

Ethnic Communities and their Cross Border Interactions: A Study of the Dalus of Indo-Bangladesh Border

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KEYWORDS Border Community. Cross-border Interactions. Dalus. Intra-ethnic Relations. Migrant Community. Minority Community

ABSTRACT The north-eastern region of India is a homeland for numerous ethnic groups who are distinct in their origins, traditions, customs, language, race, religion and geographical locations. The ethnic population of the region are mostly minority groups in context of population size, socio-culturally, linguistically, economically, as well as politically. However, there are even some ethnic groups, who are recognised as minority within the minority groups. The present paper deals with such a community who comes under the above category. This paper provides a detailed discussion on the socio-political and economic status of the Dalus of Garo Hills and Mymensingh. The paper also studies their intra-ethnic interactions across the Indo-Bangladesh border. The study is an exploratory one, based on both primary and secondary data sources.

INTRODUCTION

The community is a locality-based unit of social organisation that still retains a vital role in societal life despite its increasing subordination to, and dependence upon, larger units. Functioning within the larger society of which it is a part, community signifies a merging of common habitat, common concerns, and common culture that gives to societal life a distinguishable form and character at the level of the locality. Depending on the size of population and power a community holds, a community can be categorised as a minority community or majority community. The 'indigenous' refers to original inhabitants of a given territory. The indigenous community is a group of people having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies and developed on their territories. When people leave their place of residence to live permanently in another place, then this is called migration. A migrant community is a diaspora of men and women migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in countries of settlement. The indigenous people become border communities when they, once living in their own autonomous territories, are now forced to become a part of another state. The problems faced by the indigenous people of border areas are different from the problems of other areas. The border communities have been prevented access to the lands

to which their ancestors previously had for many years. Their networks of communication with their close ones have been paralysed to the extent that they started cultivating the feeling of utter negligence and as marginalised.

The north-eastern region of India is a homeland for numerous ethnic groups who are distinct in their origins, traditions, customs, language, race, religion and geographical locations. The Mongoloid people found in northeast India belong to three linguistic groups namely, the Assam-Burmese or Lohities, the Siamese-Chinese, represented by the Tai-Ahoms, and the Austric Mon-Khmer, the Khasis and the Jaintias (Choudhury 2017). The ethnic population of northeast India are mostly minority groups in context of population size, socio-culturally, linguistically, economically, as well as politically (Phukan 2013). However, there are even some ethnic groups, who are recognised as minority within the minority groups. The present paper deals with a community that comes under the above category.

There are considerable theoretical and empirical works on different issues relating to community, minority community, indigenous community and migrant community (Greenberg 1974; Mohsin 1999). There are literature on the understanding of the phenomenon of minority within minorities and the relationship between minority community and majority community within same territorial

space (Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev 2005; Dev 2004). Several studies have also been made by scholars on the experiences on ethnicity, ethnic identity, identity assertion, autonomy as well as secessionist movements and understanding of the politics in context of the northeast India (Singh and Singh 2014; Bhattacharjee and Dev 2006; Baruah 2005; Barpujari 1998; Misra 2000; Saikia 2011; Bhattacharya 2011; Misra 1999; Dutta 2012). Coming to the Dalus, there is little information about the Dalu community and its relations with its own counterpart in Bangladesh. In view of the above, the present paper seeks to examine their present status and their cross-border relations.

Objectives

The objectives of the paper are as follows:

1. To study the socio-political and economic status of the Dalu community.
2. To examine their cross-border interactions with their counterparts in Bangladesh.

METHODOLOGY

The study is empirical and an exploratory one, based on both primary and secondary data sources. Three districts inhabited by the Dalus, two from Garo Hills that is West and South West Garo Hills Districts in Meghalaya, and one in Mymensingh district in Bangladesh were selected for survey. The primary data were collected from Anthropological Survey and Linguistic Survey of India, Census Reports of 2011, Panchayat Samitis of Dalu-Killapara, members of the Meghalaya Dalu Association, Block Development Officers of Dalu village, Border Security Force (BSF) and BGB (Border Guard Bangladesh) personnel working in Killapara-Nakugaon border of Indo-Bangladesh, and Memorandums. Respondents were chosen at random for interviews with the help of semi-structured schedules, having both open and close-ended questions. Apart from a general survey, unstructured and in-depth interviews were conducted with village elders, scholars and officials who had some knowledge of the community. Secondary data were comprised of both published and unpublished documents, various books, articles, seminar papers, journals, memorandums, newspapers and Internet sources. Both

