status resolved many crises of the stateless era but simultaneously introduced some unprecedented problems. Infrastructure and bureaucratic projects strengthened economic networks, introduced stable administration and ensured fundamental human rights. Despite these changes, however, ordinary people failed to achieve anticipated material progress. These projects also led to the introduction of a new form of party politics that replaced accustomed leadership hierarchies and codes of ethics. Power and authority shifted from one set of elites to a new one, and transactional politics deepened and sometimes shifted local inequalities. Differences of generation and gender were also prominent: youths' use of new media extended their horizons and reach beyond roads and paperwork; women's progress was slow but also remarkable. The emerging significance of these factors enabled citizenship's cultural and political effects to gradually overshadow its legal meaning. Citizenship has become a malleable concept in former *chhitmahals* and the consequences of the swap have gone far beyond the original goals of normalization.

## **DEDICATION**

To *Amma* (Rowsan Alam) and *Abba* (Badrul Alam) for the love and sacrifice

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## **ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

BAL	Bangladesh Awami League
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BSF	Border Security Force
BSL	Bangladesh Student League
FFW	Food for Work
FIR	First Information Report
IBEECC	India-Bangladesh Enclave Exchange Coordination Committee
LBA	Land Boundary Agreement
MPO	Monthly Pay Order
NID	National Identity Card
NMREB	Non-Medical Research Ethics Board
ROR	Records of Rights
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development
VGf	Vulnerable Group Feeding
WFP	World Food Programme

## GLOSSARY

<i>Adhi</i>	A sharecropping agricultural contract between a landowner and a tenant (i.e., sharecropper). The former provides land, and the latter is responsible for labor and other production inputs. After the harvest, the crop is divided into halves between the landlord and the sharecropper
<i>Adhiar</i>	Sharecropper
<i>Ashol</i>	Original
<i>Baree</i>	A homestead
<i>Bazaar</i>	In rural Bangladesh, a <i>bazaar</i> is an assemblage of shops, restaurants, tea-stalls, offices, and other business centers
<i>Betar</i>	Radio station
<i>Bhati</i>	The downstream course of a river
<i>Bhatiya</i>	Displaced Bangladeshi residents who migrated from downstream areas of the country to Indian <i>chhitmahals</i>
<i>Bhawaiya</i>	The popular folk song in northern Bangladesh
<i>Bidi</i>	Cheap local cigarette made of tobacco flake
<i>Bigha</i>	Local unit of land measurement
<i>Bodlee</i>	Refugees who exchanged homestead properties during 1947's partition of India
<i>Burqa</i>	A long, loose-fitting garment, covering head to toe, for Muslim women
<i>Char</i>	A silted island within the river or along the shore
<i>Chbit</i>	An adjective to refer <i>chhitmahal</i> -related affairs
<i>Chbitbashi</i>	Residents of <i>chhitmahals</i>
<i>Chhitmahal</i>	Non-contiguous enclaves that belonged to one country but were located in another country
<i>Dola</i>	Agricultural land
<i>Eid-ul-fitr</i>	One of the two largest religious festivals in Islam, which celebrates the end of the month of Ramadan
<i>Hijab</i>	A headscarf worn by some Muslim women



<i>Hutbar</i>	The specific day of the week when local farmers gather in a particular place to sell their fresh produce (e.g., vegetables, fish, spice) and livestock directly to customers at a cheaper rate without any middleman
<i>Jamati</i>	The supporters of the Bangladesh <i>Jamaat-e-Islami</i> party
<i>Jumma</i>	Muslim's Friday noon prayer
<i>Kalboishakbi</i>	A pre-monsoon cyclone in Bangladesh that usually hits the country in the first month of the Bangla calendar, <i>Boishakh</i> (mid-April to mid-May)
<i>Khanapuri</i>	Documentation of the location, ownership, possession, type, and size of landholding. Creating this document is the first step in recording a piece of land
<i>Khatian</i>	Detailed documentation of land rights. Every landholding must have a unique <i>khatian</i> number
<i>Khoa</i>	A mixture of brick chips and water used in road construction
<i>Lathiyal</i>	The serfs who participate in violent fights with bamboo poles to seize disputed <i>char</i> -lands for their landlord
<i>Madrasa</i>	School and college-level institutions that provide formal diplomas in Islamic education
<i>Maharaja</i>	The king
<i>Mia</i>	A common surname among the older generation in rural areas but often people use the term to address respected and charismatic community elders
<i>Mohajon</i>	A moneylender that provides cash to a borrower who agrees to repay the amount with interest
<i>Mouza</i>	The lowest local government unit in rural Bangladesh
<i>Neta</i>	The leader. In political vernaculars, a <i>neta</i> refers to a leader of a political party
<i>Notun Bangladeshi</i>	Since the swap of enclaves in 2015, the residents of former Indian enclaves introduce themselves as the <i>notun</i> (new) Bangladeshis, as opposed to their native and old ( <i>pooran</i> ) Bangladeshi neighbors
<i>Pagla</i>	A loudmouth person
<i>Paikar</i>	Wholesaler
<i>Para</i>	Neighborhood

<i>Pooran Bangladeshi</i>	<i>Pooran</i> means old. The residents of former Indian enclaves addressed the native Bangladeshis living in surrounding villages as the <i>pooran</i> Bangladeshis
<i>Pushti Chal</i>	Fortified rice introduced by the World Food Programme
<i>Salaam</i>	An Arabic greeting, which is now a part of Bangla culture and mostly practiced among the Bangladeshi Muslims
<i>Shahid Minar</i>	A monument to commemorate the martyrs of 1952's Bangla language movement
<i>Shanti</i>	Peace
<i>Sharee</i>	A traditional dress for women in Bangladesh and other parts of South Asia
<i>Shariah law</i>	Legal codes of Islam
<i>Shibir</i>	The student wing or young followers of the Bangladesh <i>Jamaat-e-Islami</i> party
<i>Shomonnoy</i>	Coordination
<i>Shorkari</i>	Relating to government affairs
<i>Taree</i>	Neighborhood
<i>Union Parishad</i>	One of the lowest local government branches in rural Bangladesh. A <i>union parishad</i> is a sub-unit of an <i>upazila</i> (subdistrict)
<i>Upazila</i>	Subdistrict, which is an administrative sub-unit of districts in Bangladesh

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## CHAPTER 1

### NATION-BUILDING IN ANOMALOUS BORDERLANDS: AN INTRODUCTION TO *CHHITMAHALS*



This photo was one of the first visual images we<sup>1</sup> captured in Dasiar Chhara, a village located in the India-Bangladesh borderland. Transportation of goods by horse carts was also the first social action that we encountered there. It was summer noon; our motorcycle trip from the subdistrict proper just landed us on the *bazaar* hub of the village, which was a scattered assemblage of village shops and tea-stalls across a road triangle. Three different roads were merged at the triangle; one paved road led the way to the subdistrict headquarters, one under-construction brick flat soling road went down the southern neighborhood of the village, and one muddy road connected the households in the western cluster. As we decided to take the muddy road for a village walk, the horse carts caught our culturally uncomfortable eyes. Bulls, horses, buffaloes, and donkeys used to be the traditional mode of transportation of goods and people in agrarian rural Bangladesh. Technological progress, however, ousted them in this century and sent the animal-driven carts to the showcases of Bangladeshi heritage. They are now merely a seasonal spectator sports event in some areas of the

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<sup>1</sup> Myself, a fellow Bangladeshi anthropologist, and a clerk in the subdistrict fisheries office who mentored my first field trip to the border village.

country to remember the cultural past (Dhaka Tribune, 2020). Watching the horse-carts carrying goods transitioned us abruptly to the past but, after a couple of hours' walk, we circled back to the present as we returned to the triangle.

In an intriguing review on the anthropology of time, Nancy Munn argues that “people are ‘in’ a sociocultural time of multiple dimensions (sequencing, timing, past-present-future relations, etc.) that they are forming in their ‘projects’” (1992:116). Time - as she describes - is a symbolic process that originates through the interactions among persons, space, and objects in everyday practices. The triangle in Dasiar Chhara that merged three roads at different stages of their progression from mud to concrete also displayed non-linear mobility between multiple dimensions of time. If the horse carts uncomfortably took us back to the past, the satellite televisions in the tea-stalls made a comfortable landing on the present, and the ATM booth affirmed the state's promise for a future ‘Digital Bangladesh.’<sup>2</sup> This coexistence of multiple temporal dimensions of sociocultural actions did not make Dasiar Chhara unique; instead, the abrupt transition between these dimensions made the difference. While such changes were gradual in the neighboring villages, which were also more or less in harmony with the rest of the country, the landscapes and everyday practices of Dasiar Chhara did not reflect the nation's technological and spatial development standards. The reason was the exclusion of the border village from Bangladesh's national schemes of upgrading public infrastructure and facilities.

In fact, until 2015, Dasiar Chhara was not even a Bangladeshi territory; it was a *chhitmahal*, which means “a portion of one state completely surrounded by the territory of another state” (Van Schendel, 2002:116). The partition of British India in 1947 entitled Dasiar Chhara as an Indian territory but placed it inside the boundary of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The anomalous location left the *chhitmahal* excluded in the subsequent nation-building projects and effectively turned it into a stateless territory inside Bangladesh. Nearly two hundred of other small pockets of land across the new border embraced a similar fate. Through a historic bilateral treaty in 2015, Bangladesh and India swapped their *chhitmahals* with each other that merged Dasiar Chhara with Bangladeshi mainland. The next year when we visited the village, the Bangladesh government meanwhile had started normalizing it by building nation-building projects. In a few months, the

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<sup>2</sup> A political vision of the current government of Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) to provide faster and more effective state-services through digital platforms.

government had installed electricity, built road networks, developed communication technologies, and introduced an administration to the village that so far did not have any modern infrastructure, constitutional protections, or voting rights. These unprecedented developments significantly - in a hasty manner - affected the way people lived their lives, earned their livelihood, or became political, hence the abrupt transitions between temporal dimensions of vernacular sociocultural projects. This dissertation investigates this transformation from statelessness to citizenship in *chhitmahals* and explores the changes in the community that came along with it, e.g., modified meaning of power, ethics, normalcy, and affluence.

Time and temporal transitions have also played a significant role in the planning of this research, which was not the initial preference for my doctoral project. Still, the dreadful events of 2015 made a substantial change in the plan. The year had witnessed the worst humanitarian crises in decades. More than one million people from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia had attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea to enter Europe to escape war, violence, poverty, and authoritarianism. Thousands of people have died and went missing in the sea in their undocumented precarious journey.<sup>3</sup> Those who reached the shore confronted harsh border security, far-right nationalism, xenophobia, and racism (BBC, 2016; Guardian, 2020). The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) acknowledged it as a “maritime refugee crisis of historic proportions” (Albahari, 2015:1). While the global north failed to protect the international rights of undocumented residents, Myanmar in South Asia launched even a more brutal attack against one of the most discriminated and persecuted groups in the world, i.e., the *Robingyas*. They are a Muslim ethnic minority from the Rakhine state of Myanmar, but the Buddhist-majority country never granted them citizenship by classifying them as undocumented migrants from Bangladesh - not an ethnic group. This exclusion enabled state-backed persecution of the stateless *Robingyas* for decades. However, the group received worldwide attention in 2015 as thousands of people were captured in the global media as stranded in the Malacca Straits and the Andaman Sea on their way to escape violence and death. More than one hundred thousand people were displaced at that point. The state-sponsored violence eventually culminated in a mass exodus in 2017 following a combined assault of state troops and Buddhist mobs that killed, burned, and raped the *Robingyas*. At least 6,700 people were killed, including 730

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<sup>3</sup> According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a total of 3,771 undocumented migrants have died in Mediterranean in 2015 (2016). In 2018, the Guardian reported that the body-count of migrants trying to reach Europe climbed up to 34,361 and was still growing.



children, 288 villages were burned to the ground, and more than one million people took refuge in Bangladesh. The United Nations declared the persecution of *Rohingyas* as the textbook case of ethnic cleansing (Week, 2015; BBC, 2020). The boats of the *Rohingyas* are still floating at sea (New York Times, 2020).

As I was writing my research proposal in 2015, it was hard to escape the images of the lifeless body of 3-year old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi whose boat was drowned; the grim faces of the ‘boat people’ and their stranded flimsy rafts at sea; the daily update of body-counts of undocumented migrants; the torched houses of the *Rohingyas*; and, the Facebook posts sharing the narratives of horrific violence in Rakhine. The starting paragraph of Sherry Ortner’s *Dark Anthropology* piece says,

Academic work, at least in the social sciences, cannot be detached from the conditions of the real world in which it takes place. The theoretical frameworks we use, and the phenomena we choose to explore, are affected in myriad ways by the political, economic, and cultural circumstances in which we carry out our research, even if that research is about the distant past or faraway places. (2016:47)

I was initially planning for doctoral research on the mining politics in northern Bangladesh, but these news reports on the suffering of undocumented migrants across the globe turned my attention to the politics of identity documentation and its impacts on the safety and protection of human lives. It was intriguing to observe how, on their way to a refuge, the mighty seas transformed the boat people into *homo sacers*.<sup>4</sup> Their undocumented journey was translated as a threat to the sovereign norms of the destination countries; as a result, harsher border security was instantly reinforced. As soon as they arrived at the shores of the European countries or Bangladesh, they were depoliticized and desocialized. Though they were still pure biological humans, without authorized travel documents they failed to be the kind of politicized human beings (e.g., citizens) that a sovereign nation-state protects or represents (cf. Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2004:34-37). Agamben argues that in a nation-state system “when the rights of man [*homo sacer*] are no longer the rights of the citizens, then he is truly *sacred*, in the sense that this term had in archaic Roman law: destined to die” (1995:117). It was not just the stormy waves that drowned the refugees in the Mediterranean Sea or

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<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben describes that *homo sacer* is the man who is not protected by the rule of the law of a nation-state but is subjected to the law. His bare life is politically disqualified and banished from the basic human rights; therefore, he is exposed to violence and death (Agamben, 1998:10 as cited in Shewly, 2013:26).

the Bay of Bengal; the detention units and asylum centers also killed them. They left their home, family, cultural comfort, and everything else behind but ended up living a subhuman life in their destination cities across the globe. For example, in Britain, the refugees were denied the right to work, move, or universal public health care, which made them easy prey of exploitation, forced labor, and illegalization (Guardian, 2018 & 2020). The *Robingyas* were similarly reduced to a mere biological entity in Bangladesh. They were confined within the camp and denied a work permit, education in local institutions, or even a cell phone connection (Washington Post, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2019).<sup>5</sup> Agamben compares such a refuge with a bare life that “remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion” (1998:11). The sovereign mechanisms of the European nations and Bangladesh included the refugees in their national territory but excluded them from society, public institutions, and politics.

My growing interests in the limbo of marginalized populations between a desired category of politicized human beings (citizens) and an undesired category of depoliticized *homo sacers* (refugees and stateless persons) introduced me to another event of 2015, i.e., the swap of *chhitmahals* between India and Bangladesh, which eventually resulted in this doctoral research. On the first day of August in that year, the *chhitmahals* were normalized as state-territories, and stateless *chhitbashi*<sup>6</sup> were transformed into citizens of their enveloping state. The major regional and international news outlets picked up headlines like *Wait Ends at the Stroke of Midnight* (Daily Star, 2015b) and *Freedom at Midnight* (Times of India, 2015). For seven decades, the *chhitbashi* lived in a limbo between two nation-states and were effectively stateless. They were compared as *homo sacers* - a denationalized group without any political rights - and their anomalous territories were described as spaces of exception where standard rules of law were suspended (e.g., Shewly, 2013). The nation-states accepting the *chhitbashi* as citizens was seen as their newfound freedom to live as a socially and politically qualified human, as opposed to the bare life of a *homo sacer*. Citizenship would not just hold the states by an obligation to protect their life and legal rights but also to nurture their human

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<sup>5</sup> It was not only the sovereign institutions of nation-states that reduced the refugees to depoliticized subhumans. Despite the growing support of non-state actors and grassroots activists, the locals surrounding the asylum centers and camps also reduced the refugees to a pejorative entity (see Kallius, Monterescu & Rajaram, 2016). In *chhitmahals*, people used *Robingya* as a derogatory term to address anyone who they believed did not belong there.

<sup>6</sup> To identify themselves, the residents of *chhitmahals* often used the terms *chhitbashi*, *chhitmahalbashi*, *chhiter lok*, and *chhitmahali*, which meant people who lived in *chhitmahal* or people who belonged to the *chhitmahal*.

potentials. While the *Robingya* refugees and undocumented migrants in Europe had to walk into a bare life, the *chhitbashi* ended it. On the backdrop of the humanitarian crises of 2015, this transition of the *chhitbashi* inspired this research to explore if citizenship has fixed the sociopolitical disqualifications of stateless life and analyze the implications of nation-building projects in hitherto ungoverned territories.

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### ***Chhitmahals: The Anomalous Borderlands***

*Chhitmahals* are widely translated as ‘enclaves,’ which indicate the sovereign fragments that belong to one nation-state but are completely surrounded by the territorial boundary of another state (Cons, 2016:5).<sup>7</sup> Enclaves are anomalous territories, but they are not rare in history. Until the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western Europe was full of non-contiguous territories that were gradually normalized through territorial consolidation. The 21<sup>st</sup> century started with around 250 enclaves, mostly concentrated in Western Europe, the former Soviet Union, and South Asia. Almost eighty percent of these enclaves were located across a small zone of India-Bangladesh border. There were 123 Indian enclaves located inside Bangladesh, and Bangladesh itself had 74 enclaves in India (Van Schendel, 2002:116, 117; Whyte, 2002:4, 16, 17). In 2015, a historic land swap treaty between Bangladesh and India swapped and normalized more than 160 enclaves. The same year, Belgium decided to swap a total of 48 acres of inaccessible borderland territory with the Netherlands, and the United Nations settled a long territorial dispute between Nicaragua and Costa Rica (Guardian, 2015b; Telegraph, 2018a). Effective bilateral treaties swapped most of the Western European enclaves; only a few survived: Spanish enclave Llívia in southern France, German territory Büsingen in northern Switzerland, and Italian enclave Campione Italia in southern Switzerland. Belgium and the Netherlands still share enclaves with each other (Van Schendel, 2002:117).

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<sup>7</sup> ‘Enclave’ is the closest English translation to the phenomenon *chhitmahal*, which also refers to the geographical discontinuation of culture, society, or ethnicity in a surrounded territory. However, it does not specify the geopolitical sprinkling, non-contiguity of the state boundary, and spatial concentration of nationalities as the Bangla word *chhitmahal* does. Moreover, many *chhitmahals* were composite entities that comprised small contiguous enclaved territories that were called *chhit* and had unique identification numbers. The word ‘enclave’ does not indicate this plurality either. Therefore, I prefer the word *chhitmahal* instead of *enclave*. For the same reasons, I referred to the residents of enclaves as the *chhitbashi* in the dissertation.

The vernacular expression *chhitmahal* is a combination of two words: *chhit* and *mahal*. *Chhit* or *chhita* means a detached part of the whole while *mahal* being estate, land, or a self-contained building. Across the India-Bangladesh borderlands, *chhitmahal* designates the territories that are geographically disconnected from the mainland (Datta, 2003:179; Cons, 2016:5). Historically, the *chhitmahals* were outlying territories of Cooch Behar<sup>8</sup> which was a princely state (also referred to as Indian or native state) until 1947's partition of British India and now is a district in the West Bengal state of India. The history of the formation of *chhitmahals* goes back to precolonial times. At the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Turkic Muslims conquered the southern and central Bengal and were planning to occupy the remaining northern part. The threat of invasion led to political chaos among the ethnic groups (e.g., *Koch*, *Mech*, *Bhot*, and others) living in the northern Bengal. This chaos ended, between 1510-1515, when the *Koch* chiefs formed an alliance with surrounding groups and built the Cooch Behar kingdom. Like other 565 princely states of that period, Cooch Behar was run by a *Maharaja* (king) and had outliers outside the boundary of the kingdom. It was possible because, in that period, sovereignty was expressed through tax flow, not territorial contiguity. In 1576, the Mughals from Turkestan conquered the subcontinent of India and replaced the Turkic Muslim regime (Whyte, 2002: 24-27; Van Schendel, 2002:119).

By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Mughal rule stretched to northern Bengal, but the empire could not occupy the kingdom of Cooch Behar. The *Maharaja* and the powerful landlords of Cooch Behar halted the Mughal invasion either by resisting the soldiers or by building a tributary alliance with them (Hunter, 1876 *as cited in* Van Schendel, 2002:119). However, the Mughals kept attacking the kingdom, and several wars broke out. Eventually, the Mughals were able to occupy some of the outliers of Cooch Behar and annexed them to the Mughal territory. In addition, during the wars, a few Mughal soldiers successfully occupied some areas inside the princely state. However, the restless Mughals did not stop attacking the kingdom (Whyte, 2002:30, 31).

Finally, in 1713, a peace treaty was signed, which confirmed the tributary authority of the Mughal Empire over the occupied outliers in exchange for peace inside Cooch Behar. These outliers remained discontinuous fragments of Cooch Behar but enclaved inside the Mughal territory. On the other hand, the *Maharaja* could not uproot the Mughal soldiers who meanwhile had occupied small territories inside Cooch Behar. These territories were disconnected from the boundary of the

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<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere spelled as Koch Behar, Koch Bihar, Kuch Behar.

Mughal Empire and enclaved inside Cooch Behar. These enclaves pledged political allegiance to one regime but paid tribute to the other. The peace treaty of 1713 was the key legal document that created the enclaves (Majumdar, 1977 & Roy Pradhan, 1995 *as cited in* Whyte, 2002:31, 32).

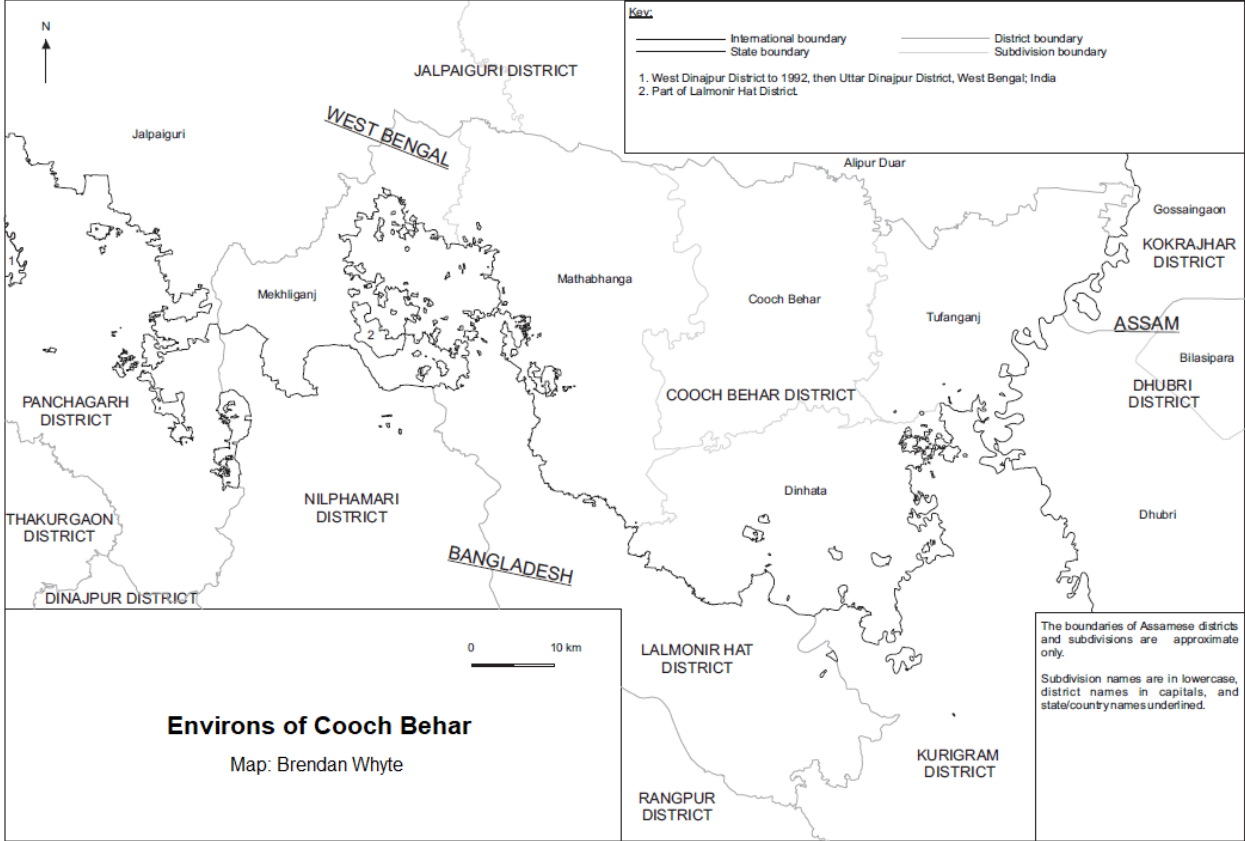


Figure 1: *Chhitmahals* across the India-Bangladesh Border (Map: Whyte, 2002:475)

By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the British East India Company started to gather its forces to challenge the native rulers and began to interfere with local business and politics. In 1757, the British officially brought an end to the Mughal Empire in India. They expanded their rule over three-fifths of the subcontinent, including all of Bengal. However, the British allowed the sovereign control of *Maharaja* in Cooch Behar on the condition of paying tribute. As a result, both the *Maharaja* and British-occupied India now had enclaves in each other’s territory (Whyte, 2002:41, 46-47; Hunter, 1876 & Majumdar, 1977 *as cited in* Van Schendel, 2002:119).

After almost two hundred years of colonization, cornered by fierce nationalist movements, the British Raj partitioned India in 1947 into two independent dominions: India and Pakistan. Pakistan was further divided between non-contiguous East and West Pakistan. The new border went through

Cooch Behar and placed its enclaves in both East Pakistan and India; the subjects of the kingdom were overnight divided between Pakistanis and Indians. The British did not partition the princely states; instead, they asked the *Maharaja* to choose between one of the dominions to be merged with. In 1949, the *Maharaja* of Cooch Behar merged his kingdom with India (Van Schendel, 2002:119). The Partition and the *Maharaja*'s merger with India transformed the Cooch Behar outliers into international enclaves. As Willem Van Schendel sums up, "the Mughal outliers in Cooch Behar had become [non-contiguous] part of British India and then part of [East] Pakistan, whereas the Cooch Behar outliers in Mughal territory had become part of the Princely State and then part of India" (2002:120). In 1971, East Pakistan seceded from the dominion of Pakistan as Bangladesh, and since then, the enclaves became the focus of a border dispute between Bangladesh and India. The local people coined the term *chhitmahal* to refer to the enclaves that were disconnected from their national territory.

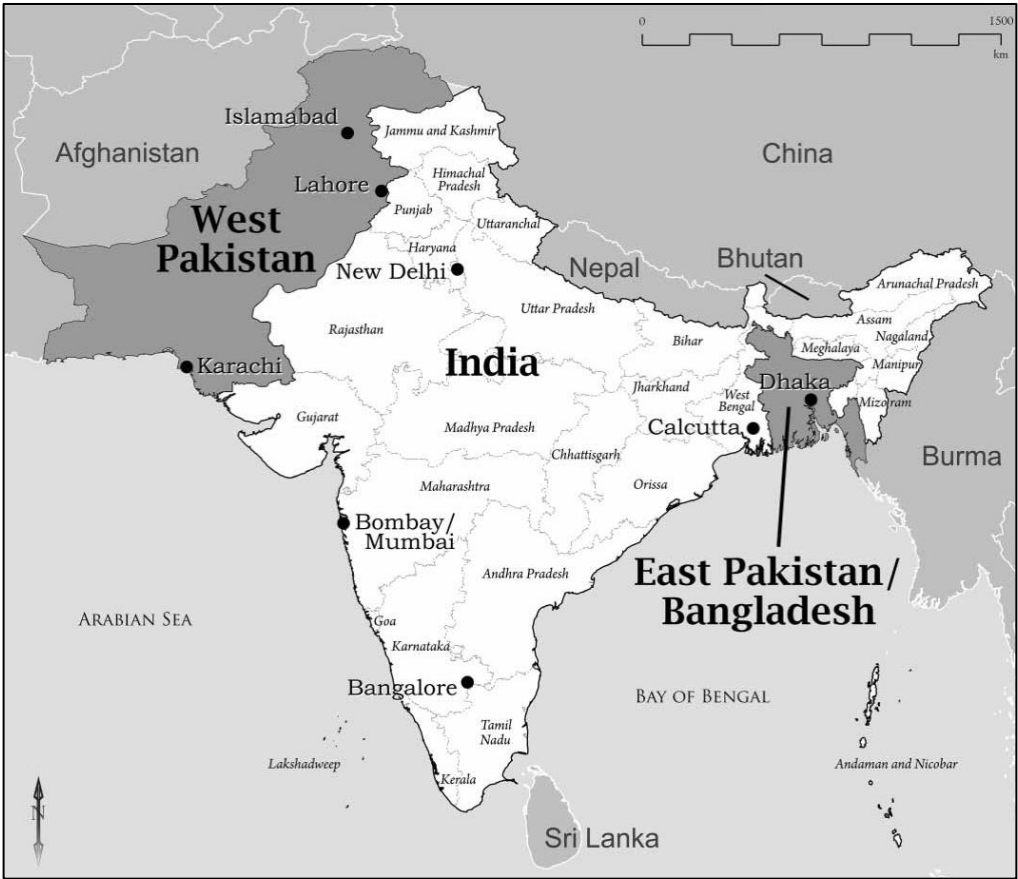


Figure 2: The partition of British India in 1947 (Map: Julius Paulo as reprinted in Jones, 2014:288)

Since the 1950s, as the anomalous locations of *chhitmahals* evolved, various political and community initiatives urged the governments to swap the *chhitmahals* or build special corridors to allow people to enter the mainland of their home country.<sup>9</sup> India's assistance in the independence war against West Pakistan developed a positive diplomatic relation between Bangladesh and India, which resulted in signing the historic Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) in 1974 to resolve the border disputes. The legal texts of the LBA clearly instructed both countries to swap the *chhitmahals*, but nationalistic politics rigorously opposed any possible land loss as a result of the LBA articles were implemented. Not only the politicians, but a few *chhitbashi* also opposed the exchange because of the fear of losing their 'theoretical citizenship' of the home country (Whyte, 2002:127-131, 186-190).<sup>10</sup> The bilateral failure to implement the LBA transformed the *chhitbashi* into stateless persons by landlocking the nationals of one country inside the territorial boundary of another. India and Bangladesh never gave up the legal authority over their non-contiguous *chhitmahals*. Both countries initiated many attempts to provide state-services in their outliers, but an adverse political atmosphere failed the initiatives and made it impossible to exercise sovereignty in *chhitmahals* (see Van Schendel, 2002:123-125). The home country eventually left the *chhitbashi* behind without any state administration, development programs, and citizenship documentation.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the crises in diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and India, the swap initiatives were taken back and forth. The *chhitbashi* formed the India-Bangladesh Enclave Exchange Coordination Committee (IBEECC) in 2008 to press their demand for the swap. Through peaceful rallies and hunger strikes, this committee began to pressure both governments to comply. After seven years of movement and demonstrations, both governments finally agreed to completely implement the LBA, including the swap of *chhitmahals* (Basu, 2011:67; Shewly, 2015:20-21). As a result, on 1<sup>st</sup> August of 2015, Bangladesh and India officially swapped more than 160 *chhitmahals* with each other. A total of 51 Bangladeshi *chhitmahals* in India were merged with Indian territory and 111 Indian *chhitmahals* in

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<sup>9</sup> In writing generalized information that applies to all *chhitmahals* across the border, I prefer using the terms 'home' and 'host' country. In her research, Hosna Shewly defined "A home country is the country to which an enclave belongs and of which it comprise a part; and a host country is the country that surrounds an enclave" (2013:23).

<sup>10</sup> Brendan Whyte (2002) thoroughly articulated the politics and legal complications around the implementation of LBA and the swap of *chhitmahals* from page 133 to 157.

<sup>11</sup> Unlike Bangladesh and India, European nations were able to provide state-services in their enclaves through successful bilateral negotiations. For example, Spain administered its enclave Llívia in France, regulated its civil administration, collected taxes, provided electricity, health care and policing services. In Büsingen, German enclave in Switzerland, Germany provided postal and telecommunication services while Switzerland was responsible for gas, water, and electricity services (Catudal, 1979:64-67).

Bangladesh were merged with Bangladeshi territory. The swap added more than seventeen thousand acres of land to the mainland of Bangladesh. In exchange for that ‘loss,’ India gained a little more than seven thousand acres (BBC, 2015; Government of India, 2015; Younus, 2013:16; Rabbani, 2017:104).<sup>12</sup> More than fifty thousand people also swapped their legal status: a total of 37,532 Indian *chhitbashi* were granted Bangladeshi citizenship, and 14,863 Bangladeshi *chhitbashi* were granted Indian citizenship (BBC, 2015; Government of India, 2015).<sup>13</sup> For the *chhitmahals* and their residents, 1<sup>st</sup> August of 2015 was the beginning of a new politico-legal identity.

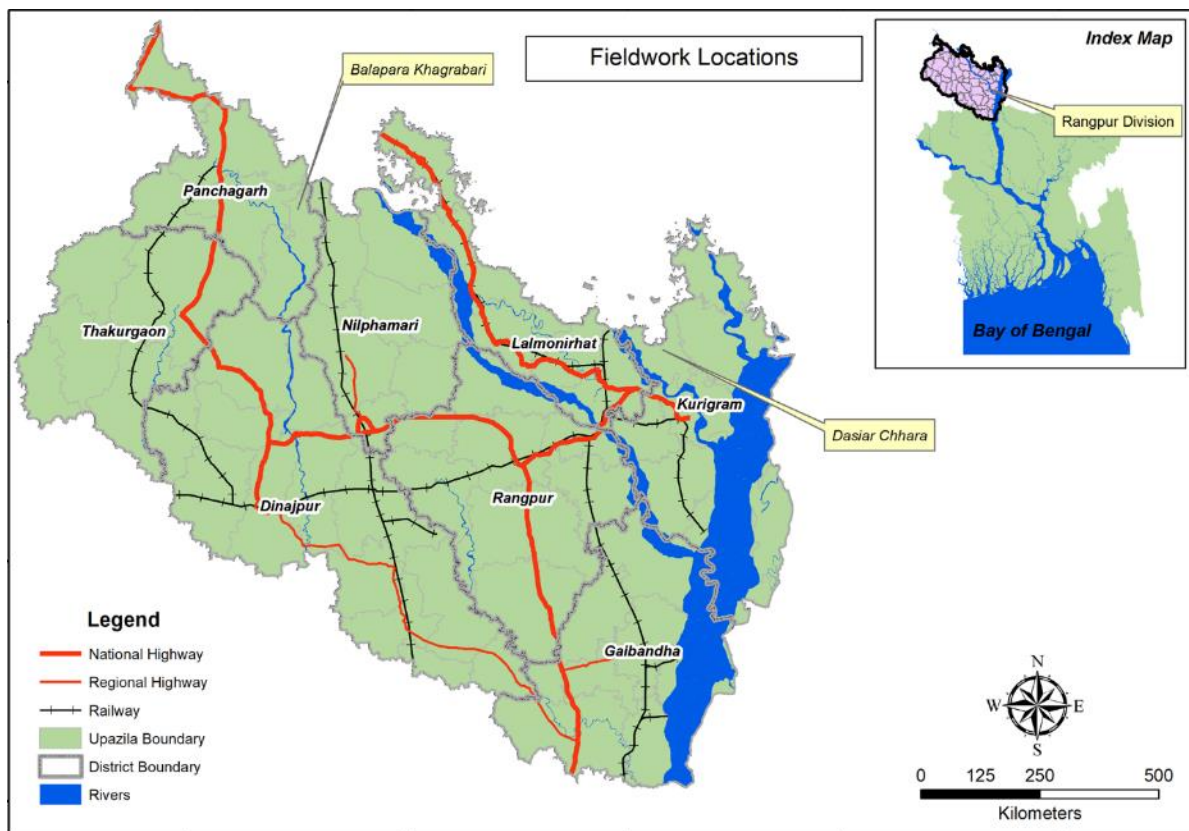


Figure 3: Locations of two *chhitmahals* where I conducted my fieldwork  
(Map: Atiqur Rahman)

<sup>12</sup> In Bangladesh, majority of the Indian *chhitmahals* were merged with four northwestern districts, Lalmonirhat, Panchagarh, Kurigram and Nilphamari. On the other hand, in India, most of the Bangladeshi *chhitmahals* were merged with Cooch Behar and Jolpaiguri districts of West Bengal.

<sup>13</sup> The population of *chhitmahals* has different estimations in different sources. Brendan Whyte’s research predicts that by 1991 *chhitmahals* did not have more than 55,000 people across the border: 30,000 in Bangladesh and 25,000 in India (2002:194). The Bangladeshi influential newspaper *Prothom Alo* estimates that, in 2011, approximately 51,5149 people were living in *chhitmahals*: there were more than 37,334 Indian *chhitbashi* in Bangladesh, whereas India hosted more than 14,215 Bangladeshi *chhitbashi* (as cited in Ferdoush, 2014:108). However, some sources also mention that the approximate population of all *chhitmahals* would be around 100,000 (e.g., Jones, 2014:289). In January of 2010, the IBEECC conducted a headcount in all *chhitmahals* and estimated the total population size was around 120,000 (Younus, 2013:16).



I conducted my fieldwork in two (former) Indian *chhitmahals* in Bangladesh: Balapara Khagrabari and Dasiar Chhara. As a *chhitmahal*, Balapara Khagrabari was under the jurisdiction of Haldibari subdivision in Cooch Behar district of India. Following the swap, the government of Bangladesh merged it with Chilahati *union parishad*<sup>14</sup> in Debiganj subdistrict of Panchagarh. The approximate size of the *chhitmahal* was 1,752.44 acres.<sup>15</sup> In 2011, the state officials of Bangladesh and India jointly conducted a headcount in *chhitmahals*, which estimated that a total of 4,425 people were living in Balapara Khagrabari (Younus, 2013:137). However, the local people I talked to believed that the actual population size would be nearly ten thousand. On the other hand, in normalizing Dasiar Chhara, the local government adopted a different approach. Since 1947's Partition, it was officially a *chhitmahal* of Dinhatra subdivision in Cooch Behar. After the swap, Bangladeshi administration partitioned the *chhitmahal* into three *tarees* (neighborhoods) and annexed each *taree* to one of three surrounding *union parishads* (Fulbari, Vangamor, and Kashipur) of Fulbari subdistrict in Kurigram. Therefore, in terms of bureaucratic jurisdiction, an integrated Dasiar Chhara does not exist anymore. The *chhitmahal* had an area of 1,643.44 acres, which is now divided among three *union parishads*. The headcount of 2011 estimated the population size to be 7,153 (Younus, 2013:147). The local people, similar to Balapara Khagrabari *chhitbashi*, did not accept this number; they believed approximately fifteen thousand people were living in three *tarees* of Dasiar Chhara.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Union parishad* (council) is a lower-level local government unit in Bangladesh, which falls under the jurisdiction of a subdistrict.

<sup>15</sup> The *chhitmahals* widely varied in size and shape. The largest Indian *chhitmahal* in Bangladesh Dahala Khagrabari had an area of 2,650.35 acre while the smallest *chhitmahal* Panisala had only 0.27 acre of land. Across the border, Nalgram - the largest Bangladeshi *chhitmahal* in India - had an area of 1,397.34 acre and Srirampur - the smallest *chhitmahal* - had only 1.05 acre of land (Younus, 2013:16; Rabbani, 2017:139-144).

<sup>16</sup> Residents of both *chhitmahals* pointed to many factors behind this discrepancy between population estimates. The exclusion of absentee residents and officials' reluctance to do a thorough survey were common allegations. But a few influential local leaders pointed out administrative politics in undercounting the population size to undermine *chhitbashi* demands for transforming their *chhitmahal* into a separate, distinct *union parishad* instead of merging it with an existing one. In their view, undercounting population was a bureaucratic tactic to show that the *chhitmahals* did not have enough people to be a separate *union parishad*, which usually comprises more than ten thousand people.

## Odd Territories and Fluid Identities

Each *chhitmahal* had a state identity but was not a normal state-space, every *chhitbashi* legally belonged to a nation-state but was not a normal citizen. The existing *chhit*<sup>17</sup> literature, therefore, adopted different approaches to address this absence of normalcy. Different terms and metaphors surfaced in the literature to refer the anomalous landscapes of *chhitmahals*: ‘landlocked archipelago’ (Van Schendel, 2002), ‘jungle’ (Jones, 2009; Shewly 2015), ‘bare life’ (Shewly, 2013), ‘sensitive space’ (Cons, 2016), ‘abandoned space’ (Shewly, 2013), ‘symbolic space’ (Ferdoush, 2019b), ‘spaces of exception’ (Shewly, 2013). The *chhitbashi*, on the other hand, was labeled as ‘proxy citizen’ (Van Schendel, 2002), ‘transient citizen’ (Shewly, 2015), ‘proto citizen’ (Jones, 2009), ‘homo sacer’ (Agamben, 1998 *as cited in* Shewly, 2013), ‘denizen’ (Cons, 2014), ‘truncated citizenship’ (Basu, 2011) and ‘quasi citizen’ (Shewly, 2013) among others. Despite a wide range of names and terms, the literature dealt with one common theme - the oddity in territorial and collective identity.

Academic interests in border enclaves started as early as the 1950s but were heavily focused on Western European enclaves (e.g., Robinson, 1959; Catudal, 1979), and *chhitmahals* entered scholarly research only in the last decade. In 2002, Brendan Whyte and Willem van Schendel published two iconic and pioneering studies on the *chhitmahal*. Whyte’s *Waiting for the Esquimo* extensively documents the historical political processes behind the formation of *chhitmahals*. Van Schendel’s *Stateless in South Asia*, on the other hand, problematizes the interactions between territorial discontinuity and postcolonial national imagination. It was also the first published work that discussed the fluidity in identity formation in *chhitmahals* and their inhabitants’ creativities in surviving a complicated situation of statelessness. These studies have provided the background of a few other important works. Reece Jones (2009) has directed focused attention to the supremacy of territorial sovereignty in the nationalist narratives that deprived the *chhitbashi* of their human rights and delayed the normalization of *chhitmahals*. In the same vein, Hosna Shewly (2013) further argued that the exclusion of *chhitmahals* from legitimate sovereign power has produced a bare life and reduced the *chhitbashi* to politically inferior *homo sacers*. She also was the first to raise the issue of gender hierarchy and the suffering of women in *chhitmahals*. Perhaps the most detailed ethnographic accounts can be found in Jason Cons’ research. One of his key arguments was that *chhitmahals*

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<sup>17</sup> In the thesis, I used the word *chhit* as an adjective to refer *chhitmahal*-related affairs (e.g., politics, culture, society, everyday practices).

created a sensitive rupture in the imagined alignment between territory and nationality. The exclusion of *chhitmahals* from one unified sovereign state-system did not transform them into sensitive spaces; instead, the ambiguous presence of multiple sovereignties amplified the sensitivity (Cons, 2007a). His research first presented the *Bhatiyas*<sup>18</sup> as an important group in the society and politics of *chhitmahals* (Cons, 2013 & 2016).

Although different in their methodological and theoretical approaches, a few generic themes overlapped in these studies: defining the odd citizenship; identity crisis; the devastating consequences of statelessness; the implications of a territorial oddity on sovereignty and nationalism; and the vernacular arts of restoring normalcy. *Chhitmahal* scholars differed in their accounts of the exclusion of *chhitbashi* from state administration and citizenship protections. Shewly (2015:15) argued that the *chhitbashi* were transient citizens; their citizenship was not suspended; instead, rights were abandoned. They were authorized as citizens, but their citizenship rights (e.g., political participation, public services) had never been actualized. They could access some state-services - often illicitly - in both host and home countries during a calm political atmosphere, but were at the absolute mercy of the state administrations. Cons' (2014:9) use of the term denizen in referring the *chhitbashi* had a similar connotation, which had been used in the context of the Indian subcontinent to refer the stateless people who were allowed restricted state-services (see Baruah, 2003:65, 66).<sup>19</sup> Van Schendel (2002:127-130), however, believed that there was a transterritorial dimension in accessing citizenship. The Partition of 1947 created two new states based on the religious majority: Pakistan comprised Muslim majority areas and India comprised non-Muslim majority areas. However, in many cases, this territorial identity did not align with the heterogeneous religious community. The Hindu *chhitbashi* were treated as proxy citizens in India, and East Pakistan/Bangladesh offered a similar favor to the Muslim *chhitbashi*. While a 'theoretical citizenship'<sup>20</sup> of the home country provided only the land registration service, proxy citizenship was more useful in communal security and networking with co-religionist neighbors. Jones (2009:377) used the term proto citizenship to

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<sup>18</sup> Being the victims of riverbank erosion-induced displacement, a group of Bangladeshi citizens permanently migrated to different Indian *chhitmahals*. They were locally known as the *Bhatiyas*. Chapter 5 details their migration history and gradual assimilation in *chhitmahal* community.

<sup>19</sup> Denizen is no longer a legal category, but the British monarchs used to allow the privileges of native subjects to selected 'aliens' while strictly restricting their employment, political participation, and property ownership. This process was known as denization (Baruah, 2003:65, 66).

<sup>20</sup> Bangladesh and India recognized its non-contiguous *chhitmahals* but did not provide the residents any citizenship documents. Whyte (2002) called this arrangement theoretical citizenship (190).

refer to this transterritorial proxy citizenship. Through these different terms, the scholars basically explained why the *chhitbashi* had experienced statelessness despite their accepted membership to a nation.

The fluidity in citizenship, as Van Schendel (2002:134) first pointed out, created a self-identification dilemma: citizenship distanced the *chhitbashi* from surrounding neighbors in the host state while proxy citizenship separated them from their *chhit* co-residents. They developed an unsettled feeling of belonging as a result, and, therefore, preferred to be identified as ‘citizens of *chhitmahals*’ (Jones, 2009:378). Besides the identity crisis, the literature has discussed other consequences of ineffective citizenship at great length: legal predicaments (e.g., incarceration, criminalization); marginalization (e.g., illiteracy, gender discrimination); livelihood insecurity (e.g., hunger, unemployment); law and order crises (e.g., communal riots, illegitimate invasions); and so on (cf. Jones, 2009; Shewly, 2013 & 2015; Cons, 2013; Basu, 2011; Ferdoush, 2014; Rabbani, 2017; Younus, 2013; Rahman et al., 2013; Abusaleh & Islam, 2019).

