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Mobility across Borders and Continuums of Violence: Experiences of Bangladeshi Women in Correctional Homes in Kolkata

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ABSTRACT

The trajectory of violence in the lives of women engaging in transborder mobility can be plotted along a continuum where the border becomes one moment and site of violence in a series of violent experiences. Being masculinised and militarised the border becomes the breeding ground for gender-based violence. In this context, the paper discusses the experiences of violence in the lives of Bangladeshi women in Correctional Homes in Kolkata. Their narratives suggest that perpetrators and sites of violence change but the Indo-Bangladesh border remains central to their experiences of violence. This paper focuses on the violence experienced by these women before crossing the border, while crossing the border to come to India, during their stay in India and while returning to Bangladesh; coupled with emotions of fear, anxiety and shame. Their experiences of violence need to be seen in the context of their non-normative ways of being – their challenge to the norms instituted for women by the family, state and society. Their so-called deviations from normative modes of behaviour put them in situations of extreme vulnerability.

KEYWORDS: gender-based violence, border studies, mobility

Introduction

> At the dawn of 7 January 2011, fifteen-year-old Felani Khatun was shot while she was climbing over the barbed wire fence at the border in the vicinity of Choudhuryhat (in the Coochbehar district, India) and Phulbari (in the Kurigram district, Bangladesh). Her father was taking her back to Bangladesh to get married. Felani's father crossed over the barbed wire fence but Felani's clothes got stuck in the fence and she shrieked. Hearing her scream, the Border Security Force (BSF) fired at her. Her body was hanging upside down from the fence and was handed over to the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB), the BSF, after thirty hours had passed (Ramachandran 2011).
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> Khukuli Khatun was an eighteen-year student of class X of Hadapara Rangiarpota High School. She was the only girl studying in her village Hatkhola of Chapra Block in Nadia District of West Bengal. All the other girls of her age in her village had dropped out from formal education. On 20 November 2008 she had an argument with a BSF jawan (soldier) M. Silva Kumar of the 42nd Battalion, and she was shot at point blank range by the jawan. The bullet tore through her stomach and back. According to Khukuli's dying statement, the jawan was inebriated and had tried to molest her, which led to a scuffle and resulted the shooting. Upon hearing the gunshot, her family members and other villagers rushed to rescue her. The killer and two of his fellow jawans threatened the mob, saying they would fire again if anyone dared to rescue injured Khukuli. Subsequently, the killer and his accomplices escaped on their bicycles, their guns still pointed at the mob (Jonaki 2009).

The two killings described above are illustrative of a myriad of cases that go unreported and unnoticed in the region of Kolkata. These are not simply cases of conflict between the BSF and the local community, but rather are symbolic of the anxieties of threatened states that have entrusted its security in the hands of uniformed armed men. Khukuli challenged the violence perpetuated and condoned within this patriarchal structure, and was ultimately killed in the process. Felani dared to trespass the border between the two nations, which left her dead body hung over the barbed wire, symbolically representing the victory of sovereignty over this alleged transgression.[i] The case of Felani was framed to suggest that those protecting the border were trying to prevent instances of illicit entry of people or goods into the sovereign state,

suggesting they were simply carrying out their duty. Violence is therefore justified in the interest of the sovereignty of the state. Such instances of violence must be viewed in the context of the challenges they pose to the nexus of state and patriarchy. Their perceived challenges to these structures put both Felani and Khukuli in vulnerable situations. Here, it cost them their lives.

Women's bodies are symbolically projected to represent the boundaries of the nation, in addition to being viewed as reproducers of the nation. Ironically, women who are seen as markers of the territorial space of the nation are also considered to be the property of the nation; property that needs defence and protection by the patriotic sons (Mostov 1995). While the patriotic sons are expected to protect their mothers, wives and daughters, they may deem it right to invade feminine spaces of another nation if it restricts their sovereignty in any manner. This relationship between women and the nation is underlined by the danger of exclusion and the pressures to conform to national cultures and values. They are seen as the bearers of cultural values by virtue of being the markers, bearers and reproducers of the nation. Therefore, mobility of women across borders is often a highly contested issue, because they are perceived as not only transgressing the political nation, which they seemingly embody and represent, but also social norms and codes of conduct. Through their mobility, women challenge the notion of rootedness. They challenge the androcentric notion of settlement, guided and established by the male breadwinner, by moving back and forth across the border and by pursuing their aspirations and desires through this mobility. As a result, both state and non-state actors inflict violence on these mobile women.

