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## Contested Spaces of Exchange: Informal Cross-Border Trade on the India–Bangladesh Border

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**Abstract** The India–Bangladesh border is the world’s fifth longest land border, a focus of political tension in an area with vibrant informal economies. Cross-border communities share culture and language and informal cross-border trade (ICBT) is well-established. This article explores ICBT on the Indian side of the border, examining its actors, power relations and spatial dimensions, and the vulnerabilities of those involved. Debates on the social and cultural roots of ICBT, and the vulnerability of small-scale entrepreneurs to a complicit state, and powerful middlemen in lucrative sectors of ICBT, inform the analysis. The trade is theorized through the lens of *jugaad*, the Indian term for ‘making do’ and ‘instinctive creativity’. The research draws on case studies of three cross-border sectors, everyday trade in small household goods, the politically sensitive cattle trade, and cross-border medical/healthcare services. The mechanisms of *jugaad* are seen to some degree in all three case studies, but heavy state regulation gives advantage to controlling middlemen and state officials. Finally, we argue that ICBT is a critical component of the wider political economy in the border regions of West Bengal, and that the forgotten sector of ICBT could, if supported by light-touch regulation, have important poverty-reduction potential in enabling livelihoods for marginalized border communities.

**Keywords:** Informal economy; informal cross-border trade; *jugaad*; India–Bangladesh border

### Highlights

- Informal cross-border trade (ICBT) on the India–Bangladesh border is politically sensitive and inextricably linked to India’s extensive informal economy.
- ICBT in small household items mostly takes place through formal border crossings, typified by informal traders, often women, carrying small loads in their luggage.

- The contested cattle trade is complex, controlled by middlemen and linked across states in India.
- ICBT is expanding into new areas, for example, the use of internet and mobile phones to facilitate cross-border medical/healthcare services.
- The Indian concept of *jugaad*, or instinctive creativity, is illustrated throughout ICBT, but restrictive border practices stifle innovation and create vulnerabilities for marginalized traders.
- There is considerable scope to reduce vulnerability through more transparent border processes and recognition of the poverty-reduction potential of ICBT.

## Introduction

Borderlands are transitional zones defined by history, geography and politics, where informal cross-border trade (ICBT) and illicit smuggling are rife. The economic, social and physical impact of borders on borderlands is significant and, although peripheral in their national contexts, the economies of borderlands are often politically sensitive and linked to national and international value chains. Given the significance of ICBT between India and Bangladesh (Sikder and Sarkar, 2005), the length of India's land borders, the scale of informal work in India and sensitivity of cross-border relations, it is surprising that there has been relatively little academic research into the economic practices, spatial dimensions and poverty impacts of this thriving trade.

The India–Bangladesh border is a focus of geopolitical tensions in an area with vibrant informal economies, and a riverine border. It is the fifth longest land border in the world. Communities on either side of the border share language and culture, and some stretches of the border are poorly defined. Many split agricultural holdings span the border, and the 150+ enclaves of Indian territory in Bangladesh and Bangladeshi territory in India raised issues of citizenship and belonging (Shewly, 2015). Although these were rationalized by treaty in 2015, communities in border areas still face issues of abandonment and marginalization. Indian nationalism and terrorism concerns have resulted in increasing fencing and policing of the border, with a nightly military parade at the Petrapole–Benapole checkpoint a symbol of its sensitivity. NGOs have sought to reduce drug smuggling, human trafficking and the excessive use of force by Indian security forces along the border (HRW, 2010). Much less attention has been given to the everyday economic exchange between communities in each territory.

This article focuses on informal trade across the border between the Indian state of West Bengal and Bangladesh in order to explore the economic and social practices of Indian ICBT. The ‘border’ can be seen as an international political/legal construct, a physical division between communities affecting the everyday lives of citizens, or as a space of economic opportunity. Cross-border trade is defined here as trade whose commercial transactions take place on both sides of an international border – both formal/

informal, licit/illicit, connected to national economies through porous crossings and socio-cultural networks. ICBT is illicit trade which evades regulatory processes or procedures on one or other side of the border. Golub (2015) argues that ICBT involves two types of illegality; the goods traded (e.g. narcotics or trafficking) or the manner of trading (e.g. evading customs duties and regulations). The latter – the focus of this article – refers to trade in legal goods by illicit means.

In this article, we examine the **socio-cultural characteristics of the operation of different ICBT sectors** on the Indian border; the **actors, processes and power relations** which exist in divided administrations; the **spatial dimensions of ICBT** near checkpoints, in remoter hinterlands, and at border *haats* (weekly cross-border markets); and the **vulnerabilities** of those involved in the trade. A key question for the research is to determine the interplay between **small-scale survivalist trade** driven by the initiative of low-income traders, and **larger complex systems** which exploit social relations and political networks to build a lucrative trade. Both take place within a neoliberal frame but are very different in impact. We argue that flexibility and economic scope of ICBT make critical contributions to livelihoods in the border regions of West Bengal, reflecting the Indian concept of *jugaad*, the term for ‘making do’ and ‘instinctive creativity’, but that elite co-option by state agents and private-sector middlemen create acute vulnerabilities for those involved in the trade. Although the fieldwork was undertaken during a spike in Covid-19 in the region, and in-person interviews were impossible, the findings make a useful contribution to literatures on Indian informality (*jugaad*) and ICBT in showing how vulnerabilities of informal work are accentuated in the overlapping regulatory contexts of border zones.

The article focuses on the 300 km stretch of the border from the Hili crossing in the north to the Ghoadanga crossing in the south and the land between, which includes the major Petrapole-Benapole crossing. After the introduction, the second section examines debates on ICBT and the concept of *jugaad* and its association with entrepreneurship, resourcefulness and subjugation. The third section introduces the case studies and explores the broader context of cross-border trade in India, followed in the fourth section by an outline of the methods. The fifth section presents the findings from interviews in the West Bengal border zone. The sixth section, the conclusions, argues that analysis of ICBT needs to explore the heterogeneity of social networks and power relations that underpin the trade, the spatial patterns of trade, and that the definition of ICBT should be expanded to include aspatial trade facilitated by the internet and mobile phones.

