

A Case Study of International Border-Side Village and its Sense of Belongingness to the Country

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Abstract

The border villages of Darjeeling district suffer from many socio-economic and political challenges. These challenges can take a natural toll on the sense of belongingness towards the nation among inhabitants. The present paper takes the same as hypothesis and explores the possibility and extent of threat to both trans-generational and contemporary ideas and practices of national integration arising from localized issues or events that test the core ideals of national identity and integrationist ethos. Taking up one hamlet as sample from the research universe, an attempt has been made to understand the impact of socio-economic deprivation upon the sense of belongingness among its inhabitants towards the nation, in this case, India. The case study has been supplemented through a systematic sampling survey of the villagers and subsequent analysis to arrive at conclusive findings.

Keywords: Perception, Belongingness, Nation, Border, Village

The border villages of Darjeeling district suffer from many socio-economic and political challenges. These challenges can take a natural toll on the sense of belongingness towards the nation among the inhabitants. As Sulehan *et al* observe, "the sense of national belonging has a tendency to be fluid, particularly when the center of power is distant away from the border, and development programs and interventions for border communities are not always forthcoming."¹

The present paper takes the same as a working hypothesis and explores the possibility and extent of threat to both trans-generational and contemporary ideas and practices of national integration arising from localized issues or events that test the core ideals of national identity and integrationist ethos.

The research universe, i.e., broad field of inquiry of the present study is those border villages that suffer from various socio-economic and political challenges, a condition that may stimulate among their inhabitants a negative perception towards the sense of belongingness to their native nation. As research sample, one particular hamlet situated on Indo-Bangladesh border has been taken up for case study. This hamlet named Murikhawa falls under Purba Bansaon mouza of Chathat-Bansaon Gram Panchayat

¹ J. Sulehan, N.R.A. Bakar, A.H. Awang, M. Y. Abdullah and O.P. Liu, "Development at the Margins: Livelihood and Sustainability of Communities at Malaysia - Indonesia Borders", *Sociologija i prostor/ Sociology & Space*, 51 (2013) 197 (3), p. 551.

(henceforth GP) of Phansidewa block under Siliguri sub-division of Darjeeling district. The river Mahananda acts as a natural border between India and Bangladesh here. The Tetulia Police Station of Bangladesh is 600 yards and Boarding Guards of Bangladesh (BGB) post is 2.5 km away from the border of India. The Border Security Force (BSF) not only protects the area but also offers a helping hand to the villagers.

The study hamlet comes under the largest block area. Among the four blocks (Matigara, Naxalbari, Khoribari and Phansidewa) of Siliguri sub-division under Darjeeling district, Phansidewa has been found to be the most backward of all with maximum number of backward villages and Integrated Tribal Development Program (ITDP) mouzas.² This block has 7 GPs, of which the Chathat-Bansgaon GP has highest number of declared underdeveloped mouzas, 6 out of total 7 (viz Madhya Bansgaon, Bansgaon Mangachh, Purba Bansgaon, Bansgaon Chakla, Bansgaon and Chikanmati), the only exception being Paschim Bansgaon.

The hamlet taken as sample for this particular study is the Murikhawa hamlet which falls under the jurisdiction of 113 Purba Bansgaon mouza. Constitutionally, two areas- Purba Bandhobjuli and Murikhawa-together form the hamlet. The hamlet is adjacent to the Bangladesh border and is considered as the most backward among all on the parameters given by the state government.³ The hamlet has 439 households as per 2011 Population and 2012 Socio Economic Caste Census comprising of a total population of 2479 people (Male: 1487; Female: 992). Among the total families, 395 are found below the poverty line (BPL) as per 2012 Backward Class Survey.⁴ Except for five Hindu families, all the rest are Muslims.

The physical infrastructure of the hamlet is poor as basic facilities are not enough. The income source of the area is mainly agriculture and small business. The hamlet being close to the international border is subject to several troubles among which cattle trafficking and infiltration are major. The hamlet is also near to another district of North Bengal namely North Dinajpur which is 800 meter away from Murikhawa and the students from this district go to the Madrasha there as there is no other high school in close vicinity. Thus this single educational unit is catering to the students of both districts.

To assess the condition of the hamlet and explore its sense of belongingness to the host country, in this case, India, the study intends to assess the socio-economic, political and religious condition of the hamlet, to assess the villagers' perception about being an Indian, to identify the factors and agencies fostering a sense of belongingness to the nation and to identify the factors and agencies dispiriting the sense of belongingness to the nation.

² List of backward villages under Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad

³ Block Profile of Phansidewa, 2013.

