

## **Identity, Freedom and Citizenship: Enclaves Peoples' Experiences of Belongingness**

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### **Abstract**

*To identify nationality, although living in a globalized world, legal attachment to land is essential for securing fundamental human rights. Attachment to the land shapes one's identity of nationality. Since the six decades, the people of Chhitmohals (enclaves) along the India-Bangladesh border lived without formal state recognition and identity. Although these lands legally belonged to their respective states, the residents were effectively stateless. As a result, the inhabitants of Chhitmohals endured prolonged statelessness. In 2015, Bangladesh and India resolved this issue by exchanging enclaves, granting the residents a new identity, greater freedoms, and the hope of a more dignified life. This article explores the identity, freedom, and politics of belongingness experienced by the former enclave residents. It also examines the role of land attachment in shaping state identity. The article has used participatory approach, intensive interview, FGD, case study and life history method as well. The finding of the article focuses on statelessness of the enclave people as well as identity that coined with livelihood that will contribute in the academic arena of state, statelessness and belongingness.*

**Keywords:** Chhitmohal, Trans-territorial, Proxy-Citizenship, Identity, Belongingness

### **Introduction**

An enclave is a geographically and culturally distinct territory entirely surrounded by the land of another sovereign state. Conceptually, it signifies a fragmented extension of one nation embedded within the territorial limits of another. After the South Asia's decolonization in 1947, the partition of India-subcontinent territorialized to the creation of numerous enclaves. The incident of India and Bangladesh partition inherited over 200 such territories, generally referred to as Chhitmohals (Azad, 1959). These enclaves, scattered along the Bangladesh and Indian borderland, collectively housed over 50,000 residents, and out of them 37,334 lived in Indian enclaves within Bangladesh and 14,215 resided in Bangladeshi enclaves within India. These characteristics of unique borderland situation

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oriented a complex and unstable geopolitical circumstance for the people of these enclaves, who lived under a constant uncertainty regarding their citizenship, legal identity and status.

The reality and existence of these enclaves exposed significant socio-political and legal challenges. The inhabitants received and faced limited opportunities to basic amenities, restricted their mobility, obstacles in reserving and securing legal as well as administrative safety nets. The absence of effective and legal cooperation between the host and sovereign nations further exacerbated issues related to healthcare, education, infrastructure, governance and many others.

To address the challenges, India and Bangladesh, both countries, negotiated the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974, aiming to exchange enclaves besides streamline their border demarcations. This agreement was finally revisited and formalized on May 7, 2015, leading to the exchange of 162 enclaves. This arrangement privileged Bangladesh to gain 111 Indian enclaves, while India received 51 Bangladeshi enclaves. This treaty and resolution represented a historical landmark achievement in addressing the enduring geopolitical, humanitarian and identity complexities associated with these enclaves' territory.

After the de-enclavement, the inhabitants of Chhitmohals are experiencing a new identity and reality of citizenship. The article tries to explore the experiences of the post-enclave period, focusing on their identity, freedom, and politics. It raises critical questions: What are their experiences regarding identity, freedom, and politics of belongingness?

The de-enclavement process freed the people of Chhitmohals from identity of stateless. Now they are Bangladeshi nationals, not Indian, and these identities are reshaping their sense of belonging. Interestingly, their new identities have transformed them from the form of citizenship ambiguity; besides have introduced challenges, including conflicts over rights, integration and assimilation into the respective mainstream society. What is defined as Indian earlier, now the communities face a new nationalistic form of identity crisis that create intertwines of comfort and discomfort of belongingness.

It is a straight line of argument that the shared border between India and Bangladesh plays a diplomatic role in shaping the bilateral relationship. Although it is a historical complexity, the significant diplomatic dialogue and effort to resolve the dispute that draw back to the partition 1947, and

the implementation of the 2015 Land Boundary Agreement (LBA). The LBA agreement enabled the exchange of the enclaves (Chhitmohals) and adverse possessions, marking a pivotal moment in the relationship between the two nations. However, critical questions remain: To what extent can the agreement and territorial exchange address broader issues, including the legal, social, and political consequences for affected populations (Abusaleh & Islam, 2019)?