The trajectory of violence in the lives of women engaging in cross-border mobility can be plotted along a continuum where the border becomes a site of violence in a series of violent experiences. In this context, this paper will discuss the experiences of violence in the lives of Bangladeshi women in Correctional Homes in Kolkata. It will focus on the violence experienced by these women before crossing the border, whilst crossing the border to come to India, during their stay in India, and while returning to Bangladesh. It will also focus on their emotions of fear, anxiety and shame, and the ways in which they navigate through this situation. Through this lens, this paper seeks to portray how, in our survival as citizens, we become complicit in the survival of violence in their lives. Further, through the narratives of the research participants, it will suggest an alternative to the violence of survival.

Conceptualising Violence

This paper looks at violence in two ways. First, as violence, which is inherent in the androcentric statist ideology of exclusion, and second, as violence, which is manifested through the normative practices of the family, state and society. These two understandings are not mutually exclusive but are closely tied to each other. The modern state is a gendered state with power and security as its cornerstones (Mohsin 2004). Gender inequality is inherent in the security ideology and practices of a militarised state and society. Banerjee and Basu Ray Chaudhury (2011: xvii) observe, the border is a "site where this contest over inclusion and exclusion is played out every day" which in turn "becomes a zone of endemic violence where masculinity is privileged." Moreover, the state is based on an exclusionary model, where the border separates the citizens from the foreigners. The border, therefore, becomes a symbolic axis between us and them, insider and outsider, here and there, citizen and foreigner. It is also representative of a power relationship that is intrinsically patriarchal. For its survival, it is important for the modern state to maintain boundaries of "us and them" and constitute processes of 'othering' through hegemonic practises of exclusion. Border control becomes central to this ideology. Pickering and Cochrane (2012: 29) point out, "border control is understood to comprise highly selective and complex performances of state power staged at multiple locations through technologies of selection, detention, deterrence, expulsion and pre-emption, involving a range of state and non-state actors." Hegemonic practices of 'othering' coupled with technologies of border control create situations of vulnerability for the most marginalized groups. The citizens become complicit in the violence which ensues as a result of this border control, for it is in the name of their protection that these systems of control are initiated. Anup Dhar (2004: 64) succinctly explains this idea:

> A more complicated understanding of the binaries Us/Them would entail an appreciation of the complicity of Us, even if implicit, in structures of violence closest to home. Maybe, not overt acts of violence. But complicity in the somewhat covert flow of violence, the silent, almost surreptitious survival of violence, violence sustained in the 'rule of order', violence sustained in everyday life, which in other words, is the everyday life of violence—violence in family, home, workplace, school—violence in the individual, in peers, in groups—in communities, in institutions—in the state, judiciary, army—violence in our very survival.

Violence, given that it is inherent in and perceived as necessary for our very survival, attains a certain kind of legitimacy and hence is considered normal and necessary. Several institutions work together for the survival of the 'us' against 'them'. To ensure this, the family and society work as close aides of the state. The family, the 'community,' the market and the state constitute a pervasive and interactive system for legitimising violence (Mathur 2004: 53). Consequently, violence is weaved through the everyday life of 'us' and 'them'. As Kannabiran (2005: 3) aptly points out, "It is within the realm of the normal, the routine, that violence against women is deeply embedded, and it is because the greatest part of violence against women is the violence of normal times that it carries with it the guarantee of impunity, irrespective of penal, punitive or constitutional safeguards. Sudden conflagrations of violence, that is these seemingly inexplicable upsurges, must then be understood in the context of this steady, ever present violence of normal times." This nuanced understanding of violence explains the brutal killings of Felani and Khukuli. As mentioned earlier, these killings require to be seen through the anxieties of the state and the way cultures of violence are woven through everyday practices, which are extremely gendered. The experiences of women and men who engage in extra-legal cross border movements are significantly different (Pickering 2011: 1).

Experiences of violence faced by women at the borders are significantly marked by sexual violence. Women's bodies are perceived as overtly sexualised and easily available. Kannabiran (2005: 4) points out that "Sexual terrorism is always part of larger political projects that hinge on the absolute appropriation of women's bodies." Violence therefore becomes both a stimulus as well as deterrent to mobility. Experiences of violence from the time women are born create situations, which necessitate their movement from one place to another, in order to look for a safer environment. Violence in various forms at the border constitutes a moment in this continuum of violence, which they are constantly trying to escape. Their survival from violence becomes linked to the citizen's survival and the latter's complicity in the survival of violence.

Violence inflicted on women may not be at the border as a physical, geographical site, but is induced by its exclusionary and inherently violent nature. Border crossing neither begins nor ends with the extra-legal crossing of a territorial border (Pickering 2011). It is not merely political or geographical space but ramifies itself into a normative socio-cultural space. What kind of subjectivities does the border create? How does it further marginalise women and create

situations of vulnerability? In turn, how do women subvert these situations of vulnerability and create safe spaces for themselves? These are some of the questions that this paper will navigate and attempt to answer.

