

## **Border Culture in the South-Eastern Region of Bangladesh: A View from the Ground**

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### **Abstract**

*The livelihoods of the border areas in Bangladesh have led to the development of a unique culture, but there is a constant worry about the legality of their activities. Both landlocked and coastal countries experience widespread illegal trading. To shed light on this issue, the study was conducted on the basis of both qualitative and quantitative methods in the border areas of Parshuram upazila of Feni district in South-Eastern Bangladesh in 2022 and 2023. The article aimed to examine the livelihood patterns and the concept of "border culture" in relation to illegal trading. The aim was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors especially the internal and external challenges in land border area influencing the borderlanders' way of life, particularly in relation to their occupation and economic activities. In this study, a descriptive research approach is used to conduct an anthropological ethnographic investigation, with an emphasis on reflexivity throughout the study. During the field study for this research, techniques and instruments from the qualitative research approach, such as observation, key informants' interviews, and semi-structured interview were employed. The border community serves as the research's unit. For analyzing quantitative data, this study has employed simple statistical measures through SPSS software. This study reveals that existing internal threats like financial insecurity, the lack of adequate educational and medical facilities, constant harassment by various law enforcement agencies, economic instability, political instability, social class discrimination, etc. and external threats like to raid Bangladeshi border villages, pillaging homes and crops, kidnapping and torturing civilians, and even killing people along the border by the Indian BSF poses livelihood of the Parshuram borderlanders differently. The border culture of Parshuram is multifaceted, particularly when it comes to occupation. The border trading occupation is characterized by a prevailing "shared culture." One significant aspect of this culture is the existence of illegal trading, which has deep historical roots. The increasing size of families, the limited income from agriculture, and the availability of easy money from illicit commerce all motivate Parshuram residents to engage in this activity, which has become a necessary aspect of their existence and primary source of income. Illegal border trade has a significant impact on the culture of border residents and has become an inherent aspect of their subsistence. Despite its negative consequences, it cannot be fully eliminated as it has shaped the unique identity of border regions and its inhabitants. It becomes apparent that individuals residing further away from the border, particularly in Parshuram Sadar, are less prone to being affected compared to those living in closer proximity to the border. The informal economy of illegal border trade has become an integral part of the border dwellers' way of life in Parshuram, carrying both positive and negative implications.*

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## **1. Introduction**

The definition of a border has become more complex compared to the past. It has taken on structural meanings and functions that reflect significant changes in the strength and resilience of the nation state, as well as the diversity of social, political, and economic processes. This was undeniably an evolutionary process through which territorial communities evolved into the broader categories of nation and state. The changes in the concepts of nation-state have been rapid and noticeable, leading to the development of a variety of related concepts in recent years. As a result of global transformation, the number of states has increased significantly, along with the number of borders. This rapid proliferation of borders has resulted in a corresponding rise in the number of border disputes (Saha, 2007).

Bangladesh and India are connected by a border that spans more than 4,000 kilometers and this border region is characterized by a unique blend of cultures, religions, and traditions (Muni & Khanna, 2015). Border commerce, both legal and illicit, is encouraged by a shared culture and the presence of relatives and friends across the border (Islam, 2017).

Bangladesh's connection with India on the border has been both a benefit and a curse at the same time. Bangladesh and India share a strongly guarded border, and tensions between the two nations have frequently erupted over matters like migration and land disputes. In the Bengal borderland (Schendel, 2005), individuals go to bed at night with one identity and wake up the next morning with a different identity, despite remaining anthropologically unchanged. Consequently, the border issues have persisted. The ongoing border conflict between two nations presents numerous dangers for the residents of border regions.

People living in the border areas of Bangladesh have developed a unique culture based on their occupation. An attempt has been made in this article to understand the livelihood pattern of border people as well as the concept of "border culture" in terms of the culture of illegal trading. It will simultaneously examine potential internal and external hazards to border landers' safety at the research location.

### **Key Objectives**

This study intends to:

- 1) Identify the livelihood practices of border inhabitants;
- 2) Identify the internal and external challenges in Bangladesh's land border regions.

## **Research Question**

This study has been developed on the basis of following research question:

Does the border culture based on occupation pose internal or external threat to the border inhabitants of south-eastern region of Bangladesh?

## **2. Literature Review**

In studying border culture, one of the striking books would be "The Bengal Borderland" written by Willem van Schendel (2005). In this book, he particularly constituted the epicenter of the partition of British India which contains borders between India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma. In examining the crucial region, William van Schendel challenges existing assumptions about the nature of relationships between people, place, identity and culture. He has put 13 chapters in this book while he discussed about how the borders have been made and demarcated, securing the territory, how the trade at borders were managed and how South Asian economy actually became bounded by borders (Schendel, 2005).

In the book "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries" which is edited by Fredrik Barth points out at the cultural differentiation marked by the borders. In this book, seven writers have placed their essays which reflect the identity and culture of regarding borders and ethnicity. Fredrik Barth himself discussed Pathan Identity and Its Maintenance which included the study of the then South Asian border dynamics (Barth, 1969).

In the paper "Cross-border Activities in Every Life: the Bengal Borderland," Shahana Ghosh (2011) addressed cross-border travel, interaction, everyday communication, border relatives, and social relationships. According to Shahana Ghosh, the 1947 country's division, followed by border guards and barbed wire, led to new kinds of relationships, marriage, inter-border contact, mobility, and social relationships along the India-Bangladesh border. Similar to how a new area of border relations has arisen, anxiety, danger, and ambiguity have also been produced. According to Shahana Ghosh, border inhabitants' exhibit chutzpah in defying these notions by engaging in such cross-border interactions, maintaining relationships with family members, sustaining everyday existence, and immigrating (Ghosh, 2011).

