



Livelihood and Precarity in Bengal Borderlands: Security and Everyday Survival in Murshidabad

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Abstract

Borderlands are not merely lines on maps but lived spaces marked by overlapping sovereignties, regulatory regimes, and competing notions of security. For communities inhabiting these margins, livelihood is deeply shaped by border governance, militarization, and exclusionary development policies. While borderlands are often imagined as spaces of threat and infiltration but they are simultaneously spaces of vibrant economic activity, cross-cultural exchange, and resilience. This article explores the precarious conditions under which borderland populations secure their livelihoods, with the focus on South Asia, and highlights how state security priorities often marginalized human security. It argues that instability is not incidental but structurally produced by the intersection of borders, state practices, and global political economy.

Keywords: Murshidabad, Bengal Borderland, Border Security Force (BSF), livelihood, sovereignty, precarity, informal economy, migration, fencing, citizenship.

Introduction

The Bengal borderland, stretching across North Bengal districts such as Murshidabad, Nadia, and Cooch-Bihar, is a space where daily life is lived under the shadow of fences, patrols, and constant insecurity. Borders are usually imagined as clear lines that defend the sovereignty of the state, but for those who live on the edge, they are landscapes of control, fear, and constant negotiation. The India Bangladesh border in Murshidabad is a sharp example of this paradox. Here, the lives of ordinary villagers' farmers, traders, migrants, women, and children are bound up with militarization, surveillance, and an uncertain future. Willem van Schendel has argued in *The Bengal Borderland*, "borders are not simply lines drawn on maps but social spaces where the power of the state encounters the realities of everyday life."¹ This encounter produces a situation where local people cannot live freely, even though they are officially citizens of the state. Instead, they must constantly prove their loyalty, negotiate with border guards, and survive in conditions of extreme vulnerability.

The Murshidabad border is one of the longest stretches of the India-Bangladesh frontier. Villages here are often divided by barbed-wire fencing; fields are cut off from homesteads; rivers shift their course and redraw boundaries; and people are forced to live with the fear of being labelled as "illegal migrants" even when they have lived in the same place for generations. Reece Jones observes in *Violent Borders* that "borders do not stop

¹ Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*.

violence; they organize it.”² This statement holds true in Murshidabad, where the presence of the border has not ensured safety but has instead institutionalized new forms of violence and uncertainty.

This article focuses on four interconnected aspects of life in the Murshidabad borderlands: livelihood, security, precarious life, and the border economy. Each of these reveals the deep contradictions of border governance. On the one hand, the state insists that the border is essential for national security. On the other, the people living closest to it experience insecurity in every aspect of their daily existence. As Ranabir Samaddar notes in *The Marginal Nation*, “border populations are included as labour but excluded as citizens.”³ This contradiction creates a permanent state of insecurity.

Livelihood of Border Area People

For generations, agriculture has been the mainstay of life in Murshidabad. Rice, jute, and seasonal vegetables form the backbone of the rural economy. But along the border, farming is not a secure activity. The erection of fences and surveillance infrastructure has turned cultivation into a risky and uncertain practice.

Many villages in Murshidabad are cut in half by the barbed-wire fencing erected by the Border Security Force (BSF). Farmers often find that their land lies on the other side of the fence, accessible only through special passes. These passes are valid only during the daytime, which means that irrigation at night, harvesting early in the morning, or protecting crops from theft becomes impossible. As one farmer said that “The land is ours, but the time is theirs.”⁴

The BSF’s control over access to fields means that farmers must negotiate constantly. Bribes, Favors, or personal connections become necessary for doing the most basic agricultural work. Judith Butler’s idea of “precarity as a politically induced condition” applies here: insecurity is not the result of natural scarcity but the outcome of deliberate state policy.⁵ the border fence ensures that sovereignty takes precedence over farming, turning every agricultural act into a conditional privilege.