The 2015 Land Boundary Agreement, signed on June 6, marked a significant milestone in bilateral relations between Bangladesh and India. Under the agreement 111 Indian enclaves, totaling 17,160.63 acres to Bangladesh, while India received 51 enclaves, amounting to 7,110.02 acres were transferred from Bangladesh (Banerjee, Guha, & Basu, 2017). Despite gaining Bangladeshi citizenship, the former residents of the Chhitmohals continue to face challenges integrating fully into their nation state. This situation calls for a reconsideration of the concept of 'homeland,' often equated with the nation state (Annandale, 1990). While the state plays a crucial role in demarcating political boundaries, the notion of 'home' remains deeply subjective, shaped by individual perceptions and lived experiences (Alam, 2021).

### **Objectives**

The paper merely focuses on a couple of governing questions which contain great academic significance. The questions include: what does identity mean in connection with citizenship and statehood? Is identity a political one finally when fluidity and flexibility become notion of identity formation in the context of the state and citizenship? What does 'belonging' mean when a living place turns into a basis of legal complexities? How do people shape the idea of freedom when it comes to the question of legibility and illegibility? Finally, how do the idea of freedom, people's identity and the politics of belonging together play out in the broader frame of the state and citizenship?

### **Methodology**

The article is qualitative, but secondary data are also used to get the historical facts. The article has been written based on field studies and the study has followed quantitative and qualitative data. Besides, formal & informal questionnaire survey were conducted; closed and open-ended questioners were applied. In addition, FGD (focused group discussions), Life history method and secondary data were collected from

international research papers, journals, articles, newspapers including internet sources also.

### **Literature Gap**

Academic research on enclaves has historically been rich but those focused especially before de-enclavement. All the texts and references we find on the enclaves are from before the enclaves were abolished, so we still do not find extensive research on the lives, identities, citizenship rights, and freedom of the enclaves' inhabitants after the abolition of enclaves. Rather, the articles have been written only on the political and historical context of the dissolution of the enclave. As a result, there is a remarkable gap in the research that has been conducted. This research will provide a picture of the past reality of the research on the Chittmahal and the kind of identity that the residents of the Chittmahal carry in the current changing reality, and the kind of impact it has on them throughout their lives, which was not available in the past research. In addition, this study attempts to portray a holistic view of the lives of enclave residents, emphasizing identity, citizenship, and freedom of rights. As a result, we will see in this article the joy and feeling that overwhelm and include people, as well as the context that develops a kind of autonomy, from statelessness to becoming a citizen of the state in terms of nationality and civic rights.

### **Everyday Livelihood in the Enclaves**

This section presents a comparative socio-economic picture of the enclave and de-enclaved dwellers. The Bangladesh-India enclaves, located in plain agrarian regions, primarily depended on agro-based livelihoods. These enclaves varied significantly in size, lacked accurate records, and often had un-demarcated locations. Politically, economically and socially, they were attached with the surrounding geo-cultural areas of the host country, where there were no clear geographical and formal boundaries distinguishing them from each other from the neighboring territories.

In the Bangladeshi side, the enclaves were scattered across the different districts near the Indian border. Due to their discontinuation locations, small in sizes (except for only a few large Chittmahals), and mixing with surrounding territories, the socio-economic conditions of the enclaves were not remarkably different from those of adjacent Chittmahals. Although the co-existence of several enclaves situated nearby, but the residents of one Chittmahal often had lack knowledge regarding the number, location, population, or the similarities and differences among these enclaves.

## **Land Ownership**

In the colonial period, Land ownership in the Chittmahals was diverse due to the distinct circumstances of their legal and political emergence. It is popularly said that when ownership of an estate was transferred as a gift, it often became virtually tax-free (Akhtar, 1982) territory. For example, the Indian enclave of Kotbhajni reportedly had a Taluk presented upon it, which had remained revenue-free into the early 20th century. The absence of landowners and governance in both enclaves led to powerful citizens from surrounding areas occupying large portions of Chhit land (Ahmed, 1993). These individuals while were living in their own country, claimed ownership of the enclave lands. Some illegal occupiers occupied hundreds of acres, and settled landless people often victims of river erosion and as adhiars (sharecroppers) on these lands.