Another important theme in the literature on border culture is the role of borders in shaping economic and political relations between nations. Studies have shown that border regions often have unique economic opportunities, such as cross-border trade, that can have a significant impact on local economies (Bach, 2014). At the same time, borders can also create challenges for individuals and communities, such as restrictions on movement and migration (Gibson, 2016).

In the article "The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe Line and Bengal's Border Landscape, 1947–52," Joya Chatterjei (1999) covered the topics of partition politics, the history of the Radcliffe line, the effects of the country's division, the newly created Bengal border, and the effects of the border residents' livelihoods (Chatterjei, 1999).

In his article "Borders and Boundaries of State and Self at the End of Empire," Michael Kearney (1991) explored the topic of immigration within the context of the America-Mexico border. He also delved into transnationalism, the application of state rule on transnational communities, and the role of anthropology in border studies.

Michael Kearney (1991) stated that numerous individuals from the Mixtecs community in Mexico have immigrated to the states of California and New Mexico in the United States. People who live near the border are moving to other places in search of better pay, increased earnings, and an improved quality of life. This immigration process is unlawful. Entry without a visa and passport. Residents living along the border between Mexico and America immigrate by avoiding the border guards of both countries. Where many of them are apprehended by American border inhabitants. This migration is dangerous, and if they cross the border, they will work for low pay in America and may experience mistreatment by Americans. They have no recourse if they experience torture or receive lower pay, as they are not American citizens. They are afraid of getting caught in America as well. Kearney compared the process of immigrating for border residents with the transnationalism of the modern era, where both the opportunities and risks of immigration exist.

Veena Das and D. Poole (2004) in their book 'Anthropology in the Margins of the State' talked about how the state controls the lives of marginalized people living in modern state boundaries, borders, and impoverished slums. They discussed the use of power by the state and the use of violence to control the lives and deaths of these people.

Das and Poole (2004) stated that the creation of marginalized individuals is a result of state actions, and similarly, the rights of marginalized individuals are also determined by state laws. The state's sovereignty, authority, power, and laws set marginal people apart and control every aspect of their lives, including life and death. It employs the concepts of 'State of Exception' and 'Homo Sacer' by Giorgio Agamben. Das and Poole stated that according to Michel Foucault's Bio politics theory, the exercise of power is widespread and involves the general control over human life.

In the lives of people living near the border, state enforces its belief in control over the area and the idea of being a part of the nation. The state controls people who live on the outskirts of the country with its laws and rules. It restricts interaction between family members living in different countries and limits their ability to make a living by deeming crossing the border as unlawful and denying them this privilege. State exercises its ultimate authority over the lives of people living near the border by using violence such as killing, injuring, and kidnapping to enforce border laws. This use of power has become common for people living near the border. Marginal individuals or stateless individuals are not idle or lacking in resistance. Das and Poole claimed that all of these individuals have the ability to resist. Residents living near the border resist the state's geographical identity and administration in their daily lives by engaging in border-based livelihood, immigration, and ongoing communication.

According to the summary of the various studies mentioned above, it can be said that there are deficiencies on anthropological research on livelihood practices of border inhabitants and also on identifying the internal and external challenges in Bangladesh's land border regions, which ultimately effects to understand the border culture of south-eastern region of Bangladesh. There are deficiencies - which, despite limitations, have been attempted to be highlighted in related studies.

### **3. Theoretical Approach**

Few anthropologists have studied borderlands, such as Alvarez (1995), Wilson and Donnan (1999), Saha (2007), and Cohen (1965). Academics are of the opinion that anthropology, among the social sciences, is most suited to study some of the less studied phenomena related to international boundaries, particularly border culture and its identities. Some specialists from different academic fields, such Rumley and Manghi, have labeled such a society as having a "border mentality" at times (Saha, 2007).

According to Saha (2007), a border can be most easily understood in terms of its functionality, as it limits not only the easy movement of goods, people, and technologies but also of necessary goods across the state's boundaries. As a symbol, borders are occasionally used by the state to create a sense of love for one's country among its citizens, in order to inspire feelings of territorial protection during wartime or similar circumstances. Therefore, even though symbolic in essence, the border serves as a dynamic presence in its operations. However, borders are no longer playing the same historical role in terms of their functions.

One challenging job for the anthropologists in the border area is to determine a border culture. According to Alvarez (1995), border culture seems to be a uniform idea that is built on political boundaries and common aspects of history, diverse identity, and two-nation economics and politics. In reality, border areas were an ideal place to observe the mixture, conflict, and interaction between different cultures. In the past, anthropologists saw the issue at the border and between border communities as a type of misunderstanding between different cultures, and it was an important aspect of anthropology overall (Saha, 2007).

Partition among the people living near the border brings new opportunities to understand the economic and social effects of division (Schendel, 2001). Partition impacts the livelihood of working individuals in border regions. As per Chatterji (1999), the partition led to the development of new lifestyles, including border-dwellers engaging in clandestine trade.

Wilson and Donnan recognized the significance of comprehending border culture because it serves specific purposes. Furthermore, it plays an important part in affecting the neighboring states as they develop their own border regulations. It has its particular functions. Describing the border culture functions, Wilson and Donnan say (Saha, 2007),

From an anthropological perspective, border culture operates on two intertwined and inseparable levels. Culture connects the individuals and organizations of the border areas to individuals and organizations within their own countries and to those located far away. This is why we talk about cultural landscapes, which go beyond political boundaries. These sceneries are shaped by the social connections that build them. They can't be figured out or concluded from understanding the political and economic systems of the neighboring states at their border (Wilson and Donnan, 1999).