qualitative and quantitative methods were used for collection and analysis of data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Dalus claimed to be a minority migrant community living in the border areas of Indo-Bangladesh in West and South West Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya. In Meghalaya the Dalus inhabit in Dalu, Killapara, Phulbari, Garobada, Williamnagar, Araimile, Mukhdangra, Dalupara, Nokatgiri, and Kalaichar. The Dalus are also found scattered in many places of Assam like Rakshashini in Goalpara district, Derapathar in Nagaon and in Darrang district. At present, the total Dalu population in Garo Hills is reported to be around twelve thousand. In Dalu and Killapara, near Bhogai River (claimed to be their first settlement of the Dalus), there are around 125 households comprising of a total Dalu population of 1000. As per the Report of Census India 2011, Dalu village has a total population of 349, of which Dalus are thirty-eight comprising twenty males and eighteen females (Census India 2011). In Bangladesh they are found in Nalitabari under Sherpur sub-division, Haluaghat sub-division of Mymensingh district, Harigaon, Hatipagar, Kumargati, Sangra, Jugli, Andheriagop, Gopalpur, as well as in the areas beside the Kangsha River (in Bangladesh Bhogai River is named as Kangsha) (Rai et al. 2009). In Mymensingh district, it is reported that the total population of Dalus is around two thousand.

Mythical History of the Dalus

The history of the Dalus is shrouded in mystery. There are many versions about the history of the Dalus, while some refer to oral history, and some to mythologies and folk stories. Their origin is difficult to trace, as there are no authentic historical records of their migration and settlement. One needs to depend only on the reframed verbal narratives. The dominant narrative the Dalus subscribe is that they have migrated from Manipur. They identify themselves as the descendants of the royal family of Manipur.

Some Dalus claimed to be the descendants of Bijoy Singh, son of the Army General, Bishub Singh to the then king of Manipur, Harjeet Singh. They claim that the history of their migration from Manipur to the Garo hills was around 1709 to

1714 AD. It was time when Meidingu Pamheiba (also known as Garib Nawaz) became the king of Manipur after he had assassinated Harjeet Singh and Bishub Singh. Subsequently, Bijoy Singh fled with some soldiers from the war to protect their lives and reached Assam. Pamheiba kept chasing Bijoy Singh for many days. They continued moving from one place to another and finally moved to Garo Hills and settled in Dalu village. In fear of losing their lives, it was stated that Bijoy Singh and his troop disguised themselves, and began to write Dalji after their name in order to hide their identity. With due course of time 'Dalji' later became 'Dalu'. It is believed that Bijoy Singh returned to Manipur after being in disguise for few years. But, he was not accepted back in the royal family, as the royal family believed that Bijoy Singh and his followers betrayed the crown and the state by escaping in middle of the war. Besides, their culture was polluted after assimilating with other communities, hence cannot be accepted and taken back to the royal family. After been rejected by the royal family, Bijoy Singh returned to the Garo Hills (Sarkar 2006).

There are other folk stories narrated by the Dalus of their migration and settlement. It was believed by the Dalus that the Burmese invaders annexed the Manipur kingdom during the reign of Gambhir Singh in 1820s, who later asked for help from the British. Some Manipuri soldiers came along with the British army to the Garo Hills and Sylhet and out of those Manipuri soldiers, few might have not returned and settled there permanently (Gait 1905).

Socio-cultural Profile of the Dalus

There is no official data on their population and socio-economic status. One has to depend only on the data collected through individual survey. The census reports do not say anything specific about the Dalus. In view of their small population, linguistic difference and weak economic and political status, the Dalus can be considered as a minority community who are living in midst of numerically and economically more powerful communities like the Garos, Bengalees, Hajongs, and Koches.¹

The Dalus are a branch of the Indo-Mongoloid group (Abraham 1903). Many Dalus believe their mother tongue was Manipuri. However, there

is no trace of any Manipuri language found among the Dalus. They speak a language, which is similar with Bengali but blend with Assamese accent. It was observed that the Dalus in Bangladesh have learnt to speak in Bengali and have completely forgotten their mother tongue.

It is said that the Dalus are divided into twelve different clans, which they called *Dopfa*. The major *dopfas* are *Chisang*, *Pira* and *Matchi*. Besides these three *dopfas*, there are seven other minor clans or *dopfas*, such as *Dorung*, *Nengma*, *Ningmai*, *Kara*, *Mybara*, *Pabar*, *Kona*, *Puka* and *Gandi* (Dalu 1996). Intra clan marriages are prohibited among the Dalus. If anyone violates this norm, the community imposes punishment on him or her. The Dalus earlier claimed to be matrilineal, but in due course of time they have evolved into patrilineal in society (Jengcham 2019).

In Garo Hills, it was observed during the field survey that the Dalus construct their houses in a traditional way with bamboo, mud and hay. The shape of the huts is typical and unique. It was found that the long front roof of the huts bend down and almost touches the ground over a small, enclosed balcony. The Dalus stated that the reason to construct the roof longer is to avoid the heat of the sun and also to protect and secure the privacy of the family members in the huts.