Each adhiar family received a small plot for sharecropping and a homestead usually and their homes, referred to as bustis (slums), operated under a system where the harvest was divided equally between the adhiar and the land holder. However, the relationship between adhiars and landowners in the enclaves differed from traditional sharecropping systems in Bangladesh and India. Adhiars were often treated as subjects (proja), reinforcing the landlords' feudal pride (Eaton, 1994).

Some occupiers acquired Chhit lands at low prices from original owners who had migrated across borders. Others fell victim to fraudulent land transactions involving cross-border brokers. Without legal oversight, many enclave residents unknowingly acquired false or invalid deeds. This fraudulent practice has since declined due to strict border controls. Nevertheless, original inhabitants, settlers, occupiers, and adhiars remain anxious about their land's future, as few possess valid ownership documents.

## **Food Security**

Food security is defined as consistent physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet dietary needs and preferences for an active and healthy life. Therefore, food accessibilities and capabilities remain a daily challenge among the enclave people. Food scarcity is a common issue in countries like “underdeveloped or developing” nationals, but enclaves of Bangladesh and India face severe experiences in this issue.

The enclave populations are relatively small compared to the billions of hungry people worldwide, their food insecurity is still a question of quest, and it is a popular narrative. This extreme vulnerability stems from natural

disasters, economic, social, demographic, and administrative instability, all are exacerbated by the historical absence of governance in the enclaves.

### **Education**

Geopolitical isolation and stateless identities are key factors achieving education in Bangladeshi Chhitmahals. Access to education was restricted as the residents often relied on schools located in the host state. To enroll children in the school, there were requirements of the approval of school authorities and local leaders, and sometimes ambiguous legal status as enclave residents create barriers. This lack of access to formal education left many enclave dwellers without basic literacy skills.

After the resolution of the enclave issue in 2015, the transformation to mainstream education systems has increased but slowly. The schools in the newly integrated areas are struggling with inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers and logistics. The lack of educational opportunities in Chhitmahals perpetuated cycles of poverty and delayed socio-economic development. To integrate the former enclave community into the broader national framework and ensuring their access to equal opportunities, these challenges should be addressed.

### **Social Institutions and Political Participation**

Being detached from their national boundary, enclave residents became reliant on their personal relationships in terms of social capital with neighboring communities in the host state. Despite the partition, the boundary often made little difference between the so-called “chhiter lok” (enclave people) and their neighbors who suddenly became foreigners. Thus, the enclave people did not need to establish entirely new social networks; instead, their existing relationships became vital for survival in the absence of state support. However, this dependency carried risks. Social relations, while strong, were fragile—any disruption could leave enclave residents vulnerable to exploitation as well as harassment due to the lack of formal law enforcement authority.

The normalization of Chhitmahals and the introduction of state governance dissolved the informal Chhit leadership councils. Integration into a sovereign nation required the replacement of these unauthorized governance structures with formal administrative systems. Though no official order disbanded these councils, their role diminished as state-administered services and local government structures took over. Political

parties also began influencing socio-political life in the Chhitmohals, further eroding the councils' authority.

Before the merger, Chhit councils served two key functions: maintaining community stability through charismatic and wealthy leadership, and providing services via personal donations or cooperative business efforts. These councils, often led by landlords, operated under a feudal system that balanced exploitation with community investment. However, the political party takeover disrupted these dynamics, transforming almost every aspect of life in the Chhitmohals. Infrastructure projects and national celebrations became dominated by political figures and their associates (Alam, 2021).

Resistance to political influence was not uncommon. Former council leaders opposed the entry of political parties, whose dominance often marginalized traditional leadership. In many cases, local governments aligned with ruling parties and pressured council leaders to withdraw from politics. This shift was particularly evident in the integration of Chhitmohals into existing union parishads, which excluded former leaders from electoral processes. In larger Chhitmohals, ruling parties discredited influential council leaders by labeling them as extremists or corrupt, further consolidating their power. This strategy marked a stark departure from the non-partisan leadership of the council practices.