### Conceptualizing ICBT

ICBT is an economic, social and cultural phenomenon prevalent in many regions of the world which often reflects historic trade networks and cultures which span borders. Often ICBT takes place in contexts of widespread informality, where the

gaps in control by state governments, border security forces and local districts provide scope for entrepreneurialism. Jurisdiction is often split between local and national administrations on both sides of the border, creating scope for actors to circumvent or co-opt the state through informal market relations, but also resulting in acute vulnerability for small-scale traders subject to complex, often politically motivated regulation, and increasing securitization of border control. It is clear, however that different sectors of the informal economy have markedly different modes of operation.

Often ICBT trade networks reflect historic patterns of trade, a survivalist mechanism for many low-income workers, particularly when ethnic communities straddle porous borders or where recent political settlements divide communities and established trading routes. One argument is that ICBT is a distinct stratum of informal trade; a systematic review of 45 academic papers on the defining features of ICBT in sub-Saharan Africa finds that ICBT, which accounts for nearly 70% of employment in sub-Saharan Africa, is an expression of African entrepreneurship and the foundation anchoring formal systems, which empowers individuals and communities by giving them a livelihood, and benefits consumers through a range of inexpensive products (Kahiya and Kadirov, 2020). ICBT should thus be considered a ‘societal mode of operation’ which allows many cross-border traders, often women, to feed their families, especially where government corruption is rife (Kahiya and Kadirov, 2020; Meagher, 2003). However, the nature of government intervention in ICBT leaves traders vulnerable to physical or psychological harm and at risk of rent-seeking and exploitation.

Several studies have emphasized the role of small-scale entrepreneurs in driving ICBT and the diversity of sectors involved. A major study of 20 land border posts spanning 11 southern African countries found that women were the majority of traders at nearly half the border posts studied (Peberdy et al., 2015). Many of the 4,500 traders interviewed travelled frequently, 90 per cent taking goods in just one direction. Goods traded commonly included fresh food, groceries, new clothes, household goods and electrical items. Traders made significant customs payments, implying that tax evasion was not a motive for trade, but they were vulnerable to cumbersome procedures, fluctuating tariffs, confiscations, bribery, intrusive questioning, theft and physical harassment (Peberdy et al., 2015; UNCTAD, 2019). The study concluded that cross-border trade, if supported, could contribute to household poverty reduction, and that the overall volume of trade, duties paid and type and range of goods indicate that this sector should be given much greater support by governments. Others have looked at the role of displacement and disputed citizenship in borderlands, where cross-border livelihoods provide opportunities for survival but the border is a precarious constraint (Zhou et al., 2022).

Frequently, larger-scale operators dominate cross-border trade through highly organized elaborate ‘practical norms’ (Titeca and de Herdt, 2010). These depend on a complex interplay of formal and informal operators and clandestine transactions through formal customs posts or under-policed border zones. Sometimes political

tensions spark opportunities for lucrative trade. For example, for decades subsidised contraband fuel was transported from oil-rich Libya to Tunisia, but as conflict closed Libya's refineries fuel syphoned from petrol stations in Algeria was transported the other way. There was also a huge loss of subsidized medicines across the border (Brown et al., 2017; Gallien, 2020, Lasessing, 2018). However, recent crackdowns by the Tunisian government on drugs and arms shipments along the contraband routes illustrate the political sensitivity of ICBT.

The powerful operators and complex supply chains which link formal/informal enterprises and state/non-state actors in ICBT often operate through ethnic and religious networks and numerous intermediaries such as customs agents and transport firms (Titeca and de Herdt, 2010). In north-west Uganda, Titeca (2012) found large-scale ICBT dominated by 'tycoons' – powerful businessmen operating an informal regulatory system which depended on complicit state authorities and integration of the trade with the formal economy. Meagher (2003; 2018) argues that the informal economy reshapes rather than merges into official regulatory processes, and that the influence of elite traders may stretch beyond bribery of government officials, to encompass election support or preferential access to goods.

Co-option of state officials appears to be essential for ICBT to function, ranging from small-scale bribes to the direct involvement of influential government elites. In North Africa, Gallien (2020) found that smuggling rarely occurs 'under the radar of the state', that states rely on illegal economies to support political settlements, and that illicit borderland economies subsist in a context of formal state neglect. However, the level of sanctions against ICBT can fluctuate rapidly, adding to the uncertainty of the trade. Here, middlemen play a key role in facilitating ICBT, arranging contacts between sellers and buyers, cross-border transport or payments to key officials – in the police, army, customs offices or government. They can also warn of crackdowns and mediate in cases of fines or confiscations (Titeca and Flynn, 2014). It is thus debateable whether middlemen facilitate an artificially constrained trading network or enhance constraints in order to extort cooperation from vulnerable informal operators.

Indian researchers have explored the concept of *jugaad* to theorize the role of entrepreneurialism and middlemen in India's informal economy. This has not yet been widely applied to ICBT, but we use it to frame the concept of ICBT here and interrogate the idea. *Jugaad* is a word of north Indian origin, roughly translated as 'make-do' or 'a temporary fix', originally referring to old vehicles (cars, motorcycles or trucks) (Birtchnell, 2011). *Jugaad* is seen as an entrepreneurial approach to navigating resource constraints and a powerful tool for development – an Indian approach to innovation (Badami, 2018; Birtchnell, 2011; Prabhu and Jain, 2015; Verma, 2017), promoting survival in Mumbai's gig economy (Sivarajan et al., 2021), or central to India's illegal cattle trade (Narayanan, 2019). The concept is linked to the idea of 'frugal innovation' which highlights the innovative business practices of poor people (Leliveld and Knorringa, 2018). Frugal innovation is also challenged for

hiding the exploitation of agencies profiting from the precarity of informal labour (Knorringa et al., 2016) and failing to recognize the elaborate economic systems of the informal economy (Meagher, 2018). The concept has not been applied to ICBT but is useful to examine the tension between community-led entrepreneurialism and exploitative trade.