Indo-Bangladesh Border and Violence

India has been increasingly focused on militarized and violent border control practices along the country's eastern border with Bangladesh. Large expenditures are being made towards increasing the number of troops, fencing the border, and establishing technologies of control and surveillance (Press Trust of India 2013, I.A.N 2014). The arbitrary and ruthless nature of border killings and arrests have been on the rise (Mittal 2011), indicating the anxiety of the Indian state to maintain its sovereignty and protect it from 'illegal' intrusions, which are often associated with terrorism. The idea of stringent border laws may also be linked to the idea of nationalism. Ranabir Sammadar (1999: 29) has pointed out that the idea of nationalism as practiced by South Asian states is reflexive. India defines its nationalism with reference to Pakistan, and Bangladesh defines its nationalism with reference to Pakistan and India. The emergence of borders in South Asia, with its roots in colonialism, is a result of the formation of independent states, which has made migration appear as an acute and illegal problem. In another context, Sen (2003) questions the use of the term 'illegal aliens' in India and its usage in the current context of South Asian nation states. According to him, "The real reasons why people are being pushed back and forth between India and Bangladesh today, with barely an audible word of protest, have to do with our fundamentally warped conception of Indian citizenship, and our fatally colonised sense of ourselves, our states and our societies" (Sen 2003: 612). He places his argument in the context of the drama that ensued at the Satgachi border in early 2003, when around 200 snake charmers and their children from Bangladesh were rounded up and driven back. Sen (2003: 611) was astounded at the meagre response of the Indian society in the face of what he considers a grotesque violation of human rights. He adds that the possession (and non-possession) of passports and visas cannot be the basis of citizenship in countries like India, Bangladesh and Pakistan because very few people possess them. For most South Asians, the concept of an identity does not end at the border, and Sen believes it need not be constantly validated by state issued official documents. The privilege of an identity based on official documents and validated by the state belongs to a limited section of the Indian population.

There have been innumerable instances of ruthless border killings by Indian border forces of unarmed local residents assumed to be infiltrators (Human Rights Watch 2010: 5). It has been estimated that approximately 1,000 people have been killed by the BSF over a period of 10 years.[ii] There have been no prosecutions for such killings. A detailed account of the violence that exists along the 2000 km long border that Bangladesh shares with West Bengal can be found in "'Trigger Happy': Excessive Use of Force by Indian Troops at the Bangladesh Border," an 81-page report published by Human Rights Watch (2010). The civilian population on both sides pay the price of the indiscriminate use of brute force by India's border guards. The same report mentions that during an official visit to Bangladesh in September 2010, Raman Srivastava, Director General of the BSF, responded to Bangladesh's complaints that the BSF were killing "innocent, unarmed" Bangladeshi civilians by saying: "We fire at criminals who violate the border norms. The deaths have occurred in Indian Territory and mostly during night, so how can they be innocent?" Such responses and these killings have further jeopardized Indo-Bangladesh relations, apart from taking a toll on the everyday lives of people who live at the border and those who have lost family members because of indiscriminate use of force by the border security force. On one hand, there are increased modes of surveillance and control, and on the other, provisions are made to enable easy access to the other side of the border. For instance, gates are provided through the fencing to facilitate access of villagers to their lands beyond the fences. The fields without fencing are often misunderstood by children, especially young boys, as an extended playground, who are then caught by BSF and handed over to the judiciary for trial under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2000 (Sanjog 2011: 30). It is thus evident that the Indian state itself has to make certain provisions to accommodate the needs of the people who stay in and around this not-so-strategically designed border.

The paranoia around fencing and border killing brings forth the insecurities of India about its borders. The inclusion-exclusion context of borders, also perceived along all properly secured international borders, is further apparent in the incarceration of those who enter India 'illegally' without valid documents. Agents who facilitate the process of crossing the border illegally often smuggle these people in (Paul and Hasnath 2000: 268-276). Often, these smugglers also play the role of a trafficker. There is an array of well-networked agents in India and Bangladesh. There are recruiters, travel agents, brokers etc. who constitute an entire