Riverine geography adds another layer of instability. Murshidabad lies along the Ganga-Padma River system, where shifting channels frequently erode farmland and displace entire villages. When land is washed away or reappears on the other side of the river, families find themselves in legal limbo. Van Schendel calls such displaced people “erased citizens,” because their place in the state disappears with the land itself.⁶ in border villages, ecological loss is inseparable from political insecurity.

The social consequences of agricultural disruption are severe. As fields become inaccessible, younger men migrate seasonally to cities like Kolkata and Delhi to work in construction or informal service jobs. Women, children, and the elderly are left behind to manage households under precarious conditions. Paula Banerjee remarks that “women in border villages carry the double burden of reproduction and survival, invisible in state records but vital in sustaining life.”⁷

Landlessness also fuels participation in informal economies. Cattle smuggling, petty cross-border trade, and casual labour in illegal networks become sources of income. But these are criminalized activities, exposing participants to violence from security forces. The line between survival and criminality is blurred, leaving borderlanders vulnerable to both poverty and punishment. Thus, the livelihood of border villagers in Murshidabad cannot be understood apart from the border itself. Farming, migration, and trade are all shaped by the militarized presence of the state. Livelihood becomes precarious because it is constantly interrupted by sovereignty.

² Reece Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move*.

³ Ranabir Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*, 12.

⁴ Sukalpa Sen, “Border People and State Policy: The India–Bangladesh Border,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2263–69.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 25.

⁶ van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland*, 98.

⁷ Paula Banerjee, *Borders, Histories, Existences: Gender and Beyond*.

Border Security in this district

The official justification for fencing and militarization is national security. The state portrays the Murshidabad border as a site of danger. A route for illegal migration, cattle smuggling, and terrorism. This discourse justifies heavy deployment of the BSF and the construction of double-layer barbed-wire fences with floodlights and watchtowers. But for local residents, security means something very different. Security for the state often produces insecurity for the people. Human Rights Watch's report *Trigger Happy* documented hundreds of killings by BSF soldiers along the India–Bangladesh border, many of them in Murshidabad.⁸ Most victims were unarmed cattle traders or farmers caught near the fence. Families of the dead rarely receive justice or compensation. Villagers live under constant surveillance. BSF patrols can stop anyone at any time, demanding identification or proof of residence. Farmers must carry identity cards even to reach their fields. Women complain of harassment during searches at checkpoints. The sense of being watched and suspected at all times creates an atmosphere of fear. Paula Banerjee observes in *Borders, Histories, Existences* that “borders regulate not only territory but also bodies.”⁹ In Murshidabad, this is visible in the way soldiers control movement, search women, and decide who is allowed to cross the fence. Sovereignty is enacted through the control of everyday life.

The discourse of national security also justifies neglect. While the state spends millions on fencing and patrols, villages near the border often lack basic facilities such as electricity, healthcare, and schools. Roads are poorly maintained, and irrigation systems are weak. Security is prioritized over development, leaving people more dependent on informal economies. The contradiction becomes clear. While the state claims to be protecting the nation, it produces insecurity for the very citizens who live at the frontier. For them, the border is not protection but a constant threat. As Jones writes, “the militarized border creates danger where none existed before.”¹⁰

Precarious Life of Borderland People

Instability in Murshidabad's border villages is not a temporary crisis but a permanent condition. It is produced by the logic of border governance itself. Judith Butler defines precarity as “a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic support.”¹¹ In Murshidabad, this condition is evident in multiple ways: militarized control of land, lack of development, ecological vulnerability, and contested citizenship. Citizenship is perhaps the most striking dimension of this precarity. Even though most villagers in Murshidabad are Indian citizens, they live under suspicion of being “Bangladeshi infiltrators.” Electoral politics in Bengal often revolve around accusations of illegal migration. Families that have lived in the region for decades must still constantly prove their identity. As Samaddar argues, “borderlands are citizens at the margins, always vulnerable to exclusion.”¹²

Women face particular forms of uncertainty. When men migrate, women take over farming and household work, but they must also negotiate with border guards. Reports of harassment, verbal abuse, and even sexual violence are common. Trafficking is another danger- the porous yet militarized border makes young women targets for traffickers who promise jobs across the frontier.¹³ Ecological fragility deepens this insecurity. Floods and erosion frequently displace families, but when they move, they risk being labelled outsiders. Relief distribution often depends on showing proper documents, which many lack. Thus, natural vulnerability becomes political vulnerability.