Borderlands are spaces of overlapping national and local jurisdictions, with the police, customs, security, local and national agencies all claiming different areas of control. Spatially, border zones are varied. In some spaces of ICBT, such as those at major border crossings, trade is highly regulated and ICBT depends on collusion with border authorities. Elsewhere, supervision may be sporadic, allowing more flexible activities. This complexity presents specific challenges for informal traders trying to negotiate competing regulatory regimes which often displace local government jurisdictions. Instead, border spaces reflect broader political, economic and social processes, shaped by international trade or military confrontation (Buursink, 2001; Kabir, 2009; Nugent, 2012). Borders are markers of inequality, and certain groups are particularly vulnerable at borders including migrants, trafficked people and some women, e.g. prostitutes.

This discussion suggests the need to analyse the processes and power relations underlying the development and operation of ICBT, and extent to which low-income actors drive the modalities of trade or are subject to powerful economic or state interests which increase the risks of informal work. It is thus critical to examine whether ICBT in any location is predominantly a localized exchange between communities spanning the border and contributing to low-income livelihoods, or part of much larger transnational network with sophisticated control networks and relations with the state. The study of the West Bengal/Bangladesh border demonstrates how different border spaces and trades are subject to very different processes of control.

## Methods

The prevalence of Covid-19 significantly restricted our planned fieldwork, but findings show an emergent and changing landscape of trade. The broad focus of the study from Hili to Ghojadanga enabled the assessment of the spatial dimensions of ICBT in different border zones including the large Petrapole-Benapole ICP, smaller land ports and unofficial rural crossings.

The first stage was an extended and in-depth review of literature and local media including newspapers and video clips in both English and Bengali. Following ethics approval, we had planned to carry out in-person interviews with cross-border traders supported by key informant interviews, and we made a scoping visit to the study area, but the alarming spread of a new Covid-19 variant made further fieldwork unsafe for both interviewers and interviewees, so we reverted to phone and internet interviews as the only approach possible, reaching 21 key informants in West



Bengal. We first prepared a list of categories of people we wanted to interview, and then developed contacts through publicly available information of government employees in block and village-level administration and lists of NGOs working in these areas. We also contacted journalists working in border areas who reported on cross border trade, and then used snowballing through these contacts to reach other groups. The final list of interviewees included: transport and clearing agents; block and village administrators; local politicians; NGOs, local journalists and residents living in border zones. We developed interview guides for each category and, after establishing initial contact, we shared the participant information sheet and consent forms with participants, followed by a telephone or video call for the interviews.

A critical gap in our data is the lack interviews with low-income traders directly involved in ICBT, but we judged that it would be too difficult by phone to build the trust necessary to interview vulnerable people working in illicit trade, and so as a proxy we used residents who purchased goods imported through ICBT who knew about its operation. This gap limits our analysis of the power relations between the authorities, middlemen and those directly involved in trade, although some triangulation of results was achieved, and while gaps remain the findings indicate fascinating processes of exchange and many avenues for future study.

The phone interviews explored the predominant livelihoods in the area, local governance, formal and informal cross-border trade and the role of state security in facilitating (or scrutinizing) ICBT. The analysis was grounded, exploring common threads emerging from the interviews, which led to the focus on three common sectors of ICBT: trade in small-scale household goods, cattle trade and the emerging medical services sector. The findings were analysed through our themes of the socio-cultural aspects of ICBT, actors and processes, its spatial implications and the vulnerabilities of those involved in the trade.

The sensitive aspects of large-scale smuggling, human trafficking and associated vulnerabilities were beyond the scope of this study, although anecdotally it was reported that due to Covid lockdowns the trafficking of Bangladeshis to India for domestic service had largely halted and trafficking for the sex trade had decreased. Furthermore, we could not explore livelihoods on split agricultural holdings, although some interviewees mentioned the challenges they faced. The data is thus exploratory rather than a definitive picture of this complex trade, but the findings have important implications for both theory and practice.

### **Confronting the India–Bangladesh border**

Informality is endemic to the Indian economy. According to government statistics, in 2017–18 the informal (unorganized) sector contributes an estimated 52% of GVA (gross value added), and 92% of the workers work informally without a written contract, paid leave or other benefits (Ramana Murthy, 2019). Given the historical links between India and Bangladesh, and the scale of informal trade, it is surprising that

relatively little research has been undertaken on the scale of informal trade across this contested border, its poverty-reduction potential, or the extent to which fluctuating security affects trade operations on the ground. This section sets the context for the case studies which follow.

The India–Bangladesh border is 4097 km long adjoining the Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram (Das, 2008). Although previously open and lightly guarded, much is now fenced and regulated (Johnson and Jones, 2016). Communities on either side share culture and language and the ‘zero line’ of the international border is often poorly defined in this shifting riverine landscape (Datta, 2020). Along the zero line there are many marginalized villages, where people depend on agriculture, cattle rearing or fishing. There are about a hundred villages along the zero line, with the doors of some houses opening across the border, raising issues of citizenship, security and conflict (Das, 2008). Monsoon flooding makes it difficult to locate permanent border posts along the zero line, and floods the *chars* (small islands which emerge and are occupied only in dry season), where claims over land and resources are intertwined with ‘insider-outsider’ discourse of being Indian or Bangladeshi (Chowdhury, 2020).