According to anthropology, there is no universal theory of border culture that can encompass the cultural aspects of all international boundaries. Hopefully, this study of border cultures in Bangladesh's South-Eastern area can open up fresh anthropological perspectives on border cultures there. Border has unique qualities that have not yet been adequately researched from an anthropological standpoint. Despite having limitations, this research will try to explore the border culture through the mirror of the approaches of Alvarez (1995), Wilson and Donnan (1999), Saha (2007), Chatterji (1999), and Schendel (2001).

#### **4. Methodology**

An anthropological, ethnographic investigative approach was used in this descriptive study. While carrying out this study, the researcher was cautious about reflexivity. Both qualitative and quantitative analysis was used in this study. The Parshuram border area of Feni district was the subject of this investigation, which lasted for two months in 2022 and 2023. This research area is within a range of 5 to 6 km from international boundary line of the eastern region of Bangladesh. The region was chosen because to the volume of illicit border commerce compared to other locations. There are border pillars, a gated barbed wire fence, just one BGB (Border Guard Bangladesh) camp, no-man's land and more than 100 floodlights (also known as Halogen lights locally) present here. India possesses land after the border barrier, which sometimes causes misunderstanding among the public regarding Bangladesh's border region. There are several border haats between Bangladesh and India. Parshuram is close to the Indian Belonia border which is under South Tripura district of Tripura, India.

During the field study for this research, techniques and instruments from the qualitative research approach, such as observation, key informants' interviews, and semi-structured interview were employed. The border community serves as the research's unit.

In this study, five (05) respondents were considered as key informants. The age, religion, gender, level of education, and employment of men and women are all diverse. The selection criteria for the key informants include having a thorough awareness of the Parshuram border region, everyday routines and activities, a strong social network in the area, and a basic comprehension about border culture.

Two women and three men make up the group of five key informants who are above thirty-five years old. One of the two women is a Muslim, the other a Hindu. Out of three guys, two are Muslims and one is a Hindu. Key informants who are both male and female have educational degrees. Key informants vary in terms of their line of work. The bulk of them work in both illicit border trading and farming. One Muslim man engage in illicit border commerce as well as farming. One Hindu man has a business and engages in illicit border trade. All of the women are housewives who also engage in illicit trade.

For this study, a semi-structured interview with fifty (50) individuals was conducted. The purposeful sampling procedures has been followed to select the respondents based on their involvement with border activities and personal experiences regarding border culture. For analyzing quantitative data, this study has employed simple statistical measures through SPSS software. The age, religion, gender, level of education, and employment of men and women are all varied. There were 50 responders, including 24 (48%) women and 26 (52%) men. Males are in the 18–50 age range, while women are in the 16–45 age range. There were 19 female and 21 male Muslim respondents and the other 5 males and 5 females were Hindu. Most of the respondents are educated. Male respondents are engaged in farming, business and illicit border commerce. All of the women respondents are housewives and some of them are also engaged in illicit trade.

In addition, for the purpose of conducting this study, secondary materials including journals, books, magazines, newspapers, internet sites, and pertinent research reports were examined.

It's important to note that the results of this study are based on a small sample size of only 50 respondents. Therefore, the results may not be representative of the entire border population, and the conclusions drawn from the data should be taken with caution.

## **5. Border Culture and Illegal Trading at Parshuram Frontier**

### **5.1 Border Culture**

During field trips, it was noted that some of the Parshuram houses are semi-cemented and that the base of the dwellings is built at a higher elevation than usual since some places experience recurrent floods. Other homes are constructed of mud and have a tin shed roof. Many homes feature a sizable courtyard where they may dry crops like maize and rice.



Animal husbandry is a practice among the locals of Parshuram. The cow, the ox, the bull, the duck, the cock, and the hen are all domesticated by the villagers. In agriculture, people utilize bulls or oxen. However, the study discovered that several villages substituted motor tractors or tillers for the bull or the ox.

After males in Parshuram harvest the crops, Muslim women perform tasks like drying, winnowing, etc. The main cash crop in these bordering communities is paddy. Locals bring their excess crop output to the Haats to sell. It was discovered throughout the study that border people are losing interest in farming on a daily basis due to increased costs associated with agricultural work as well as a lack of sufficient pricing for cash crops. They are using illicit border commerce as an alternative kind of economic activity. They are drawn to participate in this hazardous and simple method of getting money because of rising household costs as well as the flow of Indian goods.

In Bangladesh, social stratification is a prevalent aspect of both the Muslim and Hindu cultures. Muslims and Hindus are typically divided into different strata according to their patterns of occupation. When it comes to the people's religious beliefs, Parshuram is a Muslim dominant area. The lack of social stratification among the populace is a result of Islam, which forbids the concept of untouchability. In Muslim civilization, there are fewer subtle distinctions amongst the individuals. It has been discovered that residents in Parshuram who own land, tractors, stores, and money have power. Hindus adhere to the idea of hard labor and peaceful coexistence with Muslim residents. In fact, Parshuram is increasingly losing interest in social stratification.

Joint and nuclear families are the two different family structures in Parshuram. The number of family members is growing as a result of population increase, and those with high incomes are becoming less interested in shouldering the responsibilities of other family members. Here, there is conflict between brothers' spouses as well as between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. People are losing interest in agriculture, and some of them prefer to going to Chittagong or the Bangladeshi capital. In addition to the aforementioned factors, the steady loss of arable land, rising family expenditures, the development of the market economy, which created new business options, and the prevalence of illicit border trafficking all contribute to the dissolution of joint families in Parshuram. In Parshuram, several families continue to live in

an arrangement akin to an extended family, sharing a shared courtyard with individual hearths.