'industry' which thrives on the 'illegal' flow of people from one side of the border to another (Paul and Hasnath 2000: 268-276). It is therefore difficult to determine who has been smuggled and who has been trafficked. Women and children who are identified as being trafficked are sent to government-run shelter homes under S17(4) of The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956.Those who are identified as migrants without legal documents are processed under the criminal justice system and are either imprisoned under S14 of the Foreigners Act 1946, or provisions of the Passports Act 1967. Although a number of Bangladeshis in India are also arrested under the Passports Act of 1967,[iii] this paper will focus on the Foreigners Act as it is relevant to the research participants incarcerated in two correctional homes in Kolkata, who are the subjects of the present study. According to the Foreigners Act, a 'foreigner' is a person who is not a citizen of India.[iv] This definition fits very well into the two-valued logic of modernism, which describes a phenomenon in terms of distinct categories. The category of 'citizen' defines the framework for exclusion of a person who is a 'non citizen'. Every foreigner is a 'non citizen.' Such categorization, however, often proves to be very complex in the everyday lives of the 'non citizens.'

Narratives of Violence

Bangladeshi women in Correctional Homes in Kolkata, the participants of my doctoral research, crossed the border and came to India either to escape multiple situations of vulnerability, to search for a livelihood, or to pursue their aspirations of a better life. Under various circumstances they were arrested by the police in India under S14 the Foreigners Act 1946 for entering the country without valid documents. Section 14 states that a person arrested under this Act could be sentenced for imprisonment up to five years and is also liable to pay a fine. The research participants, who were in the average age group of 18-22 years, were generally imprisoned for two years in addition to paying a fine.

A number of the participants had worked as child labourers and were married in their early teens. Some had experienced violence in their marital lives, and many of their husbands had either deserted them or married another woman. For most of these women, initially crossing the border was a matter of moving from a vulnerable and violent situation in the hope of finding a better space for themselves. Rina, who was 21 years old, had divorced her husband because he was addicted to drugs and moreover, she had not consented to the marriage. She said, "My

parents married me off when I was really young…I didn't want to get married…but didn't have the courage to say this in front of my mother…this is why I am still upset with my parents…I try to stay aloof from everyone. So I decided to come to India for sometime…also because I needed money to raise my child."

The majority of the research participants stated that their relationship with their husband had been severed because he either deserted them and remarried, was violent, or they themselves chose to walk out of their marriages as their family members had forced them into it. The issue of domestic violence, severing of relationships and the subsequent deepening of economic crisis has necessitated mobility for the research participants. Any hope of a better life was promptly embraced. This opportunity often presented itself in the form of traffickers, who promised jobs in another city in Bangladesh or India. Women who started working in a garment factory in Dhaka or other cities in Bangladesh reckoned a certain Pia as their co-worker and confidante who put forth the possibility of going to India. The spectre of Pia[v] seemed to be present in a number of narratives of the research participants who had been trafficked. Pia seemed to be the principal organiser of the journey that they would make to India. Thereafter, a number of her associates guided the research participants to various destinations in India. It was much later that the latter realised they had been sold to brothel owners. The garments' factories in Bangladesh, which are often seen as the way to empowerment of women proved to be the source site of violence. Further, Siddiqi (2000: L-16) points out that by entering the public space of work, as per the acceptable social norms of behavior, they had already exposed themselves to the dangers of sexual vulnerability and thereby put themselves at the risk of losing the honor embodied in their reputation. Safina, a 21-year-old unmarried girl said:

> I went to Dhaka and started working in the garments business, I earned some money…sent some of it home and spent some as well…there were a lot of problems at home and I tried to sort them out…I got into a lot of trouble…this friend of mine, I know her well, I was very fond of her, she told me Safina it is very difficult here, come with me…I asked her where, she said somewhere else where we would be paid a lot of money…I asked what kind of work I would have to do and she said never mind the work, just come with me…she asked me if I trusted her and I said all right, and then I got everything ready and came to the border with her and she brought me here and made me wait at the Sealdah station and made some money arrangements with this man who

was there…and then there was this man who asked me my name…I told him my name…and he told me that I'm in a lot of trouble…I asked him what it was…and he told me that I had been sold off…I asked him how he found out…he said that he was one of them, said that he didn't want my life to be ruined…I escaped after I heard him say those things…they started looking for me…I arrived at a police station, I surrendered myself.

At the time of this journey some of the women realised the ploy that the traffickers were using and tried to escape.[vi] Nargis, a twenty-two-year old widow who had been in a shelter home in Kolkata for two years and then in a correctional home for two years said:

I knew there was something wrong…when I was sitting in the train with this dalal (agent) he was being very nice to me…He offered me an apple…I could sense that there was something behind his apparent good behaviour so I told him I want to go back…He then told me that once someone gets on this path they do not return…I tremble even when I think of him now…Didi why did he say that one cannot return…is it true?