Cross-border trade between India and Bangladesh has extensive impacts. The Petrapole–Benapole (India/Bangladesh) Integrated Check Post (ICP) is the largest land port in South Asia and handles nearly 30% of land-based trade between India and Bangladesh and around 2.5 million passengers a year (LPAI, 2021). There is one further ICP on the India–Bangladesh border and 34 smaller land ports including Hili (South Dinajpur district) and Ghojadanga (North 24 Parganas district) both scheduled for expansion. Exports from India include cotton and synthetic fabrics, motor vehicle parts, iron and steel, chemicals and dyes, cereals and small vehicles. Imports from Bangladesh include readymade garments, cotton rags, briefcases and bags, and jute yarn. The urban hinterland of the Petrapole ICP is rapidly developing as a transport and logistics hub, with about 5,000–6,000 trucks involved in regular border crossings, according to interviewees. In Bongaon, the town closest to Petrapole, many large import-export businesses have set up offices and smaller businesses and private parking lots cater for the thousands of trucks awaiting customs clearance (Law, 2018).

Since 2001, border surveillance in the ‘zero-line zone’ along the border has intensified (Das, 2008; McDuie-Ra, 2014). Security on the Indian side is overseen by the Border Security Forces (BSF) a central-government armed police force established in 1968 with powers of arrest, search and seizure; its initial jurisdiction covering 15 km from the zero line was extended to 50 km in 2021. The BSF is reported for serious violations of international law, including torture, intimidation and verbal abuse of civilians living near the border, and the use of lethal force (HRW, 2010). The increased securitization of border control is justified by the political discourse of preventing ‘terrorism’, curbing illicit cross-border trade and halting illegal migration (Ghosh, 2019; McDuie-Ra, 2014). Studies have highlighted the (il)legitimation of free movement (Jones, 2010), and Muslims of Bangladeshi origin have

reported increasing hostility in this exceptional space, where ‘the ‘normal laws of the state do not apply and the BSF is given authority to make decisions to kill people without consequences’ (Jones, 2009a, pp. 894).

Informal trade proliferates, both at formal border crossings and elsewhere along the zero line (Pohit and Taneja, 2003), whose scale and significance cannot be overlooked (Sikder and Sarkar, 2005). Much of the trade is small-scale linked to trade in agricultural goods and cattle, and the transit of goods and people, supported by a wide network of truck drivers, money exchangers, fixers and border guards. For example, in Brahmanbaria in Tripura state, local shopkeepers operate informally because of impediments to formal trade (Sikder and Sarkar, 2005). There are also problems of illegal human trafficking; and (il)legal movements of people (for marriages, work, employment, medical needs, etc., or evading legal action) (Jones, 2009b; 2009c).

One response by the Indian and Bangladeshi authorities has been to open border *haats*, weekly markets accessed from both sides of the border under the government’s Border Area Development Programme designed to meet the development needs of people living in remote border areas. From 2011–2015 four border *haats* were set up along Bangladesh’s north and eastern border with Tripura and Meghalaya states. The *haats* are simple markets where people from both countries trade in food items, agricultural implements, household goods and other products, initially with a limit on individual purchases of USD 200 (Bose and Roy, 2020). The *haats* are all established on the zero-line in remote areas where agriculture predominates, and provide important local employment in vending, transport and services (Bose and Roy, 2020). The *haats* legitimize ICBT and are considered safe spaces for women traders. The *haats* also provide space for people to meet, which in turn develops social and economic ties across the border, and the border agencies prefer more *haats* along the border than strict policing (Datt et al., 2018). The *haats* are also thought to reduce smuggling-associated conflict, although local newspapers have reported issues of corruption linked to border *haats* (TIWN, 2015). A report in 2023 noted that 16 more *haats* are planned on the West Bengal and Mizoram borders with Bangladesh (Mattoo, 2023).

ICBT continues to flourish, despite the vulnerabilities of operating in a heavily regulated border zone, but given its prevalence it is surprising that there are few studies which examine power relations along this contested border, nor the vulnerability and poverty implications of its operation. There is also little study of the operation of cross-border networks which challenge the BSF regulatory context nor the governance implications of this rapidly evolving trade. The implications of border *haats*, as transitional spaces which mitigate conflicts in ICBT have also not been explored. Despite Covid-related restrictions to our fieldwork, this article highlights some of the social and economic relations which underly this complex ICBT.

### Negotiating the border

The three ICBT sectors of trade in small-scale household goods, cattle and medical services were selected for analysis because of their prominence in the interview responses, their political and poverty-reduction significance, and lack of recent research on these in West Bengal. Each sector, discussed in detail below, is very different in operation and spatial scale, which also gave a broad spread for the analysis. It is clear from the interviews that trade dominates the economy of this historically-porous border. India and Bangladesh have cultural similarities and people have always had relationships across the borders. However, as larger companies move in, informal enterprise is being displaced into more marginal activities and spaces, with a growth in larger-scale border-related activities such as money changing, hotels, managing parking lots and truck loading/unloading. As one customs clearing agent noted, local logistics companies used to know and understand local needs, but now larger firms are moving in, and with more use of the internet, informal workers are losing employment (Interview TA1).

Despite the proximity of Kolkata to the region, there is very little employment in the area in either government or industry, as highlighted by an NGO (Interview NG1), and both residents and local officials emphasized that village *panchayats* (local government) have no resources to invest in skills development or livelihoods (Interviews LP1, BA1). International tensions and attempts to control smuggling have resulted in increased surveillance, and BSF officials subject residents to frequent checks of nationality papers, ownership documents for cattle, vehicles, mobile phones and other goods commonly smuggled (Ghosh, 2019; Jones, 2009a). The case studies here examine the fluidity of the resulting adaptations in ICBT, and their social and spatial dimensions.

### *Household goods: social and cultural networks of trade*

Trade in small-scale household goods is one of the most common types of ICBT. The goods pass mainly through the official crossings at the Petrapole ICP and elsewhere, carried in small loads by individual traders supported by a wide facilitation network. Goods such as cosmetics, toiletries, mosquito nets, blankets, cooking utensils, stationery, spices, garments, baby food and many other items are carried by individual travellers in bags or luggage. The bulk of the traffic is from India to Bangladesh, involving goods not readily available in Bangladesh which are either sold in Bangladeshi markets or used for individual consumption. The close affinity of communities across the border means that certain goods and brands carry cultural memories and a sense of luxury.