Here, early marriage is customary and women have little control. In Parshuram, the dowry system is used at marriage. People are aware that they must register their marriages with the authorities. Hindu marriage is a drawn-out procedure governed by stringent religious restrictions. The elderly family members and relatives of a person chooses their marriages. There are no restrictions on who can be married. Due to tight border security, rarely cross-border marriages occur in Parshuram. In a Muslim marriage, the wedding ceremony is observed by both partners. The bridegroom's side is known to have a significant celebration two to three days following the wedding, during which the new bride symbolically feeds residents of her in-law's.

Muslims have greater fertility rates than other groups. Muslim and Hindu women marry earlier, they have children sooner. Women also experience a shorter waiting period before becoming pregnant again. Women benefit from an extended reproductive period as a result of early marriage. Due to their larger families, Muslims tend to have a higher proportion of female offspring. In actuality, the cause is purely biological. Male children are preferred by both Muslims and Hindus.

Muslims strive to perform five prayers each day. They go to the mosque for Jumma prayer. When they pray, they cover their heads with white hats. They cover their heads with handkerchiefs if one is not available. Although there is no set rule about who will stand behind whom, it is obvious that the affluent, senior, and important villagers often occupy the front row in the mosque. Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Azha, and the month of Ramadan are all observed by Muslims in Parshuram.

The village mosque is a crucial location in Prashuram since it has been discovered that villagers engage with one another there and elsewhere to preserve their social ties. The villagers can share information about many topics in this place. Villagers contribute in cash and kind in accordance with their financial ability for the planning of religious activities as well as for mosque building.

In Parshuram, there is no opportunity for women to go to mosques and worship. They don't even take part in local religious festivals. Muslim women in Parshuram wear burqas and adhere to other Islamic tenets such as fasting during Ramadan alongside Muslim males and praying at home.

Durga Puja and Kali Puja are celebrated by Hindu households in Parshuram. However, people travel to Upazila Sadar or Feni Town to do significant pujas. Hindu families in Parshuram are observed to have a Tulsi (basil) tree in the center of their courtyard, which is seen to be sacred by them. Hindu women perform a ritual called as Ullur Dhoni, which involves making noise with their mouths and lighting candles and incense sticks near a tulsi tree just after sunset.

The religious holidays foster a festive mood in Parshuram. On the occasion of the celebrations, people greet one another and give out sweets. To commemorate the occasions, people bring sweets to the homes of their relatives.

In Parshuram, the shopkeepers are primarily Muslims. On the first day of the opening of their stores, Muslims in Parshuram perform a particular kind of ceremony known as Milad. Hindus are invited to such events by these businesspeople. After sunset, they frequently sell incense sticks and candles at the stores. In Parshuram, Hindus run barbershops and jewelry stores.

People who live in Parshuram's border areas listen to Radio Bangladesh and watch BTV. In Parshuram, there are amenities like dish. Additionally, they express interest in viewing Indian TV stations, which are widely accessible in this border region without the need for a dish connection. People without televisions watch TV in their neighbors' homes or in public places like stores.

Football, cricket, and kabadi (a rural activity that doubles as Bangladesh's national sport) are among the most played sports in Parshuram. Every year, the villagers in these border villages arrange a variety of sporting events, and it is particularly fascinating to see that each team competes for its own village in the Parshuram competitions, providing entertainment for the locals.

## **5.2 Border Culture in terms of Occupation: Illegal Trading at Parshuram Frontier**

Both in Parshuram and the South-Eastern border region of India, smuggling is a significant source of income for many people. Rice and other pharmaceuticals are among the most typical things trafficked into Bangladesh from the Indian side. The cattle trade, however, is the most profitable. According to some estimates, up to 20,000–25,000 animals might enter Bangladesh through West Bengal each day (Hussain, 2009). Sales of Indian livestock in Bangladesh are lawful and taxed, despite the

fact that it is prohibited to transfer cattle over international borders in India; in fact, the BDR (now known as BGB-Border Guards Bangladesh) frequently supports this trade (The Telegraph, 2006). An NGO called the Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP) performed a survey that found that, on average, goods worth Taka 832.2 million are smuggled into Bangladesh from India each month (Naher, 2013).

The illicit trade within Parshuram encompasses a diverse range of commodities, including highly sought-after items such as sarees, motor parts, mobile phones, motorcycles, various cosmetic products, Indian snacks, dairy products, paddy, onions, cows, electronic items, and assorted metals. These goods are surreptitiously transported across the border from neighboring nation and subsequently sold within Parshuram and its surrounding environs, after that it spreads nationwide.

However, the unlawful activities in Parshuram transcend the realm of consumer products. The area has evolved into a pivotal hub for the illicit trafficking of drugs and harmful chemicals. Nefarious elements exploit covert channels to smuggle narcotics and controlled substances into Bangladesh, with Parshuram often serving as a conduit. Consequently, these illicit substances permeate local communities, contributing to the manifold social and health challenges that afflict the region.

Moreover, Parshuram has garnered infamy as a central nexus for the trade in pilfered goods. Exploiting the porosity of its borders and the laxity of security measures, criminal networks facilitate the transportation of stolen merchandise from neighboring country India into Bangladesh. These pilfered goods encompass a broad spectrum, ranging from high-value electronics to valuable commodities, all of which are subsequently peddled within the clandestine black market.

The pervasive nature of illicit trading activities in Parshuram poses substantial challenges for both law enforcement agencies and the local community. The prevalence of contraband and illegal substances not only subverts the economy by circumventing legal regulations and tax protocols, but also engenders risks to public health, safety, and security. The eradication of these unlawful activities necessitates heightened border surveillance, augmented intelligence gathering capabilities, and stringent enforcement measures to disrupt the intricate networks and dismantle the infrastructure that sustains these illicit trades which Parshuram lacks.

A substantial proportion of the unlawful trade from Parshuram to India comprises agricultural products and garment items. Despite the presence of legal avenues for exporting these goods, certain individuals and groups in Parshuram resort to smuggling as a means to evade taxes, regulations, and other legal obligations. Agricultural products such as paddy, onions, and dairy products are illicitly transported across the border, finding a lucrative market in India due to high demand and the potential for increased profits.

