

Interview 1:  
Interviewer Dr Sujit Mondal.



Speaker : Diptiman Sengupta

Topic : India-Bangladesh Enclaves ( "Chhitmohol" )

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The lives of the people, residing in the India-Bangladesh enclaves, were shaped by their religious beliefs. But the interesting part was that religion could never bring in social divide into their lives because it was not their central point of concern always. Presently, religion has become a significant factor in national as well as world politics. But when it comes to the case of the enclaves, one needs to understand right at the beginning that it was one such space where the inhabitants had no nation. Humans are, first and foremost, social beings, irrespective of their caste, gender and religion. If you do not visit an enclave personally, you shall never understand what it means to be a socially responsible human being. There are neither restrictions nor any written law – no court ever existed there. In spite of not having any concrete rule about anything, the importance that has been bestowed upon religion by the inhabitants of the enclave is praiseworthy, along with showing a new direction in the way they conducted their social lives.

A fundamental difference can be seen between the social lifestyles of the inhabitants of the enclave and those living outside of it. I can give you an example. When negotiations over an impending marriage ceremony in the neighbourhood get finalised, the enclave residents first choose to inform their neighbour rather than informing a priest or a 'Moulana'. In that case, the caste or religion of the neighbour is of least importance to them.

The understanding of politics for the residents of the enclave is completely different. Our idea of politics is not synonymous with their idea of politics. A separate culture of politics has developed there. The enclave residents cannot accustom themselves with the current political scenario in West Bengal. Those areas within the enclave where religious minority communities thrive have been won by the Bahujan Samaj Party(BJP), the political party which has formed the central government. As no other political party had paid any heed to the needs and claims of the enclave residents, they had showed

their faith in the governance of BJP for solving their crisis. This unavoidable sense of liability or gratitude ultimately left its indelible mark on the election results.

The daily struggle of the enclave inhabitants, otherwise, doesn't end only at fulfilling their day-to-day food requirements. Generally, we notice that ensuring regular supplies of food in the family is a very important issue in the villages of Bengal. But for the enclave residents, security is a significant aspect apart from arranging for their daily meals. As a result, the culture of the enclave inhabitants has taken a different turn.

Another prominent aspect regarding the enclaves is that its border is not a natural one, rather it is a man-made one. The border etched in the minds of the people to separate the people residing in the enclaves, in spite of not being separated by any natural border, has given a distinct twist to the culture of the land. A person from a nearby village, that belongs to the territorial map of a nation, considers himself/herself superior to the residents of the enclave because he/she knows that they don't have a nation to call their own – they also lack the security that he/she has. This ideological difference creates an unbridgeable distance between the two social communities. This fissure in the thought processes of the two communities consequently leads to severing the ties of the inhabitants of the enclave from the mainland of any particular nation.

If you visit any of the villages in Bengal under any Gram Panchayat, you will surely find a harmonium in at least five homes and even a pair of 'tablas' in two to three homes. But you shall not find any of these musical instruments in the homes of the enclaves, because the people at the enclaves are completely separated from the market and culture of both India and Bangladesh. In the enclaves, you can come across musical instruments like a 'dotara', or a 'khol' or even a 'kortal', etc. The residents of the enclave were dependent and deprived even before the Independence as well as after it.

Talking of any positive step that has been taken in the recent past for the benefit of the enclave residents, internet facility has been made available to them since the year 2010. We had started a project named '*Digital Chhitmohol*' in the year 2012, so that the

youngsters of the enclave gather the necessary knowledge about computers. Some noteworthy changes have come up through these initiatives.

The medium of communication that can be easily accessed in the enclaves is the radio. You can find radios in many homes there. These radios have been brought from any of the nearby ports. Even in the case of listening to the channels in the radio, there existed that cultural difference from that of India and Bangladesh. The residents of the enclaves mostly listen to one particular radio channel, *BBC Bangla*, because they can get the necessary news updates related to both India and Bangladesh. They cannot understand which one of the two countries shall be or can be their own nation. That is the reason behind their listening to the news of both the countries, that holds a special importance in their lives. The enclave residents were deeply worried about the outcome of the Bangladesh election, that took place in the year 2014 because they knew that their lives would also be impacted by the election results.

The inhabitants of the enclaves earn their livelihood primarily from agricultural work and those who do not own any piece of land are agricultural labourers. There was considerably very less tendency in the enclave residents to engage in any type of research regarding the betterment of agricultural produce. For them, securing their supply of food was of primary concern. So, they were more interested in producing food crops like wheat, paddy etc.

There is a village named '*Jaridholla*' in the enclave region. You need to take the permission of the Border Security Forces to enter that village. The '*jaridholla*' village is in Block 1 of Dinhata Panchayet, that can be reached by crossing the Mansai river. I ask you to spend seven days in that village and then come back to the mainland- you will be able to differentiate clearly between the language and lifestyle of both the places.