Unlike Nargis, many women who managed to escape the clutches of the traffickers found themselves to be further victimised by the Border Security Forces. Twenty-year-old Reshmi said:

The BSF caught me…kept me in their camp for a night…they kicked me in my stomach. I fell unconscious after that. I had to be admitted to the hospital. It's been two years and three months…some parts of my body still ache because of the rape and beating from the BSF…they wronged me, raped me and tortured me.

Though the perpetrators of violence were changing, violence itself continued to have a looming presence in the lives of the research participants. The narratives of Safina, Nargis and Reshmi indicate the centrality of the border in their experiences of violence.

On their arrival in Kolkata, most of them were either arrested from the railway station or found themselves in confined rooms of a brothel. A number of research participants approached or were approached by NGO workers at the railway stations, and they were often caught by the police at the station crying because they did not know where to go from there. There were only a few who reached their destination to work as domestic help, and they were later arrested from various locations. For those who found themselves in a brothel, it took several days to come to terms with this reality before many succumbed to the exploitation. Instances of abuse by the

brothel owner, police, and the customers was a routine affair. Khushi, a 17-year-old girl who was first trafficked within Bangladesh for organ trade and then after a few years to Pune, India for use in the sex trade, said:

> The police raped me…they raped me in the room in which I was staying in the brothel…this was a year after I arrived at the brothel…we used to be locked up in the rooms and were not allowed to go out…I cried and asked aunty (brothel owner) why she did this with all the girls…and then I got beaten up very badly.

Though over a period of time they learned to bargain for themselves in the brothel and resist the physical and sexual abuse, they still did not have access to the money that they earned. They would call their family members telling them that they were working in a garment factory in Dhaka. They knew that if their family members found out that they were working in a brothel, they would face humiliation and insult. They worried about the psychological and physical violence they would have to face if their families found out that they were working in a brothel. Contact with their families was difficult, if not terminated completely, once they were arrested and later imprisoned.

Some of the research participants such as Shamoli Khatoon, who refused to succumb to the exploitation, were arrested from the brothel itself, while others were arrested whilst trying to escape. Shamoli said:

> They sold me for 60,000…they took me to a brothel…the women there told me that they will not give me any money but I could stay there…they wanted to keep me to make me do kharab kaaj (immoral work)…I begged them and told them that I will not do any kharab kaaj…in the evening around 5 they got me arrested.

Violence was to follow both in the prison as well as the courtroom and various other institutions of the criminal justice system. Bangladeshi women are often taunted in prison for leaving their country and coming to India only to add to the prison population. They are perceived as sexually aggressive and violent in comparison to the Indian woman who do not pose as many administrative challenges. The Bangladeshi women were unable to meet their family members because they feared arrest and did not come to meet them in the prison. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, many of their family members were not aware that they were even in prison. In addition, there were multiple hierarchies between the women prisoners. The Bangladeshi women occupied the lowest level in this hierarchy. They would often perform

chores for the Indian women who would then provide them with some benefits in the form of clothes, extra food or cosmetics. There were women who were labelled as 'pagol'[vii] who were at the receiving end of violent behaviour both from the warders as well as the other inmates. They often had few friends and did not get adequate medical attention. With each passing day their depression became more acute. One of the participants told me about a woman who would often get hysterical in the cell, and all the others would be scared of her and move to one side. Some would try to wrestle with her 'to get her back to her senses'. Women who were labelled as 'pagol', meaning mentally unstable, often faced a lot of moral policing from the other inmates. For instance, I quote an observation from my field notes:

> When Nargis came out of the cell she did not have an orna (stole). Just then all the girls started shouting 'aye aye tor orna ta kothay' (hey, where is your stole). Nargis ran out of the cell covering her chest with her arms and said that it was hanging outside to dry. She went to the clothesline outside the cell and put the orna around her (18 May 2011).

Bangladeshi women would engage in moral policing of each other so that they could uphold the image of a 'good' Bangladeshi woman in India. While they thought that it was important to question the prison administration, they thought it to be equally important to project the image of a moral Bangladeshi woman to preserve the maan sanmaan (honour) of their desh.[viii] Despite all their efforts, the prison administration often piled a number of abuses on them. I quote again an instance from my field notes:

> These Bangladeshis are like beggars. They only know how to fight and abuse each other. These are very dangerous women," said the warder to the male guard responsible for the female ward and the latter started laughing. The latter took a look at the jackfruit tree and asked the warder if they cook and eat that. The warder said no they didn't because who would pluck them from the tree. The male guard replied, "Why don't you tell these Bangladeshis girls to do it. I am sure they are adept at climbing tree. Anyways they are so uncivilised (18 May 2011).