Similarly, Parshuram's illicit trade encompasses garment items that are produced within the Chittagong region and subsequently stolen during transportation along the highway. Furthermore, Parshuram's illegal trade extends beyond agricultural and garment products to encompass the smuggling of metals, chemicals, and even air conditioners. Metals such as iron, steel, and aluminum, which may be subject to tariffs and export controls, are smuggled into India to circumvent legal restrictions and gain competitive pricing advantages. Likewise, both raw materials and finished chemical products find their way across the border illicitly, fulfilling the demands of various Indian industries.

Moreover, the border region between Parshuram and India serves as a fertile ground for the illicit trade of stolen mobile phones and motorcycles. Criminal networks exploit the porous borders, lax security measures, and informal trade routes to facilitate the transportation of stolen goods between the two countries. Stolen mobile phones and motorcycles are highly sought-after in the black market due to their lower prices or the potential to bypass legal ownership requirements.

### **5.3 Illegal Trading and Its Consequences**

The adverse economic conditions and constrained financial resources prevalent in Parshuram have instigated a considerable number of individuals to seek solace in illicit cross-border trade. The region suffers from distressingly high poverty rates, with a substantial proportion of the population residing below the poverty threshold. These individuals, burdened by the responsibilities of supporting large families, find themselves ensnared in precarious economic circumstances that offer limited viable survival options.

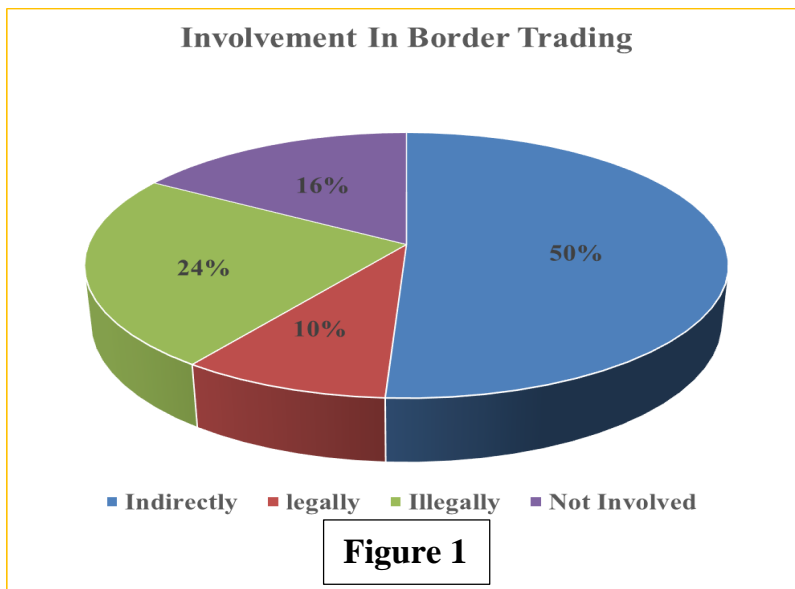
Regrettably, the factors that propel individuals into engaging in illegal border trading also contribute to a relentless cycle of involvement in criminal undertakings. Once ensnared within this realm, breaking free

becomes progressively arduous. The orchestrators of illicit operations, commonly known as underworld dons, wield significant influence in ensuring the perpetuation of individuals' entrapment. They impede any attempts at escape, as it poses a threat to their own unlawful enterprises.

Furthermore, when individuals involved in illegal trading are apprehended by law enforcement authorities, their bosses promptly intervene by providing bail. However, this assistance comes at a steep price, as those who are bailed out are expected to resume their servitude under the dons. Consequently, this perpetuates their exploitation, as they are coerced into continuing their involvement in illegal activities against their volition. The reliance on such bailouts further reinforces the control exercised by the underworld dons over individuals entangled in illicit border trading.

Tragically, the families of these illegal traders often become entwined in this process as well. In the absence of more favorable economic prospects, certain families have been engaged in unlawful trade for generations. This intergenerational participation is a consequence of the dearth of legitimate alternatives and the normalization of illegal trading within specific familial contexts. The scarcity of accessible legal avenues for income generation compels these families to plunge deeper into the realm of illicit activities.