The literature documented personal stories of statelessness but the striking similarities in individual narratives - as Cons (2013:37, 39) discussed - implied a collective community effort to present *chhitmahals* as an uninhabitable space that required state interventions. In this way, the *chhitbashi* have led researchers into macro politics (e.g., statelessness, lawlessness) and thereby masked quotidian struggle, experience, and creativities. Thus the greater effort in the literature was deployed to explore statelessness, structural abandonment, and spatial peculiarity. Sovereignty and nationalist politics as a result often dominated scholarly discussion. There was a consensus in the literature that the *chhitmahals* had become symbols of nationalist imagination of homeland and territorial sovereignty.

Since the Partition, conservative and nationalist politicians opposed every step that a ruling government had taken to implement the LBA (see Whyte, 2002). In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) compared *chhitmahals* with Kashmir in their nationalistic agendas and opposed any kind of swap (Van Schendel, 2002:140). In Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) has always promoted the swap, while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) remained reluctant (Basu, 2011:67). Even the 2015 swap, as Azmeary Ferdoush (2019b:768) argued, was a pawn in the nationalistic politics between Bangladesh and India. The BJP - the party that had always opposed the swap - agreed to exchange the *chhitmahals* as the possibility of a trade route to Southeast Asia through Bangladesh had opened up, whereas, BAL capitalized on the swap-led land gain in their

election campaigns. None of this had anything to do with the actual suffering of *chhitbashi* (Ferdoush & Jones, 2018).

The last point that the *chhit* literature has emphasized was how the *chhitbashi* survived an effective state of statelessness. The responses were different, but most of scholars agreed that the normalization of a range of illicit activities<sup>21</sup> helped people to cope with statelessness. The residents of *chhitmahals* were mostly dependent on the infrastructure and facilities of the host country to survive (Jones, 2009:377), and they illicitly obtained identity documents to send their kids to school, receive health treatments, or register marriages (Van Schendel, 2002:134). The *chhitbashi* had to cross more than one international border every day for basic survival needs (e.g., buying medicine, selling labor), which was officially illegal but normalized by the community. Except for periods of border tensions,<sup>22</sup> law enforcement officers did not arrest them; neighbors in the host countries also engaged them in myriad socioeconomic interactions (Ferdoush, 2014:112). There were also vernacular capacities that did not violate any legal standards of a nation-state. For example, the *chhitbashi* formed their own administrative council that provided justice and built basic infrastructures (Rabbani, 2007:34; Jones, 2009:373 & Van Schendel, 2002:133). Besides IBEECC, at different stages in their journey to citizenship, people also had built numerous platforms to express their survival demands, e.g., Dohogram Movement Committee (cf. Cons, 2012:549).

The existing *chhit* literature has three major shortcomings that my research seeks to address. First, the literature adopts a methodological territorialism<sup>23</sup> in an approach that considers *chhitmahals* as a spatial rupture of standard territorial contiguity. Therefore, discussions on sovereignty, nationalism, and citizenship dominate the literature. Ordinary people are seen as mostly passive victims of the absence of state administration. Their attempts to restore normalcy are overlooked or described in general terms; except for Cons' *Sensitive Space* (2016), detailed ethnographic accounts are scarce.

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<sup>21</sup> Everyday actions that were socially sanctioned and protected even though they were legally prohibited (cf. Abraham & Van Schendel, 2005:22).

<sup>22</sup> Bangladesh-India border regularly attracts media attention for unlawful and brutal border killings (e.g., Daily Star, 2020 & BDNews24, 2010). In the past decade, the border witnessed the highest number of deaths in the world at the hands of border security forces (Jones, 2016:56). Every incidence of border violence was retaliated by even harsher border surveillance that created a hostile atmosphere in the borderlands. The *chhitbashi* had to restrict their movement between *chhitmahals* and the host country for days until the border crossing became flexible and less risky.

<sup>23</sup> Van Schendel argues that border studies often fall into a territorial trap that adopts state as the point of reference and rejects borders as distinctive entities, and - therefore - talk more about how states deal with borderlands rather than how borders deal with states (2005:39, 43, 44).

Second, the literature - also the press and state maps - devote inordinate attention to Dahagram - the only *chhitmahal* that was directly governed by the home state (Jones, 2009:377). Dahagram belonged to Bangladesh but was surrounded by India. After decades of negotiation, Bangladesh was able to establish a transportation and communication corridor with the *chhitmahal*. Unlike other *chhitmahals*, Bangladesh provided policing service and other state facilities in Dahagram, and people could navigate between the *chhitmahal* and Bangladesh (Van Schendel, 2002; Cons, 2013). Therefore, many research findings from Dahagram do not apply to all the other *chhitmahals* that have survived statelessness without any public programs or legitimate state governance. Third, and most importantly, there is a silence - so far - in the literature about the post-swap transitions in *chhitmahals*. The era of statelessness rules existing research. Except for theorizing citizenship priorities<sup>24</sup> (Ferdoush, 2019a) and the swap process in the context of nationalistic politics (Ferdoush, 2019b; Ferdoush & Jones, 2018), there are hardly any ethnographic details - or other forms of information - on the transition of *chhitbashi* from statelessness to citizenship. My research intends to fill these methodological and knowledge gaps.

### **From Statelessness (paranoia) to Citizenship (anxiety)**

I started fieldwork through the conversations with my *pooran* Bangladeshi<sup>25</sup> mentors, who later introduced me to their *chhit* friends. In those initial days, the majority of conversations with my *pooran* Bangladeshi friends and neighbors started with curious questions about my background and research goals. Every time I brought up the discussions of statelessness, they acknowledged ‘some’ negative consequences that the *chhitbashi* had endured for not having an active state-administration, but they always highlighted the positive sides of it. Their rationale emphasized the *chhitbashi*’s ability to move and work beyond the *chhit* boundary as opposed to the landlocked imprisonment depicted in the literature. Besides, there was little state control over *chhit* residents’ livelihood practices that

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<sup>24</sup> After the swap, the *chhitbashi* were given the option to choose between the citizenship of host or home country. While most of the people preferred to switch nationality and stayed where they were, around one thousand Indian *chhitbashi* decided to leave their *chhitmahals* in Bangladesh and resettle in India (BBC, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> To differentiate the Bangladeshi citizen-neighbors that surround them in all directions, the *chhitbashi* address them as the *pooran Bangladeshi* which means old/native Bangladeshis as opposed to themselves - the *notun Bangladeshis* (new Bangladeshis). Similarly, the merged landscapes of *chhitmahals* are addressed as *notun* (new) Bangladesh, while the surrounding mainland is *pooran* (old) Bangladesh. This terminological usage by both ‘groups’ encourages a form of othering and self-identification.

assisted in the accumulation of wealth for many *chhit* individuals. The post-swap infrastructural changes and development initiatives also made *chhitbashi* the ultimate beneficiaries - both before and after the swap - in the eyes of their *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors.

As I started talking to my *chhit* friends, they, however, described a distressful stateless life without access to facilities and services that defined a safe and protected life. But, at the same time, most of my research participants acknowledged gaining counterfeit documents (e.g., voter identity card, birth certificate) to access various state-provided services in Bangladesh. Some events in their lives also called an absolute state of statelessness in question. For example, the son of a friend graduated college the same year Bangladesh and India swapped *chhitmahals*; he must have started schooling long before the swap. Another friend's son married a girl from neighboring Bangladeshi village; they certainly collected a marriage registration certificate from Bangladesh. My landlord started business and built home in Bangladesh years before the swap. Even the wealthy *chhitbashi* who made a fortune out of the absence of state administration shared stories of suffering that statelessness caused in their lives. But they hardly denied that using the counterfeit identity documents allowed them to move between sovereign borders; they could work, marry, live, buy land, even vote in Bangladesh. Nonetheless, they did not feel they had a normal life like their Bangladeshi citizen-neighbors. Their forged documents and illicit interactions with Bangladeshi neighbors were effective in most cases but could not provide guaranteed success and protection. A constant feeling of uncertainty and insecurity prevailed in their everyday actions that made the life of *chhitbashi* miserable. Jason Cons (2007a:28) quoted one of his *chhit* participants saying that “AGDH [Angarpota-Dahagram *chhitmahal*] folks are always in tension. They are concerned about what will happen next. Though maybe nothing will happen, in fact, but this sense of insecurity is really suffocating.”

This suffocation was ubiquitous in all *chhitmahals*. The access of Indian *chhitbashi* to Bangladesh was *normalized but not normal*. Except for accessing some specific state-provided services (e.g., school admission, land registration), identity documentation was not required to enter Bangladesh to work and interact with its citizens. Yet, the inaccessibility of legal protection made them vulnerable to exploitation, expulsion, harassment, and assault. The counterfeit Bangladeshi identity documents allowed their kids in schools and colleges, but there was no guarantee that they would not be suddenly expelled. They could work for Bangladeshi employers, but there was no certainty that they would be paid their due wage. They could do all the hard work, raise cattle, and produce food for the family, but there was no assurance that their crops or cattle would not be stolen. They could

enter Bangladesh to buy medicine or sell produce, but there was no promise that they would not be mugged on the way to return to their *chhitmahal*. Every individual I talked to had at least one story of being robbed, assaulted, detained, and socially humiliated. Their illicit participation in the host country's society and economy brought normalcy to some extent, but it was still full of uncertainty and anxiety. The growing border restrictions, on the other hand, blocked their last resort of illicit crossing the border to enter their home country, causing a mass paranoia in *chhitmahals* that made the seventy-year long limbo life unbearable. Their demand for the swap and citizenship was, therefore, grounded on a pursuit of a stable life where they could predict their next day. Throughout my fieldwork, none of my participants indicated any dramatic progress in their individual life as a result of obtaining a legal identity document, but they all expressed relief because their existence was now absolute, documented, and socially valid.

This relief from stateless paranoia, however, came with the cost of a known but unanticipated 'citizenship anxiety': that citizenship's benefits tampered with the traditional structure and functioning of the *chhit* community. In Balapara Khagrabari, for example, the construction of roads and schools introduced clientelist politics that monopolized social power for a specific group of individuals. The merger of Dasiar Chhara with Bangladesh, on the other hand, partitioned the territorial integrity of the *chhitmahal* and damaged its collective spirit. Community-making was inclusive and a-national in stateless *chhitmahals*, but an exclusionary nationalized identity came to the fore in political discussions since the swap. National political parties entered and replaced the traditional leadership, which has diminished unity among the *chhitbashi*. Easy access to global communication networks modified the utilization of time and assets. Moreover, constant exposure to the national and global culture amplified the desire for modern and affluent life. In addition to the structural ruptures that affected the collective sphere of *chhitmahals*, the requirement of bureaucratic literacy to access government services and increasing demand for material resources to keep up with the citizenship lifestyle fed a renewed anxiety. The broad objective of this research is to explore this precarious journey of *chhitbashi* from statelessness to citizenship; a journey that started in an uncertain suffocating life and ended up in an emotional state of freedom and happiness accompanied by an unprecedented anxiety.

This politico-legal transformation provides the background for my main research goals, the *first* of which was to explore the everyday lives of *chhitbashi* that formed a functioning community prior to citizenship. Despite the abundance of literature on stateless *chhitmahals*, detailed ethnographic



accounts were scarce. Most of the existing research, as Cons (2007b) argued, considered *chhitmahals* as cartographic accidents and a territorial puzzle in the framework of the nation-state system, not as the homeland of extraordinarily resilient and creative people who survived in a fluid landscape. To achieve this goal, I investigated the vernacular subsistence and governance arts crafted by the *chhitbashi* to make their villages better functioning and organized. This also included the survival strategies that challenged the standards of modern sovereignty practices. The transformation of *chhitbashi* into citizens was the heart of my research; therefore, information about their life before citizenship was essential to understand the causes of anxiety under new citizenship.

Drawing on the oral narratives of the *chhitbashi*, the chapter *Living off the Grid* articulates the findings of this research goal. This chapter argues that the *chhitbashi* had shown collective creativity and ‘almost’ survived without any state system. It was not their failure that they could not achieve self-sufficiency; instead, the sovereign institutions of Bangladesh and India failed to stop the invasions of powerful citizen-neighbors<sup>26</sup> inside the *chhitmahals*. The existing literature praised the tolerant host state for allowing the *chhitbashi* to enter and arrange supports for their survival but remained silent in discussing how unlawful activities of its citizens in *chhitmahals* created havoc in subsistence that pushed the *chhitbashi* out for asking for help in the first place. Claiming the high moral ground by the state elites for awarding citizenship to *chhitbashi* was false political pride: it was their bureaucratic failure that made citizenship the only option.

The *second* research goal directed attention to the new infrastructures of *chhitmahals*. Building infrastructure has always been a top requirement to be a modern nation. Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox (2012) emphasized the three promises that make infrastructures a great force in nation formation: connectivity and speed, economic prosperity, and political freedom. They further added that besides serving these desired outcomes, construction of infrastructures also actively confronts the local political processes in unanticipated ways. Therefore, an infrastructure can be a significant tool to explore political changes in its surrounding locality. The first time the Bangladeshi prime minister visited Dasiar Chhara, her speech heavily focused on infrastructural hopes to uplift the *chhitmahal* as a Bangladeshi territory (BDNews24, 2015). In my fieldwork, the new infrastructures provided a critical lens to explore nation-building politics in *chhitmahals*. I focused on the

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<sup>26</sup> In Balapara Khagrabari and Dasiar Chhara, many powerful *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors took the advantage of the absence of civic administration and grabbed *chhitbashi*'s land, seized their crops. I elaborate such assault cases in the next chapter.

construction of roads, electricity grids, and schools as their absence dominated the narratives of *chhitbashi* in the literature as the threshold that separated the ‘primitive’ jungle landscapes of *chhitmahals* from the ‘modern’ state-spaces.

The chapter *Finding a Nation in Infrastructures* analyzes the mundane politics that was revolving around the newly built infrastructures in *chhitmahals*. This chapter argues that these standard development works - along with serving their technical purposes - have been playing an influential role in channelling state power into the *chhitmahals*, reshaping the political landscape, and provoking surprising political action by the residents. These services became essential tools to reconfigure the new citizens into loyal voters and active agents of national politics. While the desired outcome (e.g., better transportation, an extended communication network) of the infrastructures brought happiness, the unintended political consequences (e.g., corruption, nepotism) created anxiety.

The *third* research goal explored the experiences of *chhitbashi* navigating through the bureaucratic process that officially registered the land and people of *chhitmahals* in the government record. To solidify its nationalistic signature and to naturalize amateur citizens, the state of Bangladesh has introduced various institutions and activities (e.g., offices, land-birth-voter registration, national identity card, monuments, allowances). Besides infrastructures, the concept of the state directly appeared in the form of these bureaucratic actions in *chhitmahals*. I analyzed the local narratives on changes in land ownership, local governance, and sense of entitlement and security produced by the bureaucratic recording system.

These encounters between *chhitbashi* and the new Bangladeshi administration are scrutinized in the chapter *Navigating through Bureaucracy & Paperwork*. This chapter argues that the takeover of the *chhit* governance by the politicized bureaucratic apparatuses benefited the *chhitbashi* unequally; wealthy landowners who had enjoyed enormous power in the stateless era, still do. However, the appearance of a democratic state introduced political clientelism to the *chhit* power structure, and loyalty to the ruling party now generated more power and income opportunities. The two most important formalities of bureaucratic paperwork (recording land and individuals, local government administration) replaced the conventional community practices, which posed the risk of land loss and tampered with the vernacular notion of territorial identity. Despite these drawbacks, the paperwork brought a sense of normalcy among the *chhitbashi*; their frustration itself was a part of being a normal Bangladeshi who also suffers from wholesale corruption and poverty.

The *fourth* research objective aimed to observe the life of the *Bhatiyas*. Since the colonial time, the displaced *Bhatiyas* from downstream localities had been migrating to upstream areas in Cooch Behar outliers to find a stable home (Chakraborty, 2016). They played important sociopolitical roles in both *chhitmahals* I studied, especially Balapara Khagrabari. In the late 1970s, a few displaced Bangladeshi *Bhatiya* citizens started a resettlement trend in Balapara Khagrabari,<sup>27</sup> and in four to five decades became the demographic majority in the *chhitmahal*. The then-native residents did not oppose the illicit intrusion of a group of foreign nationals because they needed cheap labor to clear the bush for agriculture. Their incredible hard work increased the liveable and cultivable areas and maximized agricultural profit and crop diversity. Still, they were marginalized and exploited in the community and socially confined within the agricultural labor sector. The *Bhatiyas* required focused research attention to better understand the internal factions within the *chhitmahal* that were often hidden under the rubric of a close-knit homogenous community. Their dominance in production was essential to understanding the sharecropping mode of production that ensured subsistence for the *chhitbashi* but, simultaneously, sustained an unequal accumulation of wealth for the landlords. Being Bangladeshi citizens, their existence in sovereign Indian *chhitmahals* also raised important issues of territorial identity formation.

The enclavized life of the *Bhatiyas* within the enclaves is illustrated in the chapter *Belonging to the 'Others.'* The chapter argues that new citizenship fostered a nationalized identity in the *chhitmahal*. The native *chhitbashi*, that publicly expressed their allegiance to Bangladesh, 'unofficially' preferred a community imagined on Indian belongingness; for not having that, they were reluctant to share ownership to the *chhit* history with the Bangladeshi *Bhatiyas*. The a-national unity that once thrived the *chhitmahals* was now under threat; the *Bhatiyas* were experiencing a social barrier in expediting their political transformation. Citizenship, in fact, double-crossed the *Bhatiyas*; while they were excluded in the intensive community-making process inside the *chhitmahal*, outside, they were further stigmatized by the *pooran* Bangladeshis for not historically belonging there. In the chapter, I discuss the remarkable progress the hard-working *Bhatiyas* achieved in their material wealth. However, they still belonged to the 'others,' their authority over the community and history of both *notun* and *pooran* Bangladesh was challenged. They retaliated with community factions, strategic affinal arrangements, and selective economic relations.

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<sup>27</sup> The historical trend of *Bhatiya* migration to Balapara Khagrabari and other *chhitmahals* is elaborated in Chapter 5.

The *fi* and final research goal investigated the transformations in the community since the beginning of nation-building in *chhitmahals*. I was particularly interested in exploring the new digital culture adopted by the youth, practices of political parties, changed community leadership, and the post-swap life of *chhit* women. Being the first generation of technology users in *chhitmahals*, the college-educated *chhit* youths were crucial participants in nation-building projects of ‘Digital Bangladesh.’ Exploring their reconfigured aspirations was a great way to understand the sociopolitical implications of their new legal identity. Next to the public infrastructures and bureaucratic documentation, another major process that the *chhitbashi* had to adapt to was the politicization of *chhit* affairs by the national political parties. The political culture in Bangladesh enables a monopoly of the ruling party over the local government and bureaucratic system that encourages corruption, nepotism, and clientelism (Arfina Osman, 2010). I, therefore, questioned whether the intrusion of political parties has modified the code of ethics in *chhitmahals*. In addition, I also wanted to explore if, in the wave of changes, anything has changed in the shared community ideology of patriarchy. Without any property rights and equal access to employment and the public sphere, the *chhit* women suffered through a miserable life in the lawless era. Has the post-swap community made progress to ensure women’s rights and participation?

The chapter *Reconfiguring the Chhit Community* addresses these sociopolitical changes in the *chhitmahals*. This chapter argues that the appearance of the local government heavily monopolized by the ruling political party disbanded the most significant symbol of the resilience - the traditional *chhit* councils. The fall of the councils created a political frontier in the community leadership that was eventually occupied by the young and ambitious political ‘party-workers.’ They introduced a ‘percentage politics’ that came along with factions, corruption, clientelist citizenship, and a regime oppressive to the voices of dissent. The citizenship-induced changes also modified the definitions of an ethical leader and a robust community. To confront the political party leaders and the influential wealthy *chhitbashi*, the youths have mastered the possibilities of social networking tools and created a powerful virtual political space that challenged the monopoly of political parties on the ground. Unfortunately, despite the opening up of diverse local, national and global opportunities, women were still confined within the household economy. By dissecting a rape allegation, I showed that the position, honor, and rights of female citizens were still being negotiated by the contested politics of men. Nonetheless, the women - especially young women - have been challenging the confinement within the household. They were participating in education almost at an equal rate to the men, were

pursuing official employment, claimed their position in virtual space, and did not hesitate to express their opposition to the corruption. They could not thrive using citizenship like their male peers, but the future looked optimistic for the *chhit* women for the first time.

### Doing Fieldwork in *Chhitmahals*

I travelled to Balapara Khagrabari only weeks before the *chhitmahal* was about to embrace one of its coldest winters.<sup>28</sup> Located in the furthest northwestern district of Bangladesh, Panchagarh, it was the third-largest Indian *chhitmahal* in Bangladesh. Balapara Khagrabari shared its boundary with two other *chhitmahals* of Panchagarh district, Dahala Khagrabari and Kotvajini, and together formed a composite *chhit* triplet of more than six thousand acres of land. The opportunity to explore the three largest inter-connected *chhitmahals* initially brought me to the area. The most convenient way to go to Balapara Khagrabari from Dhaka was a ten to twelve hours of train journey on the Neelshagor Express to Chilahati station and then a half an hour ride to the *chhitmahal* on a 3-wheeler.



Figure 4: Exploring the road construction on the first day in Balapara Khagrabari

<sup>28</sup> In the tropical climate of Bangladesh, the average temperature in the winter months stays between 10 to 15°C. The northern Bangladesh - however - often feels a colder winter than that, which could be fatal for the impoverished population.

The first day I went to Balapara Khagrabari, it was covered in the mud and dust from the ongoing road construction. The *chhitmabal* meanwhile passed two years since the Debiganj subdistrict of Panchagarh had annexed it and launched the infrastructural reconfiguration. There were three major roads, but the local government started paving the one that connected the subdistrict administration headquarters. The remaining roads were too narrow for two 3-wheelers to pass simultaneously; neighborhood roads were basically boundary-aisles between two farming plots. There were no signs of boundaries that differentiated *notun* Bangladesh from *pooran* Bangladesh. The entire *chhitmabal* was clustered. Bamboo and wooden-built houses and tea-stalls crowded a chunk of each cluster, while the rest of the area consisted of agricultural plots. Amidst the dust, Balapara Khagrabari was still shining as the sun shed its light on the new corrugated tin surfaces. The construction of new establishments was going on everywhere in the village, e.g., new shops, houses, mosques, schools, and so on; corrugated tin sheets were dominant in the roofs and walls of these new structures. This wave of building and rebuilding did not stop months into my fieldwork, while the soil turned into a fog of dust in the summer and became ankle-deep wet mud in the monsoon.

There were weeks of waiting since I settled in Balapara Khagrabari and before I started conversation with the *chhitbashi* about their pre-and-post citizenship experiences. The waiting was simply to learn the navigation, the daily routines, the popular debates, the factions, and other local features of the social landscape. The longest wait was to get to know the people; I was dependent on my mentors to introduce me to their peers. In Balapara Khagrabari, my first mentor was Ehsan Rahman<sup>29</sup> - a *pooran* Bangladeshi grassroots government health worker. A mutual friend from Dhaka introduced us, and we had started our conversation before the fieldwork. He was a popular *Bhawaiya*<sup>30</sup> singer who regularly performed on the Bangladesh Betar<sup>31</sup> that earned him fame in the locality. His professional reach as a health worker further kept him in regular touch with the local households. Together we explored the *chhitmabal*, the subdistrict towns, neighboring localities, and the no man's land in the Bangladesh-India borderland. His presence made both the *chhitbashi* and *pooran* Bangladeshis comfortable in talking to me. Despite the growing connections in our interactions, Ehsan took weeks to introduce me to Mannan Hussain - an influential *Bhatiya* of Balapara Khagrabari and an *adbiar* (sharecropper). It was Mannan who introduced me to the *chhitbashi*, but he also took weeks

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<sup>29</sup> All the names of individuals in the dissertation are pseudonyms, but I used real names of the places.

<sup>30</sup> The popular folk genre of northern Bangladesh.

<sup>31</sup> Official radio station of Bangladesh government.

before doing that. Throughout the fieldwork, Mannan and I walked down every neighborhood of Balapara Khagrabari. He encouraged people from all walks of life to talk to me. People always asked the last person I talked to about me, both behind my back and in front of me. It was weeks of waiting, but my social contacts in the *chhitmahal* eventually grew. My mentors waited for long time simply to know me and my research better to help me move forward in fieldwork; they did so in their own speed and calculation.

Besides hanging out with my mentors, two progressive steps helped to bring an end to the waiting to start pursuing my research goals. First, I meanwhile had participated in many public events in Balapara Khagrabari, e.g., annual school events, meetings of political parties. Second, I spent a significant amount of daily evening hours in the tea-stalls of Botolganj, which was a popular *baḡaar* where the *chhitbashi* gathered to hang out, watch television and meet the *pooran* Bangladeshis. My presence and participation in the public sphere gradually erased the cultural filter that the *chhitbashi* imposed while discussing sensitive political topics or factional debates in front of me. I knew the waiting was over when my mentors secretly lashed out at their landlords while talking to me, when they asked me to join them in a meeting with government representatives or when Mannan invited me to his son's wedding among selected guests. By then, my participation in their actions and conversations became very public. My mentors could predict my anticipation and inquiries while I could predict their reactions. I could tell that the *baḡaar* and tea-stalls would be deserted before the *Jumma* prayer on the Fridays, and they would offer to show and discuss infrastructural corruption with me if they discovered it in a neighborhood. This is how I started to attend the *chhit* life, actions, and movements; this is when I started conversing with my *chhit* friends to explore information related to my research objectives.

In a typical day, I usually had two daily routines. The morning was for village walks, meeting my friends at the agricultural fields, visiting my mentors' houses, searching for landmarks (e.g., abandoned border pillars, infamous sites of violence in the lawless era), and exploring the institutions (e.g., new schools for disabled children, NGOs working on gender hierarchy). In the evening, I would go to Botolganj to hang out with the *chhitbashi* at the tea-stalls. Spending time in roadside tea-stalls was considered insignificant and unremarkable by a sophisticated wealthy class, where lazy men waste their time in unproductive conversations. However, such opinions made the tea-stalls a safe space to skip the scrutiny of visible formal spaces and converted them into the backstage of the community (cf. Brown, 2014). My time there was the most productive way to join

the public conversations, political debates, bashing of leaders and bureaucrats, criticisms of police, sports and movie preferences, and reminiscence of old days. The freestyle tea-stall conversations ranged from the exploitation of *paikars*<sup>32</sup> to which *dallywood* actress could dance better. Weeks into this routine, I started writing down notes out of my conversations with *chbitbashi* along with my observations based on the weeks of participation in the *chbit* life and politics. As I started dissecting the information, more questions were raised that I tried to resolve in the next day's conversations.

However, there were ruptures in this fieldwork routine. I used to make an exception to my regular hanging-out if there was an event that I wanted to attend, for example, election campaign events, political meeting presided by regional or national-level politicians, distribution of monthly subsidized rice or laminated national identity card, and so on. Some scattered events also halted my work plans. Two of my mentors lost their parents during my fieldwork. One friend was in distress as his son was hiding out to avoid police arrest. Two hailstorms devastated the crops and houses in the locality. An intensive religious atmosphere in the *Ramadan* confined the women within homes, while the daylong fasting made the men too exhausted to talk. The infamous extreme weather of northern Bangladesh posed health and injury risks that confined me to my home for a few days in each season: extreme fog in the winter reduced the visibility for navigation, there was a strong probability of being dehydrated in the hot summer days, and it was hard to walk on the submerged roads in the monsoon. The *chbit* community was agrarian and maintained three cropping patterns throughout the year. Therefore, each month there were days when every *chbit* household was plowing, planting, or harvesting. In those days, the *chbitbashi* were occupied in the field and too tired to talk in the evening. Two televised global sports events (soccer and cricket world cups) also changed my work routines.

There was a final rupture in my fieldwork when I turned my attention from 'people' to 'things.' In discussing the agency of things in the anthropology of borderlands, Stef Jansen (2013) suggests that, instead of considering things as merely objects of human practices, ethnographic approaches should put equal emphasis on non-human 'actants' as the human forms of agency. The swap of *chbitmahals* did not just reformulate the political identity of *chbit* people but also reconfigured the landscapes, which required Bangladesh to 'nationalize' both the new citizens and the landscape. Therefore, the government has built infrastructures, erected monuments, and funded community facilities. The naming of the roads, engraved stall plates on the bridges, the photos displayed on the government

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<sup>32</sup> Wholesalers who buy agricultural produce from the *chbitbashi* and sell that to the town warehouses.



establishments, the location of mosques, and the use of monuments amplified confrontational politics in *chbit* communities. The NGOs have also provided sanitary toilets and tube-wells, the distribution of which further modified the local power hierarchy. I studied these ‘national’ and ‘a-national’ things to explore their implications in building a nation in *chbitmahals*.

The search for things led me into Dasiar Chhara in neighboring Kurigram district. I conducted brief exploratory fieldwork in this *chbitmahal* one year prior to my visit to Balapara Khagrabari. The purpose of that visit was to get to know the *chbit* landscape, explore a possible field location, and to find a few mentors.<sup>33</sup> Dasiar Chhara was the center of the swap movement on the Bangladesh side, which made it the obvious choice for the first visit by the prime minister of Bangladesh to a *chbitmahal*. The state’s attention on the *chbitmahal* placed it on the agenda of nationalistic politics. The BAL-led government fast-tracked funds to instigate an exemplary infrastructural reconfiguration there and later used that in claiming political success in transforming Indian *chbitmahal* into model Bangladeshi territories. As a result, Dasiar Chhara had better infrastructures, communication networks, transportation facilities, and community structures than Balapara Khagrabari and other *chbitmahals*. Besides an intention to study non-human actants, I added Dasiar Chhara to my fieldwork to explore divergence and similarities in nation-building processes between two *chbitmahals*: one with additional political attention and the other without.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The photo of horse-carts carrying sacks of rice that I used at the beginning was captured in this trip.

<sup>34</sup> My initial plan was to conduct fieldwork in the composite *chbit* triplet of Panchagarh district that included Balapara Khagrabari, Dahala Khagrabari, and Kotvajini. After a few earlier months into the fieldwork, however, I encountered significant similarities in development projects and administrative changes in these three adjacent *chbitmahals*. Meanwhile, Dasiar Chhara residents of Kurigram district have embraced an unexpected administrative partition (detailed in Chapter 4), a better-organized interference of political parties, and a wave of more sophisticated infrastructures. Many of these changes were the topic of concern for the *chbitbashi* I was talking to in Balapara Khagrabari. Therefore, I decided to exclude Dahala Khagrabari and Kotvajini from my fieldwork and include Dasiar Chhara in my study plan. I occasionally visited various *chbitmahals* outside of my study area to talk to individuals with an extensive background in enclave history (e.g., Natoktoka), but my major research focus was devoted to Balapara Khagrabari and Dasiar Chhara. Both *chbitmahals* were among the five largest ex-Indian *chbitmahals* in terms of area and population. Many charismatic leaders called these *chbitmahals* their home whose exemplary leadership went beyond the boundary of their *chbitmahal*. The survival strategies they adopted during the stateless period were followed by other *chbitmahals*. Apart from the research goal to study similarities and differences in nation-building progress, the prominence of these two *chbitmahals* in *chbit* demography, history, and politics provided a strong rationale behind their selection as the study area. Finding a safe accommodation and reliable mentors to conduct fieldwork in sensitive places also boosted my decision to select Balapara Khagrabari and Dasiar Chhara as the study area over other similarly large and important *chbitmahals*.

Not everything in the fieldwork went as smoothly as I planned. Anthropologists tend to learn language and local customs to remove cultural barriers in studying a community. Being a Bangladeshi, I had the advantage, but I was still an ‘other.’ Despite the weeks of participating in everyday *chhit* practices, my presence was often misinterpreted. The post-citizenship changes were yet to stabilize the social relations between the *chhitbashi* and others; trust was not intrinsic to the long-term stay, diligent participation in local events, and building rapport. I was asked secretly if my research would impact government funding in the area. I was requested to write in favor of popular demand for transforming the *chhitmahals* into distinct *unions parishads*. I was indirectly intimidated not to write about political corruption.

Offering no tangible advantages, cooperation with my research was often dismissed as not being worth the effort. I was repeatedly asked if I was there to distribute more NGO aid. In my defense, the few people who tried to intimidate me or discredit my fieldwork were opportunistic and in search of gaining extra benefits. Some were worried about being exposed for illicitly profiting from public works, and not so much concerned about the sanctity of their community. In their defense, clientelist politics and the flow of financial and material aid set the terms of interaction at that point. They were just checking if talking to me had anything to do with that, without any intended corruption in mind. My mentors and friends came to my rescue in such circumstances; without their generous help, I could not have continued the fieldwork.

However, having mentors had its own complications too. Conventional anthropology seemingly prefers local collaborators who do not have any particular group affiliation. They are expected to have authority over the issue that an anthropologist seeks to explore but not any intentional political agenda. In anomalous places, anthropologists often rely on local collaborators for the sake of safety and a better understanding that might eventually lead to a problematic relation between an anthropologist and the community (Hoffman & Tarawalley Jr, 2014). To understand the fluid landscapes of *chhitmahals*, I collaborated with a few mentors: some of them exploited the fluidity and, some were the victims of that exploitation. Every *chhit* individual - like everywhere else - had political and ideological rivals; my mentors had too. They were also driven by their agency to control the narratives. Sometimes I was advised to talk to their political opponents as an attempt to expose their hypocrisy or corrupt practices. Sometimes they preached only about their ideological affiliates. Similarly, their mentorship restrained some *chhitbashi* from talking to me while reassuring others. An

unconditional friendship was also interrupted by the fact that I could not limit my conversations to their preferred individuals. Since I was talking to everyone, my friendship was not beyond question.

I also had my own limitations. I was a *citizen*, a ‘documented’ individual my whole life. I grew up internalizing the nation-state framework. Despite our many cultural similarities, it took some time to set aside my methodological territorialism to understand what it meant to be stateless, why territorial identity could be an elitist endeavor, and how illicitness was not always a choice. Then, there was an imbalanced positionality too. During my fieldwork, two devastating hailstorms not only damaged the houses and subsistence crops of the *chhitbashi* but also pushed most of them into acute destitution. The following evening of the storms, after hanging out in the tea-stalls, when I returned to my home being safe and financially secured, my friends went back to a house without a roof. In discussing their recovery plans, it was not hard to feel their doubts in my ability to put myself into their shoes to understand their hardship.

The literature review prior to my fieldwork gave me the impression of a stateless *chhit* society that was full of destitution, insecurity, and suffocation, which could only get better with new citizenship. The *chhitbashi* also anticipated that the long-awaited citizenship would bring good in their lives, i.e., more food, an affluent future, modern practices, respects from neighbors, strong health, freedom, and so on. When I went to *chhitmahals*, I planned to write about this happy ending. My fieldwork revealed the *chhitbashi*'s continual endeavors to do the good in their lives, which is also documented in this dissertation. Still, I think the negative consequences of citizenship (e.g., transactional politics, corrupt power, social othering, gender exploitation, loss, and suffering) occupied a significant part of my ethnography. Like me, the *chhitbashi* also did not expect such an overwhelming volume of bad sides of their reformulated life after decades long struggle for the good. This dissertation intends to explore how and why citizenship-induced changes did not match *chhitbashi*'s anticipations.

Let's enter *chhitmahals*.

## CHAPTER 2 LIVING OFF THE GRID

I started my collaboration with Babul Ullah the first day I met him in a tea-stall where he overheard my conversations with a few friends about the stateless past of Balapara Khagrabari and its ongoing consequences. The 94-year old farmer did not hesitate to participate. Babul walked almost four kilometers twice a day down a muddy road to come to Botolganj, the *bazaar* next to Balapara Khagrabari, to meet and hang out with his friends. At that age, I saw him working in his agricultural fields, building a new house for his growing extended family along with his young son, and actively participating in the political discussions. He was respected and adored by everyone I knew in the *chhitmahal* and neighboring villages for his wisdom and compassion. It was a blessing that he considered me a friend and shared his insights on diverse *chhit* issues.

I instantly became an admirer of Babul's eloquent, easy-going, and hard-working personality, but there was something else that made him distinct from other folks. He was a *chhit* veteran who had witnessed the rule of the *Maharaja*, the British colonization, the Partition, the West Pakistani regime, the birth of Bangladesh, and has been experiencing Bangladeshi citizenship since 2015. He was the only *chhit* individual I met in fieldwork who survived all these major political transformations. His labor, wealth, and kinship connections played a crucial role in bringing stability and order in Balapara Khagrabari. Unlike his *chhit* peers who remembered stateless *chhit* experience only as a tragic, unfortunate, and melancholic past in their lifetime, Babul considered the state of the enclave as a force that made them creative, resilient, and sturdy. He also had a load of painful memories of living in Balapara Khagrabari being a 'nobody' under many rules and regimes. Still, he was very proud of their creations and survival strategies, from everyday life to the governance, that made sense of their community in the anomalous *chhitmahal*. He believed that their past was nothing to leave behind and forget; instead, it was very relevant to their current affairs in a normalized state-territory and had actively been shaping their new political status and identity. His friends tended to judge the progress based on the performance of post-citizenship infrastructures and public facilities; however, Babul emphasized historical formations as the determinant of their future. He helped me to understand, through our collaborations, that the meaningful explanation of the *chhit*-present was concealed in the *chhit*-past. You must know, as he said, the exploitative governance and feudal

strategies of the former *chhit* leaders in the stateless era to understand why they are now struggling to retain control and credibility over the new and free citizens.

Babul was born in the princely state Cooch Behar during the realm of the *Maharaja* around 1925. He could not remember his precise birth year. Following the communal riots triggered by the partition of British India in 1947 that killed and displaced millions of people, his Muslim family migrated to Balapara Khagrabari after the annexation of Cooch Behar by independent India.<sup>35</sup> His parents did not sell their land in Cooch Behar, neither did they purchase any property in Balapara Khagrabari for their new home; instead, they swapped land with a Hindu family that was migrating to Cooch Behar. They were aware of the *chhit* status of Balapara Khagrabari; still, they had chosen the *chhitmahal* for two reasons. First, even though Balapara Khagrabari was surrounded by East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), the Partition meanwhile annexed it to the Cooch Behar district of India. Therefore, Babul's family felt like moving from one Indian territory to another, only with better communal security for the Muslims. Second, the land was cheaper in landlocked Balapara Khagrabari compared to the adjacent non-anomalous villages of East Pakistan. At that time, Babul's family and other Partition-refugees had no way to predict that the then fluid border would have soon become very rigid, and Balapara Khagrabari might be entirely disconnected from Cooch Behar.

The beginning years in Balapara Khagrabari were relatively more comfortable for Babul's family. They hardly faced any barrier in crossing the newly drawn border to meet relatives and find work in India. Indian administrators also could occasionally visit the *chhitmahal* to offer aid and minimal policing services. Besides a few original residents, most of the families were Muslim refugees from Cooch Behar who exchanged their land with the Hindus of Balapara Khagrabari. As the new state-administrations of East Pakistan and India reinforced their border security, the *chhitbashi* lost access

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<sup>35</sup> In two separate interviews, he gave me two different years of their migration: 1954 and 1956. When I asked to clarify, he said he cannot remember the exact year and advised me to fact-check the year of mass refugee exodus from historical references. This trend was prevalent among other *chhitbashi* as well, they wanted to be as much accurate as possible about the year of major historical events (e.g., political elections, communal riots, refugee waves, and liberation wars) in describing personal experiences to strengthen the credibility of their narratives. This was not an exceptional storytelling trend for a group of people who felt excluded in the official history of the nation. Pamela Sugiman's research (2008) shows a similar pattern among her participants. Far away from *chhitmahals*, Sugiman recorded personal narratives of the Japanese Canadian women who survived the internment camps in Canada during and after the WWII. In remembering the violence of internment, the women positioned their memories in the line with historical events to put themselves in history as the audience usually relies on consistent written history than mediated individual memories (Sugiman, 2008:117, 129). In a similar way, my *chhit* friends wanted their personal memoir to be supported by the official narratives to claim historical validity.

to state services and protection. It soon turned into lawless chaos. Powerful citizen-neighbors from Bangladesh looted crops, stole livestock, grabbed land, assaulted women, murdered people, and so on. Being Indian, it became tough to get into the schools or seek hospital care in neighboring Bangladeshi villages. However, the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 brought new hope for the *chhitbashi*. Babul's relatively wealthy family bought some land in Bangladesh using their relative's address and resettled there just to have some sort of security. They did not come back to Balapara Khagrabari until the late 1980s when the desperate residents came up with their own administrative council to govern the *chhitmahal*. The council restored law and order, built some muddy roads, came up with their own land registration system, and, most importantly, formed a sense of community among the frightened *chhit* residents.

This feeling of security let Babul explore other options to bring more normalcy in their anomalous life. Following the council leaders and other well-connected *chhitbashi*, he - and the entire community - dared to forge birth certificates and national identity card of Bangladesh to access public services, e.g., school enrollment for the kids, hospital admission, marriage registration, land purchase in Bangladesh, and so on. The most successful progress the *chhit* council and the community made in the stateless era was the border pass (locally known as the *chhit* passport or *chhit* visa) that allowed Balapara Khagrabari residents to cross the border and enter India. Babul had traveled many times to India using this special border pass to meet relatives and register land.

The *chhit* council, an authorized connection with India, and normalized illicit access to Bangladesh had started to bring a sense of normalcy in Babul's life until the rampant corruption in issuing and using the *chhit* visa forced the Indian authorities to cancel the border-crossing facilities. In the meantime, the Indian government erected a barbed wire fence on the border with Bangladesh, which imprisoned Balapara Khagrabari and Babul in their own land. Abandoned by India, the *chhit* council fell short in resisting the illegitimate invasions of Bangladeshi neighbors that intensified a threat to the subsistence and political sovereignty of the *chhitmahal*. Like others, Babul's livestock was snatched, crops were plundered, and the agricultural land was seized. The community eventually gathered themselves together and started a fascinating movement for swap and citizenship. Not only all the Indian *chhitmahals* in Bangladesh built a coalition, but they also allied with their counterparts in India. Their efforts did not go in vain; both Bangladesh and India agreed to swap the *chhit* territories in 2015. Consequently, the Bangladesh government embraced the residents of Balapara Khagrabari as citizens. To respect the eldest individual who survived a dreadful yet creative stateless past, the

community let Babul raise the first flag of Bangladesh - as a citizen - in Balapara Khagrabari in the presence of government officials. In this chapter, I will take you down the memory lanes of Babul and other *chhit* folks to understand the stateless past, how it disrupted their lives, and how they fought back to bring normalcy.

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## A Chaotic Limbo

In 2002, a *pooran* Bangladeshi schoolteacher Mridha Khan was returning home at Botolganj of Bangladesh from his agriculture field in Balapara Khagrabari of India. As he was entering Botolganj, a barricade of the Bangladesh Rifles<sup>36</sup> stopped him. They asked his address and other credentials to check if he was a Bangladeshi citizen or an Indian *chhitbashi*. Being a wealthy landlord and a well-known local teacher Mridha did not have any trouble entering Botolganj. Still, he stopped for a while at the checkpoint out of curiosity to explore the reasons behind the sudden appearance of uniformed border guards at an otherwise unguarded village boundary between Botolganj and Balapara Khagrabari. His conversations with the border guards revealed that the previous day, on the other side of the border, two Bangladeshi *chhit* residents in India were shot dead by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) in the Indian mainland. To retaliate, the Bangladeshi border guards built a temporary checkpoint at the Botolganj-Balapara Khagrabari boundary to stop any *chhitbashi* from entering Bangladesh. Mridha noticed that the people he knew as *chhitbashi* introduced themselves as Bangladeshis to the border guards and convinced them by mentioning a Bangladeshi address.<sup>37</sup> They explained their travel through an Indian *chhitmabal* as a shortcut route to Botolganj *bazaar*.

Still, the aggressive body language of the border guards and their English terminology terrified the illiterate *chhitbashi* and the entire locality. To be a good Samaritan, Mridha approached the checkpoint

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<sup>36</sup> The Bangladeshi border security force, which was reformed as the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) in 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Bangladesh did not provide a national identity card to its citizens until 2007 (BBC, 2012); the ability to mention a local address, the name of the local government representative or well-known politician or community person unofficially worked for identification in rural areas.

commander and explained that all these boundary-crossers were *chbit* residents who were fooling the border guards to enter Bangladesh. He told the commander, as he remembered,

These poor *chbitbashi* are lying simply as a desperate measure to enter Botolganj to buy basic necessities. If you do not go easy on them, you would hear tomorrow that ten *chbitbashi* have died overnight as they could not purchase emergency medicine or food from Botolganj. They are dependent on Bangladesh to survive.<sup>38</sup>

Mridha claimed that his explanation convinced the border guards to let the ordinary-looking people of Balapara Khagrabari and adjacent *chbitmabals* enter Botolganj, and, in a few days, they withdrew the barricade after a few arrests and detention.

Miles apart in Dasiar Chhara, in a subsequent year, teenager Ameer Uddin was on the verge of desperation to enter India to meet his loving grandparents. He believed the year was either 2007 or 2008. Around that time, India erected a more than 2000-km barbed wire fence on the border with Bangladesh (Datta, 2003:186), which made it very hard and risky for the Indian *chbitbashi* to enter India without getting caught and imprisoned. He discovered that people were still crossing the border, and one of his friends from the village, Ripon Mohammad, was helping them. So, he contacted Ripon who agreed to assist him in crossing the border. A few weeks later, on the given day, Ameer crossed the border along with Ripon. As a regular illicit border-crosser, Ameer and most of the *chbitbashi* were familiar with a hostile and harsh Indian border force, but, at the checkpoint, he noticed friendly interactions between the border guards and Ripon. Upon Ameer's insistence to know the secret behind this blessed relation, Ripon revealed his secret role as an informant of India's BSF. His job was to provide Indian border guards with inside information about Dasiar Chhara (e.g., influential individuals, political conditions, *chbit* council, law and order situation, interference of Bangladesh). In exchange for that, the BSF allowed him and his friends to cross the border and enter India.

