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Refugee Camps: Fieldwork Strategies on the Bangladesh-Myanmar Border

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Abstract

The Rohingya refugees have been living in Bangladesh for over two decades. Temporary encampment turned out to be a permanent situation for many of them living in registered and unregistered refugee camps. The government of Bangladesh prohibits visitors' access in those camps without prior official permission. The bureaucratic hurdles for securing permission for a non-party individual to the refugee issue were lengthy, conspicuous, difficult, uncertain and risky, and involves going through layers of administration located in different places. This paper draws fieldwork experiences among registered and unregistered refugees from the Bangladesh side of the border. It shed some light on practicalities and sensitivities in the field and the challenges faced by a female researcher in a fieldwork setting in this remote borderland. It suggests various strategies and negotiations that granted access to various communities.

Keywords: Ethnography; Fieldwork; Refugee camps; Bangladesh-Myanmarborder.

1.Introduction

Research work in a remote borderland area with vulnerable populations - such as displaced people, exiles, documented/undocumented refugees, and people who have experienced various forms of violence - involves various challenges that may encounter by the researcher having to negotiate risky and problematic empirical fields. Previously, these challenges were not considered important unless it influenced or disrupted the data collection process. However, there is now a wealth of information on research experience of scholars in various disciplines. Some of these works focused on doing anthropology and ethnography in socio-political conflict. Such as Linda Green talks about the nature of fear that pervade in Guatemalan society, and how people experience it and understand it; (Suarez-Orozco, 1992) looks at psychological response to state terrorism in Argentina; (Smith and Carol, 1990) talks about militarization of civil society in Guatemala. Others have focused on researcher's reflections on managing danger and negotiating access in fieldwork. For example, Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000); Sherif (2001), and Sixsmith *et al.* (2003) reflective work deal with the danger in the field while negotiating access to the community, establishing rapport, and bringing out insiders' perspective. Research like these signifies better perspective of the conflict, and provides in-depth understanding about the researcher-respondent relationship, and provides practical knowledge about the field that might be useful for future researchers to better prepare their work. However, such academic endeavour towards the fieldwork and experiences of the researchers is surprisingly less on conflict ridden areas in South and Southeast Asian countries; although, socio-political conflicts have been addressed in many ways.

This paper contributes to the ethnographic literature by considering the researcher's experiences of undertaking an ethnographic study among the documented and undocumented refugees in Bangladesh along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. This remote borderland is an underdeveloped area where thousands of Rohingya refugees have been suffering for more than two decades as documented and undocumented refugees. The government of Bangladesh prefers encampment as a means to control refugee flows and to limit the number of refugees that they are responsible for. Thus, the official record recognizes only documented refugees, an estimated33,148, living in two official registered refugee camps, whereas the vast majority of undocumented refugees, not registered with the UNHCR. At the same time, the authorities often claim that these undocumented refugees are the cause of social and political instability in the region. The state's ambiguous attitude demonstrates that the Bangladesh government is indifferent to the destination of the refugees, be it Myanmar or a third country, but does not intend to recognize them as part of its population. It created the refugee camps in secluded areas, maintaining a safe distance from the locals, and monitored by the appointed state authority. Access to the makeshift camps, involves overcoming various political, legal and security jurisdictions. This paper highlights some practicalities and sensitivities in the field and the challenges faced by a female researcher in a fieldwork setting, with particular emphasis on how relationships between the researcher and different stakeholders were made through negotiations that influenced fieldwork. The significance of such research is that there is relatively little academic scholarship on this topic. Some existing studies that can be found on Rohingya refugees have focused on history (Yegar, 1981);(Yunus, 1994), causes of migration (Berlie and A., 2008); (Bahar, 2010) and humanitarian issues (Amnesty International, 2011); (Human Rights Watch, 2013), but it rarely deals with the fieldwork experiences and negotiations involve in the relationship between the researcher, the research and the researched in such a complex setting.

2. The Context of the Bangladesh-Myanmar Border

The location of this field study was in the far South eastern corner of Bangladesh, adjacent to Myanmar, in a place called Teknaf.[1] It is an Upazila (sub-district) of Cox's Bazar, is bounded by Cox's Bazar district on the north, the Bay of Bengal on the south and west, and the River Naff and the Arakan(currently Rakhine) region of Myanmar on the east. This southernmost tip of the country is like a long strip; spread from north to south. It is a remote area bounded by green forests and hilly areas. The River Naff and the estuary form the border between the two countries, Bangladesh and Myanmar.[2]The reason behind selecting this area is that it is a place where biggest numbers of documented and undocumented Rohingya refugees are located. In Teknaf sub-district, the main places are Jaliapara, Naitongpara, MithaPanirChora, Nayapara official UNHCR refugee camp I and II, Leda, Shamlapur and Shah Porir Dip. In Ukhia sub-district, they are more spread out in the plains and hill villages, and in the Kutupalong official UNHCR refugee camp surrounded by makeshift camps. In Cox's Bazaar district, many live in semi-urban slums in Nazirartek, Samitipara (near the port and coast) and Gunarpara (in the hills near the town).