Such perceptions often added to the struggles of the research participants who tried to reconcile with the complete absence of contact with the outside world. But the male guards of the prison, responsible for chaperoning the female inmates to the hospital or interview room, often made use of the walks to have flirtatious conversations. The relationship between the male guards and the female inmates was a complex one, where the women depended on them for

some material benefits or news from outside whilst simultaneously being at the receiving end of their abuses.

As the day of their release drew closer the anxiety of the research participants increased exponentially. They were anxious about the process through which they would be sent back and the time that this process would involve. Their anxiety over the date of deportation increased with each passing day. Often, their sentence completion date and their date of deportation were not the same. They would have to wait in prison, sometimes for months on end, until the paperwork was completed and the prison staff received orders to hand them over to police escorts. They were handed over to the BSF at the border, and then to the Bangladesh Border Guards on the other side of the border.[ix] This delay contributed to the tenuous relationship between the state and these women. It was this institutional form of violence, so well-choreographed with the exclusionist idea of the state, that the women found most difficult to grapple with. The Bangladeshi women, without legal documents, were not allowed to step foot on Indian soil outside the prison. The prison staff therefore could not release them from prison until they received their orders of deportation. The orders for deportation involved a number of agencies; one of which was the Deputy High Commission of Bangladesh in Kolkata. The delay in orders for deportation often took place because of the tension between the unwillingness (and sometimes inability) of the Deputy High Commission of Bangladesh to identify these women as citizens of their country, and the insistence of the Indian state that their identity was Bangladeshi. This often happened because the women gave incorrect names and addresses at the time of their case registration. They did this because they feared that if their family members were contacted, they (the family) would find out that the women were in prison or that prior to being in prison they were involved in sex work.[x] Some of them had not told their families that they had come to India. In the process of trying to protect their own honour and that of their families, they often gave an incorrect address without realising the impact it would have on their release and the process of being sent back. This is not to suggest that the delay in deportation was due to the fault of these women; one cannot deny the politics between the two countries with regard to migration and illegal immigration, which has peppered their relations from 1947.

In the period in between their release and deportation, these prisoners are referred to as jaankhalash, or ‘released prisoners.’ The research participants said that jaankhalash meant that they were living in prison like a ‘free public’, but ironically, jaankhalash means ‘the end of life.’

It could signify that their life as a prisoner had ended. At another level, it could imply that so far, by virtue of being in prison, they had the definitive status of being a Bangladeshi, but the moment when they finish serving their sentence, their identity became ambiguous. They are neither Bangladeshi nor Indian. This throws light on the liminal existence that they had whilst in prison as a jaankhalash, while their identity as a Bangladeshi was being established.

There was significant antagonism that prevailed in the prison for many reasons, including the constant fight for space and resources. However, there were also times when the women came together for a common cause. Often, the common cause that united the Bangladeshi women was protesting delays in releases. They would come together in large numbers to protest, which they viewed as a laxity and unwillingness to work on the part of the prison staff. Some of the women who had entered the prison prior to 2009 said that there was a time when more than 500 women used to stay in a space created for about 100 of them, many among these were jaankhalash. It was only after an incident when women jumped the walls of their ward and threatened to harm the prison staff with stones and bricks that immediate steps were taken that hastened their deportation. They often went on hunger strikes demanding their release once they had served their respective prison terms. The Bangladeshi women observed that a show of aggression on their part could bring about a change in the situation. This presumptively gave them an incentive to continue their acts of resistance in order to finally achieve the 'freedom' for which they had initially decided to leave their homes.

Prior to returning home there was another hurdle they had to cross with regard to 'protecting' their maan sanmaan (honour): the Border Security Force. There were several rumours, stories, and information about the BSF raping and torturing Bangladeshi women before they were finally asked to run to the other side of the border to Bangladesh. Due to a lack of a formal process of handover, the Bangladeshi prisoners are often taken to the border in the middle of the night and asked to run across to the other side in Bangladesh. The research participants heard some of these stories from the prison staff or police who had accompanied the released Bangladeshi women to the border, or through communication with women who had been released and had returned to India only to be imprisoned again. They had heard that the BSF often forced sexual favours from women before letting them go back to Bangladesh. In initial conversations, the research participants were often extremely anxious about being raped on their way back, as this would imply losing what little honour they had left. However, their

narratives with regard to sexual favours for the BSF shifted over time. Gradually, they began laughing and joking about it saying how a few minutes of sex would ultimately lead to their much desired freedom. This can be analysed at two levels: first, that with time their trust in the researcher became stronger and they felt safe to say what they felt without the fear of being judged, and second, they had begun to understand the inevitability of the process of going back which involved an exploitative interaction with the BSF. These narratives need to be seen in the context of systemic oppression faced by the research participants. Women's security in India and Bangladesh is jeopardized, threatened and their lives and dignity are at great risk at a daily basis from the likelihood of sexual assault and domestic violence in public and private spaces. This threat diminishes women's capacity and ability to exercise their fundamental freedoms. Their vulnerability tends to increase in a place that is unfamiliar to them. In such places it becomes important to preserve one's own integrity as well as reinvent oneself to take charge of the new conditions of survival.