Mridha possessing land in Balapara Khagrabari despite being a Bangladeshi citizen; Bangladeshi border force guarding the internal boundary; Balapara Khagrabari *chbitbashi* traveling through Bangladesh; and Ripon working as BSF's informant exemplify the chaotic status of *chbitmabals*

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<sup>38</sup> This is my English translation of his Bangla statement. Throughout the dissertation, I translated the Bangla statements of my research participants.



between a state territory and an unprotected landmass. Throughout the pre-swap era, the presence of state administration inside the *chhitmahals* was messy and illegitimate, but was quite official and systematic in the beginning. In 1950, as the anomalous situation of *chhitmahals* had evolved, both countries signed an agreement to allow each other to access their outlier territories. The state officials of the home country were required to send a fifteen-day advance notice to the host country to visit its *chhitmahals*. Upon receiving authorization, the home country could send unarmed uniformed police to resolve conflicts, deploy revenue officials to collect taxes once every six months, and transfer specific goods (e.g., clothes, sugar, oil, medicine) once a month (Van Schendel, 2002:123, 124). However, the agreement soon turned out to be difficult to implement. Applications to enter *chhitmahals* started to get rejected. State officials were harassed and arrested by the border guards of the host country. The introduction of a passport and visa system by India and Pakistan in 1952 built the final barrier since state officials now needed a visa to enter *chhitmahals*. These obstacles and recurring hostile diplomatic relations pushed both countries to give up on any effort to govern the *chhitmahals* by the mid-1950s (Van Schendel, 2002:124, 125). Both countries knew that forceful attempts in establishing control over *chhitmahals* by illegitimately penetrating an international boundary would not be fruitful. Except for some scattered conflicts, both countries hardly entered each other's territories to administer the *chhitmahals* (Rabbani, 2007:10).<sup>39</sup> This abandonment also brought an end to any lawful and regular government interventions in the *chhitmahals*.

Since then, and until the swap, the state interventions in *chhitmahals* were mainly haphazard responses to the emergency events, e.g., violent feuds, public health concerns, smuggling activities. The anomalous location did not let Bangladesh and India govern the *chhitmahals* regularly, but they were irregularly part of the state-governance that started right after the Partition and has never stopped since. I encountered many personal narratives of contacts between the *chhitbashi* and the states of Bangladesh and India. None of the *chhitbashi* I talked to had mentioned any form of regular official obstacles in entering Bangladesh. The institutions and offices of the Indian government were physically absent in the *chhit* landscapes, but the state administration intermittently provided some public services to *chhitmahals*. Land registration was the primary state service connecting the *chhit* residents and India. The majority of the wealthy *chhit* farmers and community individuals visited, at

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<sup>39</sup> Willem van Schendel believes that this maneuver was not a symbol of mutual respect towards the demarcated border, rather both countries tried their best to impress the neighbor to prevent any potential invasion from the separatist groups or communists in their discontinuous *chhitmahals* (2002:123).

least once in their life, the land registration office of either Haldibari or Dinhatra of Cooch Behar district of India.

However, to register a piece of land, the *chhitbashi* had to cross the border illicitly to enter India, which posed risks of detention and torture. Therefore, the *chhitbashi* urged the home state India to allow them to enter Cooch Behar to complete the paperwork of land registration. The *chhit* council<sup>40</sup> negotiated with the BSF to accept a council-authorized identity document to let people cross the border and enter India (Rabbani, 2007:44). The document in the council's letterhead was locally known as *chhit* visa or *chhit* passport and included the individual's information, the signature of the council chairman, and the validity period assigned by the border guards on the check-post. The Indian authority initially used to authorize the *chhit* visa, valid for two to three days, to let the *chhitbashi* register land in India, but people had used it to carry on cross-border kinship and economic relations. Land deeds authorized by the Indian registry offices also worked as a pass to enter India and return to Bangladesh.

Besides the *chhit* visa, in 2011, a Bangladesh-India joint boundary working group facilitated a headcount in the *chhitmahals* across the border. The initiative was taken on the occasion of the then Indian prime minister's visit to Bangladesh to resolve the *chhitmahal* crisis and initiate measures to secure state-provided services for the *chhitbashi*. Assisted by the border security forces, a special bureaucratic arrangement permitted the government surveyors to enter *chhitmahals* across the border and complete the census within a week (Younus, 2013:49). The list of irregular but formal and legitimate state interventions that included and benefitted the collective public stops here. Despite being sovereign territories of the nation, the non-contiguous *chhitmahals* were left effectively stateless, without any public infrastructures and services.

In everyday life, the *chhitbashi* were more connected to the surrounding host country than their home country. Compared to India, people of Balapara Khagrabari and Dasiar Chhara had more interactions with Bangladesh - its administration, politics, society, economy, and citizens. In the absence of formal Indian administration, Bangladesh often violated the sovereign norms and entered both *chhitmahals* numerous times to respond to the health and legal crises that affected the mainland

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<sup>40</sup> A locally created governing body, which is detailed in a subsequent section in the chapter.

of the country. For example, Bangladeshi border guards invaded Dasiar Chhara to destroy the illegal business and cultivation of cannabis (Mustafa, 2010 *as cited in* Shewly, 2013:26).

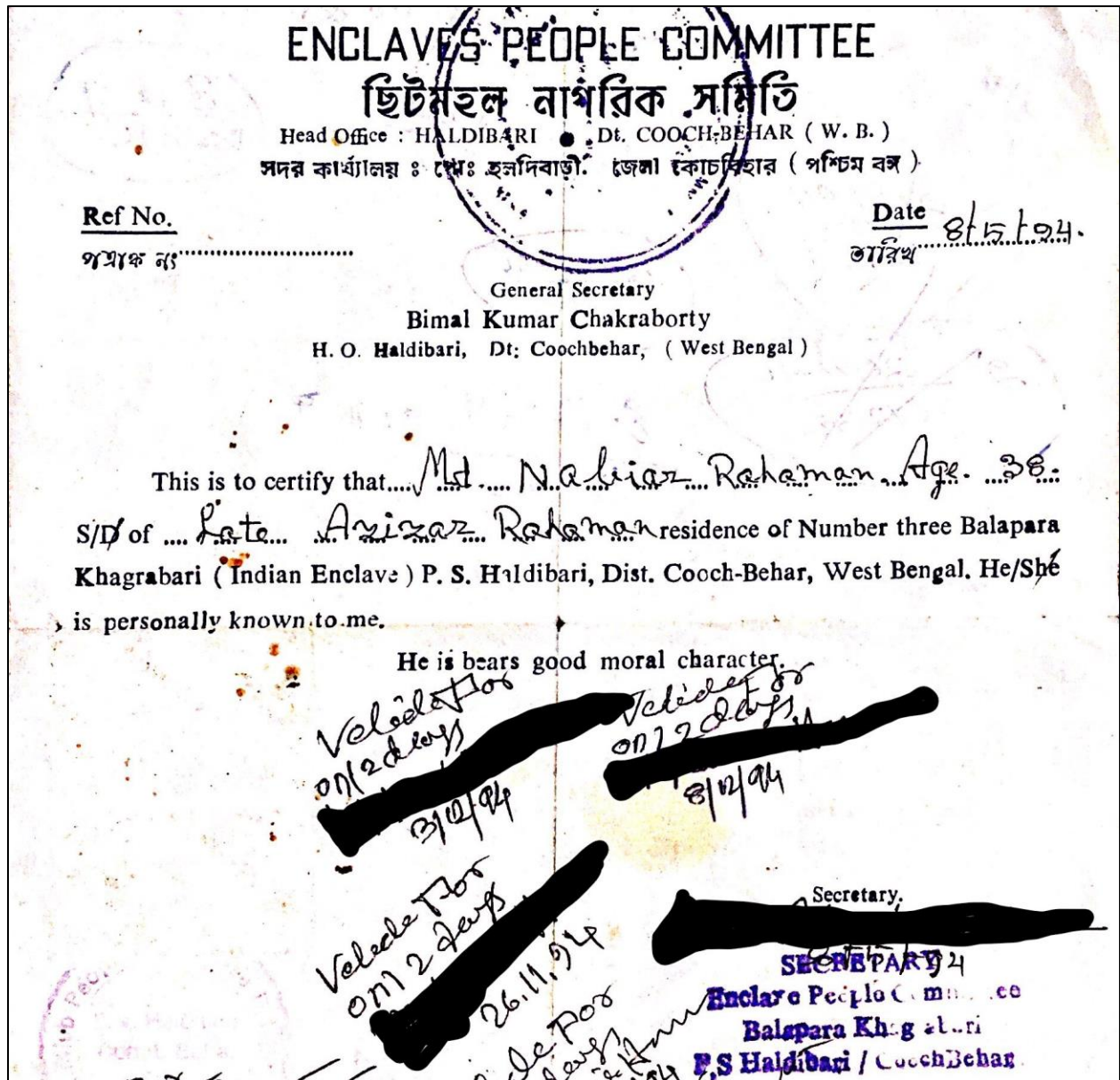


Figure 5: A *chbit* passport authorized by the Balapara Khagrabari council

Indian officials also had a history of unauthorized interventions in Bangladeshi *chbitmahals*. In the mid-2000, a Hindu Indian girl eloped with a Muslim boy from Moshaldanga, a Bangladeshi *chbitmahal* in India. Her furious parents, along with local politicians and border guards, entered the *chbitmahal* and destroyed more than fifty houses. Hundreds of *chbitbashi* fled to the Bangladeshi mainland and urged for help from the Bangladeshi officials. After long diplomatic negotiation, a flag

meeting between two border forces resolved the conflict; still, the Indian government did not allow Bangladeshi officials to investigate the damage or distribute emergency aid among the victims (Van Schendel, 2002:134-136). In another event, Indian state officials entered Bangladeshi *chhitmahal* Poaturkuthi to contain the contamination of bird flu (Shengupta, 2009 *as cited in* Shewly, 2013:26).

Inside the *chhitmahals*, as Jason Cons argues, a singular unified state was absent; instead, the *chhitbashi* were subjected to multiple sovereigns, e.g., border guards, local government units, police stations, NGOs, religious ideology, low-level bureaucrats, and so on. These sovereigns had capitalized on anomalous *chhitmahals* for personal, institutional, and nationalistic gains (Cons, 2007a:27). In their everyday life, the *chhitbashi* normalized their unauthorized access to the host country by forging identities and, by doing so, contributed to the neighboring economy and society. Nonetheless, during emergencies, they were not protected by the host country. The home country, on the other hand, occasionally provided some help but abandoned them in their daily lives.

Still, instead of rare occasions of unauthorized interventions of the host state, the invasions<sup>41</sup> of its citizens more significantly damaged the sovereign political integrity of the *chhitmahals*, which interfered with the internal politics, food sufficiency, and worsened safety and security. The *chhitmahals* had a demarcated boundary with the host country, but there was no effective arrangement there to guard it. Similar to the normalized access of Indian *chhitbashi* into Bangladesh, Bangladeshi citizens also had unrestricted access to the Indian *chhitmahals*. Building socioeconomic networks with the Bangladeshi neighbors enabled the *chhitbashi* to evade the sovereign restrictions and manipulate state-services in their favor, which I will elaborate in the next section. But the unrestricted admittance of the citizen-neighbors in many cases adversely affected the *chhit* community.

I encountered many experiences of non-state invasions; some were sensational. In such event, an influential Bangladeshi citizen affiliated with the BAL and local government had stolen some seventy cows in the dark of the night from the barn of my mentor Babul Ullah. This loss had paralyzed Babul's livelihood, and it took years for him to recover. He claimed that everyone knew who was behind such a massive theft but feared to demand justice, anticipating even more violent repercussions. His pal Monir Ahmed narrated another widely discussed event where an unidentified

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<sup>41</sup> Without any direct involvement of state administration.

corpse was dumped at night in front of his house. The young Monir, who later became the secretary of the Balapara Khagrabari *chhit* council, and his fellow *chhit* neighbors eventually had to bury the corpse. He claimed that there were rumors all over the locality that pointed a finger at a particular Bangladeshi individual behind the murder and disposing of the body. Still, the police were never involved since the corpse was found in Balapara Khagrabari, which was beyond the legal jurisdiction of both Bangladesh and Indian law-enforcement agencies. I was shown the grave multiple times where the unidentified body was buried as an example of the illegitimate inclusion of Indian *chhitmahals* in the criminal endeavors of Bangladeshi citizens.

Since the official forces of Bangladesh were not involved in these unlawful interferences, Indian authorities hardly considered them as a threat to the national sovereignty and hence remained reluctant to intervene. As a result, such invasions became rampant. Besides scattered criminal activities, the *pooran* Bangladeshis entered *chhitmahals* for two primary purposes. First, they went there to purchase land. In a few cases, the ordinary *chhitbashi* had to sell their only material possession, land, to fight impoverishment. But, in the majority of the cases, they were too ‘weak’ to prevent forced sales. Second, the *pooran* Bangladeshis often visited *chhitmahals* to collect a *chhit* visa from the council members. Instead of going through the formal passport-visa procedures, they would manage a council-approved *chhit* visa to travel to India, which they also used to access civic facilities across the border. The Bangladeshi citizens even came from the capital city, Dhaka, to collect the *chhit* visa to enter India. When the BSF realized that they validated the *chhit* visa to more people than the actual estimated number of *chhitbashi*, they suspended all border-crossings using the special pass.

The ordinary *chhitbashi* firmly believed that the former *chhit* council members deliberately assisted the *pooran* Bangladeshis in getting illegal *chhit* visas and forcing the stateless people to sell their land in exchange for a bribe. The former council members, on the other hand, claimed that they did not allow such illicit activities for any financial advantages; instead, they simply could not say ‘no’ to these influential *pooran* Bangladeshis, fearing violent retaliation. They argued that the *chhitbashi* were hopelessly dependent on the mercy of these influential citizen-neighbors to enter *pooran* Bangladesh illicitly in everyday life. In that sense, they merely reciprocated the favor. Interpersonal relations and gratitude also played a part. For example, one revered *chhit* leader told me that he lobbied for the *chhit* visa for a local Bangladeshi journalist, who covered news of the swap movement in regional and national newspapers.

The ordinary *pooran* Bangladeshis regularly entered *chhitmahals*, either to meet their friends and relatives or to take a shortcut route on the way to their destination. However, it was widely believed that the influential *pooran* Bangladeshis that took advantage of the lawlessness were wealthy and affiliated with a political party, which authorized an illicit ‘free pass’ to do these criminal activities. Moreover, as Ameer Uddin claimed, these political party leaders and their associates also cast fake votes in Dasiar Chhara council elections to elect their preferred candidate to continue illicit endeavors inside *chhitmahals*.<sup>42</sup> They did so through force and intimidation. Besides, the *chhit* election commission was not strong and independent enough to prevent such vote-rigging. The absence of legitimate state governance already left the sovereign *chhitmahals* unprotected on the ground. These interferences by the *pooran* Bangladeshi civilians disturbed the remaining socioeconomic and political integrity inside the anomalous territories; and, therefore, pushed the *chhitbashi* to the outside world for extended support and services.

The influx of refugees and displaced persons also came along with unrestricted access. Two groups of refugees today dominate the *chhit* demographic. The Partition-refugees were locally known as *bodlees* (*bodol* means exchange) as they came from India and resettled in *chhitmahals* by exchanging land with the departing Hindu refugees following the communal riots of 1947. The *Bhatiyas*, on the other hand, came from *bhati* (downstream) areas to resettle in *chhitmahals* after losing their homesteads to riverbank erosion. There was also another category of people that abused the unprotected boundary of *chhitmahals*: criminal escapees. Van Schendel’s research shows that “several enclaves were used as hideouts by groups of armed robbers who took advantage of the absence of police. They committed robberies both inside the enclaves and in the surrounding countryside” (2002:132). Besides the robbers, the *pooran* Bangladeshis would also take shelter in *chhitmahals* to avoid prosecution after committing a crime. Some smugglers also used lawless territories to hide and trade contraband. A portion of the *chhitbashi* capitalized on sheltering the criminal escapees and taking part in smuggling enterprise. However, the majority of *chhitbashi* had tried to stop the criminals abusing their *chhitmahals* and faced torture and death in retaliation (cf. Van Schendel, 2002:132).

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<sup>42</sup> The chairman and members of Balapara council used to be selected based on their individual wealth and influence; however, in Dasiar Chhara, an election used to take place to select council chairman and members. I will come to this discussion at the end of this chapter.

The stigma associated with the displaced *Bhatiyas*<sup>43</sup> and the sanctuary of criminals earned *chhitmahals* some notoriety in the borderland. My mentor Ehsan Rahman emphasized the dependency of Balapara Khagrabari residents on illicit and criminal activities to make a living in the stateless era. He shared widespread popular stories of criminals becoming free civilians by entering the *chhit* boundary<sup>44</sup> and *pooran* Bangladeshi goons bringing their victims in *chhitmahals* to murder them. He showed me multiple sites in Balapara Khagrabari where the victims were killed, their bodies were hanged to the tree, or decapitated corpses were burned. We walked down the quiet neighborhood alleys where the criminal outsiders residing in Balapara Khagrabari used to be regularly mug and assault the passerby in the stateless era. This notoriety adversely affected the decisions of *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors in pursuing work, business, and marital relations with the *chhitbashi*. The wholesale criminalization further deprived them of legal justice. The stigma was still in effect in the post-swap era.

A fluid boundary assisted the *chhitbashi* in accessing Bangladesh illicitly to carry on their everyday life. However, a reverse flow of *pooran* Bangladeshis to the *chhitmahals* worsened the chaotic limbo in the anomalous territories. This chaos also complicated the collective sense of belonging. Geographically living in one country but politically and legally belonging to another did not nurture a fixed concept of national identity and sovereignty among the *chhitbashi* (Shewly, 2013:23). To consider themselves ‘theoretical’ citizens of their home country would have detached them from their neighbors in the host country. To opt for ‘proxy citizenship’<sup>45</sup> could have weakened community-making with their fellow *chhitbashi*. This dilemma encouraged them to develop an a-national identity: the citizens of *chhitmahals* or the more popular vernacular expressions *chhitbashi*, *chhitmahalbashi* - a unique group of the population without any state or nation (Van Schendel, 2002:134, 144, 145).

My mentor Babul Ullah, however, said such expressions of a collective *chhit* identity were a materialistic political project; they did not entirely give up their historic national belonging. He and his fellows firmly identified themselves as Indians based on their ancestral belonging and used this identity to get the *chhit* visa and land registration services in Cooch Behar. But, to meet more mundane needs, they forged Bangladeshi documents and identified as Bangladeshis (cf. Van

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<sup>43</sup> The *Bhatiyas* were stigmatized as a violent and aggressive group of people, which I discuss in Chapter 5.

<sup>44</sup> Van Schendel (2002:132) also encountered similar events in the vicinity of my fieldwork location, Balapara Khagrabari.

<sup>45</sup> See page 14 for more information about proxy citizenship.

Schendel, 2002:134). The *Bhatiyas*, similarly, identified as Indians to register their *chbit* landholdings and get the *chbit* passport, but cast votes in national elections as Bangladeshi citizens. These two groups adopted pseudo national identities for practical purposes, but they believed in their ancestral belonging. Since neither country provided all their material demands, and a bias to one of the two identities involved risk of losing the advantages from the other, the *chbit* residents pragmatically developed a public identity of being merely *chbitbashi*. Babul suggested that the fluidity of identity included a subtle hint of reproach to the home country for failing to satisfy their civic demands.

As Babul implied, this chaotic limbo of status, e.g., whether the *chbitmahals* were sovereign territories or lawless zones, whether the *chbitbashi* were state citizens or stateless persons, was amplified by the two nations. The *chbitmahals* were recognized by both Bangladesh and India; still, they remained ungoverned because of their non-contiguous location. Neither state could enter another sovereign country to administer their discontinuous *chbitmahals*. As a result, the *chbitbashi* were excluded from legitimate state administration and development programs, which made them dependent on the illicit access to the host country's infrastructures to survive. The exclusion from official governance further brought the *chbitbashi* under constant surveillance and control of illegitimate sovereign power, specifically of the host state (Cons, 2013:38; Shewly, 2013:26; Jones, 2009:377).

Hosna Shewly (2013) compares this exclusion with Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'bare life.' She clarifies that "Bare life is the life of *homo sacer*, who is subject to the law but is unprotected by the law. Extremely inferior to a politically qualified life, it is, rather, a life exposed to violence in an extra-legal space and status" (Agamben, 1998:10 as cited in Shewly, 2013:26). Bangladesh and India treated the *chbitbashi* as not-quite citizens; their citizenship was not suspended, but rights were abandoned. The *chbit* residents could temporarily access certain rights depending on the atmosphere of national politics. During the calm days of politics, the border was comparatively tolerant; the *chbitbashi* could enter the parent state and safely return to their *chbitmahals*. However, tensions between both countries could easily revoke this fluidity (Shewly, 2015:20). This malleable citizenship drove the *chbitbashi* to build a community with the *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors to explore informal livelihood options. To do so, both parties ignored the sovereign restrictions of Bangladesh and India.



## Embracing a Horizontal Community, Evading the Sovereignties

A border on a map appears as only the ‘representation’ of political reality, not the reality itself. But the moment a border is drawn, it turns all the human beings of a nation, not just the state institutions, into the agents of implementing that reality (Winichakul, 1994:129-130). In fact, border studies show that ordinary people living in borderland communities contribute more to borderwork than the border guards (e.g., Rumford, 2013). For example, ordinary citizens often form an unreceptive and intolerant community to prevent the intrusion of non-citizens and undocumented border-crossers. Nonetheless, even the most sophisticated border control cannot ensure that the borderland communities will follow the state-prescribed territorial model if it disrupts their regular life. States’ sovereign protocols and the fluid parameter of legality regularly jeopardize the everyday lives of the borderlanders. In response, the borderland communities also relentlessly improve their strategies to evade the legal restrictions (Abraham & Van Schendel, 2005:25; Van Schendel, 2005:56-57). They do not passively wait for a stable situation. Instead, burdened with the agency, they adopt strategies to rebuild a meaningful life. To do so, they correspond with illicit actors to access services and protections by violating the legal codes of sovereign powers (Dunn & Cons, 2014).

In surviving the stateless era, the *chhitbashi* normalized an informal and illicit life; the entire community participated in it. They invested effort in a horizontal network with the *pooran Bangladeshi* neighbors that benefited both parties in the stateless era. Every action and strategy in this informal lifestyle evaded the legal standards of Bangladesh and India. The failure of both governments in upholding their civil rights led *chhitbashi* to rationalize their collective abandonment of the formal vertical relation between the state and the people<sup>46</sup> and encouraged the adoption of informal horizontal community-making with non-state actors. Both the *chhitbashi* and the surrounding *pooran Bangladeshi* citizens engaged in informal but illicit relations that ensured a coherent life in *chhitmahals*. These mundane activities, however, were not a part of organized crime, and the participants did not see themselves as criminals (cf. Van Schendel, 2006). Instead, they considered themselves as the victims of sovereign politics that left them behind with only two options: obey the legal codes and stay hungry and destitute or reject state-rules and restore a normal, ordinary life. They preferred the latter.

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<sup>46</sup> Referring to the African politics, James Ferguson (2006) discusses a vertical topography of power where the state holds the top position and the grassroots communities stay in the bottom.

In the stateless era, the *chhitbashi* lived on sharecropping (*adbi*) agriculture. Every *chhit* household was dependent on sharecropping to make a living. Every *chhitbashi* was either an (*adbiar*) sharecropper, an agricultural laborer, or a landlord. In Balapara Khagrabari and Dasiar Chhara, there were only a few landlords while the sharecroppers predominated numerically. The *adbi* system was a verbal contract between a landlord and the sharecropper: the former would provide land; the latter was responsible for labor and production inputs (e.g., fertilizer, irrigation, pesticide). The sharecroppers mostly used family labor for cultivation; however, recruiting seasonal daily-basis wage laborers in large landholdings was also a common practice. The post-harvest crop was divided into halves between the landlord and sharecropper.

The sharecropping practices barely provided subsistence to the *chhit* households. The high production costs and low return because of the legal restrictions on accessing markets and purchasing means of production made it difficult to accumulate any surplus for them to buy their own land. The landlords, on the other hand, earned tremendous profit from their multiple landholdings, which they invested in growing their estate. In the midst of chaotic statelessness, sharecropping practices brought food to the plates of ordinary *chhitbashi*, but simultaneously created an exploitative land hierarchy. The wealthy landlords capitalized on their fortune to secure political and community influence inside and beyond *chhitmahals*, which further helped them to gain more assets. For example, in the heyday of council-era, the last chairman of Balapara Khagrabari *chhit* council possessed more than one thousand *bighas* (approximately four hundred acres) of land. His counterpart in Natoktoka *chhitmahal* owned no less than five hundred *bighas* of land. Based on their vast land estate, these landlords-turned-leaders expanded their networks beyond *chhitmahals* and lived a decent ‘normal’ life. In contrast, most sharecroppers struggled for subsistence on only a few *bighas* of land. Mridha Khan, a wealthy landlord himself, called these landlords *vumi shontrashi* (land terrorists) as they regularly appropriated properties of helpless *chhitbashi* to expand their estates. He added that forcefully grabbing others’ land could have been the only rational explanation of such land inequality. The ordinary *chhitbashi* had nowhere to go; these exploitative landlords were supposed to protect them.

Sharecropping practices were exploitative in the *chhitmahals* but widely practiced in the region. There was nothing illegal in this. However, to make a living by sharecropping required the *chhitbashi* to circumvent several legal rules. They were not allowed to purchase and use motorized tube-wells for irrigation, neither they could buy nor sell livestock in neighboring *bazqaars* without permission. They

needed formal authorization from the border guards and *chbit* council to do any economic activity beyond the *chbit* boundary (Rabbani, 2007:32-33; Rahman, et al., 2013:73-75). Still, the *chbitbashi* bought production inputs from the Bangladeshi *bazars*, hired Bangladeshi wage laborers, rented irrigation facilities, used Bangladeshi currency in transactions, and sold their crops to the Bangladeshi wholesalers. The *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors also participated in this informal economy as it benefited them as well. The participation of the entire *chbit* community eventually normalized such informal engagement between the *chbitbashi* and Bangladeshi neighbors. Except for days of border tensions, neither government stopped these unauthorized livelihood strategies.

Besides growing crops, the *chbitbashi* also practiced the *adbi* system to raise farm animals. An affluent individual would buy a cow or goat and give it to an *adbiar* to take care of the animal and bear all the necessary costs in raising it. In this joint venture, the *adbiar* will keep the first calf, and the owner will get the second calf. Both parties made a profit by selling the calves. The destitute households even did the *adbi* of rearing chickens and ducks. In addition to the *adbi* of crops and livestock, a small number of *chbitbashi* made livelihoods from working as day laborers and shopkeepers, driving passenger vans, and running small businesses (e.g., tea-stall, grocery stores) in *chbitmahals* and neighboring Bangladeshi villages (cf. Rahman, et al., 2013:74). This work did not require any identity documents; a verbal contract was enough. Therefore, they were comparatively safer and easier to find. Moreover, many *chbitbashi* crossed the border to enter India to do the same work but for better pay. In Dasiar Chhara, a trend of traveling to India illicitly to work in brick kilns was dominant among its residents that proliferated through kinship networks and attractive promises of human traffickers. My friend Ameer Uddin traveled to India without any documentation along with his parents when he was a teenager. They had worked in a brick kiln in New Delhi for a few years before returning to Dasiar Chhara.

The *chbitbashi* knew that these livelihood activities did not comply with legal protocols. Still, the community deemed these subsistence strategies essential for their survival that did not threaten the sovereignty of Bangladesh or India on a large scale. However, a good number of *chbitbashi* earned a fortune from various illicit actions that were considered immoral by the community. In Dasiar Chhara, the influential locals used to arrange an annual fair that mainly featured folk theatre and gambling. This fair once used to be a borderless cultural event and a festival for the borderland communities that featured popular theatre and the presence of local producers with their diverse goods. As the *chbitmahals* became anomalous territories, some wealthy, well-connected individuals

distorted the meaning and purpose of the event. In the last decades of statelessness, they transformed the fair as a commercial event for drug and alcohol sale, obscene theatre, and gambling. These events poured tremendous cash into the pockets of the organizers, but proliferated gambling and alcohol addiction and damaged the moral compass of the *chhitmahal*. Some *chhitbashi* used their houses, in both *chhitmahals*, as safehouses for illegal drugs (e.g., cannabis, phensedyl) and other contraband (e.g., sugar, clothes, medicine) smuggled from India. As Ameer witnessed, hundreds of motorcycles would enter the *chhitmahal* from surrounding Bangladeshi villages at midnight to collect goods for personal consumption and commercial purposes. The majority of the *chhitbashi* did not participate in such illicit activities; they considered them contradictory to their values and extreme abuses of the absence of a lawful administration that did not bring any good to the community.

Bangladeshi citizen-neighbors were an integral part of this informal economy that provided subsistence to the *chhitbashi*. The normalized economic interactions brought them in unrestricted regular contacts.<sup>47</sup> The growing communications expanded the scope of illicit practices to secure other avenues of a normal life, not just for food. My wealthy landlord Karim Mia married a girl from Bangladesh, and, using his father-in-law's address and influence, he built a business and two houses in a neighboring Bangladeshi village. Babul Ullah's relatives in the subdistrict town let him use their address and other credentials to purchase properties to build a house. My *Bhatiya* mentor Mannan Hussain helped a local *chhit* teacher with getting Bangladeshi documents; in return, the teacher helped his kids with school enrolment. The local *union parishad* chairman and other Bangladeshi elites helped respected Balapara Khagrabri native Delowar Zaman's son to pass the background check and security clearance for a job in Bangladesh Police. This list goes on and on. The relatives and the partners in the informal economy let the *chhitbashi* use their name, address, and influence to send their kids to school, receive health treatments, get a job, buy land, access NGO loans, or register marriages (cf. Van Schendel, 2002:134). The local government and NGO officials were aware of the rampant use of forged identity by the *chhitbashi*. In most of the cases, humanitarian concerns, recommendations of influential Bangladeshi citizens, or simply a bribe removed the legal barrier.

However, there were exploitative neighbors too who knew that the *chhitbashi* were helpless and dependent on the host country - its infrastructures, public goods, and citizens - to survive. So, they

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<sup>47</sup> Besides, many *chhitbashi* had relatives in the surrounding borderland that migrated to East Pakistani (Bangladeshi) villages following the Partition, not to the *chhitmahals*.

took advantage. They plundered *chbit* crops (Shewly, 2015:19), occupied land (Daily Star, 2015c), assaulted women (Basu, 2011:61), looted household assets, and abused the religious minority. In numerous cases, the Bangladeshi neighbors purchased the crops of the *chbitbashi* but refused to pay for them (cf. Shewly, 2015:19). Some snitched on them to the government representative to expose their forged identity.<sup>48</sup> The *chbitbashi* did not have many options to retaliate, but they were creative. Some *chbit* farmers deliberately partnered with their friends from the host country who would pretend to be the crop owner in dealing with the customers. After the sale, the proxy seller would get an additional percentage of profit for investing their national identity in the deal. The *chbitbashi* also started to collect money first before handing over the crops to the buyers to get the right price (Shewly, 2015:19). To reciprocate the generosity of their host country neighbors, the *chbit* residents let them navigate through the *chbitmahals* as a shortcut transportation route. Practicing proxy citizenship with the religious majority also contributed to a stronger community. Some *chbitbashi* also contributed to the development works in the host state. For example, the Balapara Khagrabari native Babul Ullah donated a piece of his land in the subdistrict proper for a school campus in gratitude to the community that let him build a secure home during the turbulent period of chaos.

These diverse strategies of informal economy and lifestyle suggest that the *chbitbashi* were more connected with the host state of Bangladesh than their parent state India. They crossed an international boundary every day to enter Bangladesh to fulfill basic survival demands. The legal rules of sovereignty assess their unauthorized presence in Bangladesh as illegal. Despite risking criminality, the *chbitbashi* normalized such border-crossing. There was not any border arrangement in place to stop the *chbitbashi* entering Bangladesh unless there was any political tension or border retaliation between both nations. This fluidity gradually removed the harsh repercussions of illegality (Ferdoush, 2014:112). Nonetheless, India remained an essential part of stateless *chbitbashi*'s struggle to survive. In 1952, India and the former East Pakistan adopted the visa and passport system without keeping any special provisions for non-contiguous *chbitmahals*, which interrupted the daily movement of the *chbitbashi*. To stay in touch with their land, properties, and relatives and to register their *chbit* landholdings, they had to enter India illegally and risk criminality (Van Schendel, 2002:124).<sup>49</sup> The *chbitbashi* adopted different methods in crossing the border. For example, Mridha

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<sup>48</sup> One evening, my mentor Mannan Hussain showed me the *pooran* Bangladeshi who expelled him from the distribution line for subsidized rice through the help of government officials.

<sup>49</sup> The *chbit* visa reduced the risks of undocumented cross-border movement for some years. However, there were still incidents of detentions despite possessing this special pass.

Khan frequently traveled to India to buy agricultural inputs by forging the *chbit* visa. Ameer once infiltrated a group of pastoralists authorized to graze their animals in the no man's land across the border. Monir Ahmed, the secretary of the Balapara Khagrabari *chbit* council, paid smugglers to help him cross the border to register his land following the cancellation of the *chbit* visa. The border guards that gave ordinary *chbitbashi* a hard time in illicit border-crossing assisted the smugglers in running their illegal cross-border business in exchange for a bribe (cf. Ferdoush, 2014:109).

The informal economy of the *chbitbashi* brought profound impacts on the community. Their collective involvement in illicit practices branded them with a wholesale stigma of criminality that kept neighbors from forming socioeconomic relations with them. The notoriety still disrupts the integration of *chbitbashi* into the *pooran* Bangladesh. Mridha Khan, who owned large landholdings in Balapara Khagrabari, characterized the *chbitmahal* as the home of criminal escapees and violent people from both sides of the border. Many neighbors in the borderland held similar views. Forged identity documents aligned *chbitbashi* with the denial of reality and made them incredibly self-aware. As a child, Ameer was taught how to lie about his identity in Bangladeshi school. He used to falsely claim a *pooran* Bangladeshi as his father to retain his unlawful enrolment in school and college.<sup>50</sup> Such training to manipulate the facts had been passed on through generations. As a result, *chbitbashi* adopted the practice of representing their *chbitmahal* to the outsiders as a helpless but moral community by hiding the exploitative behavior of the citizen-neighbors and *chbit* leaders in order to be considered for state-help (Shewly, 2013:28; Cons, 2013:42, 43).

Similarly, they used to choose between national identities depending on their material objectives. In the *chbit* passport, the *chbitbashi* I talked to were non-contiguous residents of India, which they utilized in registering *chbit* landholdings. But, when the BSF refused to accept the *chbit* visa as a valid travel document, a collective desire to be the citizens of Bangladesh found momentum among the *chbitbashi*. While staying in Indian *chbitmahals*, they raised the flag of Bangladesh to display their intention for Bangladeshi citizenship and express national solidarity (cf. Basu, 2011:67). The flag was also a signal to the Indian politicians that they set their mind on changing their nationality. The veteran *chbit* leader Rajon Shikdar raised the Bangladeshi flag in Natoktoka *chbitmahal* specifically to send a message to Mamata Banerjee, the then and current Chief Minister of West Bengal (India),

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<sup>50</sup> Similar to the fake fathers of school-going students, there were also incidents of hiring fake husbands for the *chbit* women to admit them in hospitals during health emergencies (Younus, 2013:67, 81).

who had been an outstanding critic of enclave-swap. The message was to display their decision to give up the stateless life being non-contiguous nationals of India and adopt the official membership of Bangladesh. Amid fluidity, illicitness, and manipulation of facts, there was also a positive vibe among the stateless *chhit* community. The oppression and abandonment developed solidarity and made them a more robust and resilient community that was proud of their capacities in surviving life outside the law, without any police or bureaucrats (Van Schendel, 2002:134). It has been a while the *chhitbashi* has embraced the rule of law, but they still cherished that pride.

### **The ‘Enclave People Committee’**

In the early 1970s, the *chhitmahals* became lawless territories that fostered violence, crime, fear, insecurity, and exploitation. People who could afford illicit purchase of land fled to the surrounding villages of the enveloping state. My mentor Babul Ullah built a house in the Domar town through the help of his relatives. He used his properties in Balapara Khagrabari for farming while living with his family in Domar. This extreme chaos and anxiety of lawlessness ended to some extent with the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, which gathered the *chhitbashi* together to safeguard their community. Encouraged by friendly political atmosphere between India and newly liberated Bangladesh, the *chhit* residents formed their administrative council following the structure of Bangladeshi *union parishads* that included a chairperson and several members representing different neighborhoods. The *chhit* council was officially known as the Enclave People Committee (*Chhitmahal Nagorik Shomiti* in Bangla). The first council was formed in 1972, and, the larger *chhitmahals* shortly adopted similar governing practices. The smaller, less populated *chhitmahals* could not create self-sufficient separate councils; instead, two to three *chhitmahals* jointly developed a common council (Van Schendel, 2002:132, 133; Rabbani, 2007:44).

Babul Ullah believed that it was around late 1980s when his fellow *chhitbashi* formed the first council in Balapara Khagrabari because that’s when he returned to the *chhitmahal* from Domar where he took refuge to escape violence and insecurity. Dasiar Chhara also came up with their administrative council around the same time. Both *chhitmahals* had almost the same area and population size, but they took different strategies in building the council. Balapara Khagrabari leadership was governed

by selected influential personnel, whereas the *chhitbashi* of Dasiar Chhara elected their council members. Nonetheless, both committees featured the *chhit* elites (cf. Van Schendel, 2002:133).

In the last *chhit* council of Balapara Khagrabari, Masud Mollah was selected as the chairman, Enam Khasru as the vice-chairman, and Monir Ahmed performed the role of secretary. Monir was a *chhit* native, and Enam was a partition refugee (*bodlee*). But, Masud was not a *chhitbashi*; he was a Bangladeshi citizen with political affiliation with the then ruling party Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). He illicitly owned a vast amount of *chhit* land using the power of a council chairman. His wealth and political connections intimidated the selection committee. Masud eventually became very popular among the *chhitbashi* as he spent his fortune to run the council activities and initiate various development works. His political influence also restricted the invasion of opportunistic Bangladeshi neighbors. In a conversation with me, secretary Monir, who was known in the locality for his administrative knowledge, particularly on land registration, claimed that he deserved the chairman post for being a native *chhit* resident and the most skilled administrator. Still, he acknowledged that Masud's wealth and political connections, which he could not provide, were necessary for an effective council. The *chhitmahal* was divided into nine neighborhoods or wards; each ward had two member representatives on the council.

Dasiar Chhara residents, on the other hand, elected their council members. Similar to the Balapara Khagrabari council, their elected leaders also belonged to the *chhit* elites because, as Ameer described, the election campaigns required a considerable sum of money to invest, and the ordinary *chhitbashi* could not afford it. The required abundance of wealth to carry out council activities also indirectly eliminated the chance of ordinary villagers to compete in elections. I came across two sets of allegations about the *chhit* elections in Dasiar Chhara. First, esteemed and influential individuals - often with local governance experience from neighboring Bangladeshi villages - used to perform the roles of election commissioners (cf. Rabbani, 2007:46). They were accused of favoring their loyal candidate to continue their illicit invasions in the *chhitmahal*. Second, a fraudulent alliance between the election commissioners and candidates allowed the *pooran* Bangladeshis to cast illegitimate votes to manipulate the result in their favor. Still, the elections were a great occasion for the *chhitbashi* to celebrate the state-like normalcy and their imagined agency in controlling their fate.

Irrespective of their differences in formation and member-size, the *chhit* councils performed similar duties. They acted as the social leadership to resolve village conflicts, mediate land exchanges, build



narrow muddy roads and bamboo bridges, make essential community decisions, establish alliances with fellow *chhitbashi* and represent the interests of *chhitmahals* to the outsiders. The council initiated crucial development works through public donation and corvée labor. The income from common property resources (e.g., selling fish, leasing wetlands, collecting navigation tolls, extracting sand and stones) also funded the council projects (cf. Rabbani, 2007:46; Jones, 2009:373; Van Schendel, 2002:134). Among a wide range of activities, my interlocutors highlighted three roles of *chhit* councils that brought a feeling of stability and security in the stateless communities.



Figure 6: The *chhit* council built this bridge that connected Dasiar Chhara with Bangladesh

First, the chaos and risks of lawlessness kept the people floating between Bangladesh/India and *chhitmahals*. The residents hardly considered the anomalous territories as their homes. Those who could afford it illicitly built a second home in Bangladeshi villages to live. The council leaders organized the community, came up with informal security guards and introduced a justice system. In Dasiar Chhara, the council had its courtroom, where plaintiff and defendant had the opportunity to present their cases. Respected community figures represented them as their attorneys. There was a witness stand and the council chairman performed the roles of the judge. A group of guards used to ensure the presence of the defendant before the court. This justice system established order and

improved the security of lives and crops that encouraged people to settle in *chhitmahals* permanently for the first time. The *chhitbashi* that had fled elsewhere to escape violence before the council era started to come back.



Figure 7: The abandoned office and courtroom of the Dasiar Chhara *chhit* council

Second, the *chhit* councils successfully negotiated with the Indian border guards and politicians to accept the *chhit* passport as a valid border-crossing document. Although the BSF canceled the *chhit* passport system in 1997 based on corruption allegations (Rabbani, 2007:45), this council-authorized document worked as the documentation of identity of the *chhitbashi* until the swap. Third, in the stateless era, the *chhitbashi* had to risk criminalization and detention while crossing the border to enter India to register any land exchange because they could not do that in Bangladesh. Such illicit border crossing became extremely dangerous following the abolition of *chhit* visa system. Therefore, the council started its own land registration system by keeping a central ledger book (cf. Van Schendel, 2002:129). In Balapara Khagrabri, secretary Monir used to collect Indian land stamp paper from the smugglers and filled the details of landholding, buyer, and seller with three witnesses. The council chairman authorized the deed by putting his signature on it. When it was difficult to manage Indian stamps, Monir used Bangladeshi stamp paper, council letterhead, even blank white paper to register land exchanges. The council kept records of all such land sales. This registration process did not have any validity in either Bangladesh or India, but it comparatively improved the value of *chhit*

land because council's paperwork offered the landowners some sort of documentation of ownership instead of verbal claims over their land.

Despite such unprecedented and ground-breaking works, the council members were often accused of land grabs, corruption, bribery, and abuse of power. A position in the council was not all about noble and charity community works; it also promised materialistic gains. There was a widespread gossip in *chhitmahals* that the council members made a tremendous profit using their power, some of which they spent in re-selection or election and other council activities. Let's take the last Balapara Khagrabari *chhit* council as an example. Masud Mollah, who was a Bangladeshi citizen, became one of the wealthiest landlords in the *chhitmahal* after he was selected as the chairman. The family of vice-chairman Enam Khasru was notorious for grabbing the properties of Hindu families, which eventually forced them to migrate to India. Several respondents confirmed to me that his key income came from the bribery by the defendants to manipulate council verdicts in their favor.<sup>51</sup> Secretary Monir Ahmed oversaw the land registration process, and, utilizing his position, monopolized the making of land deeds. He charged almost five times higher for writing a deed than the rate of Indian registry office because only he knew how to write a land deed and the *chhitbashi* had no other option. His position and writing skills earned him a fortune.

Another common allegation against the council members was that they made a profit on issuing fake *chhit* passports to the Bangladeshi citizens that eventually forced the Indian government to suspend the facility. Former council members did not deny that there was corruption in issuing *chhit* passports. The ordinary *chhitbashi* and *pooran* Bangladeshis saw a purely financial reason behind issuing fake documents; but, the council members defended their action as a helpless surrender to the intimidation by the Bangladeshi citizens to get the pass, which was the easiest way to enter India at that point. Despite these shortcomings, there was a public consensus in *chhitmahals* that the councils formalized their identity,<sup>52</sup> gave them a liveable homeland, increased their livelihood security, and organized them as a 'normal' community.

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<sup>51</sup> In Chapter 3 and 6, I will show how his family, following the swap, used their new political affiliation to grab money by instilling fear of legal harassment.

<sup>52</sup> In many cases, the *chhitbashi* identified themselves as members of a specific *chhit* council and displayed the *chhit* passport as the proof (cf. Van Schendel, 2002:133).

## The Extra Burden of Being *Chhit* Women

My mentor Ehsan Rahman accompanied me in walking and biking around Balapara Khagrabari in the initial days of fieldwork. He was a public health worker and a *Bhawaiya* folk singer of Bangladesh Radio who also taught music in local schools. His outreach turned him into a popular community figure in the borderland. Whenever we visited different *chhit* neighborhoods, his young students and their parents would stand beside the road and give him a *salaam* (a religious, cultural greeting). However, since our first collaborative trip, one demographic stood alone: the young mothers. Young women under or in their early 20s holding their toddler in the lap greeting Ehsan while standing on their yards became a typical scene. In explaining such a staggering number of young mothers in the *chhitmahal*, Ehsan shared a remarkable fact. These young women used to be his students in different adjacent Bangladeshi schools in the stateless era. Most of them dropped out in high school, got married, and started their conjugal life. In Bangladesh and India, women had to be 18 to be legally eligible for marriage. But, as *chhitmahals* were excluded from state administration, early marriage of girls, sometimes even at the age of 12/13, was common (cf. Basu, 2011:61).<sup>53</sup> The key reason behind this practice was the rampant sexual violence and inability to seek legal justice. The parents would pull their adolescent daughters from Bangladeshi schools to make them less exposed to public eyes in order to save them from sexual predators.

Early marriage was also an effect of the fact that, in that part of the world, being the victims of sexual violence made women less desirable in marital negotiation (see Das, 1996). To arrange the marriage of a daughter who happened to be a victim of sexual assault, the parents had to pay a high amount of dowry to the groom. So, early marriage also made sense to them economically. Moreover, the absence of state-sponsored reproductive health awareness programs significantly contributed to the abrupt transition of these young brides into mothers. As I started to explore the *chhitmahal*, it became obvious that the *chhitbashi* were, as Giorgio Agamben would say (1998:10 *as cited in* Shewly, 2013:26), politically disqualified in the stateless era; but, the *chhit* women also lived a socially disqualified life on top of that.

Despite a shared silence about the sexual violence in the community, the extent of gruesome sexual assaults was reported by the researchers who had conducted their fieldwork during the time of

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<sup>53</sup> This practice was still in place when I visited Balapara Khagrabari two years after it became a part of Bangladesh. In fact, a son of one my mentors married a girl who barely passed the legal age of marriage.

enclavisation (e.g., Shewly, 2013:29; Basu, 2011:61; Abusaleh & Islam, 2019:664). In *chbitmahals*, there were reports of influential persons snatching women and assaulting them for hours or days. The parents had to beg for mercy to free their daughters. The council members allegedly took the side of the powerful perpetrators instead of helping the victims and their families (Abusaleh & Islam, 2019:664, 667). The frequency of assaults was so high that the women were not even allowed to walk alone during the daytime without a male companion (cf. Basu, 2011:61). In most cases, the perpetrators were not external intruders; instead, they were known to the victims and possessed prestigious positions in the community. What I heard in my fieldwork was very similar to what one respondent told Partha Pratim Basu (2011:61) in his research:

The men, who commit these sins, are very intimate to us. At day, they call our women - sisters, mothers, paternal aunts, maternal aunts, *Boudi* (wife of elder brother) ... But, at night they do these heinous deeds before the eyes of our family members and the Police of Bangladesh, who are posted to guard them.

Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson argue that sexual violation is one of the best-used weapons by the state and patriarchal society to consolidate control over the bodies in the borderland (1999:148). During the conflicts between the residents of *chbitmahals* and neighboring host country villages, often the first response was raping, torturing, or kidnapping women of the opponent group. The validation of sexual violence as an accepted strategy to defend the community was reflected in the quote of one of Jason Cons' (2013:42) respondents:

Some drunken Indians abducted Lothibor Munshi's wife, and released her after molesting and assaulting her. With the aid of Jamal Shadu [a local quasi-mythical outlaw], we also kidnapped an Indian girl and took her here. She was released after a nightlong torture.

According to Monir Ahmed, impoverished women were the frequent victims of sexual assaults. Unlike the wealthy women who could afford to stay in their secured homes, insolvent women had to go out, work as housemaids or wage laborers for the wealthy families. They were either assaulted by their employers or targeted by the perpetrators during their commute. The risk of losing work and income forced the victims, in most cases, to suffer in silence. Furthermore, there was not any policing service inside the *chbitmahals*. The Bangladeshi police also refused to help the *chbit* victims even if the perpetrators were Bangladeshi citizens (cf. Basu, 2011:61). Incidents that created a buzz

in the community were resolved through either arranging marriage between the perpetrator and the victim or financial punishments.<sup>54</sup>

When the sociopolitical rights of the *chhitbashi* were abandoned in the stateless era, the *chhit* women shared the greater portion of misery. Considering they were not protected by any legal codes, the male-dominated *chhit* governance exploited female bodies, which made the women vulnerable to public and private forms of patriarchy and gender violence and produced a bare life for them within *chhitmahals* (Shewly, 2013:28, 29). The list of things the *chhit* women ‘could not do’ or ‘did not have’ was not short. The *chhit* women could not vote or compete in council elections, which strangled the female voice in the community. Many men illicitly collected Bangladeshi identity documents and exercised comparatively normal movements in the public spaces, but the women were ignored as they were confined within the household. The *chhit* women also did not have any property rights; patriarchal governance deprived them of land ownership, which sustained the custom of dowry in the marriage. Failure to pay the full amount of dowry, which was negotiated before the wedding, resulted in domestic violence and polygyny without the permission of the first wife. The *chhit* women also did not have access to crucial reproductive health services, and this resulted in maternal and infant mortality (cf. Shewly, 2013:29). The status of *chhitbashi*’s citizenship was already chaotic; but, the customary patrilocal marriage made it even more complicated for the *chhit* women. Hosna Shewly describes this amplified marginality in the following way:

Enclave women married in the enclaves generally spend their whole lives in an extra-legal space. The host country’s women that marry into the enclaves suffer the loss of citizenship in everyday practice; and enclave women married in the host country are either tortured or receive a new citizenship in the host country. (2013:29)

Nevertheless, the stateless *chhit* women were a crucial labor force of sharecropping agriculture. They actively participated in the planting and harvesting of crops. Without the economic contribution of women, none of the average *chhit* households could survive. Except for the wealthy families that kept the women confined within the home for the sake of prestige and *purdah*,<sup>55</sup> the poorer the household was, the stronger the contribution of women was. For example, when my friend Ameer

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<sup>54</sup> In Chapter 6, I discuss an incident in the stateless era where a rapist paid financial compensation to the victim’s family and the *chhit* elites participated in such a gender-exploitative negotiation.

<sup>55</sup> An Islamic and Bangladeshi cultural practice of the seclusion of women to uphold the family honor and conservative religious values (Huang, 2017:13).

Uddin's family illicitly traveled to India to work in the brick kiln, his mother and his father both sold their labor. He acknowledged that when they returned to Dasiar Chhara, without her livestock income, his family could have fallen into destitution. On the other hand, in Balapara Khagrabari, my mentor Mannan Hussain could not make any profit out of his sharecropping if his wife, two daughters, and three daughters-in-law had not also invested their labor. Besides contributing to their own family farms, many *chhit* women worked as housemaids of wealthy Bangladeshi families for additional income. The dowry that the women brought into the marriage provided capital for many *chhit* men's agriculture and businesses. Deprived of land ownership, voting rights, health care, and public voice, the *chhit* women seemed to exist only for men's material benefit.

## Review

*Chhitmahals* were in a chaotic limbo for nearly seventy years. Despite being sovereign territories, the parent states failed to protect them from unauthorized invasions and provide the material needs of the *chhitbashi*. Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan) and India adopted different governance strategies to administer non-contiguous *chhitmahals* since the Partition, but a regular, legitimized presence of state government was absent. Instead, both nations exercised their administrative control in an irregular and repressive manner. The chaos intensified when powerful outsiders illicitly intruded on the *chhit* landscapes. Bangladesh did not officially invade or occupy the two *chhitmahals* I studied; instead, invasions of influential Bangladeshi citizens disturbed the life and livelihood security inside these territories. In addition to the absence of public goods and infrastructure, such illicit non-state invasions forced the *chhitbashi* to explore livelihood options in Bangladesh - also in an illicit fashion.

Carolyn Nordstrom argues that people tend to violate all repressive legal bindings "by hook, by genius, by hard work or by crook" (2007:73) to secure a basic subsistence. Even if the borderland communities accept an inconvenient state border, they do it by manipulating the boundary itself. In most cases, this manipulation restores a 'normal' life that was disrupted by the sovereignty measures and reduces subsistence unpredictability (Dunn & Cons, 2014:98, 100). In surviving a distressful period augmented by the absence of the Indian government and an unauthorized presence of Bangladeshi citizens, the *chhitbashi* came up with a form of life lived within a triangular field of

relations. Through the *chbit* visa/passport, one side connected them with India to register their land. In another side, the *chbit* council oversaw the local administration, social leadership, development works, and documentation inside the *chbitmahals*. The final side stretched to a horizontal community with Bangladeshi neighbors that opened the access to profitable agriculture, education, health care, and market facilities beyond the boundaries of the *chbitmahals*. Collective illicitness was the overarching theme in this triangle; almost every action defied the sovereign codes of either Bangladesh or India or both.

These three sides enabled the *chbitbashi* to claim their rights and organize their community in a sustainable order. Their mobility was restricted, so they normalized illicit movement routes. Their economy was criminalized, but they did not stop producing. They were deprived of administration, so they developed their own council. Their parent state failed, so they expressed their allegiance to the host state. They were deprived of identity documents, so they forged it. They were denied official registration, so they developed their own land registration and headcount. In every step, oppression and abandonment turned them into a creative, stronger community that developed its own *chbit* identity. Even outsiders acknowledged that they had a stronger community feeling than their citizen-neighbors. They succeeded in all this without any bureaucrats or policemen (Van Schendel, 2002:133, 134).

It was an equilateral triangle; had the extent of any side fallen short, the *chbitbashi* could not survive. Unfortunately, that was what had happened when the Indian government suspended the facilities of the *chbit* visa because of corruption allegations. The council members turned into abusive and exploitative giants, and more 'bad' started to pour in from the horizontal community-making with the Bangladeshi neighbors than 'good.' The failure of two nations not only to serve basic needs but to uphold the sovereignty of *chbitmahals* suffocated the life of *chbitbashi*. They could not bear the uncertain, fluid life anymore. Adopting Bangladeshi citizenship remained as the only option for the Indian *chbitbashi*, and they officially expressed their allegiance to Bangladesh by launching the India-Bangladesh Enclave Exchange Coordination Committee (popularly known as *Shomonnoy* Committee) in 2008. As their triangular framework broke down, they boosted their demand for the swap of *chbitmahals* and citizenship of Bangladesh.

However, a group of exploitative, opportunistic, and abusive *chbit* individuals saw a massive loss of income and power, and control in the swap. The *chbitbashi* named them *Shanti* Committee after the



infamous group of Bangladeshis that opposed the independence of Bangladesh in 1971's liberation war and built an alliance with the enemy state of West Pakistan. The *Shanti* Committee preferred the *chhitmahals* to remain non-contiguous territories of India, whereas *Shomonnoy* (swap) Committee wanted Bangladeshi citizenship. The massive public support behind the *Shomonnoy* Committee assisted them in organizing a powerful pro-swap campaign in both Bangladesh and India, which eventually succeeded in 2015 when both nations agreed to swap their non-contiguous *chhitmahals* with each other. The merger with Bangladesh reconfigured the landscapes of *chhitmahals* and refashioned the lifestyle and socioeconomic practices of the *chhitbashi*. Citizenship and nation-building projects have left behind the stateless past, abolished the council practices, and replaced the community leadership. But, the past did not entirely disappear; it has been coming back to shape the present. Many council leaders who took advantage of their position and oppressed the *chhitbashi* are now struggling to gather public support to compete in local government elections. In the meantime, youth have begun to challenge the class hierarchy that once obstructed the agency of ordinary *chhitbashi*.

The next chapter explores the changes that nation-building projects have brought to the former *chhitmahals*. It will particularly focus on the new roads, electricity grids, and schools to investigate how the new infrastructures reshaped *chhitmahal* society and politics. The chapter argues that the design and functions of new infrastructures introduced transactional politics and corruption as a constitutive element of building a nation. The chapter further explains how the infrastructures have sped up socioeconomic progress, channeling state control over the *chhitbashi*, transforming them as loyal voters, and, simultaneously, provoking them as active agents of national politics.

## CHAPTER 3

### FINDING A NATION IN INFRASTRUCTURES

Me: Hello, Ameer. How are you?

Ameer: Rashed Bhai, I am doing okay. How are you?

Me: I am doing fine. Happy New Year!

Ameer: What? I cannot hear you. The network is not good here, and I am in a noisy place.

Me: I said, "Happy New Year"!

Ameer: Ooh! Happy New Year! Rashed Bhai, I am in Dhaka. I cannot talk right now; I will knock you on Facebook later.

Me: Okay, Bhai. Bye. Take care.

Ameer abruptly hung up.

That was the conversation between me and Ameer Uddin - a friend from Dasiar Chhara and my local research mentor - when I called his cell phone number on the eve of 2019 to wish him a joyful new year. Six hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time, Bangladesh had meanwhile embraced the first afternoon of the new year. Ameer is a slow speaker, and a pleasant smile always sticks to his chin, but that afternoon he rushed, his voice echoed exhaustion. A few weeks before that phone call, we talked over Facebook Messenger; he was in Dasiar Chhara, desperately looking for employment like other educated *chhit* youths. Later that day, Ameer left a text on my Messenger:

Happy New Year! How are you, Rashed Bhai? I now live in Dhaka, along with my wife, and work at a knit manufacturing factory in Maona. I wanted to talk to you more, but we had restrictions over the phone conversations. I work long hours standing on my feet; it is exhausting. But I must do this job; I cannot afford unemployment anymore. Do you remember I told you that the government was planning to build a college in Dasiar Chhara? Well, it has been sanctioned. I want to apply for a teaching position in the philosophy

department. I talked to Ruhul Bhai and Hussain Chairman. They demanded eight hundred thousand taka as a bribe. I already paid one hundred thousand. If I get the job, I will go back to Dasiar Chhara. Wish me luck. Allah Hafez.

A *chhit* youth who overcame many obstacles to earn a college degree now worked 10-12 hours every day in a garment factory, which is condemned as modern-day industrial slavery (see Guardian, 2013), to earn between 125-150 dollars a month. This message was not comforting to me. However, my intention in showing our conversation is not to express my sympathy for the hardship he had been enduring. His message, instead, hinted at many unexpected events that had been happening in Dasiar Chhara since the appearance of the first state administration in the *chhitmahals*.

The people of Dasiar Chhara had experienced hardship in the stateless period; nonetheless, they invested extraordinary efforts, mostly, to send their children to schools and colleges for a better future. Without any citizenship documents, school enrollment was almost impossible; however, Ameer's parents enrolled him in a neighboring school using forged identity documents. They even sent him to a district college. His education expenses were paid by both licit and illicit earnings of the entire family. When Ameer was in eighth grade, he illegally crossed the border along with his impoverished parents, who were desperately looking for work to feed and educate their children. They went to India to work in brick kilns, which were also known for extreme inhuman labor exploitation (BBC, 2014). After two years living in a slum in New Delhi, they returned to Dasiar Chhara having saved some money. In addition to his father's farming and mother's livestock income, a part of this saving was spent in Ameer's college education. The dream behind all this hard work, risk, and sacrifice was to become an affluent family when Ameer eventually gets a job. He is the only son of his aging parents who depend on him for the subsistence of the extended family. Realizing the responsibility, Ameer was desperately looking for a job - any job. His wife also finished a BA degree and is now, also, looking for a job.

Ameer graduated from college at a time when the *chhitmahals* were at the threshold of merging with the state administration, which nurtured his dream of a job in Bangladesh as a Bangladeshi citizen. He was an active member of the swap movement where the leaders inspired the youths by promising that qualified *chhit* individuals would get priority in job vacancies at the newly built schools, colleges, and other service-infrastructure. The government officials unofficially agreed. But

these moral responsibilities, community obligations, and promises changed as soon as the government started to build infrastructure in Dasiar Chhara.

The two persons Ameer mentioned in his text - Ruhul Bhai and Hussain Chairman - were very influential in Dasiar Chhara politics. Ruhul Amin was one of the top leaders of the IBEECC that led the swap movement, and Ameer was one of his loyal comrades. As a popular revered community leader, Ruhul found himself in a unique position to represent Dasiar Chhara in government planning, which made him a strong middleman between the government and the public. He actively guided the local government where schools were to be built or which roads should get the priority to be paved. Like many youths, Ameer felt betrayed by him because he cared more for personal gains in mediating between the state and the community. He allegedly spent an enormous amount of time in the secretariat in Dhaka to 'sell' the miseries of *chhitmahals* to the high-level bureaucrats to bring development projects to Dasiar Chhara. He, also, was said to have lobbied for the college Ameer has been trying to get a job in. It was surreal to Ameer that he participated in the swap movement to establish the rule of law in Dasiar Chhara, and yet now his former leader would not recommend him for a teaching position without a high amount of bribe.

Hussain Ali, on the other hand, was the sitting elected chairman of Fulbari *union parishad* that had jurisdictional authority over one of the three partitioned neighborhoods of Dasiar Chhara.<sup>56</sup> Hussain was also a local leader of the ruling party, BAL, that has been trying to strengthen the party presence in the *chhitmahal*. Being the elected representative of Fulbari, he was also in a privileged position to influence government planning in Dasiar Chhara, which included more jobs, schools, roads, and aid for those who showed loyalty to his party in order to gain support in upcoming elections. Besides, he received a cut of the bribes all these enterprises entailed. The illicit alliance of these popular leaders and elected local government representatives was incomplete without the participation of local bureaucrats. After receiving the bribe Ruhul and Hussain might recommend Ameer for the job, but the subdistrict education officer had the authority to approve his recruitment and enlist him for the government Monthly Pay Order (MPO) system,<sup>57</sup> probably after getting his cut from the 'speed money.'

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<sup>56</sup> More information about the partition of Dasiar Chhara in page 12 & 92.

<sup>57</sup> The MPO system is the bridge that connects non-government educational institutions with government support. Ideally, the Bangladesh government includes a non-government institution into the MPO system based on certain conditions and performances (e.g., number of students, pass rate). The salary and other benefits of teachers and employees of MPO-listed institutions are partially provided by the government.

Ameer later clarified that there is no denying that schools, colleges, and other new service-infrastructure normalized and humanized everyday *chhit* lives. People now live in a modernized space and a land of law. Dasiar Chhara kids now go to school without feeling insecurity and embarrassment of not-belonging. The *chhitbashi* are connected to a broader horizon of sociopolitical connections and have more diverse livelihood possibilities. However, the complicated politics around the construction and maintenance of such development projects simultaneously formed a system of patron-client relationships where community leaders, political parties, and bureaucrats provided the *chhitbashi* with employment, services, and facilities in exchange for a bribe and electoral support. The transformation of their homeland not only brought together a wide range of new actors in Dasiar Chhara, but also destabilized their old community relations. In Ameer's imagination, that's how a state and its projects work.

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### **Reconfiguring the Jungle**

Ten years ago, when American geographer Reece Jones published an article on the statelessness of *chhitmahals*, he quoted one of his research participants: "There are no roads, no bridges, no food, it [the *chhitmahal*] has become a jungle, and I am a jungle animal" (2009:373). The absence of any sort of infrastructure or basic needs in the *chhitmahals* was evident in the quote. However, the *chhit* landscapes were entirely different when I went to Balapara Khagrabari and Dasiar Chhara just two years after the swap and eight years after Jones' article. A traditional state-space featuring roads, electricity, *bazaars*, schools, and other facilities had meanwhile replaced 'the jungle.'

This transformation started one and a half months after the swap with the visit of Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to Dasiar Chhara to officially inaugurate the infrastructure projects. Standing in Kalirhat - the center of the *chhitmahal* - in her speech, she said, "The days of agony have ended... Do not consider yourselves as residents of enclaves anymore. You are now citizens of this country [Bangladesh]" (BDNews24, 2015). She promised to take all the necessary steps for the welfare of the new citizens and laid out a plan to refashion the former *chhitmahals* by building different projects, e.g., schools, mosques, clinics, electricity grids, temples, police stations, information centers and roads (BDNews24, 2015). To show her good intentions on that day, she

officially launched the grid electricity transmissions in Dasiar Chhara. By the time I finished my fieldwork, the *chhitmahal* was almost entirely refashioned with these facilities, while Balapara Khagrabari was only slowly catching up.

Since the Enlightenment, infrastructure such as roads, electricity, irrigation, and railways, have been the signs of a ‘modern’ progressive society (Mattelart, 1996 *as cited in* Larkin, 2013:332). Brian Larkin argues that,

By promoting circulation [of goods, ideas, and people], infrastructures bring about change, and through change they enact progress, and through progress we gain freedom. Perhaps this process explains why as objects they provoke deep affectual commitments, particularly, but not only, in developing societies. (2013:332)

Nation-states have been relentlessly building infrastructures to pursue the common goal of modernity; sometimes, their constructions do not even intend to achieve the technical outcomes. When a socialist state like Albania imposes strict control over the ownership of cars but still built miles of empty roads, this desire to be a techno-developed modern society seems to work like a political fetish (Dalakoglou 2010 *as cited in* Larkin, 2013:333). No wonder the Prime Minister’s plan was heavily focused on infrastructures. Considering the politicized bureaucracy of Bangladesh that encourages political corruption in development projects (Arfina Osman, 2010), her reconfiguration plan involved a risk of spreading a negative image of the first state administration in the *chhitmahals*, which unfortunately, eventually developed among many people like Ameer. Still, she designed her plan ‘by the book’ and considered infrastructural interventions as a strong channel to enable the former Indian ‘jungles’ (i.e., *chhitmahals*) to catch up with her vision to elevate Bangladesh as a middle-income country by 2021 and a developed country by 2041 (BDNews24, 2015).

The local government administration followed her lead, and following her visit started building infrastructures in *chhitmahals*. Since the Prime Minister announced her plan in Dasiar Chhara, it got the first priority. During my stay I came across a wide range of new infrastructural projects there, including administrative offices, roads, schools, colleges, mosques, police camps, temples, solar panels, irrigation pumps, grid electricity, bridges and culverts, cellphone towers, *bazars*, a community center, cyber center and many others. A community health clinic was under construction, and a new plan to build a post-office and a multi-storey market complex have been

announced. Balapara Khagrabari administration and other *chhitmahals* also constructed some of these facilities and were planning for the others.

*Chhitmahals* never had a fence to separate it from Bangladesh; a few small pillars did the work, which were removed following the merger with Bangladesh. In my initial field days, I struggled to find the boundary between *notun* and *pooran* Bangladesh. My mentor in Balapara Khagrabari Ehsan Rahman taught me a trick: “wherever you see a new electricity pillar in this area, be sure that piece of land used to be a former *chhitmahal*. If you walk down a newly paved street or an under-construction brick-soling road in the locality, that road is in a former *chhitmahal*.” The trick worked very well in my field navigations. Infrastructures now characterize the *chhitmahals*, not the roadless jungle bush.

Not just the state administration, but the *chhit* public was also obsessed with these facilities. I bothered my *chhit* friends with a simple question: “what is the most amazing feature of a state administration?” Three common answers in my notebook were: (a) “we have a paved road in our *chhitmahal*”; (b) “my children get free education and books at the primary school”; and (c) “I have electricity connection at my house.” My pre-fieldwork literature review led me to expect that the *chhitbashi* would consider identity documents (e.g., voter card, birth certificates) as the ultimate achievement of citizenship. However, I found that many *chhitbashi* already had forged these documents in the stateless era, which allowed them access to government facilities in Bangladesh, but inside the *chhitmahals* these documents were useless in bringing any physical change to the landscape. It was the infrastructures that made the first imprints of a nation-state in the *chhitmahals*.

### **Roads to Mobility and Entrapment**

In the beginning of fieldwork, my mentors spent an enormous amount of time helping me to know the important landmarks in *chhitmahals*. It was not until I started to move alone and find more jungle-like roadless areas that I realized that most of our casual walks ended up in specific neighborhoods that featured paved roads, schools, or a mosque. I was frequently uplifted to the judge’s chair with a question: “don’t you think our roads are as modern as city-streets?” Even people like Ameer, who had awful experiences caused by the politics of infrastructure, were not stingy in giving credit to the roads for giving their villages with a city-vibe. Roads and other infrastructures clearly carried their pride, emotions, and awe (cf. Larkin, 2013). This originated from the fact that

infrastructural services provided concrete manifestations of their claims to citizenship and facilitated interactions between the state and the *chhitbashi*. Being the users of these facilities gave them a sense of belonging to Bangladesh.

Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox (2012) show that such infrastructural enchantment is rooted in the promises of speed and connectivity, political freedom, and economic progress (523). During the ‘jungle’ era, the *chhitbashi* used to go to the neighboring *bazuar* on the *hutbar*<sup>58</sup> evening to buy the necessities that they did not produce at a cheaper price. If it got dark by the time they finished their business, they would wait for others to make up a group and return collectively to the *chhit*. Their fear was of getting mugged by local goons and losing everything. Now the paved roads, electric lights and a booming business of electricity-driven 3-wheelers (locally known as ‘auto’) reduced the travel time and made individual movement safer, and more frequent.

Through the roads, people opted for various means of livelihood. New *chhitmahal* roads connected many distant locations that created a thriving transportation business, which inspired many *chhitbashi* - following the swap - in buying ‘made-in-China’ electricity-driven autos and vans to secure subsistence. On a couple of occasions, I checked into auto fairs arranged by a few local companies in the *union parishad* headquarters, which indicated a huge demand for these commercial vehicles. Almost all the vehicles I rented throughout my fieldwork were purchased from local businesses through monthly installments. One of the van drivers I hired had migrated to Dhaka years before he got citizenship and used to make a living as a rickshaw-puller. The infrastructural transformation encouraged him to return to Balapara Khagrabari. Now he works fewer hours and earns less than in Dhaka but still makes more profit considering the high living costs in the capital. Besides, he gets to live with his family and can do sharecropping for additional subsistence security. In Balapara Khagrabari, I frequently hired Rahman’s rickshaw-van for travelling between different villages. He was a sharecropper who started to drive the van in off-seasons following the construction of paved roads. Farmers like him now save transportation costs because the new roads let the wholesalers come directly to them with their small trucks. The number of people who commute every day from and to *chhitmahals* was also growing fast.

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<sup>58</sup> *Hutbar* consists of two words: ‘*hut*’ (market) and ‘*bar*’ (day). In Bangladeshi villages, once or twice a week, local farmers gather in a specific place in the evening to sell their produce (e.g., vegetables, fish, spice) and livestock to customers at a cheaper rate.





Figure 8: Electricity-driven auto-rickshaws that revolutionized the transportation practices

However, roads do not merely follow the equation of material input and technical output. Mundane politics of unruly human and non-human forces often rewrite the promises of the roads (connectivity, prosperity, and freedom). Such forces do not just threaten to disrupt the best plans of the government, engineers, and politicians but also reformulate and articulate political relations (Dalakoglou & Harvey, 2012:461; Harvey & Knox, 2012:524). In *chhitmahals*, unruly forces from diverse spectra of the sociopolitical environment lurked in the initiation phase of the first government administration, significantly modifying the outcomes of road building. Detailing all these forces is beyond the scope of my thesis. Still, a few examples featuring elected local government representatives, subdistrict bureaucrats, and community leaders will help to understand ongoing infrastructural politics.

The first example concerns the road politics in Balapara Khagrabari. Sandwiched between the Nilphamari and Panchagarh districts of northern Bangladesh, Balapara Khagrabari was connected to them by roads. For years, the *chhitbashi* considered Botolganj, located in Nilphamari, as an essential

hub of their community and business relations. Many Balapara Khagrabari expatriates had land and businesses in Vogdaburi, also located in Nilphamari. The former councils of the *chhitmahal* was also led and dominated by some influential individuals of Vogdaburi. Therefore, Balapara Khagrabari always had a robust connection with Nilphamari. Nonetheless, Bangladesh merged Balapara Khagrabari with Chilahati *union parishad* of Panchagarh district based on historical land documents. When I was there the Chilahati administration was only paving the road between Balapara Khagrabari and Panchagarh. The most frequently used road, which also tied the *chhitmahal* with Nilphamari, was left muddy and submerged in the monsoon. It was alleged that the Chairman of Chilahati *union parishad* manipulated the bureaucracy to subvert communications between Balapara Khagrabari and Botolganj or Vogdaburi in order to diminish the influence of Nilphamari. His plan intended to capitalize on the newly paved road to incorporate the *chhitbashi* more into the affairs of Panchagarh, thereby transforming them into loyal voters. While the new roads improved the communication facilities, but such politicized decision obstructed the best outcomes of new roads as the local government ranked the development of roads based on politics, not on public necessity.

Communication networks shaped the trust between bureaucrats and the *chhitbashi* in a different way in Dasiar Chhara. Prior to the swap, Dasiar Chhara residents did not have a direct route to Fulbari subdistrict headquarters, and had to take a long detour along a muddy village road. The incorporation of the *chhitmahal* into Bangladesh united the community to chip in to build a wooden bridge to create a faster shortcut to the subdistrict headquarters. Two years later, the growing effectiveness of this bridge moved the local government to replace the wooden structure with a concrete bridge better suited to modern government vehicles. Standard practice in replacing a flimsy structure was to build a temporary alternative bridge to keep the movement flowing. Hence, the plan for the new bridge included a budget earmarked for that. However, the chief bureaucrat of the subdistrict administration did not build an alternative structure; instead, detractors claimed that he showed the old wooden bridge for that purpose in the record and allegedly plundered the budget reserved for that. The paved bridge was being built a few meters next to the wooden structure. In private conversations with me, some members of the community expressed their frustration that the government bureaucrats not only plundered the public budget but also abused their hard-earned wooden bridge in the corruption.

Such alleged corruptions have formed a distrust and animosity toward the state institutions, which could have been a distraction carefully planted by factional politics,<sup>59</sup> but it shaped the interactions between state and new citizens. The smell of corruption spread like wildfire through tea-stall gossips and Facebook posts. In every stakeholder meeting between the bureaucrats and the *chhitbashi* I attended people expressed their suspicions about possible corruption practices. They hardly believed in the goals of actual projects; instead, saw the development works as a way to put money into the pockets of bureaucrats and personnel blessed by the ruling party. The more the bureaucrats and politicians boasted about the success of different projects, the more they became suspicious. The worst consequence of such ‘assumed corruption’ was the normalization of actual corruption of newly emerged politically affiliated middlemen<sup>60</sup> who ‘helped’ *chhitbashi* in resolving bureaucratic problems (e.g., fixing address in beneficiary card, filing a police complain, entering name in subsidized allowance lists). One of the excuses they showed in defending their demand for illicit ‘commission’ was: “I have to pay a lot of people in the subdistrict office to fix your problems.” Corruption allegations let ordinary people believe that illicit bribing make things moving in the government offices.

Not just the outsiders (bureaucrats and politicians), such unruly forces were also active inside the *chhit* community to subvert government planning. Before the construction began, the bureaucrats had consulted with the community leaders to finalize the length, routes, and priority of road networks. In Dasiar Chhara, Ruhul Amin - who asked for a bribe from Ameer - was active in the negotiation process between the *chhitbashi* and the government. Both parties agreed to pave all the Dasiar Chhara roads in gradual phases based on priority. In this process, besides recommending the major roads, Ruhul convinced his friends in the government to prioritize and support a budget for a road that would connect his home with the main road. A few other leaders also influenced the government officials in the same way. Although the administration paved the major road networks in the *chhitmahal*, manipulating influence to impose these individual demands left many more frequently used neighborhood-roads at the bottom of the priority list that were still muddy and unsuitable to use in the monsoon.

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<sup>59</sup> In the upcoming sections and chapter, I show how the ruling party BAL monopolized the bureaucratic system. The BAL supporters bragged about the successful development works in virtual spaces and on the ground, whereas the supporters of the opposition party BNP smelled corruption in every project of BAL.

<sup>60</sup> I write more about their ‘percentage politics’ later in this chapter and Chapter 6.

The *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors were also a part of these infrastructural politics. Despite belonging to different subdistricts, Balapara Khagrabari was physically connected to two large *chhitmahals*, Kotvajini and Dahala Khagrabari. In reshaping the landscape, subdistrict bureaucrats approved a plan to pave a total of sixty kilometers road networks combined ‘inside’ these *chhitmahals*. However, some influential local politicians from *pooran* Bangladesh later influenced the bureaucrats to incorporate a few Bangladeshi roads in the plan. In a conversation with me, Enam Khasru, the former vice-chairman of Balapara Khagrabari *chhit* council, calculated that this corruption illicitly grabbed almost half of the road length that the government initially approved for the *chhit* triplet. Elderly and respected Delowar Zaman further added that the lobbied road contractors did not follow the standard construction measures. He affirmed that “you have to carpet *khoa* [mix of brick chips and water] in two steps. First, you carpet it with sand and use road-roller to level it. Second, you carpet *khoa* again, but this time with water, and level it again. Finally, you carpet asphalt and level it. But the contractors skipped the second step to plunder the budget money.”<sup>61</sup> Most these contractors were from neighboring *pooran* Bangladeshi villages. He suspected that the subdistrict engineers might pass the road, but it would not last long.

Madeleine Reeves (2014) argues that “infrastructures always seem to stand for things beyond themselves: one person’s promise of mobility is another’s prospect of entrapment” (242). All these sociopolitical forces did not deviate *chhitmahal* roads from their material focus. New roads developed new routes for transportation that further accelerated public movements and developed economic opportunities. The improved communication facilities, moreover, connected *chhitmahals* with the local administration in a more effective manner. But they also ignored the traditional routes and public preferences. The new roads did not speed up the movement of many *chhitbashi* who lived in neighborhoods that did not have political favor. For example, the area in Balapara Khagrabari that was closer and more involved with the Nilphamari district or the localities in Dasiar Chhara that did not home individuals with strong political and government connections did not enjoy equal outcomes of new, modern roads. These disadvantaged *chhit* areas also experienced weaker political integration between bureaucrats, politicians, and the ordinary people. Moreover, the design and construction phases focused more on how the *pooran* Bangladeshis, including the state officials,

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<sup>61</sup> I shared this process with a friend working in the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED). Delowar was absolutely correct. The LGED was responsible for the rural roads, which consist of three layers: Sub-base, Base, and Top/Bituminous layers.

would enter the *chhitmahals* rather than how the *chhitbashi* will access Bangladesh. Then there were electoral politics too in prioritizing the road networks.

### **Schooling Politics, Politicizing Schools**

*Chhitmahals* had an unusually large number of schools, *madradas* (religious schools), and colleges. They represented, in fact, the most visible form of institutional presence of a nation in these recently incorporated territories. Akhil Gupta (2012) argues that literacy had been the most significant component of bureaucracy in the Indian subcontinent. In postcolonial India, documentation, paperwork, and record-keeping link the central state with the public living in the periphery. In both India and Bangladesh, the lowest branch of local government does not function without writing and paperwork, which establishes a strong correlation between illiteracy and structural violence against the poor (cf. 191, 203, 207). At the same time, a literate class of citizens is required for the effective functioning of state bureaucracy; schools were, therefore, an automatic choice to raise the literacy rate in former *chhitmahals* to transform them into state-spaces.

*Chhit* schools, compared to the roads, were a more unfiltered display of power, wealth, privilege, and politics. The *chhitbashi*, many of them illiterate, had begun to nurture aspirations around schools even before construction started. The subsistence farmers imagined the schools as a ladder to an affluent and smart future for their educated and skilled children. My host in Balapara Khagrabari, Mannan Hussain - an illiterate sharecropper - was very keen about his children's schooling, but an orthodox official job was not the sole outcome he had in mind. He believed that if they could not find a nine to five job, they could always make a living by farming. Still, the school-knowledge and skills would be useful in navigating the 'rituals' (e.g., reading newspapers, filling out bureaucratic forms, dealing with banks and NGOs, or understanding state vernaculars) of modernity. In addition, there were also some people who struggled to feed their children three meals a day, hence considered schools as a daily provider of free lunch.

Schools, however, simultaneously promised financial benefits, political opportunities, and social prestige to a group of wealthy and well-connected *chhitbashi* who knew that a few government schools would not be capable of enrolling all the *chhit* students. So, they built schools, colleges, *madradas* throughout the *chhitmahals* with just a few rooms, a flag, and a signboard. Their primary

intention was to enlist their institution in the government MPO system or, at least, get authorization to enrol students. Balapara Khagrabari's most thriving school *Bongomata Sheikh Fazilatunnesa Mujib High School* (locally known as 'Bongomata School') came into existence in this wave. A few *chhitbashi* and the local government manipulated every required step of building this school for personal and political gains.



Figure 9: The Bongomata School in Balapara Khagrabari

Two influential and wealthy families donated land to build the school, which was not entirely unconditional. Akram Bepari's family donated two-thirds of the area of the property on the condition of employing his daughter-in-law as the school-librarian. Enam Khasru's family contributed the remaining one-third of the land in exchange for the appointment of his younger brother Rokon Mahmud as headmaster. In the pre-state era, both Akram and Enam held leadership positions in the former Balapara Khagrabari *chhit* council. They were said to have made a fortune by influencing council verdicts in various *chhit* conflicts in exchange for money. The abolition of the council following the swap caused a significant loss of power and money for them. In such a changing circumstance, this school came to their rescue.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> At the end of Chapter 6, I describe how Enam's family has manipulated a sexual assault allegation to grab money from their community rivals.

They knew the competition to get MPO status was tight; they might fail to secure it by following the conventional measures: high student enrolment, solid infrastructure, better pass rate, skilled administration, and qualified teachers. So, they orchestrated effective political lobbying in a time when major political parties were searching for a stable ground in *chhitmahals*. They formed a school board full of influential local BAL politicians from *pooran* Bangladesh. But a few other competitors did that too, so they planned another move to stay one step ahead. They named the school after the wife of the founder of the BAL, and the nation of Bangladesh, who was popularly described as *Bongomata* (mother of Bangladesh). They reached out to an ambitious politician from adjacent Chilahati, locally known as Sitara Apa, who happened to be an assistant to an influential government minister. Sitara Apa's wealthy father illicitly bought acres of land in Balapara Khagrabari during the stateless era, and the then *chhit* council members Akram and Enam assisted him. Through her father, who was offered the position of the president of the school board, they requested Sitara Apa to convince the minister to inaugurate the school formally. Sitara Apa was considering an MP-run for the upcoming national election and did not waste the chance to strengthen her electoral support among the new voters of Balapara Khagrabari. All these political possibilities succeeded when the minister inaugurated the school.

That single event ensured a form of bureaucratic validity for the school and put it on a fast-track for getting MPO status. Following an immediate authorization of enrollment, students started to pour in from different *chhit* neighborhoods. Besides student fees, the recruitment of teachers opened up a robust income opportunity. The enterprise of Akram and Enam had taken a bribe from the teaching candidates - like Ameer's case - before appointing them in the school.<sup>63</sup> The recruited teachers also had personal or family affiliations with the BAL. In my first conversation with the headmaster Rokon Mahmud, he had the confidence to say that "if this party stays in power, undoubtedly my school will get the MPO status because no bureaucrat in this country can deny the order of the minister who inaugurated our school." This political loyalty came with a prize.

The blessing of a powerful minister awarded the 'gang' affiliated with the school with a free pass to meddle in law and order situations to earn illicit money. When I was in the field, Rokon's nephew was involved in a hit and run case that killed one person, but he did not face any police

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<sup>63</sup> The possibility of an illicit income from recruitment bribes played an important role behind the construction of some other schools. Some school boards grabbed bribes from candidates even before the authorization to enroll students or recruit teachers.

investigation, and the case was resolved outside the court. Furthermore, involvement with a noble institution, i.e., a popular school, earned them a form of status in the community. People were aware of their illicit acts, but at the same time, feared and respected them. This weird combination gave them significant social importance, and so Rokon was suggested to me multiple times as a key person whom I should talk to first before starting fieldwork in Balapara Khagrabari. The school was a shield for these opportunistic actors in strengthening their political, financial, and community influences. In the pre-state era, the *chbit* council had served these purposes. None of the schools that were founded by the followers of the opposition party BNP could even secure the authorization to start student-enrollment.

Miles away in Dasiar Chhara, a *madrasa* headmaster also adopted the name *Sheikh Fazilatunnesa Mujib* for his *madrasa*. He initially planned to name it Mujib-Indira Madrasa to honor the historic Mujib-Indira Land Boundary Agreement (LBA), but later changed his mind to appropriate the current political climate. Ruhul Amin, from Ameer's text, also founded a school that was the only recipient of government funds in Dasiar Chhara. He appointed his elder brother as the headmaster of the school who had already occupied a teaching position in another school. One of his competitors in school politics had participated in the swap movement to earn community support and invest that in building a school; another recently joined the BAL to secure political lobbying for MPO status for his school. All five private schools in Dasiar Chhara that had received authorization from the subdistrict administration were enrolling students for free to attract as many students as possible and make a solid case for the MPO application. The school boards earned money mainly by taking bribes from the teachers who were unpaid but promised a fixed salary once the schools got MPO status. Both the school boards and teachers considered that phase as their investment period, which would pay off when their institution got MPO status. Through the political affiliation with the founders, the BAL was also a significant beneficiary of these schools in both Dasiar Chhara and Balapara Khagrabari: the schools educated children, employed political supporters, literally carried out the party name, and overall strengthened the electoral benefits. The schools and the BAL served each other's interests.



## Enclave Electric

For many reasons I used to wrap up my fieldwork before dusk; safety and frequent blackouts were my key concerns. Either smugglers or random criminals took over the nights in the literature on stateless *chhitmahals* or Bangladesh-India border (e.g., Basu, 2011:61; Van Schendel, 2013:266). But as I gradually eased myself into the *chhitmahals*, I explored a vibrant nightlife that was safe and licit, powered by grid electricity. Watching the night matches of sports tournaments with my friends on television helped me to understand the rapidly changing meaning and management of time in *chhitmahals*. I do not intend to discount the literature on the nightlife; instead, my late-night soccer co-enthusiast Ameer's version of stateless nights portrayed similar facts:

In the absence of electricity-powered bulbs, an ordinary stateless night in Dasiar Chhara would embrace complete silent darkness as soon as the daylight disappears. In addition to the random thugs, two groups will slowly crawl into the night: participants and audience of the gambling and obscene theatre, and drug dealers and their clients of illegal marijuana and phensedyl.

Other research participants also often painted a vile scenario of dark stateless nights: either someone was murdered and his body was dismembered, or, someone's livestock was stolen. At night, electric light worked as the boundary-marker between a Bangladeshi village and a *chhitmahal*; i.e., the *chhit* area started where the light ended. Kerosene lanterns were used to light the households, but lighting the porch or street was a luxury. Mobility was interrupted by robbery and other insecurities fostered by the darkness. As a result, the productive working hours were mostly limited to the daytime; nights were for hanging out with neighbors in the front-yard, eating dinner, doing the prayers, and sleeping.

Following the inauguration of electricity transmission by the Prime Minister in Dasiar Chhara, the light of bulbs and grid power gradually changed everyday lives. The most profound impact was on the management of time (cf. Winther & Wilhite, 2015:575). The length of the productive day significantly extended. The farmers could bag their post-harvest crops at night or go to the *bazaar* to meet retailers. The household bulbs brightened the streets for the movement of vans and autos. Roadside tea-stalls have installed televisions to attract customers. The households also added new appliances to the usual stock (e.g., television, mobile phone, ceiling fan, LED bulbs) and adopted a bunch of new practices. Students can now study at night. Finishing the cooking within the day was

not mandatory anymore. The evening was a great time to put the livestock in the stall and take care of them. A new family time came into being, which included watching television dramas together. These new practices created a productive, safe community space at night (cf. Gupta, 2015:557).



Figure 10: Reconfigured landscape of Dasiar Chhara featured modern roads and grid electricity

Grid power overnight connected the *chhitbashi* with the nation and exposed them to diverse sociopolitical dimensions. Meter-registration provided the government with a unique opportunity to record updated identifying information of every *chhit* household. Paying the electricity bill was the only mandatory bureaucratic formality people performed every month. Therefore, at least once a month, people revisited their stance on the service provider (i.e., the Rural Electrification Board) of low-voltage electricity and frequent blackouts in exchange for a big chunk of their income. In the pre-grid era, many *chhitbashi* did not even know the appearance of state-heads or popular ministers of Bangladesh. Now the news and political speeches covered by the television media transformed the national and regional political leaders into household figures, which developed a sense of belonging to Bangladesh (cf. Winther & Wilhite, 2015:571). The television shows linked the *chhitbashi* with the national culture through movies, music, fashion, or live telecast of the republic day parades. The cheaper Chinese mobile phones brought the external world to their palm through social media, which made it very easy to comment on a political corruption post or appreciate a good cricket

match. These new electric connections worked as remote tools to govern people and, simultaneously, form an imagined national community (see Anderson, 1991).

Electricity appeared to be a form of energy that powered safety, productivity, and connectivity in *chhitmahals*, but people have paid a price for that. Electro-politics has enabled the state to reinforce social hierarchy and corrupt practices. The majority of *chhit* households used electricity for three purposes: lighting the bulbs, powering ceiling fans, and charging their mobile phones, which usually cost them 80-100 taka (\$1-1.5) each month.<sup>64</sup> Television was still a luxury purchase. After the roads and grid electricity, vans showed up as a source of income. Some families charged the engine batteries of their commercial vans at home, which often consumed more than the allocated kilowatts for household usage. In such cases, the government officials used to charge them the commercial rate, which sometimes resulted in a four to five times higher bills. Both the clients (e.g., the *chhitbashi*) and officials often settled these cases through the exchange of a bribe. Furthermore, the government had drawn the map of grid transmission lines prior to the infrastructural reconfiguration, but the later construction of roads and other establishments drastically changed the landscape. Previously, some sharecroppers used to live in the middle of farmlands for crop security. After road construction, they rebuilt their houses beside the roads for better communications. But government officials then refused to provide electricity to their homes since the changed locations did not comply with the original grid map. This was also eventually resolved by bribing the officials.

The officials that were very strict to the poor *chhitbashi*, however, were very generous toward the rich. In Dasiar Chhara, they built a solar plant to power an irrigation pump that was supposed to be a public resource; instead, the officials gave the control of the pump to one of the wealthiest businessmen of the *chhitmahal* who also had political affiliation with the ruling party.<sup>65</sup> This corruption did not always involve illicit monetary transactions<sup>66</sup> but reinforced the sociopolitical hierarchy in the community and distrust between the *chhitbashi* and the state.

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<sup>64</sup> For an average *chhit* household that was primarily dependent on sharecropping for livelihood, this monthly bill consumed a mentionable portion of their income considering the rising costs of citizenship-lifestyle.

<sup>65</sup> The fisheries department launched a similar public demonstration project in the same individual's pond.

<sup>66</sup> Non-monetary corruption mostly included the ruling party providing extra advantages (for example, more government allowances, competitive development contracts, legal shelter) to certain individuals in exchange for their loyal political support while depriving the political opponents of their deserved government aid.

## Review

I started my fieldwork at a time when the entire nation was hyped up about the upcoming national election, but the intensity was stronger in the *chhitmahals* because it was their first chance to exercise constitutional voting rights in parliamentary elections. A possible MP nominee from the area further intensified the heated political debates where one party, the BAL, evidently dominated: *Eibar o Awami League jitbe* (Bangladesh Awami League will win this election too). The public arguments highlighted the new roads, schools, electricity, and other infrastructures that had been historically a significant catalyst in South Asian elections (Gupta, 2015:557), including Bangladesh. Considering their populist demand, BAL-led government strategically emphasized infrastructures. Besides roads, electricity grid, and schools, the government - in an exceptional manner - also built technical schools, special schools for disabled children, digital information centers, community centers, mosques, and shrines. Projects for a post office, commercial multi-complex, and community clinics were under construction. Even a regular (*pooran*) Bangladeshi village did not have all these facilities. This extra care provided a strong attraction to the new *chhit* voters. BAL candidates publicized the infrastructural projects and their promise in national and local campaigns and won a sweeping victory. The infrastructures and the resulting election victories helped the BAL in building a strong political base in *chhitmahals*, which also empowered their party associates to use the bureaucracy for personal gain.

These politicized infrastructures simultaneously provided the state with an everlasting material appearance. Michel Foucault believed that the art of state-government, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, had shifted its focus to the political dimensions of the architecture of space; a form of urbanism based on collective facilities (e.g., railroads, electricity, hospitals) appeared to be new ways to discipline and regulate the population (*as cited in* Rabinow, 1984:240-243). Besides exercising vertical authority, optimizing, and controlling the productivity and capabilities of a population in a territory became a significant target (Foucault, 2007 *as cited in* Gupta, 2012:238). Through the new infrastructures, the state, not the *chhit* councils anymore, took over the control of both the sociopolitical and natural environments of *chhitmahals*. Roads now discipline public movement, schools discipline knowledge about history and politics, police camps control law and order, electricity regulates global communication, irrigation pumps control water and agriculture, bridges protect the public from floods, and the state television (Bangladesh Television/BTV) controls political realities.