*People buy minimum quantities of goods such as cosmetics, baby foods, bedding, soaps, mosquito nets, mats, blankets, and even from Kashmiri merchants selling shawls. So, they*

*start off with small quantities and then increase the quantities each time. Local businesses are thriving due to this trade. (Interview TA1)*

Many actors are involved in ICBT in household goods, from business owners (both men and women) to middlemen, agents, security forces, local government officials and the passengers who carry goods across the border, often Bangladeshi women who live near the border who, according to a local journalist, do not arouse the suspicion of BSF guards and immigration officials.

*Generally, people arrive from the border areas near Benapole, and maybe even from Jessore (Bangladesh side) in the morning.... Women cross the border legally with stamps on their passport. They spend the night in Bongaon, buy essentials such as utensils, sarees, food items, groceries, spices, medicines at the maximum possible allowable quantity and carry those in their bag back to Jessore in Bangladesh. They sell these items in local Bangladeshi markets. They do this at least twice or thrice each month. (Interview JN1)*

A network of *dalals* (agents or middlemen) operates on both sides of the border to control the trade, suggesting a wider geographical reach for the goods than the immediate vicinity of the land ports. Travellers are often approached by traders and, for a small fee, are asked to carry legally permitted quantities of goods across the border to avoid customs duty and taxes.

*People who take goods from here illegally have a 'setting' (informal social relations) with the people from the other side who live nearest to the port. Suppose the person who is coming to India was informed by his/her network that they need certain items for the next few days say 2000 pieces. Now, over the next ten days, the network on the Indian side will send those 2000 items in smaller batches through 100–200 people who are crossing the border legally... ... The Bangladeshi residents come here, buy the goods and leave them here. The Indians help to transit them through the border. It is a mutual thing. (Interview LT1)*

Amongst *dalals* there is a hierarchy, with a few powerful agents known locally as *malik men* remotely controlling specific sectors of trade, bribing officials and facilitating transport and *line men* executing their orders, as reported by a rural resident.

*Merchants from Bangladesh buy grocery products including rice, pulses, salt, oil, spices, cosmetics, and seasonal fruits from India. 'Line men' make the entire arrangements to transport their products on the other side of the border. I myself often buy products like pots, pans, clothes, coconuts, sugarcane, etc. from Bangladeshi traders. Almost all the shopkeepers in these areas accept Bangladeshi currency, and money changers also convert Bangladeshi into Indian currency. (Interview LT5)*

The relationship of traders with middlemen is ambiguous. *Malik men* play a key facilitating role, but are seen both as exploitative and supportive.

*There are local money lenders who lend money at high interest rates, and are known locally known as ‘malik men’. They control the entire business from stocking of products to transporting of goods across the border. However, malik men always help the ordinary people like us in difficult times. (Interview LT5)*

Many of the products are small-scale. As one local resident reported, products such as shrimp, raisins and cloves are smuggled from Bangladesh – with the cloves sometimes sprinkled with kerosene to disguise the smell, and cooking utensils and clothing and antiseptic creams made in Bangladesh are also in demand in India (Interview LT5). Women from the Indian side sometimes swim across the border pushing baskets of betel leaves and nuts which are prized in Bangladesh. Salt and cumin are also exported.

*Once I saw some women tie cumin packets to their belly. They looked like pregnant women. They tried to cross the border but were caught by the BSF. They thought the BSF would not search pregnant women. But they did not know that female BSF officers were present that day. Phensedyl, a kind of cough syrup, was also exported illegally to Bangladesh. It is used as a narcotic drug in Bangladesh. (Interview LT4)*

For larger-scale ICBT, political affiliation with the ruling party is essential, and without protection it cannot function, as interviewees emphasized (Interviews LT5, LT1, LT2). As the ruling party changes, so political affiliation switches. A local trader working mainly through the Petrapole ICP suggested that there are mechanisms to bribe politicians to lobby government officials or the BSF to get goods through customs.

Previously, Bangladeshi residents used to cross the border informally to buy household goods from Taki market, near the Ghojadanga land port, but as controls were tightened the trade halted. Trade in bulky agricultural produce such as seeds or cattle fodder still takes place in the less-militarized rural border zones. As one interviewee noted, villagers of the border area are extremely poor, often migrant or daily labourers, and the ‘unwarranted’ restrictions by the BSF have left them with little option but to engage in smuggling, despite the risks involved. Often interventions from the BSF are very heavy-handed, as noted by a local official and a local politician below.

*Sometimes, if there is suspicion about somebody’s identity, the BSF asks for intelligence on whether they are within our jurisdiction. They often release the person if we can trace that person’s identity and residency. (Interview BA1)*

*Our relationship with the BSF is not good. Many times, they arrest innocent villagers as Bangladeshis. They also beat us badly. We cannot lodge complaint against them. (Interview LP3)*

However, Bangladeshis can now obtain multiple-entry Indian visas, which has increased passenger numbers through the official border posts (Interview LT1).

Some aspects of ICBT in household goods are consistent with observations elsewhere where ICBT is seen as a ‘societal mode of operation’ (Kahiya and Kadirov, 2020) based on traditional cultural ties. As Peberdy et al. (2015) found in Africa, there is considerable involvement of women, for example the Bangladeshi women involved in one-way trade at the Petrapole ICP. However, the sensitivity of relations between India and Bangladesh and, at the time of the study, the political discourse emphasizing Hindu nationalism in India, meant that the scope for *jugaad* as a bottom-up approach to innovation amongst small-scale traders (as noted by Birchenell, 2011) is constrained, and that little can happen without the larger-scale brokers who co-opt state officials and help navigate the violence of the BSF jurisdiction.