The Dalu women wear a traditional dress called *Patani*, which looks similar with the dresses of the women of Hajongs, Koches and *Ruga* Garos. The Dalu women weave their own *Patani*, which is 63 inches long and 45 inches wide. But, the design in the lower part of the *Patani*, which the Dalus call *Dura*, is different from rest of these three tribes. The Dalus have their traditional jewellery namely, *Hasti* (neck bond), *Pass Kati* (hair clip) and *Kata Bazu* (upper arm bracelet), among others. They have their own dance forms. In marriages they follow *Pani Dhala Biya*², *Dekra Biya*³, and *Bhola Biya*⁴ forms.

Traditionally the Dalus practiced animism. Their ancient deities are *Kereng-buri* and *Pother-khauri*,⁵ among others. The prominent among their traditional religious practices are the *Bastou*,⁶ *Hoila-Moila*⁷ and *Sainya-batta*⁸. It is observed that the Dalus in both India and Bangladesh, due to the close proximity with the Bengali Hindus, practice Hindu religion. They practice a variant of Vaishnavism and worship the *Gaur-Nitai*.⁹ These people sing *kirtans* and cele-

brate *Holi* as their prime festival. They use the mark on their forehead made with sandalwood paste as a symbol of being a devotee of Lord *Krishna*, believed to be a *Bishnu avatar*. In most of the homestead, it is observed that they construct a raised platform and plant holy basil on it where every evening the Dalu women light *diyas* near it. The practice, they believe, would protect their families from evils. In every village, the Dalus have a guardian deity, which they believe would protect their village.

T. B. Subba argued that the Dalus of Garo Hills have continued to follow their own path of life, which he referred as “Dalu Path”. It is found that the Dalus have been following both the traditional as well as the Hindu religious practices. Besides, unlike the Garos and many other tribal communities, the Dalus preferred not to convert en masse into Christianity. Subba suggested the “Dalu Path” that is of neither assimilating fully with Garos nor with Bengalis, but following their own way of life (Subba 1998). However, at present, the situation of the Dalus has changed to some extent. The close contact of Dalus with the Bengalis and influence of Sanskritisation in the region has led the Dalus to accept the Hinduist form of religion leaving their traditional one. Thus, for this the Dalus have been facing the problem of ‘tribe-caste continuum’ (Kumar 2019), that is their tribal identity with the clan system has slowly transformed into caste Hindu with Bengali traditions. They have become a blend of both tribal and non-tribal features, which most of the times raise question an whether they are to be recognised as a ‘tribe’ or not.

Traditional Administrative System Among the Dalus

The Dalus had a traditional political institution called *Morol* or *Matobbor* to administer the village. *Bhuyan*, the village head enjoyed superior position and authority in the village. One who owns much of land and property among the Dalus was chosen as the *Bhuyan* by the village people.¹⁰ Traditional administration by the *Bhuyans* is no more visible among the Dalus at present. Most of these people have lost their land and property in course of time. In place of the rule by *Bhuyans*, the Dalus began to follow the *Mondol* system, where the most senior male member and

with more knowledge and experience was elected as the *Mondol* of a village or village head. He remained in the position throughout his life. The *Mondols* used to collect money from the people for developmental works in the villages. The village head was responsible for dealing with conflicts and any other criminal offence within his village. He had the power to decide the cases, punish and penalise the offender. He could give proper solutions for the problems of the villagers.¹¹

This kind of administrative system is no longer prevalent among the Dalus in India. But, it was observed that the most elderly respected persons would be designated as headmen and their advice would be followed by other members of the village. The Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) has recognised the *Gaon Burha* or the village head as a part of the traditional administrative system of the Dalus, and allowed the people to continue to run this system in the Dalu villages.¹²

The traditional administrative practices among the Dalus in present Bangladesh have also diminished. It was found during the field survey that the system of *Gaon Burha* or *Gram Sorkar* is working as a village administration in the rural areas of Bangladesh. In some of the mixed villages where the Dalus and other communities inhabit together, the most senior male member of the village irrespective of the community he belongs to, is elected as the *Gaon Burha* of the village (Dalu 1986).

Socio-economic Status of the Dalus

During the field survey in Garo Hills, twenty-five households and 100 respondents including both male and female from sixteen years above were interviewed, out of which only two females and eight males were graduates, four females and five males completed senior secondary, and five females and six males were matriculate. Rest of the respondents were mostly under matric and few of them never went to school. The respondents claimed that poverty and the practice of early marriage were the reasons behind the failure to complete their education.