The political regime's tactics extended to labeling opponents as enemies to undermine their political rights. Some prominent figures, including leaders of the swap movement, were targeted. One such leader, associated with the Dasiar Chhara Chhit council, refused to align with the ruling party, fearing community division. In retaliation, political figures promoted his subordinates as new leaders and tarnished his reputation. This shift in leadership dynamics reflects the broader challenges of integrating Chhitmohals into the political and administrative framework of their respective nation-states (Alam, 2021).

## **Identity, Freedom, and Politics of Belongingness**

### **Identity and Citizenship in the Chhitmahals**

It is nearly six decades, the lives of the people residing in the Chhitmahals have been deeply affected by the strained and often unproductive relations between the ruling elites of the countries involved. Despite ongoing mutual recriminations about the status of these enclaves, neither country has established effective administrative control over the territories that lie within the other's borders. In contrast, the host countries did not have the

legal authority to manage the enclaves or ensure normal civic life for the people living there. Any attempt by the host country to govern the foreign enclave would have been seen as a violation of the sovereignty of the country that holds ownership of the territory.

However, the host country generally refrains from imposing restrictions on the social interactions between enclave dwellers and the surrounding communities. This is likely due to the reciprocal nature of any action taken in another country's enclave, which could affect their own enclaves located in the other nation's territory. As a result, the absence of substantial government, people living in these enclaves had adapted by relying heavily on socio-cultural relationships with the surrounding communities for their lives and day-to-day survival. Abdar Hossain, a resident of a small Indian enclave with only a few households, shared his experiences:

*“No government functions in this enclave. No official from Bangladesh even steps foot in this territory. They would claim it's Indian land, and we are Indian citizens. But the irony is that nobody from India visits us either. We can't even go to India. We do all our work earning our livelihood here in Bangladesh, living within this small community. When any conflict arises in this enclave, the well-meaning people from the neighboring areas step in and resolve it collectively.”*

Addressing the challenges such as a unique feudal political system, increasing inequality and uneven access to national citizenship identity, the residents of the Chhitmohals adopted diverse attitude of consistency in their lives, largely conforming to the 'normal' order of Bangladesh government. In the recent past, after partition, Chhitmohal residents, who did not enjoy citizenship, led a more relaxed in the aspect of work and labor, time, loyalty, identity, and even social structures. But, after the gained citizenship, their lives were bound by the states' obligations and expectations. Such as, while they may have preferred their children to work in family work rather than attend school, although primary education is mandatory for all citizens of Bangladesh. Even if they were satisfied with using lanterns, the arrival of electricity made them stopped to habitus and practices and introduce purchasing modern appliances like LED lights, fans etc.

Government services and goods like access to healthcare or education required official identity and registration, which was sometimes difficult to personal desires. Opportunity to get access to national and global culture

through television redesigned their values and understanding regarding the world, although if they could not afford a mobile phone. Yet, participating in broader societal aspects including communication with others via technology, became an invaluable part of their lives.

As the citizens of Bangladesh engaged with technology, politics, and state institutions but the residents of the Chhitmohals internalized the desires placed upon them by the national state, perhaps more so than their fellow residents of Bangladesh. These undecided interactions led them to adopt behaviors associated with being a 'normal' citizen as in Bangladesh. They were no longer seen as 'sensitive' or 'odd' Chhitmohal residents but had become fully integrated into the fabric of Bangladesh. Potential activities like voting, cellphone registration, schooling of children, saving money, enjoying television, legal rights in terms of frameworks, expecting aid, interaction with local government, services like digital identification cards, participation in civil service exams and job became routine for them.

These sorts of citizenship crises that arose after the recent past partition left the inhabitants of the Chhitmohals particularly vulnerable in the outcome of this turbulent period. When the partition was declared these people found themselves caught in a role of strain not over choosing their citizenship right in the conventional sense, but over how to save themselves, their resources, and even their security and safety from the communal incident and violent, nationalist hegemony in both countries. In this complex situation, the enclave residents who were not even familiar with the modern idea of citizenship identity, and they were forced to chase a complex perspective and reality. They either had to hold on to the citizenship of their forefathers or adopt a form of proxy citizenship to protect themselves from communal violence.