### ***Breaking taboos: informal cattle trade***

Cattle trade across the India–Bangladesh border is politically sensitive and has been more widely researched than other aspects of ICBT. Cows are considered sacred in Hindu belief systems, and beef consumption amongst Hindus is low so the animals become a burden to poor families once they stop producing milk. Shortly after independence, a constitutional amendment to Article 48 protected cows from slaughter, which has been argued as discriminatory against Muslims (Adcock, 2018; Copland, 2017). Many Indian states now have legislation to prohibit cow slaughter for human consumption (Narayanan, 2019) but West Bengal remains one of the few states in India where it is not legally banned. Thus there is a large-scale trade controlled by a network of agents which transports cattle from the northern Indian states of Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand to cattle markets in rural West Bengal where they are sold for agrarian or sacrificial purposes (Ghosh, 2019).

Many inter-state and locally-reared cattle are also sold to Bangladesh where, as a Muslim-majority country, beef consumption and the slaughter of cows during the Eid celebrations is common, and there is a demand for smuggled animals at affordable prices. Newspapers and literature reported large-scale illegal cross-border smuggling of older cows and bulls, estimated to be worth USD 675 million in 2014–15 (Ghosh, 2019). Cattle are harnessed together to swim across river frontiers at night, or sedated and manhandled over barbed wire fences, but recent increases in military and police border controls have significantly reduced the trade, which interviewees considered to be politically-driven (Interview JN1). Increased border controls have constrained activities, but the trade still continues.

Cattle smuggling remains an ‘organized’, ‘large scale’, politically well-connected and ‘vastly profitable’ trade (Ghosh, 2019). Narayanan (2019) found a huge network of illegal cattle smugglers spread across various Indian states, despite the ban on cow slaughter and heavy scrutiny. The scale of this illegal cattle trade within India (estimated 1.8–2.0 million cows in 2015) and the small number of registered adult cattle in the border regions (153,602 cows in 2015) suggests that cattle are exported via West Bengal, which requires the large-scale bribery of different government agents

(Ghosh, 2019). An interviewee with a local trader confirmed this finding, with cows sold for around US\$ 200-270.

*Syndicates help smuggle cows to the other side through the black market ... The BSF are bribed for this. There is a network of agents for cattle smuggling, a huge network that is probably spread across India. So, there are agents at every point of exchange, such as federal state borders and international borders. These networks have a special agreement with the police. If there is no such agreement, they cannot carry on the cattle smuggling business. (Interview LT2)*

Most cattle smuggling takes place in rural areas. Although zero-line zones are technically administered by the local village *panchayat* they are controlled by the BSF to curb illegal trade and to stop insurgencies, with no clear limits of control (Jones, 2009a; McDuie-Ra, 2014, Shahriar, 2021). Residents of the zero-line zones face both exploitation by smuggling networks and heavy-handed security policing, and are under constant threat of assault, arrest or prosecution (Ghosh, 2019; Narayanan, 2019). Nationality, religion, gender and caste all contribute to vulnerabilities (Adcock and Govindarajan, 2019), and BSF controls have resulted in high fatality rates among suspected cattle smugglers (Shahriar, 2021; Uddin, 2018).

Cattle-smuggling is a response to poverty, and increasing regulation as border fencing and control has limited the livelihood options for local farmers. According to a local NGO working on human rights' violations, exploitation is rife, and directed against the most vulnerable residents.

*Villagers in the Indo-Bangladesh border area are from marginalized sections of society and from extremely poor backgrounds. Many in this community are migratory labourers and daily labourers with meagre incomes. Illegitimate restrictions imposed by the BSF on agriculture and fishing activities have left these people with limited livelihood options. Hence, illegal activities like smuggling, cattle-running and cross-border movement are frequent in these parts. Despite the risks of these activities, the villagers need to earn some extra money. (Interview NG1).*

Several interviewees were reluctant to discuss cattle smuggling but confirmed that local residents face intrusive security control. As one village official said:

*Residents of this area have to keep with them a certificate (commonly known as 'porchi') issued by the Pradhan (head of the village panchayat) from the village panchayat ... They also have to inform the gram or village panchayat how much food grain they bring into the zero-line zones. The number of cattle is also to be reported. If any animal is slaughtered as food, it must be reported ... But many of them are secretly involved in cattle smuggling. (Interview VA2)*

Women and girls are particularly vulnerable in this context, as an NGO interviewee highlighted.



*Women are always vulnerable socially everywhere, but in the border areas things are more prominent. A BSF jawan (staff member) is posted for say two to three years, and has power and authority to extract whatever he needs and that includes sex. For that he gives certain discounts such as few bottles of whiskey or allows the husband to take (a couple of cows) outside or across the border illegally and spends time with the wife.... Class 7/8 girls are not allowed to go to school.... We know about these issues, such as torture, rape. Torture is very common. (Interview NG1)*

Applying the concept of *jugaad* to the illegal cattle trade, Narayanan (2019) highlights the inherent contradiction in India's world-leading dairy industry, whereby the state promotes milk production but has no policy on the use or slaughter of 'unproductive' older female and male cattle. Resolution, she argues, is achieved through creation of 'grey spaces' of transaction by a mix of covert social contract, entrepreneurship and corruption, which enables the state to conceal and remain 'distant' from these practices. Cow slaughter thus results in an exchange of protection, favours, information and money which shapes state policy. Our findings in West Bengal suggest that cattle smuggling to Bangladesh is intricately linked to exploitative intra-state networks. However, discussion of *jugaad* largely avoids the issue of state violence towards vulnerable Muslim or low-income communities who are penalized to demonstrate state 'hostility' towards a politically unacceptable trade. Such violence was certainly evidenced in our study of West Bengal.