An important development in the research process was a shift in their narratives from 'violence' to 'love.' As a feminist researcher, I went to the prison to understand the women's experiences of violence through their narratives, but they preferred to talk about their experiences of love in the prison. They challenged the researcher's intentions to hear their stories of violence and established through their narratives that it was a certain idea of love and being in love in prison that helped them go through their everyday life. They tried to silence their memories of violence and did not want to think about it anymore. Thus, despite fractured relationships with their husbands and violent marriages, the women prisoners still longed for relationships. Love and intimacy in the prison was one of the ways in which these young women fulfilled roles they believed were destined for women, reassuring themselves of their identity as women, and simultaneously expressing their desires in a voice they had suppressed in circumstances of forced and unhappy, violent marriages (Mehta 2014a). The research participants were often in love with male and/or female prisoners. They devised ingenious ways to meet their 'lovers,' particularly if they were in the men's ward. The interview room in the prison, the waiting room at the courts, the police van which carried them to the court, and celebrations of some festivals became spaces and occasions where the research participants would use to exchange glances or a few words with the person they desired. Often, letters were also exchanged between the prisoners. Looks and smiles were sometimes all that two prisoners exchanged during their entire 'relationship.'

But the research participants expressed that having a love interest gave them a sense of security and a feeling that someone in the same enclosed space cared for them or thought about them. It is important to specify here that this shift in the narrative, from violence to love, happened soon after there was a change in the space where the interviews took place. The interviews and my meeting with the Bangladeshi women originally took place in a large damp school room decorated with wall hangings made by the prisoners. The school room was no longer in use and the school teacher retired a few months after I started visiting the correctional home. After that, the warder asked me to talk to the women under a mango tree. The mango tree and its expanse, the comfort that it provided on a hot summer afternoon and the unpredictability of its contours, excited the women and gave them a sense of purpose as they waited for a mango to fall (Mehta 2014b). The space of the mango tree and their stories of love weaved into each other. The romance of the mango tree caught on fast with the love that they claimed to have for another fellow prisoner/s. The concrete space of the mango tree and the abstract concept of love provided them with a reason to survive, to mark out a language of survival which was not based on violence but a certain sort of hope. A discussion about resistance should not lose focus of the materiality of the violence and injustice these women faced in their day-to-day lives (Mehta 2014a). Their narratives suggest that perpetrators and sites of violence change, but violence persists in their life in a continuum, with the Indo-Bangladesh border as central to their experiences of violence. This discussion should not in any way be misconstrued as an exercise in romanticizing the experiences of these women or belittling the depth of the love they feel. It requires to be seen as a way of survival against all odds; a way in which they suggest that their spirit is indomitable.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen how violence permeates the life of the research participants. The survival of violence is linked with the survival of the traffickers, brothel owners, warders, prison administration, and the BSF. Each of these stakeholders violate the bodies of the research participants not only physically and/or emotionally, but also by their existence in the system against undocumented cross-border mobility. Along with them, the citizens also become complicit in this survival of violence. The brutal killings of Felani and Khukuli are not single-handed offences committed by some errant BSF personnel. It is a manifestation of a system that

breeds on violence for its survival. It is a culmination of the continuum of violence that the research participants throw light on through their narratives. It is through these brutal killings that the violence of their everyday lives, so neatly woven into institutions and practices, comes to the forefront to jolt the individual conscience.

This paper does not seek to suggest that there is a seamless flow of violence in the lives of these women, which then seamlessly transpires into narratives of love. While I see their experiences at the border as a moment in a series of violent incidents, I understand that different forms of violence situate each individual woman's experience differently. However, my intention is not to hierarchize that violence and experience. The research participants' experiences of violence need to be seen in the context of their perceived threat to the norms instituted for women by the family, state and society. These norms may be historically or territorially located in the social, legal and political relations and structures in India and Bangladesh. Their narratives highlight the specific ways in which the research participants interacted with the various social and institutional borders and boundaries that they were confronted with. Their perceived deviations from normative modes of behaviour put them in situations of extreme vulnerability, as it was perceived to challenge the nexus of state and patriarchy, premised on the control of female mobility and, through it, her sexuality. Through these experiences of marginality and violence, the research participants showed grit and determination to survive, to take control of their lives, and to move forward. The shift in their narratives from violence to love involved a series of negotiations to exercise an agency, both with the instruments of the state as well as the researcher. Through this shift, the research participants suggest an alternative to the violence of survival by adopting love as their premise for survival. While their experience is embedded in the violence of survival, through their voice they propose a love of survival as a mode of survival.

