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Empirical Study of Stateless Persons in India-Bangladesh Ex-enclaves: Lives, Experiences, and Prospects

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Background and objective:

The geographical setting of the enclaves between Bangladesh and India was too unique to be imagined easily. The category that Indian enclaves in Bangladesh falls into is “true enclaves”. Among the existing true enclaves as of 2015, the sum of all enclaves in India-Bangladesh borderlands was the largest cluster in number of enclaves, the largest in population size and second largest in area size.¹ There were various problems associated with international border and the previous studies identified the residents of enclaves as stateless situation. They were abandoned by the states and left as stateless for 68 years since Partition of India in 1947. Finally, on 1st August in 2015, the land exchanges between the two countries were enforced and the people of these lands are formally recognized as the citizens of one of two nations.

Celebrating the land exchange as “Independence”

At the midnight of July 31, 2015, the exchanges of enclaves were completed. The residents of the former enclaves celebrated the historical moment with candle-lights. They call the moment as their “independence (shadinota)”. It was not at a few enclaves but many of the enclaves that the date for land exchange is called “independence” and since then, every year, the night has been celebrated in a same manner just like their birthday. Their celebration and expressions of joys are the relief from the oppression of being as *de facto* stateless.

Brief summary of the paper

¹ The largest enclaves in area size is Sokh, Uzbekistan enclaves in Kyrgystan. See Vinokurov (2007), Table 2.3.

This paper employs the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to uncover the lives and experiences of ex-enclaves' residents. Drawing on interviews for 312 households from former enclave residents and host communities just nearby the enclaves, and 14 Focus Group Discussions among key informants, this paper explores the circumstances that allowed the enclaves residents to continue their daily life and the strategies they have taken. As found by the previous studies such as van Schendel (2002), Jones (2009), Shewly (2013, 2016), Ferdoush (2019) and others, it was confirmed that the enclave residents were in stateless situations and were more deprived, vulnerable, and uncertain than the host Bangladeshi communities. However, when we compare some outcomes such as education, subjective evaluation, and others, many of the enclaves' residents have similar level of educations and some have access to other resources as well. Also, it was found that expanding their social networks is an important surviving strategy for enclaves' residents and their social networks are not always closed within the enclave. Above all, this paper points out that the non-rigorous implementation of institutions and kind ignorance at local neighborhood allowed their life easier than the possible worst situation.

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