From the field survey in Mymensingh, there were twenty-five households and 115 respondents including both males and females from six-

teen years of age and above, and only five males and two females have completed senior secondary level of education. Whereas, only two males and one female were matriculate, and nine males and four females have completed eight standard. It is found that the Dalus are even more backward in terms of formal education in Mymensingh than their counterpart in Garo Hills.

In Garo Hills the Dalus basically live on agriculture. They assumed that they are economically weaker than the neighbouring dominant communities, especially the Garos and Koches. Some are engaged as daily wage labourers, rickshaw pullers, drivers, contractors, etc. Out of twenty-five households surveyed in Garo Hills, seventeen households had cultivable lands. Rest of the households have sold their cultivable lands. The Dalus in Mymensingh also rely mostly on agriculture, but out of twenty-five households, only six households have cultivable land. Rest of the nineteen households have no cultivable land and they work as tenants in the agricultural lands of the dominant communities, usually the Bengali Muslims or work as daily wage labourers. One of the Dalu males during an interview commented in Bengali on his bitter economic conditions in Bangladesh, as:

Shonar Bangla Shobar Jonei Shona nei, Kam Korle Bhaat Paibe, Narkorle nei.

Golden Bangla is not golden for everyone, only if you work you will get rice, or else you won't.

This statement depicts the worse conditions of the Dalus in Bangladesh than their counterpart in Garo Hills.

Political Status of Dalus

Political status of the Dalus residing in Garo Hills of Meghalaya is different from those living in the other side of the border. In order to understand the political status of the Dalus in Garo Hills, one needs to understand the nature of the political system in Meghalaya.

Meghalaya became an independent state of the Indian Union on 21st January 1972 (Haokip 2013). The state has eleven districts. It is divided into eight sub-divisions and thirty-nine blocks. The blocks are comprised of town municipalities and village panchayats. It is predominantly a tribal state. There are 17 notified Scheduled Tribes

(STs) in Meghalaya (Scheduled-Tribes List of Meghalaya 2001). The Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos are recognised as indigenous tribes of the state. Apart from these three major tribes there are several tribal groups who have been settled in the state since its inception. They are Bodo-Kacharis, Hajongs, Hmars, Rabhas, Dimasa-Kacharis, Mikir, any Mizo (Lushai) tribes, some Naga tribes, and various Kuki tribes. The non-tribal communities comprise Bengalis, Marwaris, Nepalis and a small number of other communities from different parts of India.

According to the Census India 2011, the total population of Meghalaya is 2,966,889. The 17 notified STs of the state consist of 2,555,861 persons in 2011, constituting about 86.1 percent of the total state population. The remaining 14.1 percent of the total population is non-tribal. The Khasi-Jaintia constitute 49.54 percent, followed by the Garos with 30.86 percent and the rest of the tribal population constitutes 10.9 percent (Singh 2006).

As per the report of Census India 2011, the west and southwest Garo Hills has a total population of 6,43,291 and 1,72,495, respectively (West Garo Hills District Census 2011-2019). The Dalus in the Garo Hills can be considered as a minority community that lives in midst of numerically and economically more powerful communities like the Garos, Bengalees, Hajongs, Koches and Nepalis. In view of their small population, linguistic difference and weak economic and political status, the Dalus can be considered a minority community in Meghalaya.

The Dalus in India are striving for the Scheduled Tribe recognition.¹³ There are organisations namely, Nikhil Bharat Dalu Samaj Unnoyon Samity, Meghalaya Dalu Association, and Dalu Mahila Samiti, strongly demanding for the ST status.¹⁴ In 1952 it was accepted by the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council of Meghalaya for the inclusion of the community in the Scheduled Tribes category but it was not passed by the Parliament (The Green Book 1968). The Meghalaya Assembly had discussed the condition of this community in details during the Budget Session of 1984 and passed the resolution to recommend to the government of India that this community to be included in the list of Scheduled Tribes.¹⁵ Similarly, a Memorandum was also given by the Dalu leaders to J.P. Jain, the then Under Secre-

tary, Lok Sabha to recognise them as STs. Subsequently, responding to their demand, J. P. Jain placed the Memorandum before the Select Committee for further consideration,¹⁶ but it did not pass through the Select Committee and remains pending till date. The members of the Meghalaya Dalu Association have submitted a memorandum to the Chairman, Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes/Other Backward Class Committee, Government of Meghalaya, Shillong in 1999.¹⁷ Later, Ranjita Dalu, a member of the Meghalaya Dalu Association (MDA) has filed a petition in the Meghalaya High Court in 2017¹⁸ against the slow pace of the process for inclusion of the Dalus in the Scheduled Tribe category under the Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution (*The Shillong Times*, 7 July 2017).