As much as they were more identified as loyal to the distant homeland that is their legal identity, the more they became targets of the host country's political oppression of rioters. Besides, if they showed any allegiance to the surrounding country based on religious belief or to avoid communal discrimination and violence, they increasingly isolated themselves from their fellow enclave citizens. Although these shifts, the identities tied to neighborhood, kinship, language, and culture, shared with people beyond the enclaves, but did not disappear overnight. It is also true that the traditional identities often conflicting with the emerging identity knotted to the formal citizenship.

One of the residents recalled: *“In 1947, when Pakistan was formed, we thought we were part of Pakistan. But then the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) came and started harassing us constantly. That’s when we realized we weren’t Pakistanis, we were Indians after all. The Pakistani authorities always viewed us with suspicion. They wouldn’t even let us enter Pakistani territory or visit the market. If we wanted to go anywhere, they would demand money.”*

The introduction of formal citizenship, identity and social safety net programs brought significant structural changes to the lives and living of enclave residents. These transformation impacted their livelihoods, especially in their economic structure in terms of land right and agriculture. The implementation of law and order alongside the free movement of wholesalers, and support from government agricultural offices such as subsidized fertilizers and information campaigns transformed traditional farming into more profitable market based agriculture rather subsistence. The transform from subsistence agriculture to the cultivation of high-demand economic crops, promoted by local agricultural offices and NGOs, replaced earlier low yield crops.

During the fieldwork, the researcher met former residents who had worked as wage laborers or rickshaw pullers in Dhaka city during their stateless period. After the swap of the enclaves they returned into their villages and began investing in small plots of land for sharecropping. The people who had worked as passenger van drivers or shopkeepers in the nearby markets took up seasonal sharecropping and labor as supplement their incomes.

While the shift to agriculture benefited many but the financial gains were not evenly distributed. Sharecroppers were able to purchase land, landlords expanded their holdings to cultivate profitable crops like tobacco and maize, and individuals from other professions found financial security in agricultural ventures.

Despite the improvements, the transition to formal citizenship was far from smooth, the social, cultural, and economic divide remained significant. The financial progress was often limited to those with the means to capitalize on new opportunities, while others struggled to adapt.

### **Absence of State Administration in the Chitmahals**

The absence of national administration in the Chitmahal has been one of the most prominent issues for the inhabitants. For the decades, the law enforcement agencies and institutions of both countries, Bangladesh and India had abstained from entering into these enclaves, functionally leaving the enclave inhabitants in a state of isolation from both of judicial, legal and

administrative systems. These have resulting the residents identified them in an extremely vulnerable situation when it came to the matters of law and order situations, and rights. Because of the absence of effective law enforcement agencies, they were unable to file cases and seek justice in instances of any criminal offences, such as murder, robbery and land disputes. This had created a socio-economic environment where the economic and social lives of the people were frequently interrupted because of lawlessness, besides a question of insecurity and security.

The absence of formal administrative system in the enclaves meant that the residents had no privileges to the institutions and protections categorically enjoyed to citizens in the broader border territories of either India or Bangladesh. The people were actively cut out from any network to the national government structure of the both countries. The circumstances resulted the people in the enclaves unable to access the essential public services such as food security, health services, education, legal protection and basic amenities. This lack of visibility of state presence in the enclaves led to a prolonged time of negligence leaving the enclave residents to face with the issues of vulnerability and insecurity that were politically, economically and socially doing isolation.

Interestingly, neither the legally owner state (India, for Indian enclaves) nor the host state (Bangladesh, for Bangladeshi enclaves) had any control and authority over these special territories. These limitations lead the host state not to implement any right based and humanitarian programs or provide any assistance to the Chittmahals residents. For example, there were no government welfare programs, social or economic safety net programs or aid initiatives activities to assist address the basic needs of the population. If there is any natural disasters, health emergencies, and education services, the enclave dwellers had no option to access the support that would generally provided by the government.

When the crisis of trans-border conflicts and tensions arose, the only access available to the people living in the enclaves was to request assistance from their respective Border Guard Bangladesh (BDR), Bangladesh or Border Security Force (BSF), India camps, but these camps situated along the border sides, were not the nearest points of contact with authority easily as its geo-political location. When the problem increased in a measured level, both the BDR and the BSF would called and hold flag meetings, which is a diplomatic mechanism used to stop and defuse tensions between both of the borders and discuss a feasible measure. But these flag meetings were

basically confined to address the cross-border tensions and issues rather to provide any assertive protection or assistance to the residents of the enclave territories. These meetings often did a little to address the day-to-day challenges faced by the inhabitants of the enclaves, that were not directly involved in the political disputes but they were caught in the middle in the national issue of border.