Furthermore, the *shorkari* (government) infrastructures reinforced a well-known and already existing *shorkari* practice in *chhitmahals*, i.e., *durniti* (corruption). The public obsession with infrastructure had a significant relation to corruption. Since the infrastructures were the first step of nation building in *chhitmahals*, a great deal of people's experience about the "rupture and contamination" (Harvey & Knox, 2015:137) in public ethics involved infrastructures. The arguments, rumors, and sarcasm about corruption dominated the everyday conversations, which simultaneously confirmed the ubiquity of the nation of Bangladesh in public culture (cf. Gupta, 1995). I hardly had an afternoon hangout where my friends did not talk about corruption in road construction, electricity meter connections, recruitment of teachers, and distribution of government aid.

Akhil Gupta argues that retail corruption is a discursive mechanism of the state-building process rather than being merely a matter of bureaucratic dysfunction (1995:376). Such corruption allegations brought the *chhit* public, subdistrict bureaucrats, local government representatives, and state organizations together and shaped the first impression of the state among the new citizens, i.e., *notun* Bangladeshis. In retail corruption, lower-level bureaucrats or elected politicians grab a small amount of money from a large number of people and the rupture in standards is limited to a specific locality. Unlike grand corruption executed out of the public eye that affects an entire nation, instances of retail corruptions are visible, and the public experience it in their everyday lives. The corrupt politicians of the region also often redistribute their wealth among the community to influence their electoral decision (Gupta, 1995:376, 384 & 2017:16, 17). The retail infrastructural corruption in *chhitmahals* did not just benefit the subdistrict politicians and bureaucrats, the former *chhit* council leaders who once represented and led *chhitmahals* also made a fortune out of it. Such corruption, which was not always monetary but often was transactional, was an inseparable political force in the development and electoral practices of the nation.

In this way, infrastructures were an equivocal techno-political step of nation-building in *chhitmahals*. They marked the presence of government and transformed anomalous *chhitmahals* into modern spaces of laws but, at the same time, introduced transactional politics everywhere. They developed cynicism about the state and government among people like Ameer but simultaneously fuelled resistance against school and electricity corruption. They enhanced the subsistence security and economic progress of the *chhitbashi* and assisted new political leadership but also damaged traditional community cohesion between the leaders and the public. Electricity, new roads, schools, and other infrastructures implemented, at least partially, their promises in *chhitmahals* but simultaneously

entangled the public life with a complicated and heterogeneous sociopolitical system that was autonomous from technical functions (cf. Larkin, 2013:335).

The next chapter continues exploring how the *chbitbashi* have been navigating the nation-building processes, but the focus will be shifted from infrastructure to the machinery of governance, including bureaucratic paperwork and non-state schemes. The critical goals of the chapter are to discuss the impacts of the new land recording process in *chbitmahals*, political clientelism in the guise of a traditional vertical bureaucracy, and the entanglement of apolitical and transnational actors (e.g., NGOs) in building a nation. Through considering citizenship as a paperwork process of bureaucracy, the chapter also explores how new citizenship has performed in nurturing nationalism and upholding traditional community cohesion.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **NAVIGATING THROUGH BUREAUCRACY AND PAPERWORK**

Event Title: Consultation Meeting about the *Pushbi Rice* with the Women Beneficiaries of Fulbari

Chief Guest: Mr. Bimal Kanti Dev, Additional Secretary, Cabinet Division

Chair: Ms. Rabeya Khanam, District Commissioner, Kurigram

Date: June 28, 2018

Venue: Dasiar Chhara Community Resource Center

Organizer: Subdistrict Office of the Ministry of Women & Children Affairs, Fulbari, Kurigram

I noticed these pieces of information written on the banner of one of the government-organized meetings I attended in Dasiar Chhara, where diverse actors of *chbit* affairs were interacting with each other. The event ‘officially’ aimed to run a round-table meeting between the service provider (i.e., state) and the clients (i.e., *chbit* women) about the benefits of special subsidized rice, *Pushbi Chal* (fortified rice). This rice was introduced in Bangladesh in 2013 by the World Food Programme (WFP), backed up by the Dutch science company DSM. The Kingdom of the Netherlands was a significant donor, and the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief and the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs of Bangladesh were the project partners (WFP, 2013:19).

*Pushbi Chal* was made of micronutrient kernels that aimed to supply necessary minerals and vitamins to everyday meals of vulnerable groups who were otherwise dependent on regular milled and polished rice for subsistence that provided only carbohydrates and was low in essential micronutrients (WFP, 2013:19). At the onset of nation-building, the government of Bangladesh allocated a monthly subsidy of 30-kg *Pushbi Chal* for each household in Dasiar Chhara as a Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) program. The women were selected to be the recipient of the subsidy. Why? Because they cook, not the men. This evident patriarchal attitude had a cover-up explanation: being the recipient of significant government support will empower the women at the household level and engage them more in state affairs and public spaces.

The event was held in the center of Dasiar Chhara, whose community leaders led the Bangladesh chapter in the swap movement. When the campaign was at its peak, for the sake of gathering and comprehensive planning, the leaders built a corrugated tin-shade structure to meet the representatives of other Bangladeshi *chhitmahals* and their Indian counterparts. All legendary leaders of the swap movement frequently visited the place to participate in the hunger strikes in the early 2010s and delivered political speeches. During the swap process, that meeting space became a negotiation center between government representatives and the *chhit* leaders to lay out a smooth transition. After the swap, the district administration paved the structure and built rooms with modern facilities for meetings and conferences and named it Community Resource Center. Since then, the center became the official location where the state met the *chhitbashi*, informed them about new government projects, distributed aid, trained them in information technologies, or how to vote in elections. Political leaders used the facility for their election campaigns. Targeting frequent public gatherings in the center, the local government installed shelves of political manifestos, books, historical documents, archival photographs, and old newspapers. The purpose of this was to educate the former Indian *chhitbashi* of Dasiar Chhara about Bangladesh's political history, Bangla culture, and the triumph of BAL in 1971's independence war. The entire facility was a subtle nationalistic project.

A wide range of actors participated in the meeting to represent the state. A cabinet secretary from Dhaka, the district commissioner, the subdistrict executive officer, the subdistrict women affairs officer, *union parishad* chairmen, the district food officer, the WFP representatives, the project leader of *Pushbi Chal*, the local police officer-in-charge, local BAL politicians, community leaders, educated youths, and more than a hundred ordinary *chhitbashi* were present in the meeting. The event was for *chhit* women, but men occupied one part - with the majority of chairs - of the table. I had entered the conference room an hour before the government guests arrived. Throughout that hour, the local organizers applied many efforts to discipline the audience. The subdistrict women affairs officer gathered the women on one side and men on the other. She asked the aged women to leave the room to make it an appropriate age group as instructed by the project. A couple of local BAL politicians from Dasiar Chhara briefed the women about what to say, what not to say, even how to sit. They were advised to keep smiling during the meeting and were told not to express too many frustrating opinions about the state-building process or make any demands to the government bureaucrats. The women were silent, scared, and confused. The politicians also warned the youths,



who went there to demand employment and anti-corruption measures, not to make the government officials uncomfortable by claiming any ‘irrational’ demands. A friend whispered into my ears that these leaders were infamous in Dasiar Chhara for appropriating government and NGO aid. No surprise that they tried to stop the *chhitbashi* from calling out the actors involved in corrupt development practices.



Figure 11: Historical photographs of Bangladesh in Dasiar Chhara community center

The local head of *Pushti Chal* project then started to brief the women about the project goals in case the state officials asked them any questions. The beneficiaries who gathered to discuss the project outcomes did not know much about it, so the project head instantly trained a couple of women to answer the question, “what are the benefits of *Pushti Chal*?” He asked a young woman who was educated, affiliated with the Bangladesh Student League (BSL),<sup>67</sup> and more vocal than the others to sit in the first chair at the women’s row. The project office rushed to provide the women with project pamphlets.

In the meantime, the higher-level bureaucrats and other guests entered the conference room, and the audience greeted them with a standing ovation. One of the BAL politicians that disciplined the crowd an hour ago moderated the meeting. All the guests delivered speeches that reiterated a key

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<sup>67</sup> Student wing of the BAL.

message: the BAL government has done extraordinary work to raise the living standard of the *chhitbashi*. The speakers did not forget to mention that providing *Pushti Chal* only to the female members of households was a project of women's empowerment. On the same note, the district administration suddenly declared that a total of thirty-three Dasiar Chhara women were scheduled to travel to Jordan for housemaid jobs as a result of a successful diplomatic treaty. This declaration surprised the ordinary people. Nobody had any clue about this project or who these women were or how they were selected. My friends smelled scam, 'another' fake project, and corruption in this announcement.

There was no Q&A or interactive session on the *Pushti Chal* as it was supposed to be. After the speeches, the moderator asked the women to 'say something' about the project. The young BSL supporter stood up and praised the current Prime Minister of Bangladesh and her government's contribution to the *chhitmahals*. No other women talked during the meeting. Then the moderator gave the floor to the (male) youths, and one of them - in an unhinged short speech - lashed out at the corrupted politicians and bureaucrats to their face and demanded immediate employment projects for educated *chhit* youths. He urged a relaxation of the qualifying requirements in government jobs for them considering their underprivileged stateless past. Despite the warning prior to the meeting, this defiance of the seasoned Dasiar Chhara politicians created an uncomfortable atmosphere. In the concluding speech, the chief guest - the cabinet secretary - promised to implement more development projects in Dasiar Chhara and take action against corrupt practices, but dismissed the possibility of giving the *chhit* youths any extra advantage in the job applications. The government guests left the Resource Center with another standing ovation. The round-table that was supposed to let the *chhit* women express their opinions about *Pushti Chal* eventually turned into a showdown of national politics, NGO regime, bureaucracy, new political order in *chhitmahals*, a breach in the community cohesion, and blatant patriarchy.

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### **Recording the Land and People**

In discussing the origin of nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1991) argues that in pre-modern empires, the centers governed the states, borders were fluid, sovereignty was not equally upheld

everywhere in the territory, and rule was stretched over non-contiguous areas. But a modern nation deploys its sovereignty evenly over every inch of its demarcated territory; contiguity is a mandatory precondition (19). Besides the military, modern state sovereignty relies a great deal on information and surveillance, e.g., cartographic records, land registration, and identification of individuals. The nation-state is a structural effect of these government practices that affect individuals and their activities but simultaneously stand apart from them while still retaining control over their lives (Mitchell, 2006:180). Building the nation in *chhitmahals*, therefore, included inscribing the state symbols on the land, individual identities, and ‘everything else’ in *chhitmahals*.

A few months after the swap, a few government land surveyors came to the fruit and vegetable gardens of Karim Mia, whose house I rented. Karim was a wealthy landowner of Balapara Khagrabari, who had approximately thirty acres of land, which he used for commercial production of mango, lychee, groundnut, corn, rice, and vegetables. Until the late 1990s, he registered his land in the Haldibari land registry office of Cooch Behar, India. Any subsequent exchange of property was not registered in any government records; instead, it was authorized by the Balapara Khagrabari *chhit* council.<sup>68</sup> It was the British Raj that conducted the last land survey in *chhitmahal* areas; neither India nor Bangladesh (or previously East Pakistan) had taken any initiative to record the landownership (Rabbani, 2017:88).

Therefore, the surveyors did not ask Karim to show any Records of Rights (ROR); instead, they came to record the location, ownership, and possession status of his land properties. They asked him a few simple questions in front of his gardens, e.g., *who makes a livelihood from this land?* and *Do you own it, or is it only in your possession?* He affirmed that he owned the properties, which were also in his possession. The question of possession was necessary because, in *chhitmahals*, a sharecropper could possess a piece of land without owning it. The last question was *what is the size of this land?* The surveyors verified Karim’s claim with four of his surrounding neighbors from four directions who agreed with him. Then, the surveyors gave him a *khanapuri* - a document that included information

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<sup>68</sup> The pieces of *chhit* land that were exchanged through council-drafted deeds, sometimes even verbally in the presence of council members, became the key target of land grab after the swap by the *chhitbashi* and *pooran* Bangladeshis.

about the location, ownership, possession, type, and the size of the holding. They prepared a *khanapuri* for each of his landholdings.<sup>69</sup>

A few weeks later, another group of surveyors returned to Karim's land with a draft *mouza* map to take official measurements of his properties with modern tools and finalize the *khatian* documentation. He came to know that a few of his sharecroppers claimed the ownership of one of his holdings in the *khanapuri*. He settled the case by showing the surveyors council approved land deeds, using political influence, and paying the surveyors a bribe of 3,000 taka. Such false claims, especially by the sharecroppers, to appropriate the land of absentee owner were rampant in the *khanapuri* process. A mutual negotiation to 'help each other' between two neighbors fabricated the majority of the false claims. But I bet a feeling of class resistance might have fueled some of these claims. Historically, the region had witnessed many agrarian revolts, including the remarkable *Tebhaga Movement* of sharecroppers demanding two-thirds of the production in the late 1940s (see Bandyopadhyay, 2001). It was the sharecroppers whose blood and sweat kept the *chhit* land productive in the time of uncertainty and lawlessness, while many landlords, including Karim, used their wealth to build a safe and secure home outside the *chhitmahals*. The *khanapuri* process gave sharecroppers an opportunity to avenge hierarchical class exploitation.

In the majority of the cases the landowners buried the false claims using their political connections and bribes. The surveyors allegedly made a considerable sum of money from these disputed cases. Even in the case of unchallenged holdings, they illicitly took 100-150 taka on an average from each landowner in the *khatian* process. Interestingly, I ran into many people who paid bribes to the surveyors without bearing a grudge. They were just relieved at recording their land ownership; the bribe amount was nothing compared to the benefit and security of state registration. Karim was sympathetic to the surveyors because of their plot-to-plot hard work, which originated from the

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<sup>69</sup> The agrarian law in Bangladesh still follows the British-drafted East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950, which declared the state as the landlord of all landholdings in the country; the owners of landholdings are the direct tenants who pay rents to the state (Quayum, 2003). To officially record a landholding, the settlement office generates a *khatian* (detailed document of land-right), assigns an identification number to it, and locates it in the cadastral *mouza* (lowest revenue unit in Bangladesh) map. *Khanapuri* is the beginning process of a *khatian* documentation. The surveyors send the *khanapuri* information along with angular and linear measurements to the drawing section of the settlement office that combines all the holdings into different plots of a draft *mouza* map. A second batch of surveyors returns to the holdings for measurement with modern survey tools; they cross-check the information, fix the errors, and resolve any disputed claims that arose in the *khanapuri* process. The *khatians* and *mouza* map are finalized after resolving all disputes and published as the official Records of Rights (ROR) (Hussain, 2003).

assumption that the field-level surveyors' devoted work sped up an otherwise lengthy land registration process. The *chhitbashi* got the *khatians* for their landholdings but were yet to receive the official ROR.

Karim praised the government's decision to record land ownership based on neighbors' confirmation. He believed that the ROR-based land registration, which was the standard process in Bangladesh, could have invalidated the land ownership of the majority. Some former *chhit* council leaders recommended this possession-based land-recording method to the government. Although ordinary people opposed the idea, I hardly met any wealthy individual who did so. Many affluent council personnel had stolen land from helpless people over the decades. They therefore preferred registration without the ROR, which allowed them to manipulate the *khanapuri* process using political influence and bribes. I cannot quantify the extent of land-loss, but the influential Daily Star reported that during the stateless era roughly 15 individuals grabbed 160 out of a total of 217 acres of land from the helpless people in Banshpacha, a *chhitmahal* in the neighboring Lamonirhat district (Daily Star, 2015c). As my mentors clarified, the *chhit* land was very cheap in the stateless era because the majority of the landowners did not have any state-approved proper documents, i.e., ROR. However, the land value drastically increased as the *chhitmahals* were about to be normalized, which further attracted the land grabbers to execute this wholesale land-robbery.

The public knew the land robbers but were afraid to protest, fearing violent retaliation. Now, the land grabbers might get by with their decades-long land robbery through the excuse of stateless past, and their victims might never get back their land. But the pro-possession folks were not relieved either. Since the state has not issued the official ROR yet, they feared that they could still lose land ownership if, at any point, the government decided to prioritize formal land documents in recording ownership. Moreover, the authority of Bangladesh over the *chhit* land caused another form of land-grab. The local MP appropriated a piece of land from my mentor in Balapara Khagrabari, 94-year old Babul Ullah, in the name of building a school. It was one of his landholdings that were exchanged through *chhit* council-authorized documents and were not documented in any government record. Babul had council-approved deeds, which did not have the legal validity to fight against an influential MP. I also had a feeling that he hesitated to fight against this robbery because that would label him as a person who stopped a noble school project; hence - being a former Indian national - was not patriotic to Bangladesh.

Around the same time, the government also started to record individual identities based on the India-Bangladesh joint headcount of 2011 (see Younus, 2013:49). Following the swap, the majority of *chhit* families went to the subdistrict headquarters to sign the government prescribed form to formalize their decision to stay in Bangladesh. The offices of the *union parishad* chairmen delivered birth certificates to them, which initiated the issuing of National Identity Card (NID). A team of the Election Commission officials went to the *chhitmahals* to issue the NID that included photo, signature, name, parents, date of birth, address, and a unique identity number. People who had meanwhile illicitly collected Bangladesh's national identity cards changed their address on the new NID, but the officials left their old NID numbers unchanged. Students who used neighbors' names as their parents for their school enrollment changed it at schools, and those who already graduated applied to the education departments to make corrections (cf. Telegraph, 2018b). The state officials returned to the *chhitmahals* to collect biometric information (e.g., fingerprints, iris scan) when I was in the field. In 2016, Bangladesh launched the 'Smart Card' project - digital NID with biometric information - whose northern chapter was inaugurated in *chhitmahals*. Built with French technology, the Smart Card stores 32 types of personal information in the microchip and is required to access more than 22 government services, including passport and driving license (Daily Star, 2016).

However, there was one specific use that enabled constant government surveillance on all *chhit* individuals: the registration of mobile SIM cards. The government made biometric registration mandatory throughout the country in 2015 when purchasing a SIM card to "prevent virtual crimes and growing terrorism" (Ahmed et al., 2017). An individual was required to submit a copy of NID to complete the registration, which was a significant component of the current government's multi-billion-dollar investment in digital surveillance (e.g., phone bugging, internet policing) in protecting law and order (BDNews24, 2017; Daily Star, 2017a). The ubiquity of mobile phones in daily life enabled this single move to instantly put individuals and their everyday movements on the government radar. The *chhitbashi* who were unknown to the modern bureaucracy only five years ago are now the prisoners, like everybody else, in the government *panopticon*.

## Changing Governance

After the *Eid-ul-fitr* break for a few days, as I was returning to Balapara Khagrabari from Dhaka, I did not know the person sitting next to me on the train. After casual chitchat, I came to know that the individual in his 60s was the chairman of Chilahati *union parishad* - Adnan Bashar - and Balapara Khagrabari was under his direct jurisdiction. That means he oversaw the distribution of all government aid, allowances, subsidies, and other essential services (e.g., birth registration, village conflict resolution). In his initial response to my research, he said that Balapara Khagrabari was performing very well in the development schemes of the government. He further added that the *chhitmahal* received an excessive amount of aid and relief (e.g., sacks of rice and winter blankets) from both government and non-government sources. After distributing among all *chhitbashi*, his administration gave the surplus to the impoverished *pooran* Bangladeshis in the neighboring villages. He bragged about his popularity among the new *chhit* voters, which helped him to secure his fourth tenure as the chairman. He gave me his business card and showed interest in my research. I was excited, so I shared my encounter with the chairman with my friends. It did not take long to swallow my excitement after talking to them. Apparently, through his legislative power, the chairman was the mastermind in manipulating public movement through road construction to establish bureaucratic authority and influence their electoral decision.

I still went to visit Adnan's office; my interest was to know the grassroots bureaucracy. His enthusiastic attitude on the train towards my research made me optimistic about a good conversation. I rented Rahman's van, and my mentor Mannan Hussain accompanied me. He was not in the office, so we went to a local high school that he was visiting. Sitting in the headmaster's chair, he was surrounded by the schoolteachers and influential local BAL politicians. I sat in the room for almost an hour, but he completely ignored me, did not talk to me, did not show any interest in my research, and, eventually, very reluctantly told me to come another day. I kept wondering why he was so hesitant to talk while he expressed enthusiasm on the train. The reason turned out to be the presence of Mannan, not me. Mannan was an influential leader of the *Bhatiya* community that had a robust demographic presence in Balapara Khagrabari. In the last *union parishad* election (a first for the *chhitbashi*), he did not campaign for Adnan chairman; instead, he supported the rival candidate. Adnan still won the election drawing upon the popularity of BAL in *chhitmahals* but nurtured a grudge against Mannan.

On our way back, Mannan's anger towards the chairman implied an unethical blend between the public duty of Adnan chairman and his personal political preference. He blacklisted Mannan in a rice subsidy program and politicized non-government relief and aid by prioritizing his loyal political supporters as recipients. His political rivalry with his superior - the subdistrict (*upazila*) chairman - strangled government spending in Balapara Khagrabari, whereas positive politico-administrative cooperation thrived in adjacent Kotvajini *chhitmahal*. Many of my *chhit* friends confirmed me that the majority of the *chhitbashi* loved the candidate from the opposition party BNP, but they expressed their gratitude in the ballot-box in favor of the BAL for implementing the swap treaty. Adnan chairman's election victory came along with this gratitude, but, after winning the election, he hesitated to treat Balapara Khagrabari people as his own because of their historical connection with the neighboring district Nilphamari. Adnan chairman still had supporters inside the *chhitmahal*; one of them was with us on that day, Rahman, whose van I rented. He was a fellow *Bhatiya* of Mannan who voted in support of Adnan chairman. Why? Not because of Adnan Bashar's personal charisma but because the BAL nominated him, the party Rahman believed in. He was not on any political blacklist and did not gripe about Adnan chairman.

It was apparent that whether an elected representative was terrible or good depended on an individual's political preference and mutual material benefits, often independent of the performance of the representative's office. It was horizontal clientelism that connected Adnan chairman with Rahman and Mannan. In Bangladesh, the ruling party always controls the functioning and staffing of all state, para-state, and non-state organizations. This monopoly creates an unchallenged bureaucratic and legal apparatus to be manipulated by the party-blessed elected local government representatives to distribute extra-organizational and financial rewards for loyal party support (Arfina Osman, 2010:312, 316-317). People who received infrastructural contracts, more subsidies, and relief, jobs, or bribes from this system reciprocated with their vote or presence at political rallies. Any breach in these political transactions resulted in a lack of access to public goods. In this way Mannan was blacklisted from an emergency rice subsidy despite his legal rights to it.

This patron-clientelism ensured the dominance of the ruling party in Dasiar Chhara as well. Dasiar Chhara was one of the most populated *chhitmahals*, and its population (approximately fifteen thousand) was enough to be a distinct *union parishad*. The *chhit* leaders unofficially negotiated with Bangladeshi officials to transform Dasiar Chhara into a *union parishad* to maintain the territorial unity of the *chhitmahal*. But the government eventually partitioned the *chhitmahal* into three parts and



merged each part with three existing unions. To the best of my knowledge, Dasiar Chhara was the only *chhitmahal* that experienced such a split after the swap. The official government narratives highlighted the large population size as the rationale, but the residents pointed fingers at hostile local politics. Their suspicion arose from the public assumption, mostly dominant in the *pooran* Bangladesh, about a practicing criminalized society and economy in the *chhitmahal* (cf. Rahman et. al., 2013:73; Rabbani, 2017:84-87). The local government feared that an integrated and self-contained *union parishad* full of ‘criminals’ would deteriorate the law and order situation in the *chhitmahal* and surrounding villages in the future.

There was also a crucial politico-economic angle behind partitioning Dasiar Chhara. The *pooran* Bangladeshi politicians feared that a separate *union parishad* would stop them from influencing internal matters of the *chhitmahal*, which threatened a massive loss of income (e.g., bribes, land grab, appropriating infrastructure budget). So, they fabricated a rumor in the locality surrounding an ATM booth. Following the swap, Islami Bank Bangladesh Limited, a prominent private bank, built the first ATM booth in Dasiar Chhara to attract potential new clients. The bank was affiliated with the Jamaat-e-Islami, a conservative political party in Bangladesh that advocated the superiority of *Shariah* laws (legal codes of Islam). Both the party and the bank had a long history of allegations about possible links to funding terrorism (see Daily Star, 2012b). The local politicians circulated a rumor that there were many extremists in Dasiar Chhara whose connections with the bank brought the ATM booth to a rural community. This rumor was planted at a time when the Prime Minister was about to visit Dasiar Chhara two months after the swap. The agenda of the visit included political celebration of the swap, inauguration of the infrastructure projects as a part of nation-building and declare the process of administrative merger of *chhitmahals* with the local government. The former council leaders and many *chhit* friends told me that they convinced the local administration and the office of the Prime Minister to declare Dasiar Chhara as a distinct Bangladeshi *union parishad*. They were so confident that they even prepared signboard and banner mentioning the *chhitmahal* as the newest *union parishad* of Bangladesh. But the rumor of terrorist affiliation in Dasiar Chhara halted the whole process. The *chhitbashi* suspected that, based on the allegation, the *pooran* Bangladeshi politicians expressed their veto over the decision to the Prime Minister’s advisors. The Prime Minister declared her infrastructural plan in the speech but did not say a word about the *union parishad*.

A few months after her visit, the local government partitioned Dasiar Chhara into three *tarees* (neighborhoods) and merged each of them with three existing *union parishads*, administered by three different chairmen. This move turned Dasiar Chhara into a remembered entity that did not exist anymore. The partition loosened the community cohesion as the Dasiar Chhara *chhitbashi* were now divided among the jurisdictions of three different chairmen. The unequal performance of three chairmen of three *tarees* resulted in uneven growth throughout the *chhitmahal*. People ended up with unequal material achievements (e.g., paved toilets, sufficient subsidized rice supply, tube-wells) depending on their respective chairman's development strategies. The once-influential community leaders now had diminished power over the *chhit* affairs, within their *taree*, as the chairmen took over the control. They could not challenge someone from *pooran* Bangladesh in the *union parishad* elections because their support has been divided into three. This gerrymandering killed any chance of former *chhit* leaders winning the election and representing Dasiar Chhara in the subdistrict bureaucracy.

Allegations of criminality, bureaucratic illiteracy, and poverty contributed to a reputation of *chhitbashi* inferiority. The *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors and the local government officials treated them as ungrateful people who always wanted more despite having everything. So, when Ameer went to the subdistrict headquarters to attest a few documents to apply for a government job,<sup>70</sup> the officers kept him waiting for hours and gave him a hard time questioning the validity of his identity documents. He alleged that the bureaucrats intentionally challenged the authenticity of his documents since the *chhitbashi* had a history of forging document before citizenship. He considered it as unnecessary harassment, which his *chhit* peers also faced, since these same officials authorized them identity-related documents after the swap. On a different occasion, a high-level bureaucrat recommended Ameer to subdistrict officials for an administrative job considering he had a graduate degree. When he went to the subdistrict headquarter for the job, the officials offered him a position of a porter in the government food storage facility,<sup>71</sup> which was inferior in the job hierarchy because it did not require literacy. Ameer believed he was offered this job deliberately to humiliate him and insult his education because the officials saw the *chhitbashi* an inferior group of people who had a history of

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<sup>70</sup> In Bangladesh, to apply for government (and non-government) jobs, the applicants must submit required documents (e.g., copies of NID, diplomas, birth certificates, and so on) attested by government officials listed in the government gazette. The officials put her/his signature along with the official seal to attest the validity of the documents. In the rural areas, people usually visit the subdistrict administrative headquarter for such attestation purposes as the facility is full of gazetted government officials.

<sup>71</sup> Government warehouse facility where the state stores food, after buying from the farmers, in case of emergency relief is needed or to keep the food supply running during shortage and price inflation.

violent crimes and other illicit practices. The officials did not think he was qualified or ‘appropriate’ for an administrative or an officer’s position; instead, a menial job that requires only physical capacities would be right for him. He claimed that the subdistrict officials mocked his and many of his friends’ desire to get an officer-level job. “‘They’ do not think of ‘us’ as equal humans” - this is what he said a few times in describing the interactions between the *chhitbashi* and state officials.

Although the *chhit* residents had their differences in the *Pushti Chal* meeting, when community leaders pressed the cabinet secretary to reunify the three *tarees* of Dasiar Chhara and transform it into a separate *union parishad*, everyone in the room cheered in support. The residents of Balapara Khagrabari also expressed similar demands, but since their *chhitmahal* did not have enough people to be a separate *union parishad*, they wanted an integrated *union parishad* combining adjacent Kotvajini and Dahala Khagrabari *chhitmahals*. But the subdistrict bureaucrats were allegedly biased in favor of their enclave advisory committee, which included more *pooran* Bangladeshi personnel than the *chhitbashi*, before deciding any new step in the *chhitmahal*. The *pooran* Bangladeshis in the advisory council always opposed the idea of transforming *chhitmahals* into separate *union parishads*; instead, they preferred the *chhitmahals* to be ruled by the existing *union parishad* administration. This top-down attitude of the local administration, in addition to a feeling of constant othering, kept the demand for a separate *union parishad* alive and active among the *chhitbashi* to let their voice heard at the upper-level bureaucracy and to protect the territorial integrity of *chhitmahals*.

### **Improvised Citizenship and Malleable Allegiance**

Citizenship is the legal relationship between an individual and a nation; the terms and conditions of this relation often vary from one state to another (Sassen, 2003:44). In its purest sense, citizenship entitles an individual to the legal protection of a nation-state. But is this legal relation enough to access equal sociopolitical rights? The answer, in many cases, is a *no*. Saskia Sassen argues that “legal citizenship does not always bring full and equal membership rights. Citizenship is affected by the position of different groups within a nation-state” (2003:49). Equality has been a significant challenge to the efficacy of the modern institution of citizenship. Race, religion, poverty, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities regularly deprive groups around the world of accessing full and equal citizenship rights (Sassen, 2003:48-49).

Whether citizenship simultaneously ensures legal protection and sociopolitical inclusion is even more complicated for the naturalized citizens that had transitioned from the status of stateless persons, refugees, or undocumented migrants. Brad Blitz and Maureen Lynch's (2011) impressive edited volume on the stateless groups around the world (e.g., Tamil plantation workers in Sri Lanka, Nubians of Kenya, Urdu-speaking Biharis in Bangladesh) emphasizes that granting citizenship certainly brings legal protection and diminishes fear and embarrassment of not-belonging; however, equal and full participation in citizenship rights is usually hindered by sociopolitical discrimination and a hierarchy of privilege. Despite citizenship, formerly stateless groups often experience social exclusion, stigma, impoverishment, unemployment, travel difficulties, and political othering (Lynch & Blitz, 2011:195-200).

The enrollment into the first state administration officially ensured citizenship protection for the *chhitbashi*. Still, many elements of formal citizenship were not automatic; people needed continuously to improvise and deploy various forms of capital (e.g., political allegiance to the ruling party or a bribe) to get that protection. I have already discussed a few cases of how the ordinary *chhitbashi* invested their electoral support to get government favor and paid a bribe to register their land or get the electricity connection. Let's talk about two other significant cases.

The first case discusses legal protection and security. In the stateless era, a constant fear of external intervention made people desperate for inclusion in state administration. But now seeking police assistance became synonymous with legal harassment. The police were said to prefer cases involving *chhitbashi* because they were easier to exploit. A group inside the *chhitmahals* assisted police in targeting the victims. This group included the same bunch of people who had abused their political and community power in the pre-state era to rob land and crops from helpless *chhitbashi*.<sup>72</sup> They now became involved in opportunistic endeavors (e.g., infrastructural corruption, political nepotism) using newfound citizenship. They looked for village conflicts (e.g., land, political, even minor conjugal disputes) and turned them into police complaints. The local police had a presumption that

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<sup>72</sup> I want to clarify that this small group included a few exploitative *chhit* individuals, mostly wealthy, politically affiliated with the ruling party and well-connected. They were not a large group of *chhitbashi* to be a faction; instead, were a bunch of individuals looking to exploit fellow *chhitbashi* using new citizenship. The local people also called them *the group*, in a sense of a criminal enterprise. When I talk about the unity and integrity of *chhitbashi*, I mean the community cohesion among the majority of the people, excluding *the group*, that were subsistence farmers who shared similar hardship of statelessness and are still struggling to maximize citizenship benefits.

all *chhit* people had a criminal past, and that something would be fishy about their identity documents<sup>73</sup> or complaints, which made poor, often illiterate, people vulnerable to the abuse of law-enforcement system when seeking justice. I came across a few widely discussed domestic disputes in Balapara Khagrabari; all of them involved corruption and bribe. In these cases, this group sided with the wife to sue the husband for dowry, physical assault, and other charges. The intention was to scare the husband and rob some money from him in exchange for dismissing the charges - a portion of which went to the pocket of police officer-in-charge. A few of these couples eventually got back together but still had to bribe the police - through this group - to withdraw the case.

The second issue I want to discuss is the distribution of subsidized aid, crucial government assistance to elevate the material condition of the poor *chhitbashi*. Besides the allowance for senior citizens and disabled persons, the government has allocated rice (e.g., *Pushti Chal*) and agriculture accessories (e.g., seeds, fertilizer) for every household. However, I met at least four people whose subsidies were halted by the state officials and local politicians. My mentor Babul Ullah has not received adult allowance because his family had been the recipient of the rice subsidy. The office of Adnan chairman told him that he could not have both, although there was not any such rule. He assumed that the chairman gave his allowance to someone else in exchange for a bribe and political support.<sup>74</sup> In Dasiar Chhara, the *union parishad* chairman halted Amena Huq's *Pushti Chal* subsidy because her documents had incorrect information. Being an illiterate person, she even did not know what it was. So, she paid some money to a local BAL politician who 'resolved' the issue through the chairman's help in exchange for a commission. Unlike these ordinary *chhitbashi*, the wealth and political influence of some of their peers connected them with the police and powerful bureaucrats. Their improvisation with politico-economic resources often exceeded the scope of citizenship 'rights' and grabbed citizenship 'privileges' over the others with fewer resources inside and beyond *chhitmahals*.

A sense of belonging is not always based on ethnicity; instead, pragmatic aspirations for a prosperous life can shape people's identity formation (cf. Richardson, 2016). The desire for an affluent life was a strong driving force behind the *chhitbashi*'s struggle for Bangladeshi citizenship.

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<sup>73</sup> Similar to the suspicion the subdistrict officials had about Ameer's documents.

<sup>74</sup> Although he made assumptions of this corruption, but his allegation was based on reality. Incidents of appropriating someone's rightful access to government aid and giving it to someone else in exchange for a bribe or political support were not hard to find in the locality.

Following the swap, every *chhit* resident identified themselves as a Bangladeshi, but not everyone wanted to be a Bangladeshi. During the celebration of the swap, no media outlet covered the fact that many people opposed the merger of *chhitmahals* with the host country. In Dasiar Chhara, there were multiple conflicts between two groups: one wanted the swap, another opposed it. The group that opposed the exchange included all the people who had benefited from the absence of state administration, e.g., land grabbers, criminal escapees, a few council leaders and *pooran* Bangladeshis who used to loot *chhit* resources and exploited *chhit* people. The swap meant loss of control, wealth and power for them. But, undoubtedly, the majority of the *chhitbashi* supported the swap movement. The Bangladeshi citizenship meant livelihood security, modern infrastructure, and better state-services for them. Material conditions were the priorities for both groups in deciding their support.

Every *chhitbashi* I talked to claimed to be a Bangladeshi, not because they had a particular historical or politico-cultural tie to Bangladesh; instead, they emphasized the administrative and citizenship benefits of incorporation within the nation. They convinced themselves that because of their anomalous location, they could never get Indian citizenship benefits, so it would be better to be assimilated into Bangladesh. They, however, confessed that if instead of the swap, India were able to negotiate access to their *chhitmahals*, as many European countries did to their enclaves (see Catudal, 1979:64-67), they could have been proud Indians today. In simple words, they identified themselves as Bangladeshi because Bangladesh provided them with basic human needs; they were not Indians because India failed to do so. Their vision of identity was a fluid livelihood project, not cultural; whoever would provide for the material needs would gain the allegiance. Similarly, the *chhitbashi* who left for India from Bangladesh after the swap, have meanwhile accepted Indian citizenship to become ‘complete’ (not anomalous) Indians, but expressed their intention to return to their former *chhitmahals* in Bangladesh because the Indian government failed to offer fundamental human necessities for them (Indian Express, 2016). They shifted their allegiance to Bangladesh as India failed to ensure a better life for them.

This conditional allegiance was not hard for Bangladesh to understand. Besides the necessary infrastructures (e.g., roads, electricity grid, and schools), the government also built several service facilities in *chhitmahals* (e.g., technical schools, special schools for disable children, digital information center, community center, post office, and commercial multi-complex). Some of these facilities were usually hard to find in a traditional rural village of the country. To inspire the people about Bangladesh’s glorious political history, the district administration built a *Shahid Minar* in Dasiar

Chhara, a monument to commemorate the martyrs of 1952's Bangla language movement. The administration also installed shelves in the community center that were full of historical documents (e.g., books, newspapers, photographs) on Bangladesh's liberation war of 1971.

It is, however, tough to say that only material needs shape the sense of belonging; I cannot also rule out the deep connections between ethno-linguistic ties and national imagination in Bangladesh. Let's take the Urdu-speaking *Biharis* in Bangladesh as an example. Following the religious partition of 1947, this Muslim group migrated from Bihar (now a state of India) to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to get resettled. In 1971, when East Pakistan declared war against central Pakistan (i.e., West Pakistan) to get independence as Bangladesh, the *Biharis* opposed it. Together with the military of West Pakistan, a civil *Bihari* militia executed genocide against the East Pakistanis. In 1971, when East Pakistan achieved liberation as Bangladesh, the *Biharis* have fallen into a severe identity crisis: they could not go back to their original homeland, which became merged with India. They were not accepted in Bangladesh since they opposed its independence. Despite their support in the war, Pakistan refused to resettle them as they were never a part of its demography. Following the brutal atrocities against the *Biharis* in Bangladesh after independence, the Red Crescent built camps for them where they were imprisoned and excluded from Bangladeshi state-services. After a long struggle and international pressure, in 2008, Bangladesh approved citizenship to the *Biharis* (Redclift, 2016:122-123).

But citizenship did not end their suffering. Even though the *Biharis* could enroll their children in the schools and vote in the national election, they were still facing informal discrimination in getting passports and employment. Citizenship politically integrated the *Biharis* with Bangladesh, but their social integration was still not in sight; and, there was a historical reason. Bangladesh was founded on a couple of official principles, e.g., secularism and social-democracy, but the reality on the ground was much different - at least since the mid-1970s. A cultural identity (*Bengali*) and its ethno-linguistic nationalist endeavors took over the official ideology of the nation, which strangled the rights of other ethno-linguistic minorities (Samaddar, 2002 *as cited in* Redclift, 2016:122). The citizenship of Urdu-speaking *Biharis* could not evade this *Bengali* hegemony. National hatred against Pakistan, and its official language (Urdu), are commemorated on every republic day along with the massacre conducted by the *Biharis* in 1971. This never left the *Biharis* at a comfortable place of social integration. Modern nationhood is generally a combination of both political and cultural membership of a state, and political assimilation often implies a cultural uniformity. Politically

Bangladeshi, but culturally or ethno-linguistically *Bihari*, left *Biharis* with only one option for integration: absolute assimilation into the *Bengali* culture by giving up their *Bihari* customs (Redclift, 2016:118, 124). This sort of assimilation was impossible, which resulted in an ongoing identity crisis.

Expressing exclusive solidarity and political allegiance to Bangladesh, therefore, played a crucial role in the political performances of the *chhitbashi*. The ethno-linguistic nationalist bias gave a decisive edge to them in integrating into Bangladeshi society because of sharing the same language, attire, food, and festivals. Their expression of allegiance to Bangladesh was two dimensional. First, they participated in the nation-building schemes of Bangladesh, e.g., tax and service fees (for example, electricity), survey and census, vaccination, subsidies, passport, and many others. Both the state and the public had mutual benefits in these projects. Second, they also displayed citizenship performances (e.g., they voted in elections, celebrated republic days) that had an audience and a message. When I look at my *chhit* friends' Facebook posts showing the pictures of them campaigning in the local elections or burning candles to commemorate the martyrs of Bangladesh's independence war, I see an enormous number of comments to celebrate the freedom of citizenship. But these posts and celebrations had an audience that included the ordinary *pooran* Bangladeshis, bureaucrats, and, most importantly, political leaders. The performances conveyed a message that they value and believe in Bangladeshi nationalism; but, at the same time, they should not be taken for granted because they can influence the electoral mechanisms through their votes. Individual performances also displayed the political preferences: one *chhitbashi* could share conservative religious ideas to attract the BNP support while another could celebrate comparatively liberal cultural festivals on Facebook to invite the attention of the BAL. The posts worked as a screening tool for the political party leaders in assessing the beliefs and strengths before recruiting a proactive follower. These performances protected the *chhitbashi* from rumors and assumptions that they were merely the consumers of state-supplies, who were not loyal to the nation and the state, like the *Biharis*.

Besides ethno-religious similarities, a few other factors that came along with citizenship might be critical catalysts in solidifying the fluid nationalistic imagination of the *chhitbashi*. First, the *chhitbashi* and neighboring *pooran* Bangladeshis spoke a regional dialect of Bangla, which was quite different than standard Bangla, i.e., the written form of Bangla. The dialect was mainly orally spoken. Being a native speaker of standard Bangla, I also had difficulties from time to time in understanding a few words when talking to my friends. Similarly, they - specifically older generations who could not read or write - also had problems understanding my standard Bangla, especially if it was a phone



conversation when they could not see my body language or lip movement. However, the youths who had attended schools in Bangladesh did not have any problem in understanding my words. So, I think, in future, the language will have two significant implications in *chhitmahals*: (a) more and more words from standard Bangla will be added to the vernacular vocabulary through school-going kids, television programs, and newspapers; (b) the school-going children who grew up listening to the oral history of Indian nationalism from their parents will be gradually exposed to the official versions of Bangladesh's history through the school textbooks.

Second, in the field, I wondered about the construction of pre-swap 'Indian identity' despite not having any state-level connections with India. I asked the *chhitbashi* "how did you transform yourself from a *Maharaja's* subject to an Indian national without actually living inside India?" The typical answer was 'through the land registration.' Balapara Khagrabari people used to go to Haldibari of Cooch Behar (India) to register any land exchange; whereas, the *chhitbashi* in Dasiar Chhara had traveled to Dinhat registry office of Cooch Behar for that purpose. This registration of *chhit* land in Indian records created a psychological allegiance to India. But as Bangladesh started recording all *chhit* landholdings, their sense of belonging to India has started to experience a rupture in favor of Bangladesh.

### **Political Spaces of Apolitical Actors**

I keep coming back to Ameer. Soon after the swap, he was hired by a new NGO - RDI (Rural Development Initiatives)<sup>75</sup> - to pitch a new saving scheme where the villagers would deposit monthly installments and will get annual interest in return. His pro-swap, educated, and honest image motivated many people to sign up for the scheme. Ameer was not paid any monthly salary, but instead got a commission<sup>76</sup> from the RDI for every client he convinced to join. He had been promised a monthly salary once the scheme gained the momentum, but before that - around six months later - the RDI suddenly stopped their operations in Dasiar Chhara. The clients who already deposited a few installments started to press Ameer to return their money. After his months of

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<sup>75</sup> Although Ameer is a pseudonym, but I also changed the NGO's name to further safeguard his identity.

<sup>76</sup> This was a licit form of earning commission paid by the organization for bringing targeted clients for the scheme. The illicit money given by the ordinary *chhitbashi* to a few *chhit* folks to get NGO aid, which was supposed to be free, was also called commission in *chhitmahals*. The latter form was more of bribery.

pursuing the RDI, the scheme paid back a portion of the collected deposits and he sold the office furniture to pay the rest. RDI never returned to Dasiar Chhara. This saving scheme was not the only fake NGO project Ameer has witnessed so far.



Figure 12: Tube-well provided by the Red Crescent

Bangladesh has been a fertile ground for NGOs, especially in the impoverished northern part, since Mohammad Yunus' microcredit revolution. The Red Crescent had pioneered the NGO boom in the *chhitmahals* after the swap. In Dasiar Chhara, this transnational humanitarian organization distributed tube-wells and toilets to every household. Now, the NGOs - mostly local and national - are all over the *chhitmahals*. Most of them were involved in microcredit programs; some were engaged in education, health awareness, seasonal disaster-relief programs, and other diverse activities. In Dasiar Chhara, I came across a remarkable initiative of renowned Bangladeshi NGO, BRAC. The organization built a club for teenage *chhit* girls, which they called *Kishori Club* (adolescent club). I saw

at least three to four branches of the club in three *tarees* of the *chhitmahal*.<sup>77</sup> In my conversation with tenth grader Tahmina Akter, she told me the club hosted after-school peer group sessions of the teenage *chhit* girls aged between eleven and nineteen. In different sessions, the girls discussed books, played board games (e.g., Ludo, chess), and participated in various group discussions. Tahmina was the supervisor of one of branches where she facilitated a club of around thirty girls. Trained by the BRAC personnel, she used to conduct discussion sessions on adolescent health issues, domestic abuse, environmental awareness, women rights and empowerment, and other social issues. Though most of the club members were girls, there were also a few boys in her club. One of the key goals of *Kishori Club* was to develop social awareness and improve communication, problem-solving, and decision-making skills of the club members in the grassroots areas of the country (BRAC, 2010). The young community members praised the activities of the club to me. Such applauded initiatives and the initial, also strategic, free relief and aid prepared a smooth ground for the NGOs. Impoverished people were fascinated by a group of non-state well-wishing entities.



Figure 13: One of the branches of *Kishori Club* in Dasiar Chhara

<sup>77</sup> The NGO has established 8,600 *Kishori Clubs* throughout Bangladesh (BRAC, 2010).