In Bangladesh, there are around twelve different indigenous ethnic communities inhabiting in the plains of central north, northeast and in the hills of southeast Bangladesh (Khaleque 2019). However, only few of them are mentioned in the government records. According to the Bangladesh National Census of 2011, the country's indigenous population is around 1,586,141, which indicates 1.8 percent of the total population. The Dalus in Bangladesh are minorities, numerically, socially, culturally, economically and politically, living in the midst of the much dominant community that is the Bengali Muslims. However, the Government of Bangladesh has recognised the Dalus as an ethnic minority and indigenous people or *Adivasis* of Bangladesh.

There was not a single village where the Dalus were in majority in Mymensingh. Few of their Bengali Muslim neighbours also agreed to the socio-economic backwardness of the Dalus. During the communal riots in East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) between the Bengali Muslims and Hindus and other tribal populations of East Pakistan, that took place before and after the partition in 1942, 1950, and 1964 and in the Bangladesh Liberation war of 1971, many Dalus along with the Garos, Hajongs, Koches, Rajbongshis, Biharis and Bengali Hindus, lost their lives and property. Maximum damage was done during 1964 when a huge number of these communities were forced to leave their homes and flee to India (Sangma 2005). Lands belonging to the Garos, Hajongs and Dalus among other people were encroached

by the dominant community in Nalitabari, Kamalakanda, Durgapur, Haluaghat and Sreebardi areas of the then Mymensingh district.

During the interviews, many Dalus disclosed their conditions during and after the riots. They were denied food for several days during the riots. The Dalus were bound to sell their lands and properties in order to buy food. It was stated during the interviews that Joyramkura, earlier a Dalu dominated village was completely burnt by the Pakistani army. To save their lives, the Dalus along with other communities left their villages, leaving their properties behind.

There were nine Transit Camps in the Dalu areas in Garo Hills District during the 1964 riot. There were around 82,132 refugees in 1964, out of which there were 32,640 Garos, 19,619 Bengalis, 13,842 Hajongs, 5,584 Biharis, 4,117 Koches, 3,227 Dalus and 1,243 Rajbongshis.

In the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, sixteen relief camps were set up in the Garo Hills District for Bangladeshi evacuees and also for local evacuees. It was found that the maximum number of evacuees recorded was around 2,82,947 on 9th December 1971. Some of them were later shifted from Garo Hills to other camps in Mati and Dubapara in Goalpara district, Derapathar in Nagaon district, Ghiladhari in Darang district, Bishnupur in Bongaigaon district, Rani, Rongia and Chandubi in Kamrup district and in Kokrajhar district (Bhattacharyya 1987).

It was stated by some Dalus during the interviews that those people who have returned to the present Bangladesh after the liberation war, had to rebuild their houses, which were looted, burnt and destroyed. Few Dalus stated that they had to borrow loans from their neighbours. The repayment of the loans continued for many generations, which deteriorated the economic conditions of the families. Many of them lost their cultivating land due to encroachment, and as a result they had to work as peasants on others' lands. Many Dalu people stated that their cemetery, community lands were encroached and temples, public property were destroyed. It was observed that the fast population growth of the Bengali Muslims was also a major cause for the socio-political insecurity of the indigenous communities, especially in the case of the Dalus who are inferior in all aspects (Gain 2011).

During the field survey, one of the associated members of the Bangladesh Tribal Welfare Association revealed the poor conditions of the Dalu community of Bangladesh. The person believed that lack of employment opportunity, small population size, lack of awareness, socio-political unity and association are the major causes of the poor conditions of the community. He even added that lack of land ownership is a prime cause of their problems.

After the liberation of Bangladesh, the Dalus along with many other tribal communities came forward and began to assert their ethnic identity as indigenous communities of the country. To display their identity as an indigenous community, the Dalus participated rallies at the central Shwahid Minar in Dhaka during 1972 and 1975. Their main purpose was to assert their ethnic identity and gain socio-political and economic security from the government as indigenous and minority groups.

The Dalus living alongside the Indo-Bangladesh border in west and southwest Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya are a minority community living in the midst of the dominant Garo, Koch, Hajong, Bengali Hindu and Muslim community. They are surviving on their own terms and asserting their own ethnic identity in a unique way by not engaging in any conflict or ethnic tensions with their neighbouring communities. It is difficult to trace the origin of Dalu community for there are no authentic historical records of their migration and settlement and one needs to depend only on the reframed verbal narratives. Besides, their small population size and weak socio-political and economic position, has made them insignificant, posing no threat to other communities in the state. However, it cannot be denied that the Dalus are an ethnic community with their own distinct identity, culture, traditions, customs, religious practices, language and beliefs, with a history of origin and struggle, which make them as unique as other ethnic groups of the region.