### ***Medical/healthcare cross-border trade***

The third area of ICBT highlighted in our interviews is the emerging phenomenon of medical and healthcare services in Indian border towns catering for Bangladeshis. Although medical services in India are generally legal, access for non-nationals is facilitated by a growing network of informal operators on both sides of the border who use mobile phones and the internet to arrange everything from transport and visas to appointments for patients and their families. Both governments now issue long-duration multiple-entry visas, and medical-visit visas. Some patients are treated in the growing private healthcare sector of border towns such as Bongaon, Hasnabad or Taki, while some go to hospitals in Kolkata, or to cities in south India with reputable healthcare such as Chennai or Bangalore (Interview NG2, BA1, LT4).

*If [people] visit for medical purposes ... they will likely enter India through the Petrapole or Ghojadanga land port to reach Kolkata more easily. Even the transport network is much better there. They have options such as trains or bus to Kolkata. If they enter through these two ports, they will reach Kolkata in two hours. (Interview BA1)*

Medical knowledge is similar in India and Bangladesh, but a good transport network around Petrapole and Ghojadanga land ports and the reputation of the Indian healthcare system are key attractions. Interviewees suggest that Indian services and infrastructure are better, and it is only two hours by rail from Petrapole and Ghojadanga to Kolkata. Moreover, Indian doctors often prescribe trademark medicines not

available in Bangladesh, resulting in a growing cross-border trade in medicines and medical products. While some medicines are exported legally through the land port, there are concerns that others are being exported informally through a network of travellers and are not subject to regulation or control, as both residents and transport agents reported (Interviews LT1, JN1, LT5).

Two factors have facilitated this growth. First, the proliferation of internet use to access medical care, visa applications and travel, which agents facilitate. Second, the informal economy has precipitated the growth of many smaller privately owned facilities that cater to a Bangladeshi clientele, but as one interviewee noted, the standard of service is not questioned (Interview LT1).

A critical problem is the healthcare disparities within West Bengal which this research highlights. While more affluent Bangladeshi patients can access Indian healthcare, communities in the border regions do not have the same access. As one resident noted:

*People who come for medical treatment are usually of a higher social and economic position than normal villagers in India. They have access to internet, they have good quality smartphones which enables them to book appointments. (They) know everything about doctor's chambers and how to get there ... you know normal villagers like us don't know how to do that ... . We don't get access, but they do. (Interview LP5)*

The informal cross-border medical trade is interesting because of its aspatial organization. While patients travel through official land ports, the agents and networks which support them work mainly by mobile phone and the internet and are described as influential *line-men*.

*Through their 'line men' they easily get their appointments, they visit doctors' chambers without any hassle, collect pathology reports, buy medicines, and return home safely. In this way, the businesses of doctor's clinics, pathology centres, pharmacies, x-rays, and ambulances are flourishing in our border town. (Interview LT5)*

There is also a strong spatial impact, resulting in the growing privatized healthcare economy in the Indian border towns, where doctor's clinics and pathological laboratories cater mainly to Bangladeshi patients. As one local resident noted,

*[Medical] goods enter India through the Ghojadanga land port where they are checked by BSF and they pay the duty to central government. All types of goods are traded. People come legally using a passport and visa, mostly to see doctors and other medical treatments, visit relatives, and when the purpose is fulfilled or visa expires, they return to Bangladesh through Ghojadanga. (Interview L5)*

Initial findings suggest that the medical cross-border trade operates in similar fashion to the other sectors of trade in ICBT, with middlemen playing a key role in facilitating the trade through unofficial means. Initially, there is perhaps more scope for individual

innovation but as the trade grows, access is likely to be increasingly controlled by agents.

## Conclusions

This research sheds new light on the economic practices of Indian ICBT through an examination of three common cross-border sectors, the trade in household goods, the informal cattle trade and medical/healthcare trade. In these conclusions we first return to our cross-cutting objectives relating to socio-cultural characteristics; actors, processes and power relations; spatial dimensions, and vulnerabilities of those involved in ICBT. We then consider wider contributions to the literature on ICBT. Crucially, the discussion below is predicated on the belief that, as argued by Peberdy et al. (2015), cross-border trade could, if supported by light-touch regulation, have important poverty-reduction potential. We argue that while cross-border trade is usually defined as trade with commercial transactions on both sides of an international border, both formal/informal and licit/illicit, mobile phones and internet-based transactions are creating an evolving concept and expansion of ICBT. Given our challenges of data collection, our conclusions are tentative, but suggest directions for future study.

The *socio-cultural context of ICBT* is widely prized, as the trade in small-scale household goods illustrates, both as an expression of historic cultural ties, and as trade in culture-specific items important to communities on both sides of the border. Much of this operates clandestinely, and although controlled mainly benefits border guards rather than serving wider political aims. The border *haats* are an interesting way of recognizing and supporting cultural trading links and encouraging benign oversight of ICBT rather than heavy-handed regulation. Unfortunately, we were not able to look at their operation in more detail in this research.

In contrast, the cross-border cattle trade, despite its long-standing cultural origins, is now highly politicized and traders need the flexibility to rapidly adjust to the prevailing political rhetoric and policy. The large-scale operation of the cattle trade across northern India provides an illustration of this adaptability. While the cow is sacred in Hindu tradition as the giver of milk and life, unproductive cattle have often been sold across cultural boundaries to communities where slaughter is not taboo. Although some villagers' involvement in the cattle trade has resulted from the closing of other livelihoods due to securitization of the border, West Bengal is also a transit route for the sale of cattle from across northern India to Muslim communities in Bangladesh. Although the adaptability inherent in *jugaad*, as demonstrated by Narayanan (2019), is evident here, cross-border cattle trade in our study area was dominated by syndicates and a network of agents in league with state authorities. As both Gallien (2020) and Titeca (2012) note, state involvement in ICBT takes place in myriad ways and is integral to the trade.