The situation was further complicated by the geographical location of some enclaves. Certain enclaves were situated several kilometers distant within the territory of the host country making it particularly difficult for the residents to reach the border outposts of their home country. The geo-political location and physical discreteness, created the proper infrastructure lack of presence and left the residents feeling even more isolated and disconnected from their territories that is their national identity. In general, to reach at the nearest border security post was inconvenient and time worthy that leaving the people without any immediate means of support or safety during times of emergency.

However, the BDR, Bangladesh and BSF, India, that were responsible for border services and security, which were not specifically tasked to address the tension issues faced by the enclave citizens. Their primary responsibility was to maintain border security and manage cross-border tensions of both BDR and BSF, not to ensure and offer protection or support to the residents. The lack of ensure of dedicated oversight and insight meant that the people who are living in the Chhitmohals had no formal services and security measures instead of providing safeguard to their lives, livings, property and resources.

So, the perspectives of these compound issues of challenges, the residents of the Chhitmohals were left out in a situation of regular uncertainty. The people had no legal guaranteed access to receive justice or state protection, no safety net programs from the threats of crimes, violence, and absence of support systems to support them to improve their belongingness and livelihoods. The invisible state administration in the Chhitmohals reproduced their vulnerability and left them in a prolonged identity crisis of nationality, as well as unable to fulfill inclusion into the political, social and national fabric of either India or Bangladesh.

## **Conclusion**

The contexts between the Indian and Bangladeshi enclaves offer a critical lens through which to examine the pluralistic characteristics and relationship among the territories, nations, citizenships and identities. The residents of the enclaves experienced a dual form of identity formation distinct from the

national mainland populations. Most of the South Asian scholarship often neglects the nuanced interactions between national and transnational (or cross-border) identities, while much of them focus on national and sub-national identities based on religion, language, region, or ethnicity. The complex experiences of the enclaves people provide a thought provoking example of their interaction, as they have ornamented multiple identities attached to different territories as well as national identity.

The unique geopolitical identical situation throw the inhabitants of the enclaves in a layered and complex identities shaped by their location. They oscillated among three primary identities: that of citizens, proxy citizens, and the members of their own enclave community. Another critical broader identity encompassing all enclave communities existed but was largely insignificant in their lived experiences. It is structured in the light of class, social position as well as power. The first identity in terms of citizenship was initially significant in the post-colonial period after partition, but over the time it became less relevant, particularly after the 1950s. During this period, the residents gradually began to feel abandoned by their respective countries, exacerbated by a lack of administrative visibility and deteriorating ties with their supposed country in terms of national identity.

Proxy citizenship is the second identity has emerged during periods of communal tension and violence, particularly for Hindus in Pakistani/Bangladeshi enclaves and Muslims in Indian enclaves territory. This identity become most prominent during the communal incidents of 1950 but declined as the importance of formal citizenship. However, it would resurface during crises, when violence or displacement forced residents to seek refuge either in the mainland, where they held formal rights but were minorities, or in the neighboring country, where they were unauthorized but part of the majority.

The third identity that of being a member of the enclave community was rooted in the local experiences of marginalization and resilience. Unlike citizenship or proxy citizenship, this identity was increasingly prominent by the late 1950s and became even more significant after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, and enclave exchanges gained traction. This identity reflected a collective survival strategy rather than formal state identity and affiliation.

This overlapping identity defines as fragile and contested nature of nationhood, sovereignty and identity. The legal structure of Chitmahals

challenge the traditional ideas of citizenship, belonging illustrating how the absence of national governance can lead to the formation of alternative and localized identities. Although the creation of informal leadership structures and legal rituals within the enclaves, these structures never evolved or developed as fully autonomous entities resembling states, as they lacked both redistributive functions and coercive power of autonomous test and flavor.