Besides the fraudulent programs, however, a few other factors soon frustrated the *chhitbashi* about the NGO projects. First, the relief aid was not always culturally incompatible. For example, in launching the *Pushti Chal* project, WFP and its partners focused on the cheaper price and nutritional value, not the socio-cultural compatibility. After the *Pushti Chal* meeting, Ameer's wife told me that although it had been three years, but WFP's *Pushti Chal* still was not the preferred rice for ordinary *chhitbashi*; it tasted and smelled different than the rice they harvested from the field. Either the poorest of the poor were dependent on it, or average people cooked it during the days of extreme hardship. Many household-heads signed up for *Pushti Chal* only to sell that eventually in the *bazaar*, or to poorer neighbors, to buy their preferred rice and other necessities. Second, the lousy quality of aid also irritated many *chhitbashi*. The quality of Red Crescent provided latrine ring slabs was so bad and fragile that many households could not use them; instead, they used them to store thatch and water for the cows. Third, the involvement of field-staff in local politics and corruption did the worst damage to NGO reputations. For example, in the three partitioned *tarees* of Dasiar Chhara, the Red Crescent created three development zones and appointed three individuals to distribute their aid and relief. Other NGOs later followed this zoning strategy of Red Crescent based on the administrative structure (e.g., boundary of the *tarees*) established by the state. The zone leaders developed their own clientelist distributing strategies and, based on that, later built a loyal group of political followers. However, they had one common approach: while the aid from the Red Crescent was supposed to be free, they charged each household a bribe of 300-500 taka before handing over the latrines and tube-wells.

I had the opportunity to talk with Kalim Ullah, the supervisor of Red Crescent's *Shomonnoytari* Zone, who also happened to be the last elected chairman of Dasiar Chhara *chhit* council. Following the swap, he reportedly lost massive income that he used to earn from influencing council-arbitration in exchange for bribes. Now, besides agriculture, bribe from the Red Crescent's aid was his key source of income. I also met Rifat Munshi, the supervisor of Red Crescent's *Balatari* zone, who developed a strong connection to the BAL following the swap, and this earned him an influential position in Dasiar Chhara affairs. He had a history of targeting old illiterate persons (preferably women), intimidating them by claiming that they had inconsistent information in their identity documents and

demanding a bribe to fix that.<sup>78</sup> Both these zone supervisors simultaneously filled zone leadership roles of other NGOs and made similar corrupt demands.

The appearance of state institutions did not just let local and transnational NGOs enter the *chhitmahals*; there were state-based international actors too. For example, Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development was a partner in the reproductive health awareness campaign in Balapara Khagrabari. Then there was also the corporate world. Big Bangladeshi companies have been sponsoring popular sports events, providing free blankets during the winter to attract new consumers. These non-state actors significantly modified the standards and vernaculars of living in *chhitmahals*. For example, the idea of sanitary and unsanitary practices has changed. Shaded holes were not an accepted form of toilet anymore; neither was drinking water from a pond. Dowry-induced assault was still rampant, but the conscience against it was also rising, thanks to the initiative like *Kishori Club* and other women's empowerment programs adopted by the government. Microcredit-induced cash flow also started to accelerate children's education or family livestock businesses.

Most importantly, these non-state organizations challenged the established power hierarchy, where a dynamic and progressive state holds superiority over the old and stagnant local. The transnational and international connections transformed the locals into a vibrant, worldly, and opportunistic category who were not archaic, authentic, or ethnic anymore (cf. Ferguson, 2006). The *chhitbashi* were increasingly becoming aware of the global view of safe-drinking water, sanitation, women empowerment, gender equality, and other basic humanitarian rights. They were also simultaneously becoming more capable of using non-national organizations in overwriting the state's local politico-administrative plans and making personal gain out of it. Research shows that NGOs in Bangladesh meanwhile took over control of many development sectors that used to be performed by the government departments, e.g., livestock, sanitation, small industry, and microfinance. The majority of their clients are rural women, an influential force in local elections. Vote campaigning within the beneficiary groups has already elected a significant number of local government representatives who were affiliated with the NGOs. This political involvement, transnational donors, and a formidable local outreach empowered the NGOs to force the government to adopt many new policies (e.g.,

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<sup>78</sup> Rifat was the individual who took a bribe from Amena Huq to 'help' her getting the *Pushti Chal* that I mentioned in the previous section (page 96).

safety of sex workers, rights of slum dwellers) in recent years (Haque, 2002:419-421). The *chhitbashi* have been slowly merging themselves with this force.

## Review

In early August of 2017, Laily Begum was found dead while working as a housemaid in Dhaka. The forensic officials found wounds on her head and neck but remain undecided if it was a murder or a suicide. Her death sparked protests in Dhaka and Dasiar Chhara (Daily Star, 2017b). Laily and her family were the residents of Dasiar Chhara *chhitmahal*. Like many other *chhitbashi*, they also had migrated to India illicitly before the swap to find work. When the swap-treaty offered them citizenship in their preferred country, her husband felt uncertain in deciding which would be a better state that could provide them a better life. Remaining undecided in India, he sent Laily and their two children to Dasiar Chhara. By the time he made up his mind to return to Dasiar Chhara and his family, the official deadline for citizenship applications had already passed. He was arrested as an intruder while crossing the border to enter Dasiar Chhara in Bangladesh and was held in an Indian prison during the death of Laily. Protesters in Dhaka accused Laily's employer of her murder, allegedly assaulting her repeatedly and not paying her wages over the last seven months before her death (Prothom Alo, 2017b). Dasiar Chhara protesters, on the other hand, blamed her death as a failure of Bangladesh that - despite many promises - failed to take any initiatives to improve the material conditions of underprivileged *chhitbashi*.<sup>79</sup> The locals believed that the split of the family left Laily desperate to travel to Dhaka and take a risky job; her death could have been avoided if the family had stayed together and found work in Dasiar Chhara.

Laily's family was one of many others that were separated following the swap and consequently suffered from socio-financial hardship and psychological trauma. When Chapala Barman - a 60-year old Hindu resident of Dahala Khagrabari (a neighboring *chhitmahal* of Balapara Khagrabari) - headed to India to accept Indian citizenship, she left behind three daughters and a son in Bangladesh. During the stateless period, her daughters married Bangladeshi citizens and moved to their husbands' homes; they were therefore ineligible for Indian citizenship. Her eldest son was not

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<sup>79</sup> Around the same time, people were expressing their demand for a *chhit* quota in government jobs (Prothom Alo, 2017a).

counted in the joint headcount of 2011,<sup>80</sup> which also made him ineligible since the census was the key document to identify the *chhit* residents (Dawn, 2015). Unlike Chapala, many elders of other families refused to leave their ancestral home while youths found India a better place to work. There were also many people, like Chapala's son, who had traveled to big cities in search of a job and were absent during the joint headcount. These floating people are still stateless (Rabbani, 2017:128).

Despite the family separation and many other inconveniences caused by the swap, the majority of the *chhitbashi* still believed that citizenship provided a sense of normalcy in their everyday lives. They were frustrated but were not surprised by these inconveniences; instead, the frustration itself was a part of being a 'normal' Bangladeshi who also suffered from wholesale corruption and poverty. The greatest joy of this normalcy was their newfound social legitimacy, which, in many cases, was more significant than their legal identity. I had friends who had expertly forged identity documents to enroll their kids in schools or to visit clinics in Bangladesh in the stateless era. Still, there was always someone from the locality - particularly the *pooran* Bangladeshis - who snitched on them to the government officials of these facilities. These neighbors exploited their labor, looted their crops, and assaulted them, knowing they had nowhere to go for help. A relief from livelihood insecurity and the embarrassment of expulsion from service facilities was what felt like being a normal person.

But the inclusion in government record-keeping did not just bring a mass sense of normalcy; it also benefited some people more than others. Wealthy landowners who had enjoyed enormous power in the stateless era still do, except in the presence of a democratic state, loyalty to and leadership of the ruling party now also produce considerable power. Modern bureaucracy has not entirely replaced the traditional land-based hierarchy, instead added new political clientelism to the *chhit* power structure. While some *chhitbashi* were struggling to adapt themselves with these bureaucratic changes, many of their peers were successful in taking advantage of the new forms of governance.

So far, this dissertation has discussed how the *chhitbashi* navigated through the public infrastructures and bureaucratic paperwork to explore a nation, freedom and entitlements. But the next chapter moves on to discuss the impacts of citizenship in the internal community-making and identity politics of *chhitmahals*. The focus of the chapter will be the Bangladeshi *Bhatiyas* - their life, livelihood, identity crisis, and socio-political accomplishments in *chhitmahals*. The normalization of *chhitmahals*

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<sup>80</sup> See page 12 & 37 for more information about the joint headcount in *chhitmahals* by Bangladesh and India.

transformed the Bangladeshi *Bhatiyas* and the former Indian *chhitbashi* into fellow Bangladeshi citizens; this political reformulation was supposed to resolve identity conflicts in *chhitmahals*, but eventually ended up reinforcing factions in the collective sense of belonging. The next chapter seeks the reasons behind the opening of unanticipated breaches in the *chhit* community; the principal goal of the chapter is to show how and why the *chhitbashi* further ‘enclavized’ the *Bhatiyas* in their enclaves.



## CHAPTER 5

### BELONGING TO THE 'OTHERS'

I met Mannan Hussain at the initial stage of fieldwork when I was looking for someone to accompany me for a few days until the *chhitbashi* in Balapara Khagrabari get to know me and feel comfortable in hanging out with me. He drafted (and repeatedly re-drafted) a list of individuals whom I should interview to start my fieldwork. The timing was fortunately perfect as it was a break between the harvest of *Aman* rice and groundnut. So, he accompanied me in long van-rides for four to five days, thoroughly showed me the landscape of Balapara Khagrabari, and introduced me to some influential people from the list. We also participated in a few community gatherings (e.g., school sports events, political meetings). His presence in our joint rides effectively snowballed my research throughout Balapara Khagrabari; as I started walking alone through the neighborhoods, the folks he had introduced to me further introduced me and my research to others.

In one of those reconnaissance field trips, Mannan introduced me to Mortuza Master<sup>81</sup> - a teacher in a local primary school - whose name came up in his list of powerful and knowledgeable individuals of Balapara Khagrabari. Mortuza agreed to share his *chhit* wisdom and show me some historical documents. In the next few weeks, Mannan repeatedly asked me if I had meanwhile interviewed Mortuza Master. He kept emphasizing how important his inputs would be for my research. A few days later, during our afternoon tea-stall conversation, he suddenly retracted his praises about Mortuza and advised me not to talk to him. This change in the attitude had a hint of the contested relation between two groups: one that was native to Balapara Khagrabari and had a nationalistic tie to India (e.g., Indian refugees of 1947's partition); and another that had migrated to the *chhitmahal* from Bangladesh; Mortuza Master belonged to the former group, and Mannan represented the latter.

Mannan was a *Bhatiya* - a term in the regional dialect that has two connotations. Etymologically, the term refers to people living in the downstream (*bhati*) course of a river or confluence area of two rivers. Downstream areas of northwestern Bangladesh are extremely prone to flooding and

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<sup>81</sup> In the rural areas of Bangladesh, male and female teachers of schools and colleges are usually addressed as master and madam respectively.

riverbank erosion, which frequently cause displacement. The victims who lose their homes to these disasters usually move to adjacent upstream areas and are labeled as the *Bhatiyas* (Chakraborty, 2016:139). However, the term also has a pejorative meaning to refer to unwanted, homeless people who do not belong to a place where they temporarily resettle. In Balapara Khagrabari, the term referred explicitly to the impoverished river communities that had migrated from *chars* (silted islands) and banks of the Jamuna, Brahmaputra, and Padma rivers to the *chhitmahal* after losing their homesteads to riverbank erosion (cf. Cons, 2016:94-95).

Mannan resettled in Balapara Khagrabari from neighboring Gaibandha district in the early 1990s after the Brahmaputra river had swallowed his ancestral home. He followed the trail of his predecessors more than ten years after the first group had arrived in Balapara Khagrabari from his district. He was a citizen of Bangladesh with all sorts of official identity documents. Yet, his family resettled in the then deserted *chhitmahal*<sup>82</sup> because the land was cheaper and ungoverned by any states. Mortuza Master, however, was born and raised in Balapara Khagrabari. He was among a few fortunate *chhit* people who got a teaching job in a Bangladeshi school using a forged Bangladeshi address. He was in his late 50s and did not face any major issue in his teaching career until a year or two before the swap when the local bureaucrats halted his pension files after learning about the forged identity documents. At that moment, Mannan came to the rescue; he took Mortuza Master to his district of origin, Gaibandha, let him use his home address to ‘fabricate genuine’ Bangladeshi identity documents. This illicit endeavor helped Mortuza Master in solving the address issue to pass his pension files. A few months later, Mannan’s youngest daughter was expelled from the Bangladeshi school for being a *chhit* resident. Mortuza Master was a teacher at that school. It was only a few years later, when I was in Balapara Khagrabari, that Mannan found out that Mortuza Master had orchestrated the expulsion of his daughter, which made him furious and changed his attitude about Mortuza Master.

This illicit exchange of identity and betrayal was not an isolated case; other *Bhatiyas* have also allowed many fellow then-Indian *chhitbashi* to use their citizenship details in accessing Bangladeshi government services. The displaced *Bhatiyas* could not say - or did not want to say - ‘no’ because

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<sup>82</sup> The community elders told me that until the migration of the *Bhatiyas*, which started in the late 1970s and gained momentum in the early 1990s because of flood and riverbank erosion, the population permanently living in the *chhitmahal* was very low. There were two primary reasons. First, some parts of the *chhitmahal*, where the majority of *Bhatiyas* now live, were bushy, steep areas, which was not suitable for agriculture. Second, the lawlessness did not provide any safety and security for life and livelihood.

they were dependent on *chhit* residents for a safe setting to build a forever home. They left behind their regular citizenship protections and willingly embraced an un-administered *chhit* life precisely to build a solid and stable homestead. Their growing numbers had increased security in *chhitmahal*, and their intensive labor had boosted agricultural production before the switch. Still, the homeless *Bhatiyas* could not entirely overcome an ethnicized and classed stigma that the ‘original’ *chhitbashi* had imposed on them (cf. Cons, 2016:94). The local *chhitbashi* and their *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors did not bring down the invisible sociocultural barrier between them and the *Bhatiyas*. The *Bhatiyas* remained the outsiders and were stereotyped as rough and aggressive as they had to cope with a harsh environment. They were (and still are) poor-shamed and treated as lower-class residents in the social hierarchy of Balapara Khagrabari. Despite their substantial contributions in the security and political economy of the *chhitmahal*, the *Bhatiyas* were marginalized in the social landscape and public sphere for their physique, instincts, cultural practices, or simply being homeless poor. This chapter tells the story of the *Bhatiyas*; their perils, struggles, and accomplishments in *chhitmahals*.

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### **Displaced Citizens Entering into Stateless *Bhatiya* Life**

One might think a stateless territory is not the best option for the displaced persons to resettle in because of the insecurity and pervasive lawlessness. But the absence of state administration, in fact, had attracted more than one wave of migration to *chhitmahals*. The Indian Muslim refugees of 1947’s Partition featured the first wave of migrants who had exchanged land with the Hindu *chhitbashi*, who were heading to India. These migrants now consider themselves as native residents as they migrated before the birth of Bangladesh. The second wave, mostly since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, brought the erosion-victim *Bhatiyas*. People from as far as central and southern Bangladesh begun to buy land and build houses in *chhitmahals*. Many of them were not from the downstream areas, nor were the victims of riverbank erosion. However, the native *chhitbashi* - in an ethnocentric fashion - still labeled all sorts of migrants as *Bhatiya* to differentiate themselves from the outsiders.

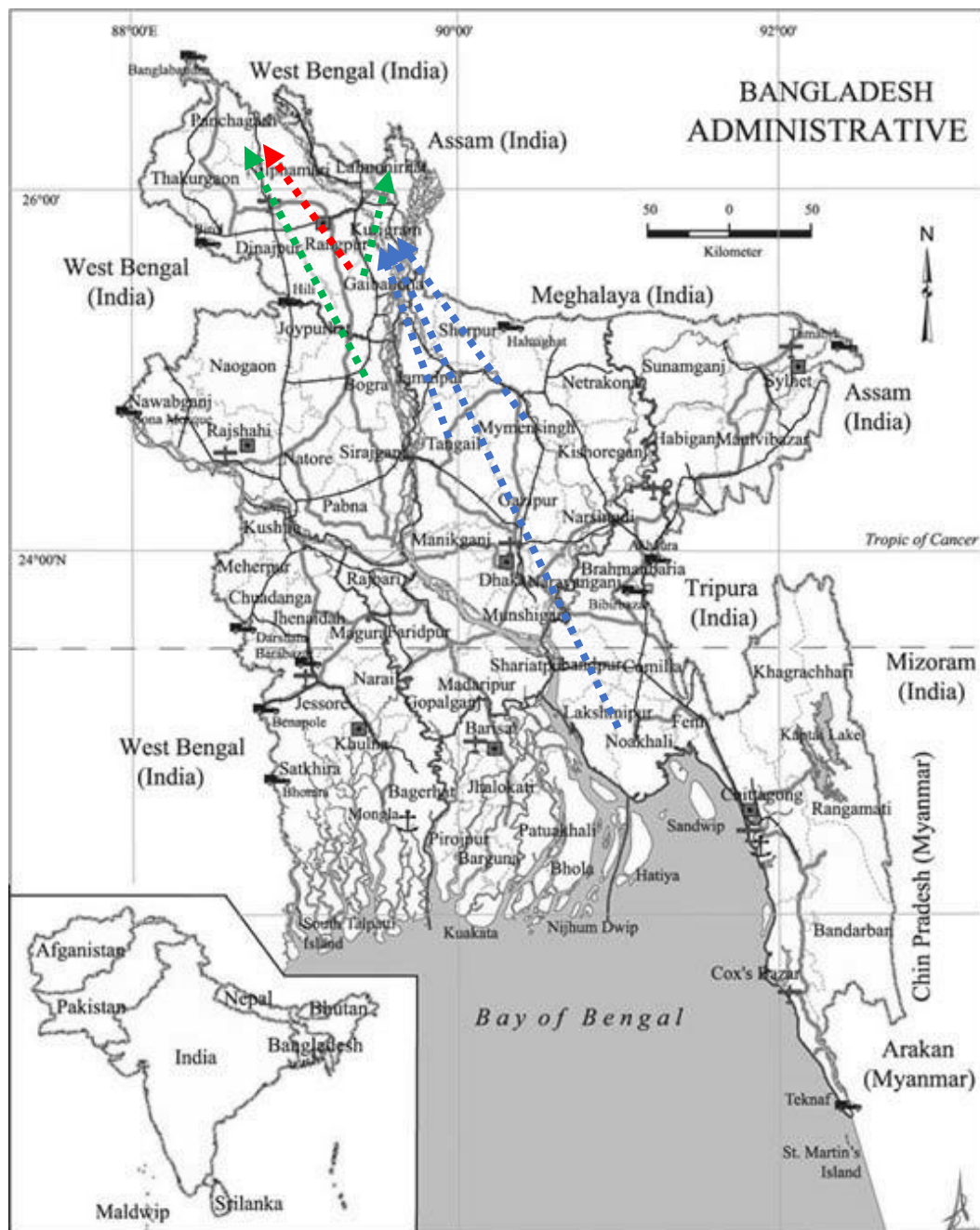


Figure 14: Migration of the *Bhatiyas* to Balapara Khagrabari (red) and Dasiar Chhara (blue) [To show the long routes that the *Bhatiyas* have crossed to reach *chhitmahals*, and due to the unavailability of official maps with pin-pointed enclave locations, I show the district-to-district migration of the *Bhatiyas*. The green routes were taken by the *Bhatiyas* in Mukul Chakraborty's research (2016:141)] (Map: Chowdhury, 2015)

Other than the first wave of the Partition-refugees, the subsequent waves of *Bhatiyas* chose *chhitmahals* for specific reasons; (a) the land was cheaper and easier to get as government registration was not required, (b) the availability of big mass of land was ideal for a rural home (i.e., homestead

surrounded by farming land) and, (c) unlike many other places, the local communities were more receptive because they needed cheap wage labor, customers for their land and, most importantly, more people in the then deserted *chhitmahals*. These advantages granted the stateless *chhit* people a dominant position to rule and exploit the displaced *Bhatiyas* who were Bangladeshi citizens. Citizenship did not bring any additional protection for the *Bhatiyas* in the *chhitmahals* as they were excluded from Bangladeshi jurisdiction.

The *Bhatiyas* had migrated to *chhitmahals* in a heterogeneous fashion; their migration route, places of origin, reasons behind migration, and destination widely varied from one group to another. In Balapara Khagrabari, the *Bhatiyas* were brought in as agricultural labor. In the late 1970s, because of the local labor shortage, one of the then wealthiest landlords of the *chhitmahal* had employed the first batch of the *Bhatiyas* from adjacent Gaibandha district. His initial demand was for 8-10 families, but around 25-30 families migrated to the *chhitmahal* to find shelter and work. Entire families, not just the traditional male laborers, moved into Balapara Khagrabari. These families were the inhabitants of *char*-lands<sup>83</sup> in the Brahmaputra floodplain that had to keep moving from one place to another due to the constant accretion and erosion of the river. The *chhitmahal* that *pooran* Bangladeshi laborers considered as unsafe had promised the *Bhatiyas* a stable home and work.

In Dasiar Chhara, on the other hand, besides the victims of riverbank erosion from Mymensingh district, I came across a group of migrants from almost the other side of the country. In addition to the *char*-landers, the latter group came from the coastal district Noakhali and also included a bunch of economic migrants who came to do business in the region. Some migrants settled in Dasiar Chhara through their affinal networks. Ignoring patrilocal traditions, some grooms from Bangladesh had moved in with their in-laws in the *chhitmahal*; some couples later built their own homesteads. Another group of *pooran* Bangladeshi petty-smugglers bought land and built a home in Dasiar Chhara to exploit the benefits of the *chhit* visa, i.e., easy entry to India. The original *chhitbashi* named all these diverse migrants the *Bhatiyas*. It did not matter that some of them were not from the downstream areas or the homeless victims of riverbank erosion; to the native residents, they all were outsiders. A politico-symbolic meaning replaced the literal sense.

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<sup>83</sup> The erosion and accretion processes of major rivers create bars in the riverbed, which periodically emerge as settlement and agricultural land within the river and along the shore. In Bangladesh, these emerging lands are known as *char* or *diara* (Sarker et al., 2003:61; Islam et al., 2010:394).

The *Bhatiyas* had been a vital part of the *chbit* demographic on both sides of the border. They came from diverse backgrounds, and their migration had heterogeneous push factors. Some journeys even went through more than one stop before finally ending in *chbitmahals*. Migrating to upstream areas to find a stable home was a trend that the *Bhatiyas* had been practicing since the colonial time, even before the creation of *chbitmahals*. In the mid-1940s, the native residents of Cooch Behar had formed a civil society group called *Hita Sadhani Sabha* to organize the *Bhatiya Khedao* (Deport *Bhatiya*, Save Cooch Behar) movement (Das, 2011 as cited in Chakraborty, 2016:140).

Since colonial times, the *Bhatiyas* have prioritized easy access in choosing their migration destinations, not political boundaries. For example, many *Bhatiyas* from Mymensingh district of Bangladesh migrated to Madhya Masaldanga, a Bangladeshi *chbitmahal* inside India, because it had uninhabited upland areas to build houses (Chakraborty, 2016:140-141). In fact, many *Bhatiya* residents of the Indian *chbitmahals* in Bangladesh had first migrated to the Bangladeshi (formerly East Pakistani) *chbitmahals* in India until 1947's partition-induced religious violence took place. The partition forced the Hindus of *chbitmahals* in East Pakistan to flee to India. Some *Bhatiyas* occupied their abandoned houses and evicted the remaining Hindus. After returning to India, these displaced Hindu refugees evicted the *Bhatiyas* from the East Pakistani *chbitmahals* and other mainland areas in India. The expelled *Bhatiyas* migrated - for the second time - to the Indian *chbitmahals* in East Pakistan, took their revenge by displacing more Hindus, and finally resettled there. Therefore, losing the homestead to riverbank erosion might have led to the initial migration of many *Bhatiyas*, but it was violent revenge, kinship networks, and uninterrupted access to the land that instigated the second and final migration (Chakraborty, 2016:141-143).

The state was also involved in the migration of *Bhatiyas* into the *chbitmahals*. Dahagram was a Bangladeshi *chbitmahal* inside India, which was initially considered as connected to the mainland of East Pakistan. But it was revealed in 1953 that a small piece of Indian land (approximately 85 meters area) separated Dahagram from East Pakistan. Indian authorities then built a gated fence in that tiny territory that stopped mobility between Dahagram and East Pakistan (Van Schendel, 2002:136-137). Following independence in 1971, Bangladesh started bureaucratic negotiations with India in adopting measures to gain access to the *chbitmahal*. In the late 1980s, when the tension around this access got worse, the Indian border force overnight gathered some Hindu *Bhatiyas* from mainland India and settled them in Dahagram. The native residents took it as a strategy by the Indian force to reclaim control in Dahagram; so, in retaliation, they gathered some Muslim *Bhatiyas* and armed them

with local weapons (e.g., bows and arrows). Soon, the Muslim *Bhatiyas* - backed by the natives - destroyed the small settlement built by the Hindu *Bhatiyas*, seized their livestock, and forced them to flee to India. This back and forth violent retaliation ended through a flag meeting between the two border forces (Cons, 2016:95). Regardless of their diverse backgrounds, these homeless and destitute citizens survived a *Bhatiya* life in *chhitmahals* across the border that was full of stigma, exclusion, exploitation, and - finally - resilience.

*The Case of Gaibandha Para: An Enclave within an Enclave*

Gaibandha Para (*para* means neighborhood) was the enclave of climate migrants in the heart of Balapara Khagrabari *chhitmahal* where the *Bhatiyas* from nearby Gaibandha district had rehabilitated themselves. The beginning of Gaibandha Para had an intricate relation with the political economy of Balapara Khagrabari. The neighborhood had planted its roots in the late 1970s when a clerk of the health department was transferred to Botolganj. In the *Ramadan* nights, I sat down with that clerk's son Mridha Khan. His family moved into Botolganj with his father in 1979 from Sundarganj subdistrict of Gaibandha. Sundarganj was a known zone of riverbank erosion in the region, where many residents experienced displacement more than once in their lifetime. Therefore, after his retirement, Mridha's father permanently settled in Botolganj. Like many other wealthy Bangladeshis at that time, he also bought a massive amount of land in Balapara Khagrabari in illicit ways. He registered the initial purchases in the Haldibari registry office of Cooch Behar (India), and the subsequent deals were recorded in council-authorized deeds. In both purchase-modes, he concealed his Bangladeshi identity; instead, showed himself as an Indian citizen who was living in the Indian *chhitmahal* Balapara Khagrabari and used the location of his landholdings as the address. His friends in Balapara Khagrabari *chhit* council helped him in these purchases as they themselves were dependent on such wealthy Bangladeshi elites in using Bangladeshi addresses to access government services. Without an effective Indian border control in Balapara Khagrabari, it was tough for the *chhitbasbi* to stop such powerful Bangladeshi individuals from buying out the *chhit* properties.

The scarce wage labor turned out to be a significant obstacle in transforming the large *chhit* estate that Mridha's father had purchased into a profitable investment. At that time, Bangladeshi laborers were frightened (and were not officially allowed) to enter the lawless *chhitmahal*, even in daylight, fearing robbery and other forms of physical assault. So, Mridha's father decided to employ a few impoverished displaced persons from his home district in his new Balapara Khagrabari landholdings.

He reached out to his relatives in Gaibandha and asked them to circulate an employment offer. More than the number of individuals he had asked for showed up in Botolganj in search of work and home. They set up plastic tents under the open sky to make temporary shelters in Botolganj and immediately started working as sharecroppers (*adhiar*) in the landholdings in Balapara Khagrabari owned by Mridha's father. The local residents in the *chhitmahal* and adjacent villages eventually called these displaced Bangladeshi citizens *Bhatiyas*. Surviving by struggling in an adverse socio-climatic environment added a rugged toughness to the local *Bhatiya* image. The continuous erosion and accretion processes often created hostile landownership claims in their place of origin (i.e., the *char*-lands), where landlords used to practice a semi-feudal mode of production, and serfs were deployed as mercenaries (locally known as *lathiyal* or man with bamboo pole) to defeat rival landlords in violent conflicts to grab the possession of newly emerged land (Zaman, 1991). As a result, downstream *char*-dwellers had earned a strong-built muscular daredevil image in agrarian folklore.

It did not take long for the *Bhatiyas* to impress the *chhit* landlords with their extremely hard-working attitude. Besides Mridha's father, they started sharecropping for other landlords in Balapara Khagrabari. The landlords invested their land; the *Bhatiyas* invested their labor. After the harvest, both parties divided the production into halves. The first batch of *Bhatiyas* was supposed to return to Gaibandha whenever their eroded homesteads resurfaced from the riverbed, but this did not happen. Instead, the possibility of a stable home and non-violent work gradually pulled more *Bhatiyas* into the *chhitmahal*. They very shortly transformed themselves into a vital labor force in local agriculture. In recognition of this Mridha's father negotiated with other powerful landlords of Balapara Khagrabari and sold a few pieces of land to these *Bhatiyas* at a very low price; this is where they built their houses and moved out from the tents. This was the beginning of Gaibandha Para in Balapara Khagrabari. Those who could not afford the land-purchase had built shanty houses on their landlord's land. To express their gratitude to Mridha's father, the *Bhatiyas* named a cluster of their neighborhood after him, *Dakua Para*.

Gaibandha Para was an enclave of *Bhatiyas* inside the enclave, like a counter-enclave full of Bangladeshi citizens inside the Indian enclave Balapara Khagrabari. The neighborhood that was established by 25-30 families forty years ago is now the home of more than two hundred families. Each year the erosion of Brahmaputra pulls new *Bhatiya* families into the Gaibandha Para. But the largest wave entered in the early 1990s following a catastrophic flood in 1988 that inundated 75 percent of the country, displaced eight million, and killed two thousand people (Shaw, 1989:11).



Instead of living in scattered places, the *Bhatiyas* built houses adjacent to each other and extended the area of the neighborhood. They named it after their district of origin, Gaibandha.



Figure 15: A typical *baree* (homestead) in the Gaibandha Para

Balapara Khagrabari had an uneven population density throughout the *chhitmahal*. It had a few isolated clusters where homesteads were built next to each other. The rest of the area was agricultural land. But, Gaibandha Para was different from the other clusters; it was in the corner of the *chhitmahal* where the population density and household size were much higher. The residents were related to each other because they came to know about Balapara Khagrabari through their kinship networks. Almost the entire neighborhood was Muslim. The majority of the residents were subsistence sharecroppers. Their hard subsistence life never prioritized the formal education before the integration of the *chhitmahal*, but their literacy rate has been increasing since the swap.

### **A Typical *Bhatiya* Life in *Chhitmahals***

Mannan came to know about Balapara Khagrabari from his kin, who founded Gaibandha Para. He could not tell which exact year he had migrated to Balapara Khagrabari with his wife, but indicated that it was after the catastrophic 1988's flood wiped out his ancestral home. He initially settled into Gaibandha Para and started sharecropping for Mridha Khan, who, by that time, had inherited a massive amount of land from his father. It was the early 1990s; Balapara Khagrabari had meanwhile formed its political council that succeeded in diminishing the frequency of robbery, theft, and other safety risks but could not entirely eradicate them. To increase the security of his crops, Mridha pulled 8-10 *Bhatiya* families from the *Gaibandha Para* and built them houses in the middle of his landholdings.<sup>84</sup> Mannan was one of these *Bhatiyas*, who later became Mridha's leading sharecropper. At that time, local rice varieties were the dominant crop, most of the landlords were still subsistence peasants, and commercial production was yet to start in Balapara Khagrabari.

By the mid-1990s, the grassroots-level agriculture extension officers in rural Bangladesh started to motivate farmers to adopt high-yield hybrid rice and vegetable varieties, which required intensive labor and an increasing amount of irrigation and fertilizer (Cons, 2016:102). Mridha was the first landlord in Balapara Khagrabari, who cultivated hybrid crop varieties. The impressive production of rice and potato in the first year encouraged him to grow more hybrid varieties. He claimed that his successful production had encouraged other *chhit* landlords in adopting hybrid varieties, which eventually pioneered commercial agriculture in Balapara Khagrabari. I have witnessed two major seasonal harvests in fieldwork, which included *Aman* rice, maize, potato, tomato, groundnut, green chilly, lychee, mango, and many other fruits and vegetables. Mridha affirmed on multiple occasions that this agricultural growth had begun in the stateless era, and he gave full credit to the *Bhatiya* sharecroppers, who had not only invested extensive labor but also ensured crop security throughout the season. Besides the landlords, growing high-yield crops brought affluence to sharecropper households. The leader of Mridha's sharecropping team, Mannan, also ended up with surplus profits from the extra production. His achievements and firm grasp over the fellow *Bhatiyas* gained him a position as member in the former Balapara Khagrabari *chhit* council. However, he was a rare

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<sup>84</sup> After the swap, when the subdistrict administration finalized the routes to develop major roads in the *chhitmahal*, he rebuilt their houses beside one of the major roads for the sake of communications and electricity connection.

exception. The majority of the *Bhatiyas* still struggled to find a place in the community beyond the identity of sharecropper, and they remained ignored in political spheres.

The arrival of the *Bhatiya* migrants had a mixed reception. The *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors, and fellow citizens, considered them a nuisance and a socially inferior group because they were illiterate and aggressive. The ordinary *chhitbashi*, on the other hand, appreciated this bold daredevil image, which drove Bangladeshi goons away from stealing *chhit* crops and livestock. To the landlords, the *Bhatiyas* were the forces of production they were looking for; they were cheaper, abundant, hard-working, brave, and exploitable. The *Bhatiyas* appeared to be the key providers of two services that were vital to living in an anomalous space: security and agriculture. Influential individuals of Indian *chhitmahal* Balapara Khagrabari acknowledged this contribution and overlooked the fact that the *Bhatiyas* were Bangladeshi citizens.

However, the scope of this conditional generosity was limited. I collected two lists of members of the Balapara Khagrabari council: one was formed in 1994 and the other was the last council of 2014. The 1994's council did not have any *Bhatiya* members on their committee. The last council consisted of twenty-eight members, and only three of them were *Bhatiya*. Considering the population size of Gaibandha Para, if there were an election, the result might have been much different. In the last forty years, the growing *Bhatiya* population outnumbered the native residents and the heirs of the Partition-refugees (*bodlees*) who also considered themselves as natives. The elites of Balapara Khagrabari allowed the *Bhatiyas* to stay and work, but their political prospects had always been strangled; they were expected to contribute to Balapara Khagrabari society but not to lead.<sup>85</sup> The selection of three *Bhatiya* members in the council was not to ensure the representation of Gaibandha Para but to exercise natives' control over the migrants and use them as an organized crowd in the swap movement. Moreover, a few leaders of the council were the landlords of the selected *Bhatiya* members who, being serfs, were not able to challenge the council's decisions. The elites chose three *Bhatiyas* for the council to influence their fellow *Bhatiyas*; their main job was to channel the governing plans of the natives.

Following the swap, the growing profit in commercial agriculture enabled the *Bhatiyas* to achieve impressive economic growth. Although the majority of the *Bhatiyas* in Balapara Khagrabari were

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<sup>85</sup> Jason Cons' research (2016:103) explored similar marginalization of the *Bhatiyas* in Dahagram *chhitmahal*.

subsistence peasants, there was a good number of *Bhatiyas* who had been transitioning from sharecropper to small-landlord. In fact, all the *Bhatiyas* to some extent experienced an upward economic mobility. The wage laborers have been transitioning into sharecropping for a stable supply of subsistence, and the sharecroppers have been buying small pieces of land to make a surplus profit beyond subsistence-needs. Even people from other professions started to sharecrop to increase subsistence security and income surplus. Next to the agriculture work, transporting passengers in rickshaw-van was a dominant profession among the *Bhatiyas*. I was a regular passenger in Rahman's van, who used to be an agriculture-labor but recently became a sharecropper besides part-time van-driving. His first harvest was potato in two decimals of land. I met many young *Bhatiya* van-drivers in their 20s who also worked as seasonal wage labor during the harvesting months. Every *Bhatiya* was working hard to catch up with the next step possible in the post-swap economy, and the dominant factors behind this mobility were the new varieties of crops, good crop production, state-security, and a legal right to participate in businesses beyond Balapara Khagrabari.

This livelihood mobility also blessed my mentor Mannan Hussain. He bought a couple of landholdings from his landlord Mridha a few months into the post-swap transition. Besides sharecropping, he has been producing rice and other seasonal crops on his own property. He was a father of four sons and two daughters and lived with his married sons in a joint family. His entire family worked during the harvest in his fields. In the first harvest I observed in Balapara Khagrabari, his potato and groundnut harvests were too large for his family labor; he had to hire daily wage laborers. He, along with other *Bhatiyas*, had taken the risk and developed the agriculture works in the stateless *chhitmahal*. The Bangladeshi wage laborers who refused to work in Balapara Khagrabari for fear of their safety eventually ended up working in Mannan and other *Bhatiyas'* fields following the swap.

However, similar to the pre-swap era, this economic mobility following the normalization of *chhitmahal* also did not parallel the sociopolitical achievements of the *Bhatiyas*. After the swap, many former *chhit* council members built a solid position in the Bangladeshi political parties, but the *Bhatiyas* remained ignored. After the crisis of security and agricultural labor was over, the *Bhatiyas* lost their indispensable position to the *chhit* elites.<sup>86</sup> A few of Mannan's fellow members of the abolished

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<sup>86</sup> This fear motivated the *Bhatiyas* in Dasiar Chhara that included climate migrants, economic migrants, petty smugglers, and other Bangladeshi outsiders to jointly oppose the swap movement, but they were outnumbered by the pro-swap supporters.

council, who were native *chhitbashi*, succeeded in achieving a commanding place in the changing political landscape, but he failed to retain his dominant position in the post-citizenship *chhit* leadership. Since the beginning of the swap, a wide range of external actors exerted control over the society and politics of *chhitmahals*. While this transformation cornered even the influential ‘original’ *chhitbashi*, once again, it was the *Bhatiyas* who were marginalized. Economic progress could not save them.

### **Still, the ‘Others’**

A few weeks following the incident between Mannan and Mortuza Master, I visited another Balapara Khagrabari native, Delowar Hossain. Mannan accompanied me because they were colleagues in the former *chhit* council. We mainly visited him to discuss how a few young college-educated *chhit* youths overcame the obstacles of statelessness and achieved success in their career. The case of the day was Delowar’s son, who had successfully defeated all difficulties in the stateless era and secured a job in the Bangladesh Police. At some point in the conversation, Delowar wanted to know the progress of my research. I shared my plan to work with the *Bhatiyas*; he instantly replied,

Why? They do not know the history; the problems of statelessness had started a long before the *Bhatiyas* came here. To get the accurate information, you should talk to the residents in the vicinity of Balapara Bazaar; they are the *ashol* [original] residents.

This statement clearly shocked Mannan. He did not say much for the rest of the conversation. Before we left, Delowar acknowledged the contribution of the *Bhatiyas* but reiterated his statement. It was not hard to understand that the gradual socioeconomic interactions assimilated the *Bhatiyas* in Balapara Khagrabari and made them an integral part of the community, but their marginalization has remained a regular element of the question ‘who belonged to Balapara Khagrabari’ (cf. Cons, 2016:98).

The question concerned the national imagination more than the ethno-linguistic identity; the *Bhatiyas* were the only group in Balapara Khagrabari that did not have ancestral ties to India. The fact that ‘they came from Bangladesh’ might not have caused a big issue in finding a home or job in Balapara Khagrabari, but it was imprinted in the public memory that they did not come from India. Hence,

they were outsiders - the ‘others.’ Another mentor and Indian Partition-refugee, Babul validated this exclusion with a smiling face, “Balapara Khagrabari used to be an Indian territory, we were Indian. Our ancestors were Indian. The *Bhatiyas* came from Bangladesh. They even voted in the national election of Bangladesh after resettling in Balapara Khagrabari.” Despite the merger of Balapara Khagrabari with Bangladesh, a form of historical national imagination resurfaced in excluding the *Bhatiyas*.

Mannan did not instantly call Delowar out, but on our way back he rejected Delowar’s statement and made it clear that the *chhitmahal* Delowar proudly claimed his membership in was uninhabitable until the *Bhatiyas* contributed their blood and sweat. As he went on bashing Delowar, I realized that it was not a stereotypical historical genealogy, but the fact that they helped Balapara Khagrabari’s prosperity grow shaped a sense of *Bhatiya* belonging. The natives, like Delowar, claimed ownership to the *chhitmahal* based on political belonging, history, or birth, but the *Bhatiyas* grew a sense of belonging based on their sacrifice and contribution to help it function all the years without a nation.

Otherwise, the *Bhatiyas* were very fluid and pragmatic about national identity construction. They had participated in Bangladeshi elections and stayed connected with Gaibandha before the citizenship, but they also knew Balapara Khagrabari as their home, and its fate was linked to their future. So, they did everything that Delowar did to survive in the *chhitmahal*; they collected *chhit* identity documents, registered their land in Haldibari (India), participated in the council, and actively supported the swap movement. I cannot remember that any *Bhatiya* ever told me that they were in a dilemma about their identity; instead, they were least worried about it. The generation that was born and raised in Balapara Khagrabari was even less concerned about their national identity. They developed a unique *chhit* identity; it was not the tax-based citizenship services, but the shared fear and suffering of statelessness that shaped their sense of belonging (cf. Van Schendel, 2002:132). If there was still any ambiguity left in formal identity formation, the merger of Balapara Khagrabari with Bangladesh had almost normalized it. Their central concern continued to be the everyday othering processes, and the social inferiority the ‘original’ residents imposed on them.

Of many local theories explaining why the *Bhatiyas* were different from the ‘originals’ of Balapara Khagrabari, three were dominant and continuously repeated. Despite striking ethno-linguistic and religious similarities, the first narrative fabricated an ‘ethnicized’ theory that the *Bhatiyas* looked different than the natives. They had a darker complexion; they grew long beards and hair. Compared

to the natives, they had a taller figure, larger eyes, sharper nose, and a more muscular stature (Chakraborty, 2016:140).

This theory extended a second narrative that accused the *Bhatiyas* of practicing a culture of crime. Mridha Khan was the best-known employer of the *Bhatiyas* in Balapara Khagrabari. In conversing with me, he assumed that the *Bhatiyas* that founded the Gaibandha Para had a criminal past. He claimed that they used to be the mercenaries (*lathiyal*) of their landlord, and that many of them fled their *char* after murdering their rivals. He believed that the intention to escape murder charges was a strong motivation in migrating to Balapara Khagrabari. According to this view, their mandatory involvement in the violent conflicts among the *char* landlords gradually shaped an aggressive and violent culture. For the sake of proving *Bhatiyas*' criminal past, the 'original' *chhit* folks often participated in spreading stories about how gruesome they were in murdering the rivals. Their involvement in the conflicts and struggle to cope with natural hazards earned them a reputation for energy and bravery in Balapara Khagrabari. Still, Mridha once accused them also of being lazy, arguing that the *Bhatiyas* work only during the plantation and harvesting seasons; the rest of the year, they just sit lazily in tea-stalls, do unproductive chores, and make evil plans.

Delowar's unwillingness to share 'real' membership in Balapara Khagrabari with the *Bhatiyas* exposed the third narrative, which spread fears of a demographic threat to *chhit* indigeneity. In the stateless era, the *chhit* residents cultivated a tendency to present themselves as a helpless, peace-loving community that was a passive victim of oppression by border guards and citizen-neighbors (Cons, 2013:39). In this oversimplified version of peaceful *chhitmahals*, in their view, the *Bhatiyas* posed a risk of criminalizing their society. Mukul Chakraborty's research (2016) shows that growing *Bhatiya* migration into the Seotikursha and Sahebganj - nearby *chhitmahals* of Dasiar Chhara - scared a few native *chhitbashi* badly enough about their security to induce them to migrate to India (144). In Balapara Khagrabari and Dasiar Chhara, such stigmatized and ungrounded fears erected a social barrier between the original *chhitbashi* and the *Bhatiyas*. Their mutual dependency obscured this barrier in the stateless era, but citizenship-induced security measures and uninterrupted movement reduced reliance on each other and made it easy to 'other' the *Bhatiyas*.

These popular theories had a political-economic angle too. The majority of these *Bhatiyas* were the obedient sharecroppers of Balapara Khagrabari landlords who treated them as their serfs. The historical patron-serf relation in the subcontinent of India was extremely hierarchical and strictly

controlled the livelihood mobility of subordinate serfs. The Balapara Khagrabari elites were uncomfortable in acknowledging the fact that the *Bhatiyas*, whom they once generously allowed to stay and work, were on the verge of climbing up the steps of social hierarchy (cf. Cons, 2016:103). I observed that Mridha Khan often addressed his sharecroppers as *amar proja* (my subjects) and treated himself as their lord (*raja*). A semi-feudal kingship connotation was evident in his interactions with Mannan, who recently elevated himself as a landowner. On many occasions, he asked Mannan to perform unpaid household chores, e.g., buying groceries or helping his nephew in moving. Interestingly, they both were migrants to the locality and belonged to the same erosion-prone Sundarganj subdistrict; still, Mridha stigmatized Mannan and other *Bhatiyas* as violent and aggressive for being former *char*-landers. He saw himself as educated and progressive, while the impoverished *Bhatiyas* were illiterate and backward-thinking (cf. Cons, 2016:96). In the age of growing commercial agriculture, when it became harder for the local landlords to completely control the mode of production, they unleashed these narratives of social othering to retain the domination over the *Bhatiyas*.

This othering process had real-life consequences. Following the swap, when the elites of Balapara Khagrabari started to construct schools throughout the *chhitmahal* for their own neighborhoods, the *Bhatiya* leaders also built an elementary school for the Gaibandha Para. The school had the potential to enroll the highest number of students considering the demographic majority of the *Bhatiyas*. However, before they could apply for the authorization to enroll students, the *Bhatiya* leaders were asked to send the Gaibandha Para kids to the Bongomata School<sup>87</sup> that was founded by the former (native) council leaders and landlords of Balapara Khagrabari. The *Bhatiyas* could not say ‘no.’ I observed them working as unpaid recruiters of *Bhatiya* kids in Bongomata School, which was on the way to becoming the first non-government MPO school in the *chhitmahal*. A couple of kilometers away, the *Bhatiya* school became just an abandoned and broken structure. An aspiration of building an educated and modern neighborhood community around the school remained a shattered dream.

Moreover, the post-swap infrastructural development plan was also manipulated to deprive the *Bhatiyas*. For example, when the subdistrict administration unveiled their infrastructural plan, the *Bhatiyas* were very happy to learn about an allocation for a paved mosque in the Gaibandha Para. But eventually they found out that a few powerful native *chhitbashi* influenced the administration to move

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<sup>87</sup> The illicit clientelist politics involved in the construction of this school was described in Chapter 3.



the location of the mosque to a different neighborhood. Such exclusionary politics also left the most populated neighborhood of Balapara Khagrabari with the worst roads, which motivated the (Bangladeshi) *Bhatiyas* to distrust, not just the politicized bureaucrats, but also their fellow (former Indian) *chhitbashi*.