Border ‘Economy’

Despite all these difficulties, the border is also an economic resource. Informal cross-border trade sustains many households in Murshidabad. The most significant is the cattle trade. Cows are bought in Indian markets and

⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Trigger Happy: Excessive Use of Force by Indian Troops at the Bangladesh Border*.

⁹ Banerjee, *Borders, Histories, Existences*, 74.

¹⁰ Reece Jones, *Border Walls: Security and the War on Terror in the United States, India, and Israel*, 15.

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* 19.

¹² Samaddar, *The Marginal Nation*, 41.

¹³ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of Passage: Border Crossings, Imagined Homelands, India's East and Bangladesh*, 134.

smuggled across to Bangladesh, where beef and leather are in high demand. Though officially banned, the trade thrives because it is essential for local survival. Participation in the cattle trade is dangerous. Traders often move at night, hiding from BSF patrols. Many are beaten, detained, or even killed. Human Rights Watch recorded dozens of such deaths, often without accountability.¹⁴ Yet people continue, because the income is vital.

The cattle trade illustrates the contradictions of border governance. While declared illegal, it is often tolerated because officials themselves benefit through bribes. Akhil Gupta calls this the “grey zone” where legality and illegality blur.¹⁵ Border economies are embedded in corruption, making them simultaneously possible and precarious. Alongside cattle, smaller trades flourish: food, textiles, medicines, and household goods move across the border through petty smuggling. Women often play a major role, carrying small bundles across checkpoints. They rely on gendered stereotypes of being “non-threatening” to pass through, but this also exposes them to extortion and harassment.¹⁶ Kinship networks sustain these exchanges. Families divided by the border maintain ties, exchanging goods and support. These informal networks defy the state’s attempt to divide communities. As van Schendel notes, “borderlands are zones of connectivity as much as separation.”¹⁷ The border economy is thus both a lifeline and a trap. It provides survival but keeps participants in a state of permanent risk. For villagers in Murshidabad, to live at the border is to live in the economy of illegality, where every act of survival is also a potential crime.

Conclusion

The border of Murshidabad is not simply a line of protection; it is a landscape of precarity. Farming is disrupted by fences and river erosion. Security policies create fear rather than safety. Citizenship is always under question. Informal economies sustain life but criminalize it at the same time. This paradox is captured by Samaddar’s remark that “the marginal nation produces marginal citizens.”¹⁸ Sovereignty secures the state by making its border populations insecure. Butler’s theory of precarity helps us see this not as accident but as design: vulnerability is produced and managed as part of governance. Yet, within this precarity, people show resilience. They continue to farm, to trade, to migrate, and to resist. Their survival practices—bribing guards, crossing fences, maintaining kinship across borders—are forms of everyday resistance. As James Scott argued in *Weapons of the Weak*, even small acts of defiance carry political meaning.¹⁹ The story of Murshidabad’s border villages forces us to rethink what security means. For the state, it means fencing, patrols, and surveillance. For the people, it means freedom to farm, to move, and to live without fear. Unless border governance shifts from sovereignty alone to human security, borderlands will remain laboratories of precarity.

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¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Trigger Happy*.

¹⁵ Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*, 88.

¹⁶ Anindita Datta, “Spatial Marginality, Gender and Borderland Livelihoods,” *Geography Compass*.

¹⁷ van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderlands beyond the state and nations*.

¹⁸ Ranabir Samaddar, *The Politics of Dialogue: Living Under the Geopolitical Histories of War and Peace*.

¹⁹ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*.

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