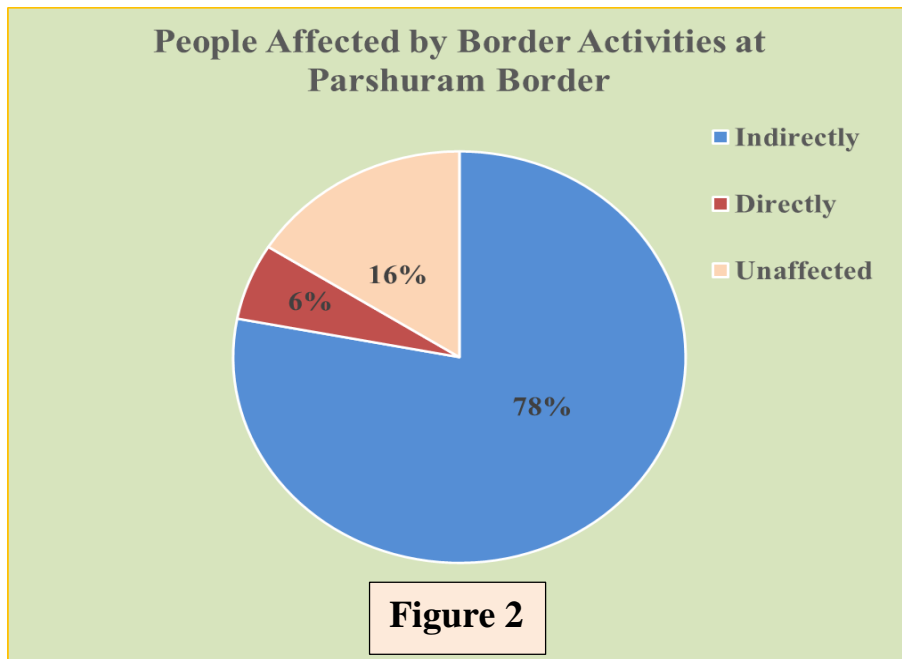
## 6. Findings and Data Analysis



## Border Culture in the South-Eastern Region of Bangladesh

Border trading is a major source of livelihood for people residing near the Parshuram border, where over 50% (figure 1) of the population is indirectly involved in this trade. In addition, around 23.6% are involved in illegal trading directly, and only 9.1% are engaged in legal trading, while the remaining 16.4% are not involved at all.

Despite the Belonia Land port opening up opportunities for legal trading, many people are still engaging in illegal trading. The demand for Indian goods is increasing, and illegal traders take advantage of this situation to make easy money. The illegal trading involves smuggling of goods across the border without paying taxes or duties, resulting in huge losses to the government. It also poses a significant risk to the health and safety of the people, as illegal goods may not meet the required standards and could be harmful.



The findings (Figure 2) of the study indicate a substantial proportion (78%) of the respondents who were affected indirectly as a consequence of harassment by local authorities, particularly the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and the police. These authorities have been reported to employ false accusations of illicit border trading and drug dealing in order to apprehend individuals and instill fear within the community.

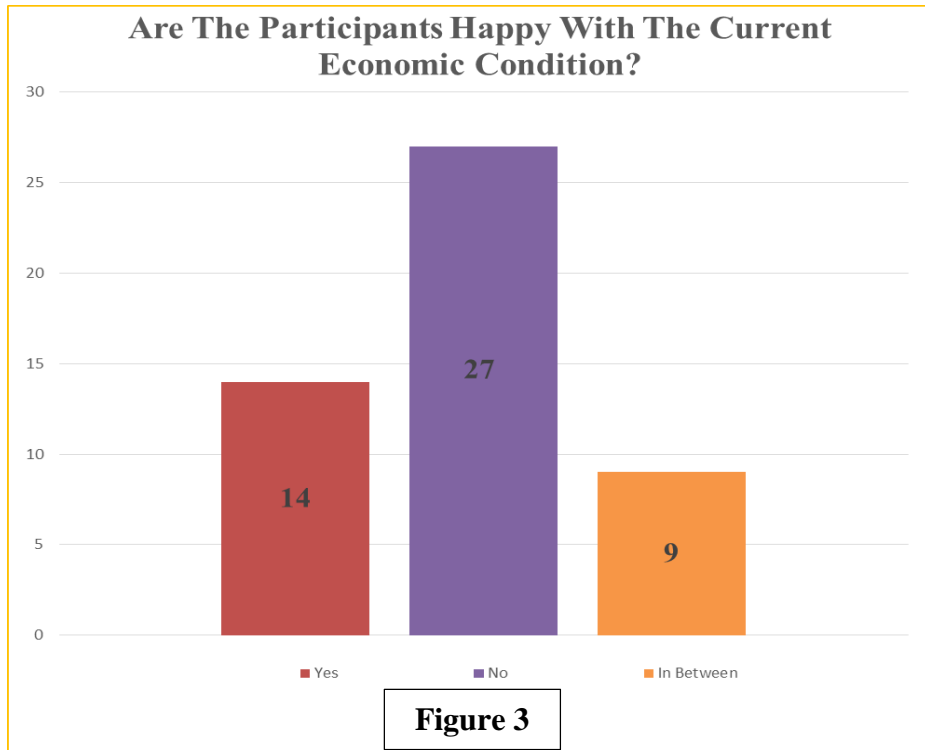
*Shefali Begum (pseudonym), a 33-year-old widow living in the border area said, "I am a poor, helpless woman. I am not engaged in any smuggling or illegal trading. But BDR and brokers often tease me in my house and give me mental pain. I can't sleep peacefully at night with my children."*

An intriguing observation made in the study is the relative lack of harassment experienced by women in the area. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a manifestation of gender-based discrimination, as women are often exploited for trafficking various goods due to the perception that they are less likely to be targeted by the authorities.

The illicit trade of goods in the region has caused injuries and hospitalizations among certain individuals, with three out of fifty participants (6%) directly affected. These individuals were apprehended by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) and subjected to torture, highlighting a disconcerting issue. Incidents involving lethal force employed by the BSF at the border further underscore the gravity of the situation.

Among the respondents, eight out of fifty individuals (16%) reported being unaffected stemming from residing in the border area or from involvement in illegal border trade. It is crucial to recognize that while these individuals may have remained unaffected, they are still susceptible to broader socio-economic and political dynamics prevailing in the border region. Most of these individuals do not reside in close proximity to the border, suggesting that the location of one's residence plays a pivotal role in determining the level of risk exposure. Consequently, within the context of the study, it becomes apparent that individuals residing further away from the border, particularly in Parshuram Sadar, are less prone to being affected compared to those living in closer proximity to the border.





As 27 of 50 participants suggests (figure 3), living in the Parshuram border area can be particularly challenging for many people, with the majority of the population struggling to make ends meet. Lack of income source, price hikes, poverty, corruption, and large families with few earning members all contribute to making life difficult. These factors create significant economic pressure on individuals and families, which can lead to frustration, stress, and a sense of hopelessness.

Furthermore, the border issue exacerbates the challenges that people face in this region. Border areas are often less developed than the main land, which means that there are fewer economic opportunities available. This lack of opportunity can create a sense of despair and a feeling of being left behind, which can push people towards looking for alternative ways to earn money.