⁴ Provisional Population Census, West Bengal 2011; Socio Economic Caste Census, Block Phansidewa, 2012; Backward Class Survey, Block Phansidewa, 2012.

The study involved a mixed-method research design. Thus, while on the one hand, qualitative research tools such as sample participant observation and personal interviewing were employed to understand the socio-economic, political and religious praxis, quantitative research tools such as questionnaires were employed to gather data for validation of findings. The questionnaires were structured differently based on objectives to collect relevant data from the villagers, government officials, schools, politically and socially recognized persons. While the sample for the research universe, i.e., the hamlet was selected purposively, the sampling units within the hamlet, i.e., the families were selected through systematic sampling. Thus, every third house of village Murikhawa was selected resulting in a total sample size of 146 households out of 439 total families of the hamlet.

Assessing the Condition of the Hamlet

General Infrastructure

The household survey of 2013 reveals that Murikhawa is lacking in basic amenities and facilities. Maximum houses are *kuchha*. Each family has 6-7 members at an average. A trend of staying together has been observed. Though a common paternal land is being shared by as many as 7-8 families on certain occasions, each family is found to arrange its separate kitchen. However, owing to increasing number of family members and inadequate space, some families have started staying apart within the hamlet area. Majority of the people reside in self-owned houses and only twenty Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) houses have been given to the villagers. With electricity having reached almost all the houses except for few, villagers are increasingly realizing its utility in study, work and entertainment (for watching television). Low rate electricity meters have been given to 30 BPL families of the village so far.⁵ Sanitation facilities are scanty with only 38 families having such facility at home. However, efforts are being made by the Water and Sanitation Department of Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad in this regard.⁶ Scarcity of drinking water is visibly high with most villagers not having such facility and managing it from neighbors. The river Mahananda is being used for farming and irrigation. The hamlet lacks proper sewage or drainage system.

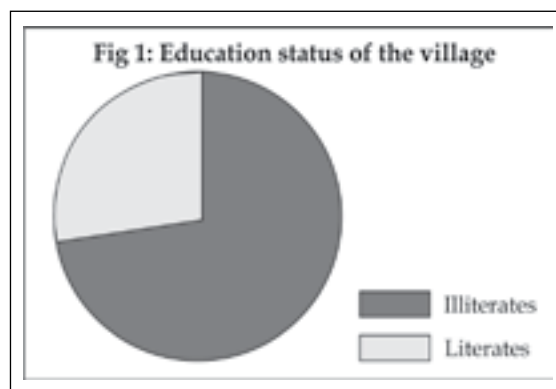
Education

The literacy rate in Murikhawa is low. Total 943 heads are found literate among total population of 2479 among which most of them are first generation learners of their families. The proportion of literacy is very low (Fig. 1). Most of the elder members in any household are illiterate. However, they are interested in sending their children to school. Most of the literates are first generation learners of their families which show that there is an increasing awareness towards literacy among the villagers. An interesting feature is that the enrolment rates in schools and Madrashes are higher for girls as

⁵ Electricity connectedness record of Block Phansidewa, 2012-13.

⁶ Water and Sanitation infrastructure record of Block Phansidewa, 2012-13.

compared to the boys. This is an indication of reduced social discrimination against girls in this village. But, at the same time high dropout rates among the girls owing to their early marriage, points towards the prevalence of conservative socio-cultural system. However, a recent trend shows that many girls are getting married after attaining 18 years of age. This shows an increasing social awareness.



There is only one government primary school which covers two adjacent villages, Murikhawa and Paschim Bandhabjuli. The school has 359 students (male- 171 and female- 188) and 13 teachers. The school has no boundary wall and electricity but has 6 tin shaded classrooms and 4 toilets. Border Security Force (BSF) has given 2 computers in last two years along with a printer and few play materials for school children. Health camps for girls are being organized by the school often. This school acts as the Panchayat Election Centre of adjacent 4 villages. It received the 'Nirmal Vidyalaya Award' in 2012 for appropriate sanitation practices among school goers.

Besides, there is a high Madrasha (upto standard 10)⁷ and one higher secondary school (upto standard 12)⁸ which is around 10 km away from the village. The High Madrasha has more than 1400 students among which 60% are female students as per the data given by the school. This school also serves students of adjacent North Dinajpur district. It has 17 teachers and has infrastructural facilities except boundary wall and gate. The school provides bags, books and school dress to the students from its allotted fund. This year 771 students are given fellowship for their studies. To pursue higher secondary schooling, students have to shift to Chathat Higher Secondary School. Now, even girl students of the hamlet are found attending the high school with many boy students. There are 3 small private schools managed under 'Bandhan' finance organization in the hamlet. Many children under the age of 5 years after attending ICDS or private school in the morning are also found to attend the government primary school in the late hours.