In examining the *actors and processes of ICBT*, we had expected to find the individual enterprise in ICBT constrained by the additional regulation of border environments. This was indeed the case, but we had not expected the extent of control of

small-scale operations by middlemen which left little scope for the individual enterprise and innovation anticipated in the *jugaad* literature. A key finding of our research is that ICBT appears to be heavily controlled by a hierarchy of powerful and politically-connected ‘fixers’ and ‘agents’, often operating in collusion with state officials. While such control mechanisms are common throughout India, the unequal power relations seem particularly dominant in ICBT. The trade in household goods perhaps allows individual traders the most agency, for example, the Bangladeshi women buying goods in India to sell in Bangladeshi markets. However, they remain vulnerable to officious bureaucracy and unpredictable harassment and confiscations found in other studies (e.g. Peberdy et al., 2015; UNCTAD, 2019) and have little chance to expand their operations. Our interviewees often talked of bribery, beating and torture, suggesting acute harassment by border guards.

The distinct spatial identity of border towns has been identified by Bursnink (2001) and Nugent (2012), and this influence was seen in Bongaon near the Petrapole ICP, with its proliferation of truck parks, hotels and medical facilities. However, four spatial zones were found in this research. At official border crossings shipments were often small and disguised in luggage, e.g. the household goods and medicines, facilitated by unofficial payments at the border crossing. Remoter zero-line zones permitted trade in bulkier goods, such as cattle or agricultural products, but these transits were extremely risky and the BSF reportedly used harassment, torture or even lethal force to impose control. The medical sector of ICBT was largely aspatial and thus hidden, relying on the phone and internet providing informal means to access mainly formal services, suggesting that the definition of ICBT should be expanded to include aspatial trade facilitated by the internet and mobile phones. Finally, the border *haats*, were state-sanctioned zones of small-scale exchange.

The *vulnerabilities* of many people involved in ICBT are acute. Our research confirms that risk is handed down to the poorest who have least agency, such as the minority religious populations of the zero-line zone, and women in rural areas, or those who transport goods at official and unofficial crossings, such as those carrying cumin or cloves disguised in their clothing. Along the border in West Bengal, the overlapping responsibilities between BSF and *panchayat* administrations in zero-line zones creates unclear lines of protection for local citizens, and tensions between national (BSF) and local administrations in which national actors usually prevail. The co-option of state officials to support ICBT found by other researchers (e.g. see Gallien, 2020; Meagher, 2003; Titeca, 2012) is clearly evident in West Bengal.

The relationship between small-scale survivalist operators and larger-scale agents is neatly illustrated in the concept of *jugaad*, seen as the entrepreneurial approach which allows innovation and invention in contexts of resource constraints, which is inherent in India’s vibrant informal economy. As Nayaranan (2019) argues in his study of India’s cattle economy, as reinforced in our research, *jugaad* can be seen the complex network of agents, transporters and other operatives with state officials profiting from each transaction, which underpins this vast inter-state trade and

provides a practical solution to a politically unpalatable trade. Many other authors such as Prabhu and Jain (2015) and Sivarajan et al. (2021) have drawn on this concept. However, inherent to *jugaad* are the payments made to each actor at every stage of exchange.

The mechanisms of *jugaad* are seen to a greater or lesser degree in all three case studies of this research, with the control by middlemen and state officials involved in all aspects of ICBT. However, in all three examples, the control mechanisms limit the scope for small-scale entrepreneurs to drive the process of trade and be creative in its operation, and the mechanisms of trade heighten the vulnerability of some actors. However, our research suggests two contributions to this literature. First, as shown in all three case studies, the systems of *jugaad* rely on the inherent ‘othering’ and violence towards vulnerable communities participating in trade, such as the Muslims and Bangladeshi immigrants living in the zero-line zone with few alternative livelihood options, the women ICBT transporters who are vulnerable to coercion, and medical patients who may be directed away from adequate health facilities in Bangladesh. Thus, many debates on *jugaad* sidestep the vulnerabilities it exacerbates, a critique that Meagher (2003) levelled against the linked concept of ‘frugal innovation’. Second, the spatial dimensions of *jugaad* are important, as highlighted both by the large-scale inter-state operations of the cattle trade, the small-scale community links of trade in household goods, and in the aspatial aspects of control evidenced in the medical trade. Thus, the celebration of innovation inherent in the concept of *jugaad* should be tempered by an understanding of the heterogeneity of social networks involved and the vulnerabilities inherent in a system built on opaque control by agents and middlemen.

Finally, we argue that ICBT is an integral component of the wider political economy in the border regions of West Bengal. First, ICBT has emerged from local custom and tradition and is founded on long-standing cultural systems of exchange. The border is a relatively recent imposition, which has divided land-holdings and communities. However the complex regulatory system of competing local and national controls on both sides of the border, appears to provide enhanced opportunities for extortion and rent-seeking by both customs or border agents and private middlemen, creating an accentuated layer of vulnerability for those involved in ICBT. While the *products* of ICBT are mostly considered legitimate by interviewees, the *processes* have to adapt to a changing regulatory context driven by political rhetoric, as seen in the othering of Muslim citizens in India, and increasing security fending along the border. Second, ICBT also has to be highly adaptive, as established relations may change, as seen both in the evolving cattle trade, and the internet-based medical trade. ICBT should thus be considered as a distinct element of the informal economy, integral to the wider economy, but subject to particular pressures and vulnerabilities.

The policy implications of this research are still to be fully explored but suggest two areas of concern. First, the extension of national control in border regions

means that the needs of local communities are not prioritized and their access to services and livelihood options are constrained. Better supervision of BSF operations in the borderlands seems warranted. Second, the scope for individual enterprise allowing broader participation in cross-border trade should be strengthened through more consistent and streamlined operation of border crossings in recognition of the poverty-reduction potential of the trade. Here the border *haats* seem to offer potential for an inclusive and more transparent location for exchange, and their potential expansion is thus interesting. Finally, the limitations of telephone interviews and the exploratory nature of the findings highlight further questions, for example on the operations of power relations and sanctions, the gender implications of ICBT and the different levels at which state co-option occurs.

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