Borderlands Between India and Bangladesh

India shares 4095.70 kilometres of land border with the present Bangladesh. This border runs along the states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. Bangladesh is strategically locked within the lands of India where In-

dia's northeast and eastern lands act as an arc to the lock. While both India's northeast and Bangladesh are inextricably inter-locked, the countries cannot avoid the fact that their relations have turned into inseparable co-existence, which also needs to be turned into mutual benefit and not let it degenerate into a conflict zone (Ravi 2019).

India also acts as an important neighbour for Bangladesh due to the strong geographic, cultural, historical, and commercial ties between the two nations. Thus, India has emerged as a 'friend for all seasons' with Bangladesh due to the strategic issues (India-Bangladesh Relation 2019). It is observed that both the countries in recent times have shared a friendly bond and cooperate on several issues. Besides, not only the governments cooperate and interdepend on each other, even the people of the two countries continue to have socio-economic and cultural ties with each other, despite all fears, suspicions and animosities dating back to the partition and the birth of Pakistan.

The Indo-Bangladesh border has separated the similar ethnic groups into different nationals, who once moved freely to engage in social cultural and economic interactions in those geographical areas. The political borders criminalised the cross-border movements of the indigenous people residing in the areas near the international border of Indo-Bangladesh (Goff 2000; Sur 2012). The establishment of international frontiers enclosed indigenous peoples within states and separated them from their own relatives without their consent. Indigenous people who have been trying to maintain their distinct identities into the present continue to face serious threat to their survival, which lead them to use illegal means in order to assert their identity and protect their cultural ties across the border (Berman et al. 1993).

Borders and border crossings are projected as lethal, hence crossing borders often escalate risks of life. Previously, many scholars have termed the Indo-Bangladesh border as a 'killer border' (Van 2005). The borderlands are often seen as centres of political violence, poverty, insecurity of life and property, persecution, militarisation, and marginalisation of the indigenous people, particularly belonging to the minority groups (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2014). It is partly true in the borderlands of Indo-Bangladesh. There is heavy patrolling by the armies of both India and Bangladesh at the border. Howev-

er, it is interesting to say that though borders are lethal, yet trans-border mobility is commonly visible due to the absence of border fencing in many border areas of Indo-Bangladesh. Thus, the Indo-Bangladesh border coexists with local and trans-border legitimacies that many-a-times accommodate undocumented border crossings.

The border situation at Dalu Killapara Nakugaon is peaceful in comparison to many other borderlands of Indo-Bangladesh. It was reported during the interviews that the Killapara and Nakugaon share some socio-cultural and material affinities with the Mymensingh district of Bangladesh that make the borderland specifically important for the non-Muslim commuters as well as for the indigenous people of the borderlands of northeast India and Bangladesh. It was observed that the indigenous communities of Killapara Nakugaon border areas are trying to maintain their familial ties and culture and language intact across the border. During the field survey it was also observed that these people at the border areas are experiencing different cross-border connectivity since long before the creation of the closed border till recent times. The border has separated these indigenous border communities into different nationals, yet it could not separate them from their family ties, emotional attachment and cultural interactions.

Cross-border Interactions Among the Dalus

The Garo Hills lie next to the international border, north of Mymensingh district, and the east of the extremely porous Goalpara district, through which the immense stretch of Brahmaputra and its tributaries flow into Bangladesh. Many indigenous tribal communities living on the other side of the border continue to practice their traditions and speak own dialects. Although the borders have parted them, they have maintained relations among their families living across border.

Similarly, the Dalus who inhabit on both sides of the border also share close inter-group relations. During the field survey it was observed that the community is eager to maintain connectivity with their kith and kin across border. Kinship ties ensure sympathy and emotional attachment between them.

During the communal unrest of 1964 and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, a large num-

ber of the Dalus fled from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and took shelter in the refugee camps at the Indo-Bangladesh border in Garo Hills of Meghalaya. At that time, the Department of Relief and Rehabilitation, Government of India, built relief camps for the Bangladeshi evacuees.¹⁹ The refugees included the Dalus and other communities like the Hindu Bengalis, Garos, Hajongs, Koches, Banais, and Rajbonshis. Some members of these communities permanently settled in India, while others went back to their homes in Bangladesh.

The Dalus continue to have cross-border mobility in recent times also. The Dalus who live at a close proximity to the border in Dalu village and Killapara and the other side in Nakugaon and Nalitabari, often engage in border crossing. The distance between Dalu village and Nalitabari from the border is around 1.5 kilometres and 13 kilometres, respectively.