The enclaves of India and Bangladesh consider underscores the violence, legal and arbitrariness inherent in the creation of motherland, homeland, nationhood and citizenship. It represents the complex identity structure in the situations where the state is legally present but really absence, nationalism is active but practically passive, and survival depends upon localized systems of belonging rather to nationality. In the increasingly globalized world defined by statelessness and displacement, the enclave people experiences provide examples of valuable insights into the fluid, switching and contested nature of identity beyond the boundaries of the national identity.

Within these shifting identities, enclave people found ways to adapt to their circumstances accordingly the legal and national perspectives. When much of the scholarship on South Asian identities views them as sub-national identities oriented within broader national structure, the identities within the enclaves challenge, overlap with, and sometimes dishonored national identities. The present interconnected world, the idea of entirely stateless populations seems difficult to grasp while examining cases like the Chittmahals of India and Bangladesh that are crucial as they offer a different insights into the complexities of identities, territories, and belongingness beyond the nation-state.

The statelessness of the Chhitmohals once has symbolized profound silence, invisible, unaddressed and darkness. However, on the evening of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015, that fluidness and silence was broken and disappear. The rainy weather and muddy paths did not stop hundreds of residents gathering to celebrate a transformative moment of emotion in their history of identity crisis. The shops, the tea stalls, community spaces and the whole environment buzzed with the energetic celebration as Bangladesh's national anthem rang out loud and clear, signaling a break from their long-standing statelessness although conceiving national identity but not recognized.

The residents gathered together, chants, dances and expressed their newborn identity of nationality as Bangladeshi in Bangladeshi Chittmahals. They slogans were screaming like “Joy Bangla” (Long live Bangladesh), “Tomar desh, amar desh. Bangladesh! Bangladesh!” (Your country, my country. Bangladesh! Bangladesh!), and “Ar noy chhitbashi, amra shobai Bangladeshi” (We are no longer chhitbashi; we are all Bangladeshis). This moment of emotional celebration land marked not only the end of their statelessness but the beginning of a new journey toward national belonging avenue.

At the midnight, marking the end of 68 years of contested statelessness, the gathering of people lit 68 candles, symbolizing the end of their prolonged darkness of 68 years old, and the embrace of their new nationality and citizenship. The following day, both national and international media reported the land-swap agreement between Bangladesh and India, which dismantled the Chhitmahals and granted citizenship to their residents.

Golam Mostafa inhabitant of one of the chitmahals said, “The 68 candles mark our 68 years of endless pain since 1947 and the struggles we faced living in no-man’s land.” Sixty-eight-year-old Nurul Islam expressed his excitement, stating, “Just a few more hours and I will be a citizen of an independent country. I will taste freedom for the first time in my life.” Moinul Huq reflected, “It is a matter of great relief that the rule of law has arrived here.”

These moments of jubilation and reflection were shared by the younger generation. Sharifa, 15, inspired by leadership of the Prime Minister of that regime, said, “Now that I am a Bangladeshi citizen, I aim to be a female political leader” like others who will address the peoples basic issues.” Similarly, Hamidul Islam, 14, shared his relief, “I will no longer have to use fake identities.” Bashir Mia noted, “We are very happy that our children will no longer have to hide their identity to go to school.”

The residents of Chhitmahals expressions reflected their hopes for a better future of freedom, citizenship and identity, prosperity, empowerment, and socio-political security. After the land-swap agreement, political leaders echoed these aspirations. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi exemplified and likened the agreement to the fall of the Berlin Wall, stating, “We’ve resolved a question that has lingered since independence both India and Bangladesh. Our two nations now have a settled land

boundary. It will make our borders and borderland more secure and people's lives in more stable situation." Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina later visited Dasiar Chhara, reassuring the residents, saying, "The days of pain and agony have ended over. The day is not far when we'll provide electricity, education, and healthcare to every home."

The paper explains the changes that have taken place in the life and lives of Chhitmohals' residents and studies the tangible and intangible transformations that lead the land swap agreement as well. The de-enclavement of the Chhitmohals has reshaped their lives, life, living, identity, economy, social status, ownership of state, citizenship right, education, dream and provided them with a new state identity, marking a significant moment of national belongingness.

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