One such alternative is illegal border trafficking. The lack of legal job opportunities and the desperate economic situation make it tempting for people to engage in illicit activities, including smuggling of goods, human trafficking, and drug trafficking. In some cases, people may feel

like they have no other choice but to participate in illegal activities to make ends meet for themselves and their families.

*45-year-old Nafiz Islam (pseudonym) living in the border area of Parashuram said, "I can't take three meals a day and eat properly. There is no arrangement at the border for any work. I sometimes cross the border without finding a way to survive. Get good money with little trouble. Due to the work of crossing goods at the border, at least I can take care of my wife and children and can run the family."*

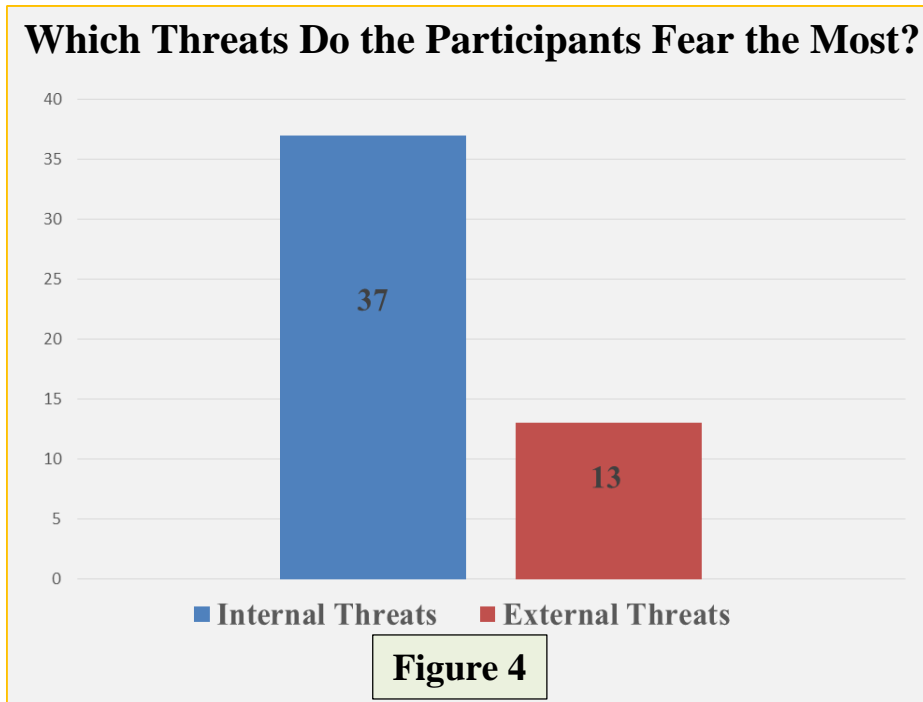
Moreover, when people are struggling to make ends meet, they may resort to participating in illegal trade as a means of survival. This can lead to a vicious cycle of poverty and crime. People may see this as an opportunity to make quick money without considering the long-term consequences.

Out of 50 participants, only 14 of them are happy with their current economic condition. It is noteworthy that most of these 14 individuals are wealthy businessmen or come from a rich family background. This indicates that financial stability and affluence play a significant role in determining one's level of happiness with their economic condition.

Additionally, some of these 14 individuals are involved in illegal border trading which is concerning. This may suggest that some people are willing to engage in illegal activities to maintain their wealth and economic status. They are able to manage local authorities by bribing them, indicating a lack of ethical and moral values among those in power, which is alarming.

Among these individuals some involved in illegal trading are also local politicians and public figures, which could have significant implications. Their involvement in illegal activities could raise questions about the credibility and integrity of the political system and those in power. Moreover, it leads to public distrust and undermines the rule of law.

9 out of 50 participants are neither happy nor unhappy with their economic condition. Most of them are middle class people with relatively stable income, but they are unhappy with the economic system overall.



Internal threats refer to dangers that exist within the country and affect its residents as a whole. These can include natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, or droughts, as well as human-made hazards such as civil unrest, terrorism, or crime.

External threats like to raid Bangladeshi border villages, pillaging homes and crops, kidnapping and torturing civilians, and even killing people along the border by the Indian BSF, on the other hand, are hazards that arise from outside the country's borders and affect its citizens, particularly those living in border regions. In the context of Bangladesh, these external threats include the risks posed by neighboring countries, such as India and Myanmar, and their respective security forces.

The distinction between internal and external threats is important for understanding the specific risks faced by different groups of people within a country. In Bangladesh, while both internal and external threats are present, border dwellers are particularly vulnerable to external hazards arising from neighboring countries and their security forces.

The fear of external threats expressed by the 13 respondents (figure 4) is closely linked to their proximity to the border with India. These individuals live in areas where they may come into contact with Indian

security forces, and as a result, they fear harassment, harm, or even death. For those whose livelihoods depend on agriculture, the fear of bringing their crops home safely adds to their sense of insecurity. The presence of the BSF and the threat of violence make it difficult for border farmers to tend to their crops or livestock and also make obstacles for women and girls to move freely and participate in their own community.

The recent erection of a barbed-wire barrier by India has provided some relief for these individuals, as it has reduced the frequency of Indian security forces entering Bangladeshi territory. However, some respondents have suggested that Bangladesh should also erect its own barbed-wire fence to provide additional protection.

The concerns expressed by the remaining 37 participants (figure 4) highlight the range of internal threats facing Bangladesh, many of which are deeply interconnected and have a profound impact on people's daily lives. These include economic conditions, corruption, food safety, political instability, population growth, climate change, poverty, unemployment, lack of adequate educational and medical facilities, poor communication infrastructure, weak border security management and oppression and harassment by local authorities. It was found in this study that the border people in the study area were affected indirectly as a consequence of harassment by local authorities, particularly the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and the police. These authorities have been reported to employ false accusations of illicit border trading and drug dealing in order to apprehend individuals and instill fear within the community.