Late Premendra Ch. Sarkar Dalu was a popular village head of Dalu village. He was one among the prominent leaders of Dalu community. When he died in July 2018, on request the BSF (Border Security Force) in India and BGB (Border Guards Bangladesh) personnel in Bangladesh granted permission to the people to enter India and attend the funeral without passport and visa.²⁰ It appears the BSF and the BGB allowed the people from Bangladesh to cross border on the occasion for two reasons, firstly, Late Premendra Dalu was very well known to the people and also to the BSF and BGB personnel of that area, and secondly, they respected the sentiments of the tribal people residing at the border. Apart from this, there are also other occasions, which facilitate cross-border interactions. During the interview, the people in Dalu village admitted that when marriages take place in border villages, the BSFs and the BGBs allow the Dalus from Bangladesh to cross border without documentation. Apart from such border crossings that take place with the consent of the border security forces, there are also many occurrences of undocumented and unauthorised border crossings by the people, especially from Bangladesh. One Dalu lady from the village Andheriagop near Nalitabari Town of Mymensingh district admitted that she crossed the border without documents and stayed in Dudhnoi, a town in Goalpara district of Assam in India. She stated in the interview that her sister was ill and she came

to meet her, and stayed with her for almost two years without official consent. Once the situation at home became normal, she returned to her home through the same path, without been caught. Similarly, another Dalu lady from Mukdangra stated that her parents are in Bangladesh and she visits them every year without anyone's knowledge. In her interview she revealed that people who want to cross the border illegally, use River Bhogai near the border at Killapara Nakugaon. Some, on the pretext of taking a bath or swim, and enter the other side of the border without much difficulty. In addition, there are other ways of crossing the border such as hiding and walking through the paddy or sugarcane fields among others. These border crossings are 'open secrets' for all villagers and family members. Absence of fencing in areas near Killapara Nakugaon border facilitates this without much hurdle. The Dalus interviewed stated that there are no incidents of the people being caught by the border security forces while crossing the border.

Religious interactions take place between the Dalus of India and Bangladesh during the time of *Holi*. During this Hindu religious festival the governments of both countries authorise the BSF and BGB personnel to allow the people to cross the border and interact with one other in the border villages. This festival continues for a week, and the people chant *kirtans* in the temples at the border village of Killapara and Nakugaon throughout the week. On the fifth day of the festival that is on *Pancham Dol*, the BSFs and BGBs allow the people to cross the border without any formal documentation. The crossing of border is allowed for three days. Only those who come for participating in the festival are allowed to cross the border without the formal documentation. This practice of giving permission for cross border interactions on the occasion of *Holi* is visible in few other Indo-Bangladesh border areas as well.

Some Dalus take the advantage of the festival and cross the border to visit even their dear ones living far away from the border areas. They spend days and return before the festival gets over. It was also revealed during interviews that sometimes few people stay for one year and return home next year during the festival season. However, such a stay becomes risky, and hence they prefer not to venture such stays unless there are strong reasons. Some people stated during the

interview that the festival of *Holi* is just like a free pass for them that gives the people the chance of meeting and spending time with their relatives and thus becomes possible for them to maintain the family relations. This helps them to keep their culture, language and family ties intact.

In fact, cross-border interactions take place between the border community members for economic reasons as well. Border dwellers like the farmers, the fishers, daily wage earners, and small vendors, find ways to continue everyday interactions with their counterpart on the other side for the purpose of trade, common use of river water, cultivation of paddy fields and use of pastoral lands. One individual named Jogesh Kanti Dalu from Debipur works in a daily market at Nalitabari town in Bangladesh. He buys sugar, salt, oil and tea in Dalu bazaar in India, which he then sells at Nalitabari bazaar on the other side of the border. The crossing usually takes place via paddy fields through the crops. Many informal parallel crossing points are there through which these people cross the border easily.

There are four border haats operating at four different border areas namely, Kalaichar and Balat in Meghalaya and Srinagar and Kamalasagar in Tripura, and six more are likely to come up soon.²¹ The Killapara-Nakugaon border of Indo-Bangladesh does not have any border haat at present, though there used to be one earlier. However, the Dalus who live in Mukdangra, Phulbari, Harigaon, Dalupara, Nokatgiri and Kalaichar come to visit the border haat of Kalaichar-Baliamari border to sell and buy things. Among different items, the Dalus of Garo Hills mainly trade with their handloom items like the traditional garments. Many Dalus in Bangladesh stated in their interviews that they prefer to buy the food items, groceries, and handloom clothes from Dalu bazar in Dalu. The Bangladeshi traders cannot own or rent stalls on the Indian side. It is only the Indian Garo traders who can own and rent stalls in border markets in Meghalaya. They seldom travel to Bangladesh to procure goods. However, like Bangladeshi Dalus, Indian Dalus frequently travel to Bangladesh for shopping and maintaining kinship ties.