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Notes

[i] According to the Memorandum of Understanding and related treaties signed between India and Bangladesh, if citizens of the two countries illegally cross the border, it is considered trespass, and by law, those persons should be handed over to the civilian authority. However, we have repeatedly noticed that India has been violating treaties, shooting at anyone seen near the border or anyone trying to cross the border, which is a clear violation of international law and human rights. See more at: http://odhikar.org/violations-in-the-border-area/#sthash.4GRsyqwr.dpuf

[ii] Refer to http://kashmirwatch.com/opinions.php/2014/05/21/india-suppresses-bangladesh-on-teesta-river-issue.html;
http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/libertycentral/2011/jan/23/india-bangladesh-border-shoot-to-kill-policy

[iii]Under the Passports Act, 1967, offences and penalties are enumerated as follows:
"a) contravenes the provision of section 3, b) knowingly furnishes any false information or suppresses any material information with a view to obtaining a passport or travel document under this Act or without lawful authority alters or attempts or alter or causes to alter the entries made in a passport or travel document; or, c) fails to produce for inspection his passport or travel document (whether issued under this Act or not) when called upon to do so by the prescribed authority; or, d) knowingly uses a passport or travel document issued to another person; or, e) knowingly allows another person to use a passport or travel document issued to him shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to (two years or fine which may extend to five thousand rupees) or with both."

[iv]Section 14 A (b) of the Foreigners (Amendment) Act 1946, reads as "Penalty for entry in restricted areas, etc.-Whoever- (b) enters into or stays in any area in India without the valid documents required for such entry or for such stay, as the case may be, under the provisions of any order made under this Act or any direction given in pursuance thereof, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which shall not be less than two years, but may extend to eight years and shall also be liable to fine which shall not be less than ten thousand rupees but may extend to fifty thousand rupees; and if he has entered into a bond in pursuance of clause (f) of sub-section (2) of section 3, his bond shall be forfeited, and any person bound thereby shall pay the penalty thereof, or show cause to the satisfaction of the convicting Court why such penalty should not be paid by him".

[v]I refer to the '*spectre* of Pia' as one is not sure if the same woman had trafficked all the women who mentioned her name or different traffickers used Pia as a name to conceal their identity. Also, irrespective of the name of the trafficker, their presence in the lives of these women loomed large and seemed to be omnipresent, and Pia becomes almost like a *spectre* for them.

[vi]It is difficult to fathom why an associate of Safina's trafficker would facilitate her escape. This may have been due to the differences between the chain of traffickers.

[vii]*Pagol* literally translates as 'mad', implying mentally ill.

[viii]*Desh* may have multiple meanings. It may be used to refer to a country, a land, a state; motherland, native land.

[ix]The Ministry of External Affairs, India, has mandated the respective Foreign Nationals and Non Resident Indians (FN/NRI) Departments in different states, permission to carry out the process of sending the Bangladeshis back to their country. The prison authorities in West Bengal are supposed to send the list of Bangladeshis in their custody to the FN/NRI Department in West Bengal that in turn is to send the list to the Deputy High Commission of Bangladesh in

Kolkata. The latter is to send the list of names to the respective police stations in Bangladesh. The police are entrusted with the responsibility of verifying the names and sending the list back to the Deputy High Commission of Bangladesh, who in turn is supposed to send it to the FN/NRI Department. The latter sends orders to the prison authorities to repatriate the Bangladeshi prisoners following the due processes. (The details of this process have been gathered through interactions with bureaucrats at both the regional and national level. The researcher did not find any official document mentioning the same and have stated the process based on the narration by different people. A number of bureaucrats reported that often the Bangladesh High Commission accepted, for instance, 2 of 100 people on the list, as Bangladeshi. This is what caused the delay. It is probably because of a lack of coordination and cooperation between the two states that the process of push back is carried out as opposed to repatriation or deportation. Yet again, the researcher does not have any evidence to corroborate this.)

[x] There seemed to be a dichotomy in wanting to hear from their families and the shame and fear of contact with their families. There is a push and pull factor here between psychological yearning and practical reality. Also, they were not sure how the prison staff or the police doing the verification in their village would represent their lives in India. If they themselves contacted their families they could have control over how their experiences were represented.