Figure 16: The abandoned school in the Gaibandha Para

### A Tight-Knit Community

Sitting in Humayun Huq's tea-stall in Botolganj and hanging out with my *chhit* friends was my most regular evening activity. Humayun was a *Bhatiya*; his family migrated to Cooch Behar in the 1960s after losing their home to riverbank erosion, but they had to relocate again to Gaibandha district following the Partition-caused communal conflicts. In the early 1990s, he migrated to Botolganj along with his wife. He did not have a house at the time, so he ran the tea-stall where his wife made

tea and cooked local snacks. The couple used to sleep at the tea-stall after closing it for business. Among four to five other tea-stalls, Humayun had the most fragile one, which was not even sealed to stop rainwater pouring inside the shop. Still, his tea-stall was always packed. He had a specific group of customers, the *chhitbashi*; to be more precise, the *Bhatiya chhitbashi*. It never happened that I went to his tea-stall, and there was not someone from Balapara Khagrabari drinking tea or watching television there. Hanging out with fellow *chhit* residents in a place owned by a *Bhatiya* gave them the comfort of a close community where they found a safe space to trash the Balapara Khagrabari leaders in a loud voice or simply scold the wholesalers for underpaying them.

Just before the monsoon, an accident interrupted my daily visit to Humayun's tea-stall. Struck by a strong Nor'westers<sup>88</sup> one evening, a huge tree fell on the tea-stall. One person died, and four to five were severely injured, including my 94-year old mentor Babul Ullah. If it was not a stormy evening, I would have been there at the time. The next day, this natural accident had been transformed into a tale of a murderous conspiracy against the *Bhatiyas*, who had been the regulars in the tea-stall. A couple of persons were reportedly seen cutting the roots of the tree with a saw to make it unstable. Humayun and his fellow *Bhatiyas* strongly believed that it was a joint conspiracy by the *pooran* Bangladeshis and the native *chhitbashi*, who targeted the tea-stall for destruction to break up their community gathering.<sup>89</sup>

Humayun rebuilt his tea-stall within a few weeks, and I soon witnessed another disturbance there. In the monsoon, blackouts in the evening were widespread. Because of this a few *pooran* Bangladeshi businessmen of Botolganj installed a massive generator just next to his tea-stall to supply power during the blackout. The generator was so loud that it was tough to sit there or have a conversation with anyone. Humayun claimed that there were many empty spaces in the *bazaar* for such a noisy generator; still, they intentionally installed it behind his tea-stall as a renewed attack to break the gathering of *Bhatiyas*. Nobody agreed with his claim, except the *Bhatiyas*. However, his tea-stall would become empty for a few hours throughout the monsoon as soon as the generator was turned on.

These accusations might sound like baseless fabrications, but it was a fact that the *Bhatiyas* were praised for practicing a tight-knit community in the Gaibandha Para. Humayun said that both their

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<sup>88</sup> A pre-monsoon cyclone in the region, locally known as *Kalboishakhi*.

<sup>89</sup> However, their *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors seemed to be reluctant about this accusation because another rumor was circulated that it was a job of the poachers to appropriate the wood.

*pooran* Bangladeshi and Balapara Khagrabari neighbors abused and assaulted the *Bhatiyas*, exploited their wage labor, and invaded their properties. Despite keeping a submissive attitude on their face, the *Bhatiyas* displayed a passive-aggressive resistance toward their landlords, and spoke of them as *roktō chosha* (bloodsuckers). They did not think half of the crop production was fair to sharecroppers, considering their heavy labor investment. Many landlords also used to violate the sharecropping contracts and paid them less than half in the stateless era. Being helpless dependents, they hardly resisted this oppression. But the scenario had been slowly changing. Throughout my fieldwork, I witnessed Mannan expressing an attitude of resistance to Mortuza Master, Delowar, his landlord Mridha Khan, and others whom he used to obey. Other *Bhatiyas* also raised voices of dissent.



Figure 17: Humayun's packed tea-stall in Botolganj prior to the storm-damage

The *Bhatiyas* had particular strengths that empowered them in the post-citizenship era to build a bold community in raising their voice against prolonged oppression and exploitation. One way they did this was in recent local government elections, when their large population size transformed the Gaibandha Para a formidable vote hub. It would be difficult to win any election in Balapara Khagrabari without winning the *Bhatiya* votes. Second, despite their reputation for violence and aggression, I found the *Bhatiya* community in Gaibandha Para as the most orderly and organized among all the neighborhoods. Compared to the native population, they had fewer factions and were less politically divisive. Leaders like Mannan had a strong grip over the ordinary *Bhatiyas*. Third,

being historically Bangladeshis, the merger of Balapara Khagrabari with Bangladesh gave them additional confidence in their everyday activities. Their kinship connections and familiarity with Bangladeshi bureaucracy had helped them navigate local politics and administration more effectively. And although the native *chhitbashi* hesitated to form marital relations with them (cf. Chakraborty, 2016:140), the *Bhatiyas* were very strategic in this matter as well. Two sons of Mannan recently married the daughters of two families in *pooran* Bangladesh that were well connected with the ruling party, which helped him in a recent police case.<sup>90</sup> In addition to their immediate relatives in Gaibandha, these affinal connections also became a strong pillar of the *Bhatiya* community.

Every village has a person who is known as crazy (*pagla*) who does not worry about making people uncomfortable by uttering the harsh facts. In Balapara Khagrabari, it was Lokman Farazi - an impoverished *Bhatiya* wage laborer. As Mannan got busy with groundnut harvesting and after watching native *chhit* elites hide sensitive information (e.g., internal class conflicts, land appropriation, council corruptions) to me, he put me in touch with Lokman. In our several tea-stall conversations, he truly made everyone around uncomfortable.

Once in a crowded tea-stall, in front of the native *chhit* landlords and politically influential persons, Lokman lashed out in a harsh and loud voice at a local *union parishad* member for being involved in mosque corruption. He went on scolding the local government for its negligence in implementing the infrastructural plans in Gaibandha Para. He also announced that the *Bhatiyas* had a stronger community; even if the native *chhitbashi* stole all development projects that were allocated for them, they would still survive. In the stateless era, they built their own mosque and roads; if necessary, they could do that again. He shouted at the tea-stall audience that *pooran* Bangladeshis and natives made the mistake of assuming that the *Bhatiyas* had no external administrative connections, while the truth was that if the corruption went on, *Bhatiyas* knew whom to contact to report that. Lokman also believed that the allegation of intentionally destroying Humayun's tea-stall was not a rumor but a fact. Since the swap, the land value in *chhitmahals* and *pooran* Bangladesh went up; therefore, a few influential politicians had been trying to grab *Bhatiya* properties by creating disturbance in their everyday lives. He suspected that someone intended to displace Humayun and his wife by destroying their tea-stall, which was located on a government land under Humayun's possession. His unhinged

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<sup>90</sup> Elaborated in the section *Exploited Female Bodies* in Chapter 6.

speech might have been a little exaggerated, but I believe he was not so crazy as to pronounce these allegations in a public space unless he was confident that his community had his back.

## Review

In fieldwork, besides countless impoverished and oppressed *Bhatiyas*, I also met a few *Bhatiyas* who were wealthier and better-connected than their native counterparts and *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors, particularly in Dasiar Chhara. Many forms of discrimination that the ordinary *Bhatiyas* experienced would not apply to these few economic migrants. Prioritizing the accounts of these privileged *Bhatiyas* would have generalized the politics of nurturing a sense of belonging to a *chhitmahal* vs. a nation. Instead, I wrote about the ordinary displaced *Bhatiyas* whose experiences of suffering helped me to understand disguised internal community factions and class exploitation, which are usually left buried under the uplifting narrative of a united *chhit* community.

The *Bhatiyas* had migrated into the *chhitmahals* from the floodplain of northwestern Bangladesh that often suffered from severe riverbank erosion. In most cases, the erosion victims did not get state-sponsored resettlement. The displaced people usually used to resettle in empty lands, forests, or abandoned places in adjacent districts. Since the late 1970s, the *Bhatiyas* from nearby Gaibandha district began to relocate in Balapara Khagrabari. These Bangladeshi citizens knew the stateless situation of anomalous *chhitmahals*, but they had nowhere else to find a stable home and work. In fact, the statelessness of the *chhitmahals* helped them find a large amount of vacant land. They worked hard to make the *chhitmahal* livable and productive. The *Bhatiyas* wanted shelter while the Balapara Khagrabari natives wanted cheap labor to make agriculture profitable. Over the years, the *Bhatiyas* achieved remarkable material progress but got stuck in the lowest ranks of the social hierarchy in *chhitmahals*.

I heard people calling them illiterate, violent criminals because they grew up in a rough environment of *char*-land. The *chhit* natives and *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors hesitated to form marital relations with them. But nobody could deny that because of their growing demographic and dominance in agricultural labor, they played a significant role in various sociopolitical structures of Balapara Khagrabari. Despite their essentiality, the original residents wanted to limit the extent of their mobility. The natives were happy to let them work or have them as neighbors, but their gradual

progress posed a challenge to the existing social hierarchy, which was not easy to accept for many native *chhitbashi*. The original *chhit* residents, who had previously been stigmatized by their *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors, repeated the exclusionary politics of othering against the *Bhatiyas*.

Besides the turbulent relationship between the native *chhitbashi* and the *Bhatiya* migrants, citizenship-induced changes have also redefined other foundations of the *chhit* community; the next chapter discusses some of these changes in detail. It will start by exploring the new order of politics introduced by the national political parties into the former *chhitmahals*. The transformed definition of ethics fostered by clientelist politics will be a significant focus of the chapter. A section of the chapter will also investigate the confrontation between the 'old' semi-feudal system and the 'new' political system of retail corruption in the journey of *chhitbashi* from 'subjects' to 'citizens.' One of the critical arguments will be that the *chhitbashi* actively reconfigured their community, featuring both 'good' and 'bad' practices, to make it viable in new circumstances.

## CHAPTER 6

### RECONFIGURING THE *CHHIT* COMMUNITY

If you ask me *Where should I go to witness a theatrical performance of the chhit community*, I would certainly send you to the fragile tea-stalls of *chhitmahals*. It was not for drinking tepid sugary tea or smoking *bidi* (cheap local cigarette); I visited the tea-stalls every day just to listen to the public conversations. After a full day of physical labor, people gather in these tea stalls in the evening and heal their daily grief by talking to each other. The agency, sincerity, and noise decibels in a conversation might fluctuate depending on the audience and the topic. The performers and the audience also reactively communicate with each other. Two sharecroppers bashing their landlord for exploitation might perform a rehearsed obedience in the next minute if the landlord enters the tea-stall. If you go there and get involved in such a conversation, you do not need to facilitate it to understand the community. You just listen to it and immerse yourself into the essence of the conversation. You will have your chance to ask follow-up questions. If the audience belongs to the same social category, the conversation-leaders do not tend to be very cautious about their words.

I used to be a regular audience of this public space and participated in diverse public interactions - mostly about politics, corruption, and citizenship agonies. There was a widespread and recurring consensus in those tea-stall conversations that the nation-building process has mostly modified the community-self (e.g., stable law and order, local government administration) and physical landscape of the former anomalous borderland. However, citizenship was yet to empower the *chhitbashi* directly, I mean the ordinary individuals, or to be specific - the educated youths. It would not be wrong to infer that unlike the middle-aged adults or elders, who celebrated their citizen-self for being able to vote or walk on paved roads, the youths demanded more individualistic perks to 'feel' their citizenship. They did not see any immediate relief from poverty and livelihood insecurity through the new roads, electricity, or schools. Not just public infrastructures and other services, the youths wanted a special quota in government jobs, priority in local employment opportunities, specialized training to develop skills, voice and leadership in politics, even their share of local corruption-loot. They believed that infrastructure-dominated nation-building failed to reach and enrich the capacity of individual youths immediately. Therefore, they polished themselves into the political users of a digital world through mobile phones, Facebook, and YouTube to launch a form

of virtual citizenship to exercise the membership perks and express their individual-agency as citizens.

These dissatisfied youths in their twenties were the dominant demographic among my research participants. As I was trying to give you an impression about the digital *chbit* youths,<sup>91</sup> Fahim Rahman of Dasiar Chhara poked my memory first. When I came across him, Fahim introduced himself as a school teacher and the founding convener of the Bangladesh Student League (BSL) in Dasiar Chhara. An educated *chbit* youth who successfully claimed his position in the local employment sector and politics impressed me and, thanks to his easygoing personality, in a few minutes of our first conversation, we became Facebook friends. The ‘About’ section of his Facebook profile highlights his involvement in the school, local politics of BSL, and many diverse community positions (e.g., member of a cultural group, local sports club, and enclave-swap movement). I can not show you his Facebook posts due to my ethical commitments to protect his identity. However, I do not think it would be unethical to tell you that his Facebook posts had (still have) a few visible patterns that are connected to the *chbit* politics and community.

First, he was a loyal BSL activist and a virtual bookkeeper of all BAL-BSL deeds since the swap, from his contributions in co-founding the party wing in a newly normalized territory to the political achievements (e.g., electoral success throughout the country) of the party. In the photos, he portrayed himself as the central figure in the gatherings of BSL men in Dasiar Chhara to celebrate diverse political occasions in solidarity with the party headquarter. Second, Fahim shared regular updates on on-going development projects, e.g., road, school, in Dasiar Chhara. As a grassroots BSL-man, his posts were full of uncritical gratitude to the party chief, the current prime minister of the country, and local leaders. Third, while the ordinary *chbitbashi* were busy in the crop fields, Fahim and his followers emphasized equal importance on cultivating nationalistic rituals (e.g., selfies in the celebration of republic days). Fourth, posts showing him giving interviews to television reports about the miseries of stateless past and the benefits of citizenship reminded his followers of his superior position as the voice of the community, which they acknowledged in the comments section.

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<sup>91</sup> To transform Bangladesh into a modernized country, the ruling party of Bangladesh (BAL) adopted an initiative called *Digital Bangladesh* in their political manifesto, which means training the citizens in information and technology programs and providing faster and effective state services through online technologies. Therefore, in vernacular expressions, ‘being digital’ means an educated, updated, modern, sophisticated tech-savvy person or institution (Huang, 2017).



Fifth, teaching in the classroom photos along with the captions intended to let the followers know how much he loved elevating underprivileged *chhit* kids through formal school education.

I bet you would have an impression of Fahim as a popular community figure, a passionate school teacher, or a successful politician if you have not met him in person, instead just follow his Facebook posts. His posts gave me a similar impression of a dynamic current of national politics in Dasiar Chhara, along with magnificent infrastructures and a vibrant school system in the *chhitmahal* where he performed an active role. But, this virtual reality that Fahim created very carefully and deliberately was not consistent with the actual events that were happening in Dasiar Chhara. The subdistrict chapter of the BAL did not officially endorse the BSL unit that he co-founded in Dasiar Chhara and had an active presence in his Facebook posts. His self-declared position as the convener of the unit was also not approved by any superior BAL panel either. The teaching position he held in one of the local schools was not paid; even the school itself did not have the authorization of teaching students from the local education department. The magnitude of infrastructural projects was also a distorted fact. Since the initial phase of infrastructural expansion, new projects were slowed down. Unlike his posts implying a satisfied community, ordinary *chhitbashi* were often frustrated about infrastructural corruption. The countless after-event photos showing him shaking hands with national leaders and bureaucrats were not because they knew him in person - as he claimed on Facebook - instead were simple photography tricks. I participated in a couple of political events along with him; when the chief guests of an event positively responded to his request for a photograph, he posted it to claim of having a personal relationship with them. The photos of crowded political gatherings of BSL under his leadership simply focused on the congested part of the frame.

Fahim was very different than his digital alter ego. He was not a full-time teacher or an influential Dasiar Chhara politician as he claimed to be on the Facebook. His uncritical loyalty to the BSL came from an aspiration to gain a leadership position in the party, which, in the current Bangladeshi political climate, was a very profitable 'profession' as well. The politicized bureaucracy and other branches of the government let a political leader of the ruling party make personal gains through interfering with government projects. The leading BAL men in Dasiar Chhara meanwhile earned a fortune through earning illicit commissions from various development programs in association with a bunch of bureaucrats and local government administrators that also had strong political affiliation. A third consecutive term of the BAL in the government did not give Fahim much choice in

choosing between parties. When I asked him why he supported the BAL, he said, “you have to understand the absolute political control of the BAL over everything. What would I get from supporting BNP [the major opposition]?”



Figure 18: Sharing photos of politicians distributing public goods was a *chhit* trend on Facebook  
Photo courtesy: Jakir Sarker’s Facebook page

Not all his Facebook posts were also factual. He hashtagged his celebration of republic days along with a few other followers as a community celebration. In many cases, such ceremonies were performed with a few men with candles just to post on Facebook. Apart from being the witness of a few such events, I started to doubt his posts when he told me that he was planning to orchestrate fake unrest by burning tires in Dasiar Chhara to show it as a community protest on the Facebook to gain the attention of the bureaucrats and political leaders who stopped caring about the *chhitbashi* after the implementation of basic infrastructural projects. He might have been exaggerating the efficacy of such fake news, but his Facebook activities did not go in vain. The new digital network increased the number of young Facebook users in Dasiar Chhara, which enabled Fahim to gather a substantial virtual crowd behind him. His political and nationalistic posts were liked and shared by hundreds of his followers. They might be struggling in the ground, but Fahim and his followers meanwhile gained a robust control over the digital space of the *chhitmahal*.

Fahim's active presence in the Facebook also entitled him a powerful representation of the community to those who did not live in Dasiar Chhara. When I was looking for a field guide, one of my friends, who was a subdistrict bureaucrat in the area, proposed Fahim's name. I saw television and news reporters were looking for him in preparing any news about the former *chhitmahals*. The subdistrict BAL and BSL leaders regularly liked and commented on his Facebook posts. He was also a top choice to the local government representatives in representing the *chhit* youths in different government events. Trainers in the skill department programs were photographed handing him certificates. There were many leaders in Dasiar Chhara more powerful than Fahim, but his active presence on the Facebook earned him a persona of an educated and politically conscious popular youth to all these different actors. Besides, he was valued, talented and hard to avoid because he was capable of creating a virtual buzz among the *chhit* youths and imposing pressure on the public service providers.

I do not want to suggest that Fahim represents all *chhit* youths, but he exhibits how the young individuals have been modifying themselves to speed up their long due presence in the sociopolitical scene in *chhitmahals* and neighboring *pooran* Bangladesh. He was aware of the diminishing dominance of land in rural politics and the rising influence of virtual networks. The traditional politics confined his newfound citizen-self within Dasiar Chhara, so he celebrated it and made it powerful through the Facebook posts. The leaders on the ground ignored him, so he lined up a bunch of virtual followers behind him. The established leaders who failed to understand the power of virtual networks lost their dominance in the virtual political space of Dasiar Chhara to the youths like Fahim. Unlike their beliefs in the territorial confinement of power and authority, Fahim believed as a citizen, not just Dasiar Chhara, entire Bangladesh and its politics were his areas of concern. Fake news and playing BAL leaders by showing pragmatic obedience were some of his imagined citizenship rights. His Facebook posts created a new political consciousness, an aspirational virtual community, and a sanctuary of the dreadful memory of stateless past. Fahim did not always prefer such unorthodox and often illicit political strategies; instead, many times, these were just a desperate and necessary attempt to be heard, find his importance amid the intrusion of outsiders, and feel a sense of normalcy. This chapter aims to explain that while the state was modifying the physical landscapes of *chhitmahals*, the individuals were modifying themselves as well to capitalize on the citizenship-induced agency. The following paragraphs introduce the individuals and groups that, through their unconventional sociocultural actions, have been augmenting the most remarkable ruptures into the

traditional landscapes of *chhitmahals*. Their works boosted the process of normalization of former anomalous borderlands by connecting it to a borderless web of relations.

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### **The Youth and their Pursuit of Visibility and Normalcy**

After the *Pushti Chal* meeting between the *chhitbashi* and the state and its development partners,<sup>92</sup> watching his friend Fahim's Facebook posts on my phone filled with praising comments by followers, Ameer expressed a keen regret for not having a smartphone. An active Facebook profile gave Fahim a dominating status in the virtual world of Dasiar Chhara. Having almost similar sociopolitical reach in the community, Ameer - on the other hand - was nearly absent in the public sphere, both real and virtual. He acknowledged that Fahim's posts gave him a political momentum even though many posts were exaggerated and fake. Besides, the unexplored online job market let him believe that this 'technological poverty' caused him a tremendous politico-economic loss. He could still scroll through his Facebook profile on his GPRS-enabled mobile phone, but he was saving money to buy a smartphone for its dedicated social networking and internet features. His budget was between seven and ten thousand taka (approximately one hundred and fifty dollar). In his view, spending this amount would be a significant investment to capitalize on political and material gains.

Across the wealth-aisle, Ameer's friend Reshma Khanom - a college graduate, a BSL activist, and the daughter-in-law of a wealthy family - meanwhile invested in a laptop to pursue an income from freelance outsourcing. The world was changing fast through technological innovations. Citizenship inspired a bunch of *chhit* youth to catch up with this changing world by using digital and social networks. Based on the flow of wealth, their desired gadgets were different. Ameer has invested his maximum financial efforts in purchasing a smartphone while Reshma passed that 'poverty line' and advanced to more sophisticated use of technology. Becoming visible was what they all were pursuing; visible in jobs, politics, and other extended networks.

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<sup>92</sup> The event is elaborated in Chapter 4.

Besides observing their digital *pooran* Bangladeshi peers, this growing technological dependency had a strong connection with the extensive government discourses about a prosperous future through ‘Digital Bangladesh.’ In Dasiar Chhara, the majority of the skill development initiatives focused on training the youth in information and community technology, e.g., how to use a PC or laptop, how to browse the internet, how to exchange emails, how to fill up government forms electronically, and so on. The subdistrict administration also built an information and technology center to represent the government’s ‘Digital Bangladesh’ vision in Dasiar Chhara. In a small room, the center had a few internet-connected computers, a television, and some chairs. It worked like a cybercafé where the youth hung out, finished necessary tasks (e.g., job search and application, filling bureaucratic forms), read and watched news, and games. They also learned about the computer, internet, and virtual networks through peer discussions in the center. The message of this facility was clear to the youth: to be an ideal and a normal Bangladeshi youth, like their *pooran* Bangladeshi peers, one must be ‘digital.’

This mass adoption of a digital future does not owe its origin solely to a political vision or government discourses; more importantly, the life of the *chbit* youth became entangled with it. And, they were not an exceptional marginal group that modified their life and imaginations through internet or Facebook use. Neha Kumar (2014) studied the use of Facebook among the underprivileged urban youths in India and explored the implications of that on the community. Similar to my friends in *chbitmahals*, these youth were the lead and first generation of internet users in their households and communities. While owning a personal computer was still a luxury among these impoverished youth, the price wars among phone companies and service operators made 2G or GPRS-enabled mobile phones ubiquitous in the community that became the primary source of internet use. Kumar argues that the youth has adopted the new media (e.g., Facebook) as a self-empowerment tool; their aspirations, avenues, and agency have been modified since they started to use the internet and social networks (Kumar, 2014:1122-1123, 1125-1126). The *chbit* youth adopted a similar path to speed up their personal growth, unlike their parents’ generation who used to (and still do) measure progress in terms of agrarian affluence.

The newly built cell phone towers, a vibrant local market of cheap Chinese regular and smartphones, and competitive data packages of different operators transformed the *chbit* youth into a bunch of relentless followers of the World Wide Web. A modified form of *aspirations* to become a visible and normal citizen-youth penetrated their mind through digital connections. Fahim, Ameer, and their

educated cohort had illicitly accessed schooling in surrounding Bangladeshi institutions before the swap. Therefore, they were already exposed to a ‘participatory culture’ (cf. Jenkins, 2009 *as cited in* Kumar, 2014) practiced by their *pooran* Bangladeshi peers. They wanted to have the gadgets their *pooran* Bangladeshi classmates had. The *chbit* youths also wanted to pursue a career utilizing their diplomas. But, without infrastructure and identity documents, it was not easy to follow the youth-culture of their *pooran* Bangladeshi cohort. Citizenship and associated programs of nation-building have eliminated this barrier. Access to the internet has connected these youths through Facebook. Ameer and Fahim did not just follow their digitally advanced *pooran* Bangladeshi cohort on Facebook; they were also followed by the youths beyond the boundary of *chbitmahals*. They all became inseparable in boundary-breaking digital youth culture. One’s success and accomplishments influenced others; one’s ideological posts were liked and followed by others.

Fahim’s aspirations to be a BAL leader, Ameer’s goal to join a national NGO, or Reshma’s investment in a freelancing career were the results of this ‘following’ peer culture. Not just career prospects, their behavioral expressions were also influenced. Countless posts sympathizing with the miseries of fellow Muslims in Kashmir or Palestine or wishing happy birthday to the favorite Australian cricketer gradually transformed them into a member of diverse imaginary communities. In the stateless era, the co-schooling and other social contacts might have still kept the flow of global information, but the urge to express solidarity to the fellow Muslims, congratulate the national cricket team, commemorate the martyrs on republic days or simply the identical selfie styles were the texts of trendy Facebook culture. For example, on different occasions, I saw Fahim’s post glorifying a BAL leader for inaugurating a development project in Dasiar Chhara was liked and shared by his loyal crowd on Facebook. After a while, other youth jumped in to share posts on the same event with similar captions keeping Fahim tagged on. These aspiring youth looked up to Fahim to know what sort of issues were worthy of posting on social media to become visible in the political space. The *chbit* youth aspired to be a youth who was not merely a political leader or a successful service professional but also keeping up with the trendy social networking texts.

The digital networks became instrumental in discovering *avenues* to fulfill newfound aspirations. In the introduction, I detailed the implications of creative and manipulative Facebook posts on Fahim’s aspiring political career. Since the beginning of the clientelist political party system in Dasiar Chhara, politics means power, illicit earning, and required lobbying to get a job. Therefore, every other day I see more youth are following Fahim’s footsteps to be visible in politics. However, more apolitical

and formal aspirations also owe credit to Facebook, which serves as a critical source of job information. The official Facebook pages of agencies, companies, and NGOs and different job search groups spread the news of job openings and facilitate peer discussions (e.g., channels and amount of bribery, speculation on the number of appointments). The relentless circulation of information makes the presence in social media itself a cultural and economic capital.

While it is hard to stop writing about the promises an online digital future hold among the spellbound youth, I should also emphasize the efficacies of offline digital communication - the mobile phone. Once again, my reference is Ameer. A registered sim card, along with an uninterrupted cell phone network that came along with citizenship, transformed his college diplomas into valuable livelihood capital. In the major nation-wide civil service recruitments in Bangladesh, it was mandatory to pay application fees through the mobile transfer. Following a successful payment, the agencies would inform the applicants about the interview location, time, and other details by sending a text to their mobile number that was used during the payment. The regional and local employers still use mobile numbers as the primary communication channel with prospective incumbents, not email or online registration. Without a phone number, it would have been nearly impossible for Ameer to communicate with his current employer in Dhaka. The first day I went to his house, his wife Sahana Begum was texting back and forth to a potential employer.

These new digital aspirations and avenues, as Neha Kumar (2014) also argued, empowered the youth to speak out their opinions about their surrounding sociopolitical events and express their *agency* on the comparatively more anonymous space of social media. Ameer was a calm individual who was extremely aware of the shifting politics and rising corrupt practices in Dasiar Chhara. He always reserved himself in expressing dissents before an unknown public crowd. Even he felt an urge to criticize the government agencies, ruling politicians, his friends in political parties on Facebook posts. Instead of confrontation in real life, Ameer preferred to show frustrations and write criticisms about the nation-building projects in public groups and pages on Facebook.

But the expression of agency was not just limited to the newsfeed of Facebook. In 2017, the youth of Dasiar Chhara demonstrated a human chain to protest the corruption of the BAL associates in the community who were reluctant in negotiating with the government for employment opportunities for the educated and skilled youth; instead, they concentrated in painting a perfect happy picture as a political show. This form of protest by attaching posters on the chest in a human

chain was a popular form of protest in Bangladesh, especially among the urban youth. The country has seen a surge in public demonstrations in this decade organized by the youth who did not agree with the government in diverse issues, ranging from the trials of the war criminals to the reformation of civil service recruitment. The viral posts and videos of these protests were circulated on Facebook throughout the country. The *chbit* youth picked up such modern forms of protests, e.g., human chain, informal public speaking for the press, and so on. These forms were not just trendy but also were easier to plan and did not require a huge crowd.



Figure 19: One of the human chains widely circulated on Facebook by the *chbit* youths  
Photo courtesy: Jakir Sarker's Facebook page

The old-fashioned procession of a huge crowd was still more accepting among the *chbitbashi* of all ages. Since the swap, Dasiar Chhara has witnessed a few of such massive marches. In 2016, people walked into a procession to protest the corrupt practices of new political leaders and subdistrict bureaucrats in distributing government subsidy. In 2018, another march cost the principal of *Sheikh Fazilatunnesa Mujib Madrasa* his job after allegations of nepotism, bribery in recruitment, and fund embezzlement became public. The youth played an essential role in organizing both processions. There is no denying that in their digital pursuit of visibility, not all took the egalitarian path. Some used the access to the digital media to cash their own profits; it was not very rare to see young activists of the BSL sugarcoating government narratives that the ruling party blessed *chbitmahals* with a state administration that meanwhile resolved the problems and griefs of the lawless past. The



access to the social media and its borderless information flow empowered the *chhit* youths, that have just recently joined the official institution of Bangladeshi citizenship, in fulfilling their diverse aspirations.

This self-empowerment did not come along without causing a rupture in the underlying meaning of a good everyday life. The first blow was on the traditional idea of affluence. Not long ago, three full meals of rice with vegetable - or occasionally fish - every day was everything a union of family labor had pursued. But now the youth brought a rush to the poverty to the family table, a feeling of being poor. Nothing was enough now; what they had before was not enough now to become a normal Bangladeshi youth. The basic needs of everyday life went beyond three meals; mobile phone, trendy clothing, shoes, and so on were added to the list. After days of hard work, when one demand was fulfilled, another surfaced. Constant exposure to a boundaryless world redefined the idea of a normal youth who did not just want to be well-fed but also wish to be well-connected, which often skipped the traditional scaling of necessity in spending limited resources. Ameer started to save for a smartphone even before his employment. His aging parents provided him daily pocket money, still buying a smartphone or paying the monthly data, and call expenses of his existing phone turned out to be a necessary investment to him. The second blow hit the idea of time. There was no idle time now. On the online apps in smartphones, people were playing Ludo or soccer, taking and posting selfies, sharing songs, watching games, and a wide range of videos, chatting with friends. Searching and applying for jobs or preparing a political post also consumed a big chunk of active time.

A third rupture impacted the community grip. There was a time when the *chhitbashi* used to look up to their council leaders for updated information about almost everything. Youth's access to the unfiltered new media democratized the information (cf. Kumar, 2014), which was not anymore channeled through a few particular individuals. This empowerment-induced rupture assisted the youth in drawing perhaps the most visible and vital borderline with others in *chhitmahals*, a redefined notion of individual dignity. The ordinary *chhit* residents had an intense fascination about the free government subsidy and NGO aid. The youth were not exactly swimming against the tide, but they clearly developed a sense of shame in being helpless recipients of relief and aid. They believed that a typical group of youth should not be dependent on the assistance and generosity of others; they would earn a living from employment.

It might have occurred to you meanwhile that the female youths were left behind in this online digital empowerment. Neha Kumar also argued that the young urban women from marginalized communities in India could not transform their aspirations and agency by following the online participatory culture compared to their male counterparts (2014:1135). She suggested further research to explore the reasons. In a more recent study, Julia Huang (2017) indicated some hints. Her study shows that the young rural women of Bangladesh adopted various social contacts and career prospects through cell phone networking, which their predecessors could not think of doing. However, they did that through a self-governance to not to utterly overthrow the customary gender roles. For example, they exchanged texts with unknown male employers but restrained themselves in a phone conversation with strangers. Huang called this self-control a ‘digital *purdah*’ (2017).

In *chhitmahals*, while the male youth often broke and challenged established community traditions on their path to becoming digital, it was not the same for female youth. Unlike a very few young women from wealthy families - like Reshma - the digital networking of the majority of female youth was confined within GPRS cell phones, texting with employers and phone conversations with friends, parents, and other relatives. I am not trying to underestimate this progress. On the contrary, I agree with Sirpa Tenhunen (2014) whose research among the women in India argues that the increasing access to cell phones might not have overnight improved the lives of women, but the use of cell phones in kinship communications challenged the established gender boundaries, extended the scope of women’s activities and networks, and showed an indication of a more significant social change. What the female youth was doing with their cellphones might be less empowering compared to what digital systems have done to the livelihood potentials of *chhit* men. It was still tremendous progress compared to the confinement of the previous generations of *chhit* women within the household.

### **The Triumph of ‘Percentage’ Politics**

The current ruling party of Bangladesh, BAL, always had a firm grounding among the borderland communities and *chhitmahals*. The founder of the party, father of the current prime minister, signed the LBA in 1974 with the then Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi to resolve all the boundary

disputes created by the partition in 1947.<sup>93</sup> The assassination of both state-heads, however, halted the process. During one of BAL's previous tenures (1996-2001), they initiated the dialogue to swap *chhitmahals* but could not succeed until 2015 when the LBA was implemented, including the swap of *chhitmahals* (Basu, 2011:67). Only three years after resolving another long-disputed maritime boundary with Myanmar (see Daily Star, 2012a), the swap treaty was a landmark success of the BAL. The party launched a country-wide campaign to spread its emphasis on sensitive border nationalism. Indian prime minister Narendra Modi has compared the swap of *chhitmahals* with the dismantling of the Berlin Wall (Guardian, 2015a). His enthusiasm was quoted in the BAL campaign as an endorsement of their political victory.

The party's historic diplomatic ties with India and the implementation of complete LBA built a solid ground for the party to enter the political scene of *chhitmahals* and gather support among the former Indian *chhitbashi* even before BAL's arrival. With the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) attempting to halt the swap (Basu, 2011:67), BAL's entrance to the *chhitmahals* could not have been better. This favorable political atmosphere later earned BAL sweeping victories in every public election since then.

BAL entered the *chhitmahals* as the ruling party, and they introduced standard political practices. In Bangladesh, the ruling party monopolizes the bureaucracy and the local government. After every election, the civil service experiences a massive reshuffle: the loyalists of the ruling party get the top bureaucratic positions and promotions in all government departments, whereas the supporters of the opposition parties get transferred to insignificant posts and undesired locations. Through the help of these loyal bureaucrats, ruling party politicians (e.g., MPs, subdistrict chairmen, leaders of the subdistrict chapter of the party) manipulate local government elections, management, and distribution of the safety net programs<sup>94</sup> in favor of the party supporters (Arfina Osman, 2010:317, 319, 324, 325). A study of Transparency International Bangladesh showed that the MPs throughout the country were involved in manipulating school-boards, taking bribes from teaching candidates, embezzling school funds, and helping individuals registering their schools in exchange for a bribe. Using their authority over the distribution of subdistrict-level safety net programs and development

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<sup>93</sup> Chapter 1 (page 10) mentions more details about this treaty. I also suggest Brendan Whyte's research (2002:127-133) for detailed information about the LBA.

<sup>94</sup> For example, Food for Work (FFW) Program, Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) cards, Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) rice subsidies, emergency disaster relief, monthly allowance for senior citizens, widows and freedom fighters, and so on.

projects, MPs influenced the administration to allocate illicit advantages and award supply-and-construction contracts to party supporters and their family members (TIB, 2012:14-15; Ahmed, 2018:177, 178).

In political vernaculars, such aggressive monopolization by the ruling party and illicit practices of elected political representatives are called ‘commission politics’ or ‘percentage politics.’ This phenomenon refers to the primary goal of the local politicians is to grab a percentage of commissions from the development projects. This can range from taking a bribe from an aspiring school teacher before recommending his name to the department of education to demanding a percentage of the infrastructural budget from the contractors before awarding the contract.<sup>95</sup> Being the winner in three consecutive national elections, BAL already had strong grasp over the neighboring local government units. As a result, political leaders and activists, elected representatives, bureaucrats, ministers, and all other actors that walked in into the post-swap *chhitmahals* with politico-administrative responsibilities were already loyal to the BAL. This politically unchallenged ground let the leaders and activists of the local BAL introduce percentage politics and stereotypical clientelist governance. Either by politicizing the local government or by questioning the credibility of veteran community leaders, the BAL established authoritative control over the new administration and development works of *chhitmahals*. The party adopted many conventional practices that completely modified the political practices of *chhitmahals*. In my view, the following changes caused the most significant political upheavals.

First, BAL created a new political supply chain that generated and paid for loyal political support. This supply chain was comprised of new young *chhit* leaders, small-scale bureaucrats, politicians of the local chapter of BAL, and the local government representatives. This enterprise appropriated government budget allocations for *chhitmahals* and manipulated the distribution of services and safety net programs to make personal gain. For example, they charged a commission from ordinary people in exchange for allocating subsidized rice even though that was supposed to be free. They resolved police cases outside the court by taking money from defendants. The government has supplied electricity for free for every household, but this racket charged every household a commission

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<sup>95</sup> The son of a former prime minister was famously called ‘Mr. Ten Percent’ as he and his political entourage demanded a percentage from all contractors and companies before giving them infrastructural projects or business licenses (Daily Star, 2009).

before distributing the electricity meter and wire connection. Every actor in the supply chain has claimed a portion of this commission.

Second, in the agrarian community of *chhitmahals*, land used to provide the most sustainable source of wealth until the BAL-led local government made political loyalty the most profitable commodity. The opportunity of making a commission-profit from a BAL membership hooked many *chhitbashi* in politics. Let's take Motahar Hossain of Dasiar Chhara - or as people called him 'Commission Motahar' - as an example. He was one of the leading BAL sympathizers in the *chhitmahal*, which helped him to get the zone leader position at the Red Crescent and a few other NGOs. His job was to distribute relief aid among the impoverished *chhitbashi*. This position enabled him to earn a commission from every low-income family in exchange for giving them tube-wells, toilets, and other NGO aid. He also influenced the distribution of subsidized rice to make a commission profit from vulnerable recipients (e.g., poor older people). They could not read or write and were easy to intimidate. Through his political channels, he built up connections with the influential leaders and elected representatives who also, allegedly, supported his illicit practices. Despite these corrupt acts, his authority over NGO aid, the support of BAL, and his connections with influential people made him a formidable but hated rich leader in Dasiar Chhara.

Third, the local BAL has politicized the regular course of development works and new citizenship services to strengthen a loyal base in *chhitmahals*. The subdistrict BAL leaders, for example, influenced the recruitment of schoolteachers who shared their political ideology. The government officials allocated government budget to those schools that had an administrative board affiliated with BAL. Every new *chhit* infrastructural project was inaugurated by either a member of parliament, a minister from the area, or an elected local government representative of BAL whose name was usually engraved in the foundation. A few projects were even named after these politicians. Every development project had a budget earmarked for inauguration purposes under the 'miscellaneous' category. This abuse of public money for political purposes was an open secret that the political leaders used to arrange a celebratory meeting for party followers and, simultaneously, to execute a political show to impress the new citizens. As the major opposition party, BNP, failed to secure a win in the national elections since the swap, they were absent in the political landscape of *chhitmahals*. The engraved inauguration plates over almost every public infrastructure remind the people of their newfound citizenship and also marked a solid monopoly of the BAL over the *chhit* affairs.



Figure 20: MP's name engraved in the newly built culvert in Balapara Khagrabari

Fourth, the clientelist politics of the BAL modified the definition of political ethics. In *chhitmahals*, people expressed their displeasure towards the new BAL leaders; they mocked all leaders behind their backs, accusing them of taking commissions and bribes<sup>96</sup> from the *chhit* people before giving them their deserved aid, subsidy, or employment. Still, in every local government and national election since the swap, BAL secured a landslide victory. There were two explanations of this paradoxical political behavior. First, the direct link of pro-swap BAL with every major development project in *chhitmahals* earned the party strong support among the *chhitbashi*. The local government representatives of the party had informally involved the new BAL activists in all development

<sup>96</sup> The *chhitbashi* used both terms in describing the illicit money they had to pay to the politicians or state officials to access certain goods and services. However, they mostly used *commission* while describing the illicit cash they paid to get the aid or allowance that was already earmarked for them for free, e.g., NGO-provided latrine, government-provided rice. *Bribe*, on the other hand, was the cash payment they made to influence a decision in their favor (e.g., job appointment, police complain) or fix a problem in the paperwork (e.g., wrong information in land documents).

schemes, from disbursing subsidized aid to recruiting road contractors. As a result, despite their commission corruption, ordinary people immediately saw these new BAL men as the direct providers of allowances and other aid. This new supply chain created a powerful image of these politicians and presented them with a loyal base in the community. Second, new citizenship facilities have introduced modern amenities to the lives of *chhitbashi*, e.g., internet, electricity, mobile phone, and roads, which have further increased the expenses of everyday life. It was hard to afford these new amenities through regular agriculture work. Many people, therefore, have involved themselves with the commission politics of BAL. They did not think such opportunistic political behavior was unethical or immoral. If joining the BAL processions, election campaigns, and meetings - along with the leaders that exploited them - let them earn a few hundred extra takas, then they were okay with that. The enchantment of the cash flow in their pocket through a BAL membership sometimes led them to overlook the systematic exploitation by the BAL associates. The common assumption was 'if I do not do it, someone else will do it.' I came across many people who were known in the village as the 'seasonal League'<sup>97</sup> or 'new League' because their support for the party derived from the aspiration to earn commission money.

Fifth, the rewards of having an active BAL membership and the abrupt and appealing increase in the affluence of the BAL men made everything in the *chhitmahals* underscored the triumph of BAL. Every public political act was centered around BAL standards. For example, in the Victory Day celebration in *chhitmahals*, it was 'mandatory' to mention how BAL had contributed to the independence war of Bangladesh. The politicians, bureaucrats, civil society personnel had to deliver a speech about that in the celebratory programs. There were a few televised national and global sports tournaments during my fieldwork. In congratulating the national team for winning games, many Facebook posts shared by the *chhitbashi* highlighted the contribution of the BAL in improving the sports infrastructure and the gracious presence of the prime minister in the stadium to encourage the players. Even religion got involved too. I saw Facebook posts sharing photos of combined prayers in the mosque to pray for the departed soul of the founder of BAL on his death anniversary. The presence of only the party associates in such prayers indicated these actions as a reciprocal way to impress BAL personnel and get material rewards.

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<sup>97</sup> The supporters and leaders of BAL were also known as *League* in the locality.

The public excitement about a pro-swap India-friendly political party, which was evident in the elections, has begun to disappear as BAL went for ubiquitous control over the *chhitmahals*. It was not like people were not familiar with the absolute authority of the ruling party over local government and small-scale bureaucracy in rural Bangladesh. But the *chhitbashi* still hoped for effective assimilation between the BAL and their traditional *chhit* council. Most of my research participants anticipated that the Bangladeshi government would transform the *chhitmahals*, at least the large ones, into self-functioning *union parishads*. This aspiration was grounded on the chance to elect their former council leaders as the chairman and members of their *union parishad*, which would allow the council leaders - without any external political intervention - to improve the *chhit* conditions using their position in public office.<sup>98</sup> The *chhitbashi* expected some consequences of retail corruption in Bangladeshi bureaucracy but did not know that it would create a hierarchical society, an egoistic leadership, and a damaged community-making so fast. Their hopes and expectations remained too utopian to be realized in the typical political practices of Bangladesh.

### **Damaged Local Leadership**

The normalization of *chhitmahals* and the introduction of state administration automatically abolished the *chhit* leadership councils. The merger with a sovereign nation had to get rid of any apolitical and unauthorized administration; however, there was no official ordinance to dismantle the councils. It was more of an expected change that came along with emplacing the citizenship protection and services. With local government installing its typical multi-layered administrative authority and political parties taking over the socio-political processes and leadership, the *chhit* councils and leaders inevitably lost their control over the former *chhitmahals*.

Besides administrative functions, the former *chhit* councils performed two significant roles: a) the wealthy, connected, and charismatic council leaders were the symbols of a stable community; b) through personal donations and cooperative entrepreneurial initiatives, they appeared to be the service providers in pre-swap *chhitmahals*. In the old-fashioned feudalism, the *chhit* council was mostly a committee of wealthy landlords - with a few exceptions of non-wealthy but educated and

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<sup>98</sup> A few former council leaders told me that this was not just a hopeful expectation, during the months of negotiation prior to the swap, Bangladeshi government had promised them to do so. A staggering number of people had heard of such a promise, which let them believe firmly in a positive and effective swap.



charismatic secretaries - that accumulated a massive amount of profit from the sharecropping mode of production. Ordinary sharecroppers still had to accept it for lack of an alternative. The landlords-cum-leaders fostered a controlled order in the community, which also earned them public obedience.

In addition, the concept of leadership was also entangled with competition for prestige and status in the community, and the leaders were selected from among those who were eager to spend their wealth in building community infrastructures or providing loans to the poorest in hard times. In a way, this was a trade-off between an exploitative mode of production and functioning, compassionate leadership. The abolition of *chhit* councils and the fall of these leaders from grace, therefore, significantly changed the way *chhitbashi* so far had imagined their community. The replacement of councils with new clientelism by the political parties was typical and expected, but the extent of associated changes in the community baffled the ordinary people. By crossing their accustomed boundaries, today the political parties - the BAL specifically - have left their fingerprints on every aspect of *chhitmahals*, from infrastructure and subsidized programs to the celebration of republic days. It was not the state administration that officially disbanded the *chhit* councils and modified the definition of leadership; instead, the BAL and its newly appointed *chhit* associates were the agents executing the changes.

Despite a politicized local government, however, the entrance of BAL in *chhitmahals* was not easy. Although politically unchallenged, the BAL-men were confronted by the powerful former council leaders on the ground. Without diminishing their influence, BAL could not have a monopoly over local politics. In many cases, the joint forces of BAL-shadowed local government and bureaucracy intimidated the council leaders into vacating the political landscape. Furthermore, in an interesting and unexpected turn of events, the BAL-dominated local government had changed the plan to transform the *chhitmahals* into new self-contained *union parishads*.<sup>99</sup> Instead, they decided to merge the *chhitmahals* with existing *union parishads* that already had elected BAL-supported chairmen. This move killed the chance of former council leaders winning a local government election because they did not have much support and exposure in *pooran* Bangladesh beyond the boundaries of their *chhitmahals*. This screened out many potentially powerful competitors, particularly in the smaller *chhitmahals*.