In fact, cross-border interaction among the indigenous border community members is almost unavoidable on the Indo-Bangladesh border. Border dwellers like the farmers, the fishers, daily

wage earners, and small vendors find ways to continue everyday interaction at the grassroots level in response to their needs, which include trade, common use of river water, joint use of paddy fields and pasture. During the field survey, it was observed that the border markets in Killapara-Nakugaon and in Kalaichar-Baliamari have temporary stalls and newly constructed permanent shops. The small stalls with plastic sheets, bamboo poles and a raised stage are constructed by the small local vendors at the border markets. The local men and women vendors of the borderlands come to the weekly *bazars* across borders with their baskets loaded with vegetables and handloom items.

Hence, these interactions build trust between the community members, improve relationships and forge cross-border networks. Local border communities manipulate borders as they trade for a living. Unlike many communities who have experienced the partition as a one-time displacement and relocation followed by getting the formal legal citizenship, several others and especially those communities who lived close to the border have experienced political transformations and border-making through multiple displacements and relocations for many decades. Despite the efforts of border fencing, the Dalus of borderlands of Garo Hills in northeast India and Mymensingh in Bangladesh lead transnational lives.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be said that the Dalus are a minority border community who are surviving in the midst of a numerically, socio-economically and politically dominant indigenous community without any conflict. The Dalus, although demanding ST status, never resorted to any violent means to fulfil their objections. Moreover, the Partition and the birth of nation states have divided the Dalu community and placed them under different socio-political systems. Yet, the Dalus in Garo Hills and their counterpart in Mymensingh continued to have familial and cultural ties. The continuing official as well as unofficial and illegal border crossings facilitate uninterrupted interactions between the Dalus of Garo Hills and Mymensingh. The borders have not obstructed their inter-dependency or day-to-day interactions. Through multiple unauthorised bor-

der crossings, the Dalus keep their culture, language and family ties intact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the present research work, the author has tried to examine the existing socio-political and economic status of the Dalu community in the border areas of India and Bangladesh as well as their day-to-day interactions across the border. The author has also tried to highlight some facts of communal unrest that lead this community to flee to the Indian side crossing the border and, how this community after surviving the unrest, maintained its unique identity and keeping their culture, language and family ties unbroken. It also offers the understanding of the fact that though borders are necessary for national security and integrity, it is the border that has torn apart communities and their existence, and yet they are trying to maintain their intra-ethnic relationship across such a lethal border through different means. Furthermore, the study tried to add some information on the Dalus who are among many lesser-known communities that are surviving as a minority within minority communities with distinct identity.

NOTES

- ¹ According to Census India 2011, in West Garo Hills, the total population of Garos and Koches are 9,04,022 and 29,640 respectively.
- ² A young unmarried boy of appropriate age, if wants to marry, with due permission pours water on the head of his chosen girl in the village, is automatically declared by the village elders as married couple from the very incident.
- ³ It is regarded as an emergency marriage system, when any of the parent of the girl or of the boy who wants to marry are sick or in any other emergency situation, the village people arrange the *Dekra Biya* system, by simply declaring the boy and the girl as husband and wife from the day onwards of the permission granted by the sick parent. In this kind of situation no rituals for the marriage takes place.
- ⁴ In this marriage system, nine married women together light nine candles under a Banana plant, where the bride and the groom are made to seat together. Those nine women chant prayers for the bride and the groom and finally announce them as husband and wife and from that day onwards they are allowed to stay together.
- ⁵ *Kereng-buri* and *Pother Khauri* are the ancient deities of Dalus, they are worshipped at the diver-

- gent of three- roads, Dalus Construct the idols of a tiger and a pigeon and sacrifice a young female goat to remove sickness from the young children. *Bastou* is the ancient deities, the goddess of death. They worship in the last part of Autumn season. *Hoila-Moila* is practiced at the child birth. They clean the new born baby with flowers, rice power, etc. and chant prayers.
- Sainya-batta* is the clan Deity, Goddess of Snake, not all the clan follow this ritual. In this religious practice, the Dalus construct a small tomb like structure and sacrifice ducks. It is done in the last part of monsoon season.
- Gaur-Nitai* (*Gaur* means 'golden one' and *Nitai* being a shortened form of Nityananda). According to Gaudiya-Vaishnava tradition Nityananda is an incarnation of *Balarama*, with Chaitanya being his eternal brother and friend, *Krishna*.
- Interview with the Gaon Burha of Dalu, India, 19 August 2019.
- Interview with the Gaon Burha of Dalupara, India, 24 August 2019.
- Interview with the Officials of Garo Hills Autonomous District Council, Tura, India, 20 August 2019.
- Interview with the General Secretary of Meghalaya Dalu Association, Meghalaya, India, 22 August 2019.
- Interview with the General Secretary of Dalu Mahila Samiti, Dalupara, Meghalaya, India, 23 August 2019.
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Paper received for publication in January, 2020
Paper accepted for publication in January 2020