There is no scope of adult or continuing education, trainings to join any technical profession. Self Help Group (SHG) wing of the Phansidewa block office is found to

⁷ Madrasha is equivalent to school which usually refers to Islamic institution. Such institution is found functional upto class 10 in the study village. However, it may impart higher education than specified standard.

⁸ This educational system is administered by West Bengal state government autonomously for the standard 12.

arrange certain professional trainings though.⁹ The increasing numbers of SHGs show interest to become independent among village women but the teams require intensive monitoring and persuasion at the government level to make it happen.

Job

Job opportunities are few within the village. The villagers visit towns for jobs but prefer to return to the village being unable to cope up with urban life. Another factor of coming back to the village is belongingness to the village and fellow brethren. Societal bonding among villagers being strong facilitates sustenance through active participation in socio-economic activities. Interestingly, though the villagers prefer the simple village life, they demand 'urban' facilities from the government for a standard living.

Majority of the population is found restricted to the unorganized sector of farming. Due to lack of proper education and skill enhancing training, employability in the formal recognized jobs is minimal. Almost all are found to be marginal workers. Most of the families have their own farming land and often take others' land on lease. Villagers also work in tea gardens or farming lands as daily wage laborers. Mainly tea, rice and jute are produced here. Few farmers are found to grow all these three products by dividing their total land area whereas few prefer to cultivate tea only. All these small tea growers of the hamlet sell the raw green leaves to medium or big tea companies around. Many growers even avail loans from local bank to meet farming expenses. Most of the farmed products are being consumed by the families. However, it is found difficult to sell produce as markets are quite far. Help of middleman is taken often as the villagers face difficulty in reaching and selling their produce in the three major markets of Rangapani, Ranidanga and Leusipakhri which are located 23, 25 and 21 kms away respectively from the village owing to poor communications. The village also has carpenters, saw-mill workers and small shop-keepers who sometimes migrate in search of work from the village. Few have migrated to other states and few have come back after earning an amount. Almost all families have job cards and have worked under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) except family members of panchayat member and school teachers. The average monthly earning of each family is found to be Rs.4000-5000 only. As per 2012 Backward Class Survey, 395 families of Murikhawa fall in BPL category (Fig. 2).

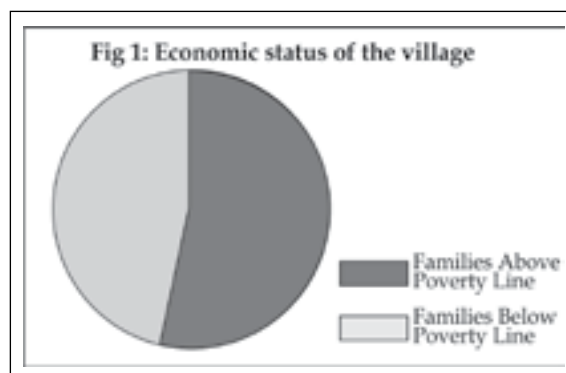
Communications

Communications in terms of public transport are found nil within 8-9 kilometers of the hamlet. Villagers use cycles or motorbikes to traverse this distance. Only a single Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY)¹⁰ road connects the area with by-pass roads of Murikhawa-Chathat or Murikhawa-Bidhannagar which are connected to National Highway-31 of Bidhannagar-Ghoshpukur or Bidhannagar-Siliguri. This is the single

⁹ SHG record of Block Phansidewa, 2013.

¹⁰ Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad Engineering department records, 2012-13.

road availed by both villagers and BSF equally. The entire hamlet is interconnected through narrow mud lanes.



Health

Though the government health department has allotted the Matigara Primary Health Sub Centre¹¹ (situated 5 Km away from Murikhawa) for the hamlet but villagers generally avail themselves of the Tufandangi Primary Health Sub Centre (situated 4 Km away from Murikhawa). It has been observed that unavailability of vehicles causes much trouble for pregnant ladies, mothers with small children, aged people and seriously ill people in reaching these sub-centres. There is no critical care unit/ centre in the region to support emergency cases. So, such cases are referred to either Siliguri hospital or North Bengal Medical College and Hospital (NBMCH). Both the facilities are 1-2 hours away from the village. Besides, Anganwadi or Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) centres provide health services to pregnant ladies and children up to the age of five years.

Media Access

No villager has access to any daily newspaper or magazines except for two school teachers. Radio is available in 2 houses only but Television set (with cable or dish facilities) is found in almost all houses. Internet or web media has not reached the hamlet yet. Here, almost every family has a mobile phone and internet service on mobile sets is accessed only by few. Television is chiefly used for watching serials or movies and at times news. No folk communication mode is used in the village.