The residents of Parshuram border area, located near the border, are particularly vulnerable to the actions of the BSF. Despite the recent construction of a fence along the border, people on the Bangladeshi side still fear for their safety and livelihoods. The BSF has been known to raid Bangladeshi border villages, pillaging homes and crops, kidnapping and torturing civilians, and even killing people along the border.

These actions have a significant impact on the daily lives of the residents of Parshuram. Many are farmers who rely on their land to support their families, but the presence of the BSF and the threat of violence make it difficult for them to tend to their crops or livestock and also make obstacles for women and girls to move freely and participate in their own community.

## **7. Conclusion**

Borders are unique, different from the mainland, and shape the cultural and economic identities of borderland residents differently from the state's center. Diversity in history, geography, religion, ethnicity, linguistics, and culture defines borders. Religion is significant in distinguishing the Bangladesh-India border, but less so in the Parshuram region, where the Belonia border is also Muslim-oriented.

Present study reveals that there are different internal and external threats exist in the study area. The fear of external threats of the border people is closely linked to their proximity to the border with India. These individuals live in areas where they may come into contact with Indian security forces, and as a result, they fear harassment, harm, or even death. For those whose livelihoods depend on agriculture, the fear of bringing their crops home safely adds to their sense of insecurity. The presence of the BSF and the threat of violence make it difficult for border farmers to tend to their crops or livestock and also make obstacles for women and girls to move freely and participate in their own community. The recent erection of a barbed-wire barrier by India has provided some relief for these individuals, as it has reduced the frequency of Indian security forces entering Bangladeshi territory.

The concerns expressed by the border people highlight the range of internal threats facing Bangladesh, many of which are deeply interconnected and have a profound impact on people's daily lives. These include economic conditions, corruption, food safety, political instability, population growth, climate change, poverty, unemployment, lack of adequate educational and medical facilities, poor communication infrastructure, weak border security management and oppression and harassment by local authorities. It was found in this study that the border people in the study area were affected indirectly as a consequence of harassment by local authorities, particularly the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and the police. These authorities have been reported to employ false accusations of illicit border trading and drug dealing in order to apprehend individuals and instill fear within the community.

This study reveals that different internal and external threats of Parshuram border area makes different culture, especially gives shape the occupation of local people differently from the other areas of the country. The Parshuram border community depends on agriculture but many also engages in illegal border trading for income. Illegal trade operates on the law of supply and

demand. Ongoing illegal trade is a significant economic development in Parshuram, creating cultural differences along the border. While the Bangladeshi government considers it unlawful and hostile, border residents rely on it to survive. Opinions on illicit trade vary among individuals.

This study provides insights into the culture of Parshuram border residents, particularly in terms of occupation and illegal border trade. The border dwellers have both a territorial identity and a territorial idea, defending the border on the basis of nationalism. This identity has been shaped by the historical partition of the subcontinent and has led to the creation of new economic opportunities, including illegal trading. The increasing size of families, the limited income from agriculture, and the availability of easy money from illicit commerce all motivate Parshuram residents to engage in this activity, which has become a necessary aspect of their existence and primary source of income.

It is found in this study that those individuals residing further away from the border, particularly in Parshuram Sadar, are less prone to being affected compared to those living in closer proximity to the border.

The adjacent Indian Belonia border also has an impact on the Parshuram border culture, creating a mixed culture of employment associated with trade. The illegal trade that occurs between the two states reflects the cultures of both nations and their borders. Therefore, the Parshuram border culture can be said to be a blend of these cultures.

The illegal trade occurring in Parshuram raises questions about the legitimacy of the border and its relevance in the modern globalized world, echoing the ideas put forth by Donnan and Wilson (1999) and Saha (2007).

India's construction of barbed wire fencing has made the border less permeable. However, the prevalence of illegal border trading in the era of global capitalism and free market economies suggests that even if hostilities between nations arise, legal relations may cease, but unauthorized border trading will continue in Parshuram and other border regions around the world.

Illegal border trade has a significant impact on the culture of border residents and has become an inherent aspect of their subsistence. Despite its negative consequences, it cannot be fully eliminated as it has shaped the unique identity of border regions and its inhabitants.

Parshuram's border culture is not straightforward. In terms of occupation, it is complicated. Given that Parshuram is a predominantly Muslim border

region, it may be said that the culture there is homogeneous in terms of religion. However, the researcher would vary with Alvarez (1995) and claim that the illicit border trading occupation in Parshuram is characterized by a "shared culture." The Wilson and Donnan (1999) concepts in terms of border functions and economic activities are virtually analogous to the shared culture of Parshuram in terms of occupation. According to Chatterji (1999) and Schendel (2001), it is evident from this research that partition has an effect on this border and also makes new economic opportunities, such as illegal trading, available. These opportunities have an impact on the daily activities of the Parshuram border folks and introduce a new way of life to this frontier upazilla.

The emerging area of border culture study in anthropology is crucial for understanding the unique culture of border dwellers. Policymakers in both India and Bangladesh acknowledge the importance of their border connections, and initiatives such as the Border Area Development Plan and Border Haats have been implemented to improve the standard of living for border residents. However, more attention needs to be paid to the culture of border dwellers in order to tackle the many concerns affecting their livelihoods and bilateral conflicts between the two nations.

Policymakers must consider the distinct culture of border regions and the role of illegal trade in residents' lives to develop an effective strategy for improving their economic conditions and standard of living. Understanding the complexities of border culture is crucial for informed policymaking that benefits border residents and strengthens bilateral ties.

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