Culture has its own set of wider associations, including religious culture, craft culture, to name just a few. If we consider all these associations together, we realise that economy forms the base and this economic base structure supports the cultural superstructure formed above it. So, to understand the cultural alienation of the enclave residents, one must understand the extent of their economic alienation.

My personal association with the enclave residents and becoming an active member of their fight for equal rights movement have an underlying history of its own. Our family was never a resident of the enclaves. We have been living at Coochbehar within the Indian territory for quite a long time. We are the descendents of Badal Gupta, one of revolutionaries in the famous trio, Binoy-Badal-Dinesh. Therefore, dedicating oneself to become part of a movement that fights for attaining basic human rights was considered to be a symbol of our family's prestige. But we need to remember that Coochbehar was not a part of India's map in 1947. It was incorporated into Indian territory in the year 1949. My father, Dipak Sengupta, was actively involved in the anti-Monarchy movement going on in Coochbehar for those two years. After that, he kept on involving himself in more such movements like the Freedom movement in Goa, or even the 'Khadya Andolan'. Later, he also became a part of parliamentary politics as an MLA of Dinhata for quite a few years. I used to work for an corporate house at that time, along with helping my father in few of his responsibilities. The enclave residents used to visit my father for seeking solutions to their problems at that time. Due to his growing age, my father could not visit each and every corner of the different enclaves to address their issues. So, I decided to travel to those areas within the enclaves. Those were the times that resulted in a spark within my mind and I started thinking about the various problems that the people faced within the enclaves. Now the horizon of those thoughts and consequent initiatives have widened.

In the recent election, the vote of the enclave residents can be considered to be one of the major reasons behind the stupendous win of Bharatiya Janata Party by pushing the Left to the third spot. Right from the year 1958, the politics in Coochbehar has been shaping up surrounding the enclaves. In 1991, Kamal Guha of Forward Block had given his consent in favour of exchange of enclaves and building a corridor of three Bighas. But after losing his ministership in 1992, he started protesting against this decision. From that time, border issues had started playing the most prominent role in the politics of the enclaves. That was the time that led to the initiation of incorporation politics into the lives of the fifty-one thousand people living in the enclaves.

My father had fallen severely ill in 2008. On his deathbed, he had asked me whether I would be able to continue working for the betterment of the enclave residents. I could not help myself but promise Baba that I would continue working for them. Even on Baba's *shraddha* ceremony, I bestowed the responsibility of serving food to the guests to the people of the enclaves. Baba's political life and agendas were encircled around the enclave residents. Many of them were followers of Islam religion. Seeing them in the role of serving food to the invitees became a reason of discomfort for quite a few. I had clearly stated to the family members that I am least bothered by anyone's displeasure and decision of not eating in the ceremony due to this issue. Those who share a soul-to-soul connection with my father, they would not be complaining about this arrangement and would happily consume the food served to them by Muslims, by going beyond all kinds of discrimination based on caste and creed. Fifteen thousand people had ultimately eaten on that occasion.

The next thing that came to my mind was whether I could merge corporate house management with the case of the enclaves. I was never actively involved into politics like my father. So, I started thinking about solving their problem in a different manner. Then I completely plunged myself into the fight for claiming equal rights for the people of the enclaves. I left my job and kept on investing into this greater cause with the help of my remaining bank balance and even by selling my wife's jewellery.

Presently, many enclaves have been attached to the mainland and electricity has also reached the enclaves. As a result, the residents have got rid of their sense of mental alienation to a great extent. The cultural movement that we have incorporated into the movement of the enclaves is, to an extent, inspired from the Shankar tribe. We had to conduct protest movements for the enclaves of both India and Bangladesh. Therefore, the days that we used to select for organising our protests were either significant in India or Bangladesh. We used to zero down on days like 15<sup>th</sup> August, which is India's Independence Day, or 21<sup>st</sup> February, which is celebrated as the Mother Language Day in Bangladesh. If a mass gathering was being addressed in Bangladesh, then the name of the speaker would be announced, for example, as "Janaab Diptiman Sengupta", whereas in India, the announcement would be made as "Shri Diptiman Sengupta". Nowadays, if any

news regarding the condition of the enclaves comes out in the newspapers, they are referred to as '*Shabek Chhitmohol*' (Traditional enclaves). The use of the term '*shabek*' (in Bangla) has been inspired from Bangladesh only.

The residents of the enclaves are living their lives in a much better condition as compared to their previous lifestyle. Their famous folk song, popularly known as 'Jaari Gaan' (Jaari Song), is still sung by many of the inhabitants. Presently, I am working on a project that has been built on 1.5 Bigha of land in the Mashaldanga village. The main objective of that project is to make the enclave residents economically independent in multiple ways other than agricultural works.

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