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<sup>99</sup> The *Changing Governance* section of Chapter 4 describes more information about such an administrative change in Dasiar Chhara.

The story of larger *chhitmahals* was different. To tackle any possible challenge from the council leaders who possessed influence over a broad demographic, the BAL adopted another ‘standard’ opposition-handling measure by discrediting political rivals as extreme Islamists and corrupt individuals. In the council era, leaders did not have any political labels in their campaigns: liberals, conservatives, nationalists, Islamists, and apolitical individuals were able to lead a council. But in their third consecutive term, a growing autocratic attitude in the liberal BAL government adopted an intolerant culture towards political opposition.<sup>100</sup> Labeling political opponents as *Shibir* or *Jamati*<sup>101</sup> to harass them and revoke their political rights has become a new normal in the BAL reign.

Ruhul Amin from Dasiar Chhara was the target of such an authoritarian politics. He was the president of the Bangladesh chapter in the swap movement and had a strong relationship with the then Dasiar Chhara *chhit* council. Ruhul had a large number of committed followers, not just in Dasiar Chhara but also in other *chhitmahals*. After the swap, the subdistrict leaders of the BAL invited him to publicly express his allegiance to the ruling party to strengthen its presence in the normalized *chhitmahal*. Fearing that might divide the community cohesion, Ruhul rejected the offer. In response, the BAL started to promote a few former council members who were previously subordinate to him as the new leaders, and simultaneously launched a campaign against Ruhul’s credibility by accusing him as a *Jamati*. This accusation and the growing power of his subordinates eventually forced Ruhul to express his allegiance to the ruling party publicly. But this time, the BAL leaders rejected his offer by saying that the party does not ally with a ‘traitor.’ Meanwhile, the BAL enterprise deliberately involved the new leaders in fake and failing development projects, which cost them their credibility as honest and community-oriented leaders. In this way the BAL leadership eventually disempowered emergent leaders and diminished any remaining threats from the former *chhit* council.

The new BAL leaders and their *chhit* supporters filled this void. As they gradually established control over *chhit* politics and started to capitalize on party affiliation, the once-revered former council

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<sup>100</sup> See Deutsche Welle (2018) and Washington Post (2018) reports for more information on the challenges Bangladesh democracy has been facing under the rule of BAL.

<sup>101</sup> Supporter of *Jamaat-e-Islami*, an Islamist party in Bangladesh that supported Pakistan in 1971 and opposed the liberation of Bangladesh. The party is infamous for their wartime atrocities along with the Pakistani military. The ruling BAL-led government executed the top leaders of *Jamaat-e-Islami* who were found guilty of war crimes. Recently, the BAL government banned the party in national election. In the current political climate, a *Jamati* means an individual that opposes the secular democracy of Bangladesh; hence, she/he is an anti-state person. This political assumption let the BAL men often use their unofficial ‘free-card’ to accuse political opponents as *Jamati* to harass or even torture them.

members discovered themselves struggling to revive their influence and to use citizenship advantages to improve their material conditions. The swap and subsequent abolition of former councils had turned many leaders into ordinary persons who now live life only as wealthy farmers. A few others who used to earn a living using their position at the council have joined the BAL's new political supply chain - 'percentage politics.' Nizam Sheikh was one of them.

Nizam Sheikh was involved in the swap movement as the General Secretary of the Dasiar Chhara swap unit. Among the crowds of new leaders, he understood the political current and joined BAL. He did not make as much money from the transactional politics as Motahar Hossain, but through the BAL connections, he strengthened his declining position in the political hierarchy of Dasiar Chhara. When I was discussing the new political factions in the *chhitmahal* with a few friends, being a very loyal supporter of BAL, he bragged that almost 97% of people of the *chhitmahal* people support the BAL. Some friends present later denied his estimation as a strategic exaggeration. Nizam was a seasoned politician; he did not speak a word about the internal politics of the *chhitmahal* and discouraged others from disclosing anything critical of the party to me. In our group conversation, he denied that the *chhitmahal* had any problems because BAL solved all of them. His only demand to the government was to transform Dasiar Chhara into a new unified *union parishad*, instead of splitting it among three existing unions. It was not hard to understand his motive; a distinct *union parishad* might give former council leaders like him a chance to be elected in local government elections and enjoy more power. In a partitioned Dasiar Chhara, they would not have enough votes as people outside the *chhitmahal* were less likely to vote for someone from *chhitmahals*.

His former council colleague Kalim Ullah also felt the same way. Kalim was the last elected chairman of the Dasiar Chhara council. As the chairman, he had authority over the entire *chhitmahal*. After the partition of Dasiar Chhara, he became a subordinate to an existing *pooran* Bangladeshi *union parishad* chairman. He knew that he did not have any possibility of regaining authority unless the government re-unified the *chhitmahal* and declared it as a new *union parishad*. Moreover, as citizens, his once-loyal 'subjects' were now very critical of him because he was one of the few members of the infamous *Shanti* Committee<sup>102</sup> that opposed the swap because enclave status was more profitable for them. Like Commission Motahar, he was also a zone leader of one of the three NGO blocks of Dasiar Chhara and earned money through illicit commissions from distributing NGO aid. Most of

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<sup>102</sup> The *Review* section of Chapter 2 has more information about the roles of this committee during the swap.

the former council leaders were very proud of their leadership that protected the *chhitmahals* in the stateless era. They felt ignored in the new politics dominated by the political parties, and they were not happy about it. It might be possible that their engagement in the new but dominant ‘percentage politics’ was not just for personal gains but a desperate attempt to revive their lost authority. Interestingly, neither Commission Motahar nor Nizam Sheikh, who carried the BAL flag in Dasiar Chhara, was able to secure a place in the *union parishad* or subdistrict committee of the party leadership. They only worked as a proxy for the subdistrict leadership.

Even in their declining influence, former council leaders still gave people a sense of belonging to the unique history, struggle, and achievements of *chhitmahals*. Every time I came across Akram Khan, the last chairman of Balapara Khagrabari *chhit* council, I saw his presence awed people who felt honored when he talked to them or sat with them. Whenever he walked in a public place, ordinary people stood up and gave him a *salaam* to express their respect. Following the swap, he did not have any official authority over the Balapara Khagrabari, but the memory of a unified *chhit* community was still reflected through his representation. Therefore, people still called him the ‘chairman.’

In the stateless era, when outsiders thought of *chhitmahals* as a lawless jungle, the council leaders gave them a sense of stability, a feeling of home. When outsiders criminalized the *chhitbashi*, the council’s success in restoring law and order brought back the confidence of people in their abilities. People rarely called the council leaders *neta* (Bangla for a leader). Instead, they were addressed as grandfathers, uncles, brothers, or *mia* (a term to address respected and charismatic community elders) who took care of their family in a dire situation and gave the community a feeling of cohesion. Now, the political leaders are either *League* or *neta*, which typically refers to a BAL politician whose sole purpose is to maximize personal gains within the tenure of the current government. Their dramatic hierarchical rise gives people a sense of inequality and broken community. These *netas* used to be their fellow *chhitbashi*, who now exploit them and treat them differently. The *union parishad* and subdistrict chairmen or MPs in *pooran* Bangladesh, who simultaneously held the official position of their local governments and the BAL leadership, hardly gave them a sense of community; instead, they represented a sense of invasion, intimidation, and exclusion to the ordinary *chhitbashi*. If you create a list of things from the stateless past that the *chhitbashi* has been missing since the swap, the former *chhit* councils will top the list despite many limitations, including the current involvement of their leaders in exploitative clientelism.

## Exploited Female Bodies

I am about to take you through the social post-mortem of a police case of sexual assault in Balapara Khagrabari. So, refresh your feminist understanding of how men exploit female bodies and sexualize gender relations to channel their politico-economic aspirations. In Balapara Khagrabari, I witnessed two unprecedented hailstorms that damaged nearly all houses, rice fields, and seasonal crops; still, the case at hand turned out to be the most sensational event in the impoverished community. The alleged assault originated in a village romance between two teens: the girl (Nasima Khatun) was in the eighth grade, and the boy (Sihab Kabir) was a tenth grader. Within a few months in the relationship, the boy impregnated the girl. This scared the duo because the conservative Muslim-dominated *chhit* society had a strong stigma about premarital sex and conception. It was also prohibited in Islam and, to some extent, was even socially punishable. Therefore, they secretly went to a local pharmacy, bought pills, and aborted the child.

Soon after the abortion, Nasima came to know that Sihab's family arranged his marriage with a girl from another family, and he agreed. She immediately went to Sihab's home to confront him and claimed her 'right' to be his bride, emphasizing their physical affair and the pain she went through in the process of abortion. Her revelations shocked both families, but Sihab's parents refused to accept her as their daughter-in-law. So, Nasima refused to leave his home and stayed there for three days as a strike to secure her rights. While going through a non-stop public berating and watching Sihab's parents moving ahead with their arranged-marriage plan, the stubborn girl could not take the betrayal by her lover and, on the third day, consumed rat-killing poison to kill herself. Her parents took her to the subdistrict health clinic. Fortunately, the doctors were able to save her life. Following the suicide attempt, her parents sued Sihab and pressed the rape charge against him.

In the First Information Report (FIR), the plaintiff accused nine to ten more individuals as the associates of Sihab whose selection went beyond the scope of the alleged rape. One of them was a young *Bhatiya* boy, Raqib Hussain, who was one of the closest friends and classmates of the alleged rapist Sihab. Raqib, his family, and the other members of the community firmly denied his involvement in the affair or the betrayal. His family soon revealed that it was the headmaster of Raqib's school, Rokon Mahmud, who testified in the complaint that Raqib was actively helping the perpetrator in this abusive relationship. Moreover, a few nights following the complaint, an unknown person called Raqib's father, my *Bhatiya* mentor Mannan Hussain, and offered him help in

clearing his son's name from the case in exchange for twenty thousand taka. He was almost sure that the disguised caller was Rokon.

Rokon's involvement exposed a long-running conflict between two landlords of Balapara Khagrabari. In the stateless era, a son of one of the sharecroppers of Rokon's family sexually assaulted the daughter of one of the sharecroppers of another influential landlord Mridha Khan. The latter happened to be the landlord of Mannan as well. To resolve that case, Mridha - on behalf of his sharecropper - had demanded fifty thousand taka to the perpetrator for not reporting the assault to the *chhit* council or police. Rokon's family negotiated to reduce the amount but failed. They considered this financial burden on their sharecropper was an attack on their landholdings and social status. Therefore, years after, when they had a remote chance to get back at Mridha by harassing one of his sharecroppers (Mannan), it was said that they seized it by dragging Raqib into the complaint, although he had nothing to do with this conflict. Veena Das' research on the sexual violence in India argued that men's conflicts transform women's bodies into political territories where they execute their political programs; the female body and its violation become a medium to channel interactions between men (1996:2411, 2421). In Balapara Khagrabari, the subsequent negotiation process went beyond the question of rape and justice for Nasima; her social and physical miseries became a political ping-pong ball between two powerful landlords.

The transformation of a failed teen romance into a rape charge was itself a move in the accumulation of patriarchal capital. It was an open secret in Balapara Khagrabari that, instead of reporting illegal abortion or physical assault, Rokon pushed Nasima's father to report a rape case and wrote the FIR himself. Even though consensual sex under a fraudulent promise of marriage might not be prosecuted as rape (see Daily Star, 2015a),<sup>103</sup> the sole reason to pursue a rape case was to intimidate the accused persons and their families. In addition to the social stigma, rape sentences were harsher, harder to get bail, and expensive to fight in the court, which made it easier to exploit the accused individuals. Like Raqib's father, Mannan, parents of all other accused associates listed in the FIR received late-night calls from unknown numbers asking for money in order to help them remove their son's name from the case. The majority of them suspected Rokon's family behind this

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<sup>103</sup> The section 375 of The Penal Code of 1860 of Bangladesh determines sexual intercourse as rape if a man conducts sexual intercourse - i) without consent; ii) against a girl's will; iii) with the girl's permission, which is attained by putting the fear of death or hurt; iv) with consent where he knows that he is not the husband and the woman accepts the man as her lawful husband without any legal marital contract; and v) with a girl aged under 14, with or without consent (Ministry of Law, 2019).

extortion. These *chhitbashi* argued that Rokon's family used to have strong authority over the *chhit* council, which they cashed in for personal gain by interfering in various village conflicts. Since the swap, they had been pursuing the same strategy, except now their partners in crime were the local police. During my fieldwork, there were a few other police cases in Balapara Khagrabari. Rokon and his brother Enam Khasru, who was the vice-chairman of the former *chhit* council, were involved in most of these cases. They exaggerated and transformed simple, non-violent domestic arguments into dowry and physical assault charges to extort money from the husbands.<sup>104</sup>

Two factors helped Rokon in capitalizing on the misery of Nasima. The first factor was what Veena Das (1996:2411) calls the 'judicial silence' that always helps the male perpetrators and their associates in the cases of sexual violence. I left Balapara Khagrabari a couple of weeks after the girl's suicide attempt, but the police had not made any arrests by then. Meanwhile, all the accused individuals vanished from Balapara Khagrabari, including Raqib. Mannan immediately contacted relatives who had political affiliations and influence over the local police. His landlord Mridha Khan also reached out to his police contacts. All actors were busy negotiating a price with the police to issue or cancel an arrest warrant.<sup>105</sup>

Second, ordinary community members seemed not to be worried about the implications of the rape charge; instead, they took pleasure in wholesale blaming of Nasima for her audacious and 'immoral' involvement in premarital sex and abortion. In the village gossip Sihab's participation in the premarital sex was a natural teenage desire. Nasima, on the other hand, was simply an immodest lustful individual who lost her value in customary marital terms (cf. Das, 1996:2420). This sort of public thinking validated the idea of resolving alleged sexual exploitation either through marriage or financial transactions (cf. Baxi, 2014:144). Since Sihab's parents refused the marriage proposal, paying a hefty sum to Nasima's family was seen as an appropriate punishment in people's court. This financial 'compensation' would ultimately help her finding a groom who would overlook the issue of premarital sex and abortion in exchange for a high dowry. As a result, the *chhit* community soon became less concerned about the questions of violating the integrity of Nasima's body, or whether she gave consent in the sex. Instead, the public debate acknowledged her existence by

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<sup>104</sup> The sections *Schooling Politics, Politicizing Schools* in Chapter 3 and *Improvised Citizenship and Malleable Allegiance* in Chapter 4 have more information about Rokon and Enam's illicit practices using new citizenship.

<sup>105</sup> I was present in more than one meeting where such negotiation took place. Some people who attended the meeting hesitated to express their opinions and strategies in front of me, but Mridha and Mannan both assured them it would not be risky to do so as 'I was on their side.'

judging her value in the marriage negotiation and men's conflicts over capital accumulation by politicizing her body.

The entire process of reporting and responding to the alleged sexual assault judged the actions of the girl in terms of her family, potential groom, community, or society. Her individual-self remained ignored. Would she get justice for the sexual exploitation of her lover? Would she be compensated for a stigmatized future or her impaired mental and physical health? The answers would not be easy because the *chhitbashi* were not accustomed to such questions. She lost her chastity to a man who was not her husband; hence, she had breached traditional matrimonial standards. She was already labeled as a girl of 'easy virtue' (cf. Das, 1996:2418, 2420) who did not stop the boy who was enacting his 'natural' sexual desire on her body. Therefore, not only was she immediately blacklisted in the local marriage system but also socially judged as unworthy of legal protection.

Despite individual differences, all *chhit* women were shackled to an identical patriarchal structure. When Raqib's father Mannan invited me to another son's wedding, I was very excited to be a part of the community but became uncomfortable after meeting Renu Akter, the bride. Her heavy bridal attire and makeup could not hide her teenage face. I was very concerned that if she had not passed the legal age of marriage, 18, then I was being a part of an illegal ceremony. The children in rural Bangladesh usually start their primary education later than town kids. In her tenth grade in high school, Renu might have barely passed the legal age of marriage, but it did not appear to be a matter of concern to the other invitees that ranged from local teachers to politicians. I did not learn how much dowry Renu's parents had paid to Mannan's family. Her father had distant affiliations with the ruling party, which was a crucial determinant in the alliance.<sup>106</sup>

In *chhitmahals*, women entered matrimonial discussions in their late-teens and made a long jump to becoming a fully-grown woman - not physically, but socially - through the marriage. Mannan told me that his family would 'allow' Renu to continue going to school. Along with the ceremony, Renu was not a free individual; she instantly became a part of Mannan's family labor force. Her education prospects became dependent not just on her husband but also on her in-laws' opinions. A few months into the marriage, she became pregnant and went through a complicated medical treatment

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<sup>106</sup> This marriage ceremony took place before the alleged sexual assault with Nasima. Renu's BAL-affiliated father later played an active role in sending Raqib to a safe and secret location as he accessed police information ahead of any drive to make an arrest. He also helped Manna and Mridha in the negotiation process resolving the matter.



related to premature conception. Her husband, in his early 20s, was also an essential part of the family production unit, but unlike Renu, he still had some personal privileges: he could still earn some extra money by working as a wage laborer outside the family or go to a movie with friends. But moving forward in life, all of Renu's decisions were supposed to prioritize the family first.

I do not know whether Renu still goes to school, but Sahana Begum was 'lucky' in that case. When she married my friend Ameer Uddin in Dasiar Chhara, she was only a couple of years older than Renu, and had just passed the higher secondary exam. Ameer and his family supported her completion of the undergraduate degree. Like Mannan, Ameer's family was also dependent on agriculture. But as a sociology graduate himself Ameer believed that Sahana could contribute more to the family if she got a formal job. I saw him helping her with job resumes and guiding her phone conversations with prospective employers. Sahana participated in government-sponsored skill development training following the swap, and had also worked in some temporary NGO projects in Dasiar Chhara.

However, these accomplishments did not mean that Sahana was free from the patriarchal leash. Ameer's mother was delighted with Sahana because she had learned religious modesty - she wears a *burqa* when she goes outside. During her NGO jobs, she still performed household chores and crop planting and harvesting. She was mainly looking for an NGO job or a teaching position in Dasiar Chhara or surrounding villages because that is what Ameer felt was safe and appropriate for her. These jobs would allow her to earn money and simultaneously contribute to family labor. While Ameer and his father contributed full-time labor in seasonal agriculture, his mother, sister, and wife had to do non-stop household chores in addition to seasonal agriculture.

Renu and Sahana both married through arranged negotiations between their families, the dominant mode of forming marital alliances in *chhitmahals*. However, village romances were also very common, mostly between neighbors or school/college mates. In most of the cases, the love affairs failed to end in marriage because, in *chhit* society, marriage was seen as more of a union between two families. In a love affair, the duo usually fell for each other's charms or physical beauty; but, when families meet, they look for the wealth, land holdings, capacity to pay a dowry, or any political affiliations that can be capitalized. During the stateless period, *pooran* Bangladeshi people rarely wanted to form matrimonial relations with the *chhitbashi* because of their lack of access to civic facilities. Still, Sahana's impoverished Bangladeshi parents arranged her marriage with Ameer, a *chhitbashi*, because

he had the potential for a good job, and his demand for dowry was low. On the other hand, although Ameer's family received a low dowry, they not only got a qualified bride, but also a citizen with a valuable Bangladeshi address, and many potentially helpful relatives.



Figure 21: Women played an important and equal role in *chhit* agriculture

In *chhitmahals*, daughters did not work outside the family fields and talking to strangers was not the sign of a modest girl; unlike the sons, it was still very rare for a teenage daughter to have a personal mobile phone. While Ameer turned himself into a digital person through his smartphone, Sahana used her 'un-smart' phone, which she got after the marriage, mostly for communicating with her parents and prospective employers. Any deviation required Ameer's intervention. Once she got a call, in front of me, from an unknown caller, when the caller started to flirt with her, she handed over the phone to Ameer, and seconds within Ameer said 'hello,' the caller hung up. In Bangladesh, a husband possesses robust control over the movement and interactions of his wife beyond the family. It was a part of masculinity in traditional family roles, and intervening in his wife's communications was what Ameer felt defined his role as a husband (cf. Anwary, 2015).

Unprecedented access to mobile phones allowed young rural women of Bangladesh to pursue various career opportunities but 'digital *purdah*' (Huang, 2017) simultaneously restricted them from violating societal norms. In my farewell get-together, Dilara Begum, the wife of my wealthy landlord, asked her daughter to take pictures using her tablet computer. Dilara was very proud that her daughter was very modern and knew how to use such a complicated device. She emphasized that

despite having access, her daughter did not spend time in ‘bad’ internet surfing, watching obscene movies or chatting with random boys. Another strong proof of her digital daughter’s modesty was that she was voluntarily wearing the *hijab*.

In the traditional *chbit* marriage, the next step for Renu and Sahana is the role of a mother, like Shapla Ara - a mother of two daughters and a son. Shapla’s husband was almost thirty years older than her.<sup>107</sup> Besides the seasonal crop planting and harvesting, Shapla was responsible for all cooking, cleaning, and other maintenance works in their household. She also had chicken, ducks, cows, and goats, which gave her family an extra income from selling milk and eggs. Recently, she got microcredit loans from an NGO to help their family farming. Her contributions brought her family and herself better and stronger livelihood security than many of her peers in Balapara Khagrabari. But that did not improve her position in the family. It was still her husband who had control over the decisions on expenses, investments, and savings in the family (see Al-Amin & Mathbor, 2019). With all her income, she barely had the freedom to buy herself an extra *sharee*. Even though she was officially responsible for repaying the NGO loan, her husband decided the investment options for that money.

Based on their family wealth, the accomplishments of these women were different. But they all were tied to an identical patriarchy. An ideal *chbit* woman prioritized her in-laws, husband, and children over her personal career. However, unlike their predecessors, modern digital *chbit* women now pursue individual careers, but they do not get an exemption from household chores and traditional norms. Working outside can be an excuse for the men not to participate in household tasks, but not for women. The post-citizenship era has been adding more ‘formal’ work options for the *chbit* women but this did not free them from ‘informal’ household work.

Citizenship has modified, more or less, every feature of the *chbit* community and replaced it with a national or global model. But gender exploitation was one of the cultural issues in *chbitmahals* that remained unchanged. In her research on stateless *chbitmahals*, Hosna Shewly writes, “... rightless enclave women are extremely exposed to and the victims of male violence and different forms of patriarchy because of their extra-legal status in a zone of abandonment” (2013:28). In the pre-swap *chbitmahals* women were victims of private and public forms of patriarchy at the household and

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<sup>107</sup> These days the age gap between a couple is not that long, but it was the norm in thirty to forty years ago.

community level (Shewly, 2013:29). Citizenship has ensured *chhit* women's legal ownership to land and other constitutional rights. However, the *chhit* men still control the physical and material conditions of women in *chhitmahals*. Here their newly achieved citizenship status was a difference that, for most women, made little difference.

I do not mean to discount the progress that the *chhit* women have achieved since the swap. Instead, I propose that continuing to control women's politico-economic status has been a significant part of men's community-reconfiguration projects. The forms of patriarchal control have taken different shapes than the pre-state era, but men were still the household and community heads. They assisted their wives and daughters in participating in public programs (e.g., receiving subsidized aid) because it would increase household affluence. Women corresponded with NGOs for microcredit, but men of the household decided the utilization of the loan. The wives could seek and do formal jobs, but the nature of the work had to be compatible with husbands' and in-laws' preferences. Daughters could possess mobile phones powered by the internet, like sons, but they were expected to use them for job searches, not to chat with random men or to watch obscene movies or songs. In their individual attempts, *chhit* women have accomplished and experienced things that their mothers and grandmothers could not even think of doing. The *chhit* women contributed to reconfiguring the post-citizenship community in numerous ways, but they have not yet challenged it. The *chhit* men mediated the citizenship rights, benefits, and aspirations of their female counterparts. As a result, the events around the physical abuse of Nasima were open to male tampering with the resolution process.

## Review

A few months after I settled down in Balapara Khagrabari, my mentor Mannan Hussain introduced me to former council secretary, Monir Ahmed. He praised Monir for his wisdom on the administrative history of the *chhitmahal*. After months of pursuit, one Ramadan morning I got the chance to talk to Monir; Mannan accompanied me. Mannan was quiet except for an occasional nod assenting to Monir's talking points. But, in the evening when I met him in our usual tea-stall, I discovered an entirely different Mannan. He was furious at Monir and accused him of lying and hiding the truth about *chhit* leaders' abuses of power during the stateless period. To my surprise, he

even said that he had suspected that Monir would not tell the truth. As I planned the next meeting with another member of the former council, he said: “he would not tell you the truth either.” He has passed such judgments to me before and afterward, but all the people he criticized as corrupt liars were people he recommended as important actors.<sup>108</sup>

Throughout the fieldwork, I encountered a gradual rise of such contradictions between overt loyalty and covert opposition among my other friends too. Mannan introduced me to many influential individuals of Balapara Khagrabari despite the fact he considered them exploitative and corrupt. I believe he did not want to risk omitting high-profile actors. The fear was that if any of these influential people saw me talking to others, but not him, they might have thought that Mannan omitted his name intentionally, which could have put him in unnecessary trouble. After several of my conversations with powerful individuals, he, along with his peers, made it clear that statelessness could have been less devastating if these influential *chhitbashi* had not taken advantage of the absence of law in Balapara Khagrabari. While my mentors could not avoid these people, they also kept introducing me to ordinary people, praising their honesty, and asked them to speak up about the ‘real’ misery that *chhit* residents went through.

Increasingly vocal dissent, in my view, was one of the most significant changes that citizenship brought about among the *chhit* residents. Post-swap changes weakened the old system of power and authority by diminishing the monopoly of *chhit* councils and the supremacy of landlords. Access to virtual media and transactional politics gave more people an alternative space to scrutinize the historically unquestioned authority of the *chhit* elites. This scrutiny, however, did not always mean wholesale disapproval of opportunistic leadership. In many cases, the *chhitbashi* ditched the landlords and former council leaders, who could hardly offer any benefits to them in the changing political currents, but allied with more powerful but clientelistic political leaders instead. A key difference in both forms of allegiance was the availability of means to challenge the current politicians compared to the earlier hopeless dependency on landlords-turned-council leaders.

Growing confidence was another change that I observed in the *chhit* community as I passed my days hanging out with them. When I started my fieldwork, there were one or two places in Botolganj where my *chhit* friends used to gather and hang out; nine months later, when I finished my fieldwork,

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<sup>108</sup> I illustrated another example in the beginning of Chapter 5.

every corner of the *bazaar* was packed by the *chhitbashi*. There were new restaurants, grocery shops, butchers, pharmacies, and so on full of *chhit* customers; the number of businesses owned by the *chhit* residents was also rising in the *pooran* Bangladeshi *bazaars*. Instead of passive and imbalanced encounters of the stateless era, the *chhitbashi* successfully claimed a stable position in the economy, society and politics of adjacent localities beyond the *chhit* boundary. Growing encounters with *pooran* Bangladeshi neighbors, leaders, and politicians developed multi-dimensional transactional ties rather than the one-dimensional agrarian relation they previously had with their landlords.

Some *chhitbashi* pursued even more extended networks. Besides this outbound public crowd in the adjacent *bazaars*, two specific *chhit* groups were also moving out to further towns and cities. Wealthy individuals were relocating to the subdistrict and *union parishads* headquarters and building houses and businesses there for a better life. Youths, on the other hand, were moving out for better livelihoods (e.g., knit manufacturing factory, NGO jobs) in Dhaka and neighboring districts. In the same way, the incorporation of the *chhitmahals* attracted others to them. In the stateless era, mostly the *Bhatiyas* and criminal escapees moved to *chhitmahals*, but the normalization created new livelihood and political opportunities for fresh newcomers. Now school teachers, health workers, and NGO staff commute to the *chhitmahal* every day to provide public and private services. In addition, seasonal harvests employ laborers from surrounding villages. Workers for political parties, especially BAL, frequently come to politicize new voters. Some absentee *chhitbashi* have also been returning to their homes since the insecurities of statelessness faded away. Such dynamic interaction and movement contributed to the pragmatic and everyday normalization of *chhitmahals*, which was not any less important than the legal documents of citizenship or public infrastructures.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

The midnights in stateless *chhitmahals* were dark and quiet; the monsoon nights were even more lifeless. But the eve of the first day of 2015's August was different. Hundreds of cheerful people crowded the muddy roads, tea-stalls, and other community spaces of the village on that rainy night. Their public chorus of the national anthem of Bangladesh broke the dark silence. As the crowds moved forward to the hub of their village, they started to dance, chant and scream patriotic slogans: "Joy Bangla" (Long live Bangladesh), "Tomar desh, amar desh. Bangladesh! Bangladesh!" (My country, your country. Bangladesh! Bangladesh!), "Ar noy chhitbashi, amra shobai Bangladesh?" (We are no more the *chhitbashi*, we are Bangladeshi) (Hindustan Times, 2015; Hasan & Das, 2015). At one minute past midnight, leaving behind sixty-eight years of stateless darkness, the enthusiastic crowd lit sixty-eight candles to embrace the light of citizenship. The next morning, and in the following days, national and global media broke the news of the historic land-swap agreement between Bangladesh and India that abolished the anomalous *chhitmahals* and granted citizenship to their residents. The news reporters captured the reactions of first-time citizens:

"The 68 candles mark our 68 years of endless pain since 1947 and the agonies and poverty we faced living in no-man's land" - Golam Mostafa (Deccan Herald, 2015)

"Just a few more hours and I will be a citizen of an independent country. I will taste freedom for the first time in my life" - 68-year old Nurul Islam (Daily Star, 2015b)

"It is a matter of great relief that rule of law has arrived to this place" - Moinul Huq (Hasan & Das, 2015)

"Now that I am a Bangladeshi citizen, I aim to be a female political leader like our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, I will study hard and join politics in future" - 15-year old Sharifa (Hasan & Das, 2015)

"I will no longer have to use fake identities. None will call us *chhit* people anymore" - 14-year old Hamidul Islam (Daily Star, 2015b)

“We are very happy, our children will no more need to hide their identity to go to the schools” - Bashir Mia (Salon, 2015)

These straightforward statements indicate what the people of *chhitmahals* had hoped for as they were stepping into citizenship. The anticipation of freedom, affluence, empowerment, employment, modernity, political representation, administrative order, and a clear sense of belonging was repeatedly echoed in their cheerful voices. Words of hope also guided the speeches of the government heads. After signing the swap treaty, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi compared the swap of *chhitmahals* to the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. He said, “We’ve resolved a question that has lingered since independence [in 1947]. Our two nations [now] have a settled boundary. It will make our borders more secure and people’s lives more stable” (Aljazeera, 2015). A few months after the swap, Bangladeshi prime minister Sheikh Hasina visited Dasiar Chhara and assured the new citizens: “The days of agony has ended. ... The day is not very far when we’ll be able to provide electricity to every house. We’ll not only provide electric light, but we’ll also give the light of education, health care” (BDNews24, 2015). This dissertation intended to explore the status of these anticipated changes in people’s lives and the landscapes of *chhitmahals*. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss what people have gained and lost from a reformulated identity, i.e., citizenship, and how their life looks since the night they lit the candles of hope.

The most widely circulated promise that citizenship had offered to the *chhit* community was freedom or liberation. When I talked to the swap movement leaders - who also happened to be the former *chhit* council leaders - they proclaimed themselves as the freedom fighters that liberated the *chhitmahals*. On more than one occasion, they asked me to write down their demand for a freedom fighter allowance from the government.<sup>109</sup> During the swap movement, one popular slogan had energized the youth comrades: *hoi mukti, na hoi mrittu* (either freedom or death). The statement “we now have freedom” was one of the first reactions whenever *chhitbashi* were asked about the impacts of the swap. Despite not having any state forces or troops inside their villages, the surrounding barbed wire border with India and the delineated national boundary with Bangladesh always nurtured a feeling and fear of being occupied, hence the aspiration for freedom. This local concept of liberation meant the end of their helpless imprisonment in a landlocked landscape, restricted

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<sup>109</sup> Bangladesh government provides allowance to the freedom fighters of the 1971’s liberation war against West Pakistan and their successors. Many swap leaders expected a similar allowance for their contribution.



mobility, and the criminalization of livelihood works outside the *chhitmahals*. Making the governments acknowledge their existence and protect their fundamental rights was their freedom. In this sense, people of the *chhitmahals* certainly have achieved freedom; the internal border between *chhitmahals* and Bangladesh has been abolished, a strangled feeling of being occupied has come to an end, and people could freely travel and work anywhere in the country.

But the meaning of freedom, which was a constant in landlocked *chhitmahals*, has added new meanings to its vernacular definition in the citizenship era. The merger with Bangladesh and unrestricted mobility did not just allow the people of *chhitmahals* to roam and work freely; the local government, political parties, NGOs, banks, and various other actors flooded into the *chhitmahals* as well. A series of interconnected politico-legal modifications enabled these external actors to take over the control of *chhitmahals* gradually. The ordinary non-aligned *chhitbashi*<sup>110</sup> and their former council leaders hardly had any control over *chhit* affairs: the political parties controlled the local government, *pooran* Bangladeshi representatives ruled the leadership and public offices, wealthy neighbors were buying more and more *chhit* land. Corruption of low-level bureaucrats excluded the interests of ordinary people, retailers' demands dominated the cropping patterns, legal justice depended on material affluence, political autocracy crippled freedom of speech, digital networks influenced the local culture, and political loyalty dictated access to government aid. The *chhitbashi* were aware of these side-effects of citizenship; still, they have become overwhelmed by the unstoppable effects of all these interventions. Confined in a shackled life, without any firsthand experience of government formalities, they considered a dismantled internal border, and unregulated mobility were the signs of liberation. However, as they started to experience the workings of the Bangladeshi government, the ability to roam freely was no longer enough to define freedom. Except for a few politically blessed personnel, most people I conversed with felt like they were controlled and exploited again by powerful actors. Citizenship and associated nation-building initiatives put an end to their spatial confinement but simultaneously transferred them into an even more sophisticated structural prison.

The aspiration of freedom accompanied an explicit desire for material affluence. The *chhitbashi* were dependent on agriculture, which had barely provided them three meals a day<sup>111</sup> but left them

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<sup>110</sup> That is, not connected to political parties, bureaucrats, influential individuals or any other power blocks.

<sup>111</sup> Having three meals -- in morning, noon, and evening -- is the standard image of livelihood security in Bangladesh.

vulnerable to unanticipated events like natural disasters or medical emergencies. They did not have electricity or phone bills to pay. Still, they had to buy groceries (e.g., oil, spices) that they did not produce or educational goods (e.g., notebooks, pens, pencils) for the kids whom they sent to Bangladeshi schools in illicit ways. After paying for the costs of sharecropping, people did not have enough left over to afford these basic necessities. A cycle of pay-and-take<sup>112</sup> formal and informal loans kept them in a loop of poverty. The restrictions on mobility, a criminalized public image, and the lack of legal access to skills education and training did not promise a prosperous future in stateless *chhitmahals*.

There is no doubt that citizenship and the implementation of safety net programs brought anticipated changes in people's lives. Significant modification in the cropping culture and occupational trends earned people more money to afford a better living. Agriculture had always been the pride and symbol of the *chhit* livelihood and society, but citizenship-inspired adjustments in the living standard and diverse commercial possibilities have shifted the nature and promises of agriculture. Uninterrupted mobility of wholesalers, stability in law and order, and the services of the subdistrict agriculture extension office (e.g., subsidized fertilizer, consultation, information campaigns) have pulled more people into agriculture and shifted the farmers from rice-based subsistence agriculture to a more profitable commercial agriculture. Crops and vegetables<sup>113</sup> that had a regional and national demand dominated the cropping patterns; the hybrid varieties promoted by the local agriculture office and NGOs have replaced the low-production traditional varieties. The high-yield and easy access to wholesalers<sup>114</sup> encouraged and improved the production-return of farmers. I met absentee *chhitbashi* who used to work in Dhaka in the stateless period as wage laborers or rickshaw-drivers but, after the swap, returned to their villages and invested in a little piece of land for sharecropping. I came across people who used to drive passenger-vans or work as shopkeepers full-time in *chhitmahals* and adjacent *bazaars*, but they have recently started seasonal sharecropping for extra income. Regular and new farmers - all have increased their household income from agriculture unequally. The sharecroppers bought their first land, landlords purchased more land and produced

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<sup>112</sup> Borrowing money from landlords, *mohajons* (professional lenders that lend money with interest), or wealthy individuals during planting months and paying back after the harvest.

<sup>113</sup> The region is well-known for its production and supply of rice, corn, wheat, groundnut, tobacco, and seasonal vegetables.

<sup>114</sup> On a specific day, the wholesalers would come to the village along with a pickup van, collect crops from house to house, and pay the farmers in cash.

more ambitious crops (e.g., strawberries, lychee), while people from other occupations started to make a more secure living from sharecropping.

This additional income from agriculture put the *chhit* households in a better place in affording their expenses. But the desired affluence was yet to achieve for most of the people in *chhitmahal*, mainly for two reasons. First, citizenship introduced a modified standard of living, which was more costly than the stateless era. In *chhitmahals*, affluence meant achieving the ability to afford all household expenditures, not just the subsistence necessities. Along with rising agriculture income, new demands for household expenditure have also appeared. People now have to pay for electricity, mobile phone communications, internet packages, education equipment, light bulbs, ceiling fans, transportation, and so on. Expenses like purchasing a television or building a paved-floor house have also entered their wish list once competitive consumption had become common in the *chhitmahals*. The additional agricultural income enabled many *chhitbashi* to comfortably afford some of these new amenities for the first time but left them vulnerable to other unanticipated hazards. I observed that even the wealthy households struggled to fix their houses when hailstorms ravaged them; they had to borrow money with a post-harvest payback option. My mentor in Balapara Khagrabari, who had just become a small-scale landlord, fell into poverty when he had to pay for the legal costs of his son's alleged involvement in an assault.<sup>115</sup> The 'percentage politics' of politicians and bureaucrats has further deteriorated the material condition of people. The *chhitbashi* also had to pay a hefty amount to access state-services and public goods.

The second obstacle to affluence despite rising incomes was a syndicated wholesale market that controlled and exploited the crop prices. During the post-harvest season, anger around wholesalers' unfair demands for extra kilos of crops in the 40-kg sack was prevalent in *chhitmahals*: they received 43-45 kilograms of potatoes in each sack, but paid the farmers for 40 kilograms. It was syndicated exploitation; farmers could not find a different wholesaler to get a fair price. If a farmer refused to accept this bad bargain, a wholesaler could easily buy from another farmer. Wholesalers used to come to the doorstep of the farmers, which they used as a leverage to exploit them: they knew it would be more costly and inconvenient for small farmers to take their produce to the nearest wholesale market. Furthermore, the small farmers' crops rarely had insured profits, which left them

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<sup>115</sup> As per my latest knowledge, his son was still on the run and has not been arrested. The case was yet to be brought before the court.

vulnerable to weather conditions and natural disasters. While the large wholesalers or companies used to pay for the crops of wealthy farmers' entire fields before the harvest, the small farmers had to wait until the harvest to sell their produce. Therefore, when a brutal hailstorm destroyed all crops in Balapara Khagrabari, my wealthy landlord still made a profit because the wholesalers advanced him the nonrefundable price before the harvest. On the other hand, some of my friends - being sharecroppers and small landowners - lost everything since no crop was left in the field to sell.

Achieving affluence has shown gradual progress in *chhitmahals*. Agricultural income has enabled people who had starved before to afford three full meals a day but fell short for other necessities. The small sharecroppers made a comparatively better income from agriculture by buying their own farming land and the resulting increased production. They were more comfortable with affording food and other everyday expenses. But extreme wealth did not come from land or agriculture, it came from political connections and loyalty. The *chhit* individuals that accumulated immense wealth were directly linked to the BAL. The BAL-dominated local government rewarded their loyalty with important community positions, which enabled them to make lots of illicit money. For example, appointed zone leaders who took bribes before handing over NGO aid were the supporters of BAL. The headmaster whose private school was approved by the government to start enrollment was also a local leader of BAL. These illicit favors were a faster route to wealth than the slow, seasonal, and risky return from agriculture, and connections to the BAL changed the terms of the wealth-based power-game in the *chhitmahals*. As the former council leaders' income declined after losing their arbitrating power, these new BAL-affiliated individuals filled the void to become the new elite.

Besides political party workers, the *chhit* youth undoubtedly led the most groundbreaking reconfiguration in the *chhit* community. Accessing new digital networks via cellphones and Facebook has produced diverse mechanisms to modify their aspirations and agency. The 'adult version' of normalization focused on a traditional sense of infrastructuralized development and egalitarian growth. The youth, however, equated normalcy with a global version of youthful modernity that emphasizes individual development and expressions. Walking down a modern road and living in an electrified house while being offline, unemployed, and politically strangled did not translate as a 'normal' youth. The social networks assisted them in creating a parallel public sphere to gain political power, search for employment, announce unpopular opinions, criticize the government, and organize protests. Their actions in this virtual sphere did not necessarily conform to the traditional norms, but were harmonized instead with the national and global lingo of a normal life. As a result

of a market-war between service providers, the number of online cellphone users has exponentially increased, data and call prices went down, and the accessibility improved due to the company-built network towers and valid identity-related documents to purchase sim-cards. Due to these developments, digital space of *chhitmahals* turned out to be equally powerful as ground-level politics. As the first generation of cellphone and internet users in their village and household, the *chhit* youths took charge of this parallel public space to solidify their long overdue visibility.

The *chhitbashi* in general considered these new changes as a step-up in their normal life. Still, they acknowledged that some citizenship-induced changes had dimmed their pride and disrupted their imagined community. But this dissatisfaction was not universally shared. In most of the cases, the ordinary *chhitbashi* were victims of corrupt practices of their fellow *chhit* residents that had political and bureaucratic support. Therefore, their frustration arose from the failure of citizenship to establish equality that kept them struggling for livelihood security as they did before. On the other hand, the elites, e.g., former council members, landlords, were disappointed because they lost their power to the BAL leaders. Their frustration was less egalitarian. Furthermore, national differences did not count for much in the old days, but the normalization induced a social discontent between the ‘original’ *chhit* residents and the *Bhatiyas* based on the nationalistic beliefs.

The people of *chhitmahals* welcomed the appearance of an administrative order and legal institution in their village because they wanted a licit life. In the stateless era, their entire community was involved in illicit livelihood strategies, which left them vulnerable to external exploitation (e.g., border guards, police, Bangladeshi goons) and wholesale criminalization. After the swap, people hoped for a more stable society that could thrive through licit endeavors with the help of local government and policing services. However, unfortunately, a modified version of illicitness plagued *chhitmahals* since the swap through the very institutions that were supposed to eradicate it. The clientelist practices of BAL rewarded its loyal followers with powerful positions and retail corruption while punishing the voices of dissent by stripping them of their rightful access to the government support and subsidies. The BAL-monopolized local government had involved loyal *chhit* individuals in all development schemes, from disbursing aid to recruiting road contractors, which gave them a free pass to launch an organized illicit corruption. This political nepotism has significantly impacted the community grip among the ordinary public.

Despite growing inequality, a corrupted political machine, and an imbalanced distribution of citizenship-rights, there was one thing common among the *chhitbashi* - their everyday life has adopted the 'normal' Bangladeshi order. Only a few years ago, the stateless *chhitbashi* had a more free-spirited idea of work, time, loyalty, belonging, legality, political order, and consumption, but citizenship has prescribed a particular lifestyle for them, whether they preferred it or not. Whether they wanted to send their kids to school or preferred them working in the family farms - primary education was compulsory for all Bangladeshi citizens. Whether they were satisfied with lanterns, electricity created a tempting urge to spend on LED lights and ceiling fans. Whether they wanted to hear from the government or not, access to cable television told them how to live their life. Whether they only wanted the state goods and services, the government ordered a mandatory process of identity registration to access that. Whether they wanted to teach their kids customary values, the kids were exposed to a televised national and global culture. Whether they could afford a cellphone or not, it was a must to have one to share a participatory culture with their peers. Through the constant interaction with technological, political, and state forces, at a degree probably higher than their neighbors from *pooran* Bangladesh, they self-disciplined their behavior as prescribed by the state and standards of modernity. I observed them casting votes, registering cellphones, sending kids to a school, saving money, watching television at a particular news-hour, rethinking their actions based on the idea of legality, waiting in the line to receive aid, waiting in the reception to meet their local government representatives, receiving digital identification card, appearing before the civil service examination, and performing many other citizenship-actions. They were not 'sensitive' and 'odd' *chhitbashi* anymore; instead, they became 'normal' Bangladeshis.

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## APPENDIX: NMREB APPROVAL



**Date:** 10 November 2017

**To:** Dr. Dan Jorgensen

**Project ID:** 110063

**Study Title:** Reformulations of Space and Identity in India-Bangladesh Border Enclaves

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** December 8, 2017

**Date Approval Issued:** 10/Nov/2017

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 10/Nov/2018

Dear Dr. Dan Jorgensen

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

**Documents Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Conversation and Participant Observation Points_Final Version	Participant Observation Guide	26/Sep/2017	
LOI & Verbal Consent_translated into Bengali - Nov 9 (clean)	Letter of Information-Verbal-Translated	09/Nov/2017	2
LOI & Verbal Consent_version 2 clean	Letter of Information-Verbal	10/Nov/2017	2
LOI & Written Consent_clean version 3	Letter of Information-Written	10/Nov/2017	3
LOI & Written Consent_translated into Bengali - Nov 9 (clean)	Letter of Information-Written-Translator	09/Nov/2017	2

**Documents Acknowledged:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Attestation of Translated LOI & Consent	Translation Attestation Certificate	30/Oct/2017	1
List of Pseudonyms	Master List-Blank form	28/Oct/2017	1

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Paterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

## CURRICULUM VITAE

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**MA Dissertation:** Livelihood, Resistance and Coal Mining in Rural Bangladesh  
[available at <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/2975/>]

**Conference Papers:** Non-state Spaces Between Two Nation-States: The Making of Enclaves along the Bangladesh-India Border  
Annual Conference of American Anthropological Association, Minneapolis, USA. 2016

Border Maps are Body Maps: The Practices of 'Othering' in the Bangladesh-India Border Enclaves  
Annual Conference of Canadian Anthropology Society, Ottawa, Canada 2017

'Infrastructuralization' of a Formerly Stateless Enclave: The Politics of State-Making through Infrastructure in a Border Village of Bangladesh  
The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities, Tokyo, Japan 2019