Now that we have assessed and briefly summarized the condition of the said hamlet, let us move to our second objective, i.e., finding out the villagers' perception about being an Indian.

Assessing the Villagers' Perception about Being an Indian

Based on the feedback obtained from the villagers, it is found that despite having very limited knowledge about India as a nation and other national markers such as national

¹¹ Health record of Siliguri Mahakuma Parishad, 2013.

language, anthem, emblem, flag etc., they still consider themselves as 'Indians' first. To establish themselves, most of the individuals boast of referring themselves as 'Indians' rather than just a villager or citizen of West Bengal. Despite the village sharing border with Bangladesh and many villagers having visited there for personal or professional reasons, the villagers refer to Bangladesh as a 'small and foreign country' and recognize India as their 'Motherland'. Not only because of 'increasing job scope here than Bangladesh' or being resident of the hamlet 'over generations' or having 'own land and home to stay in here', they prefer to recognize themselves as 'Indian' primarily because of their trans-generational leanings. Though the villagers strongly identify themselves as 'Indians' first, most of them are found to be unaware of the national leaders. The apathy towards national leaders is such that some firmly deny identifying the President or Prime Minister of India stating- 'They neither know us nor solve our problems then why should we know them?' On the contrary, most of them know the chief minister of the state. This reflects a visible disconnect of the national administration with the village which does not bode well for the sense of national belongingness.

Identifying the Factors and Agencies Fostering a Sense of Belongingness to the Nation

Certain factors are found functional in making villagers more emotionally attached to India. Based on the feedback obtained from the villagers, it is found that National Events such as Independence Day are observed in the hamlet by the youth. These certainly will go a long way in fostering and retaining a sense of belongingness to the nation among the villagers. The schools observe all national events like Independence Day and Republic Day and encourage the participation of the villagers too. Another positive factor is the political participation of the villagers. The villagers eagerly participate in local and national elections. They feel that electing the right nominees would help them have increased access to political and government facilities. All the villagers have Indian voter identity and ration cards. This reflects that they understand their rights as citizens of India.

Identifying the Factors and Agencies Dispiriting the Sense of Belongingness to the Nation

The first and foremost deterrent to the sense of belongingness to the nation is the lack of infrastructure and services. The villagers understandably feel that they are considered as second-class citizens as their basic healthcare, communications, and education rights are yet to be fulfilled even after sixty-five years of Indian independence. Though the villagers elect their representatives to local bodies with high expectations, their expectations remain unfulfilled as the representatives themselves seem unaware of facilities given by the government. This acts as a dampener. This is reflected from the feedback from some of the villagers who think that the central government allows facilities for them but they cannot receive it as the local administration is highly reluctant. There is a general lack of publicity of government services or schemes in the village. Though government officials claim to organize meetings in the schools to make people aware of given facilities

but such information fails to reach unanimously. Though the BSF observes different events, little efforts have been made so far to make the villagers aware about national affairs. That is an area that needs to be improved.

Conclusion

It is evident from the discussions so far that the standard of living at Murikhawa shows inexplicable struggle to sustain life. Though self-reliant largely, the villagers have to depend on facilitators too. With lack of private service providers, the villagers solely depend upon the government for any help. Despite being busy in their daily chores, they recognize themselves as Indians. Though not enough acquainted with national attributes, they villagers are found attached to their homeland. Such psychological and emotional bondings can be considered an integral part of national ethos. The self-realization, while trans-generationally natural, is also practical. Thus, while it is natural of them to consider themselves as Indians as they have been born and brought up in India, the idea of India as their sustainer also acts as a motivator. However, prolonged deprivation may turn the tables.

As the study reflects, the local government and BSF need to take more initiatives in this regard. This is reflected from the fact that the villagers have lesser complaints against state or central government than the local administrators. While the villagers are closer to the local authorities, they struggle to get their entitlements from the latter.

Thus, there is considerable need for strategic intervention. Positive attitude of the local administration towards these marginal communities can help bring the villagers within the fold of extensive national development. Development of 'hard' and 'soft' infrastructure need to be initiated methodically for ensuring better living conditions for the villagers. Extensive publicity of various government services and facilities should also be ensured to reach out to the villagers. Frequent meetings between villagers, government officials and BSF are likely to help in identifying the best possible approaches from within the community. Such initiatives are likely to further encourage the sense of belongingness among the villagers towards their nation.¹²

¹² We thank of Mr. Kapil Kumar Bhattacharyya, Research Scholar, CJMC, Vishva-Bharati, Shantiniketan and Fr. Dr. George Thadathil for their valuable comments and inputs.