Being the immediate neighbour of Myanmar, Bangladesh has received constant and increasing inflows of displaced Rohingya minority population from the Rakhine state of Myanmar, where they were subjected to systematic structural inequalities and structural violence perpetrated by the state of Myanmar. Political outcomes of state actions led to at least two major refugee crises in history. The first occurred in November 1977, when a large number of people were internally displaced, and more than 200,000 Rohingya fled the country and became refugees in Bangladesh. At that time, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) considered it as a temporary issue and treated it as internal and exclusive matter. Official records suggest that by December 1979, GoB had repatriated all of the refugees back to Myanmar. However, within a decade, Bangladesh experienced its second biggest inflow of refugees. From late 1991 to July 1992, an estimated 300,000 Rohingya crossed the border into Bangladesh to escape military brutalities.The current refugees in two UNHCR managed camps are those who came during 1990s. The third biggest inflows of refugees happened since Mid-2017. This time, more than 700,000 refugees entered into Bangladesh. Myanmar has officially denied any responsibility behind the forced displacement and outmigration from Myanmar.

Central to this refugee problem is the issue of Rohingya identity and non-recognition by the state of Myanmar. In 1982, the military government amended its Citizenship Law to deny the Rohingya any rights to lawful citizenship, in effect declaring the community stateless in their own country. By considering Rohingya as "Bengali Muslims," the Myanmar government has externalized what is mostly an internal issue of historical migration, long-term residence, and attachment to place; this took place prior to the creation of the modern geo-body we call Burma/Myanmar. Government's exclusionary policies andstructural violence in the form of military operations and militarization forced the Rohingya ethnic community to become internally displaced and many became refugees. The government continues to suppress the community further by producing new discriminatory policies, such as restrictionon interfaith marriage and two-child limit (The Hundu, 2013). As a result, we find thousands refugees continue to arrive on South and Southeast Asian shores creating a migration crisis (Farzana, 2011). As far as Bangladesh is concerned, it views the refugeeissue as created by the Myanmar state, therefore, the ultimate responsibility rests on Myanmar to take care of its own people. By referring the displaced group as "Myanmar refugees" Bangladesh continues to take the stand that the Rohingya must necessarily be induced to return to Myanmar or relocate elsewhere, but they could not be allowed to reside permanently in Bangladesh. This approach is expressed in all of Bangladesh's diplomatic initiatives to repatriate the refugees as well as in its policies and arrangements for refugees that are staying currently in the bordering areas.

3. The Study

The broader purpose of the study was to explore the everyday live experiences of Rohingya refugees' exile life in Bangladesh. Information were collected during field work carried out by the author under several fieldtrips and a total of six-month time in the field, from June to August 2009, October to November 2009, and in December 2010, using qualitative methods of data collection, informed by an ethnographic approach. The "complex activity" of getting access into the community or cultural group (Reeves, 2010, p. 329) was done through various research techniques, such as interviews, group discussions, and participant observation. The number of participants was not an issue, as statistical analysis was not the interest of this research. At the end of the fieldwork, 62 had participated in this study at different times from 2009 to 2010. Of the respondents, 32 were males, 30 were females; 30 registered, 32 unregistered[3]; 52 one-time migrants and 10 double-entry migrant refugees. The average age range of the respondents was between 25 and 68 years. A combination of purposive and convenience non-probability sampling strategies had to be used to recruit participants for the study.

[1]Teknaf is located 510 km from the capital city of Dhaka, and takes 13 hours by bus to reach this destination. [Dhaka to Chittagong = 275 km (6½ hours); Chittagong to Cox's Bazaar = 150 km (4 to 4½ hours); Cox's Bazaar to Teknaf = 85 km (2 hours)] There are no direct flights between Dhaka and Teknaf. One alternative is a combination of air and bus routes.

[2] Myanmar (Burma) and Bangladesh are neighboring states that share an international border of 270 km. The source of the River Naff is the Arakan hills of Myanmar on the southeastern borders of the district which flows into the Bay of Bengal. It is an elongated estuary in the southeast of Cox's Bazar district, dividing the district from Arakan. The River Naff is 3.22 km wide; therefore, some parts of Arakan, especially the mountain 'ArakanYoma,' is visible from Teknaf.

[3] Unregistered refugee respondents were from seven different places in Teknaf - Naitong Para, Jalia Para (Fishing village), Lamar Bazar, 45 families from the hill top close to Naitong Para, Lada camp, MithaPanirChora (towards Shamlapur), and Shah Porir Dip.

During my fieldwork, I spent time with both the registered and unregistered refugees observing and interviewing them. On most occasions, I left home at 9:00 am and spent the next nine hours going to different places and visiting refugees within the locality or in camps. My interviews and observations took place at village teashops, town bazaar, and the places where they live. I spent time talking to them and observing them as I visited the same places on several times. I observed how the refugees lived their lives, such as their cooking style and eating habits, and other daily activities, and I tried to see life from the perspective of a family; young refugees; and female refugees. In some cases, I noted which family members stayed in camp, and who chose to go out. During leisure time, I spent time chatting with young refugees who could now speak proper Bengali, having spent a number of years in camp. These details and observations provided me with insights about the community and helped me develop much-needed rapport so that they could accept and trust me. However, it must be recognized that all the claims made here are data-specific, and subjective qualitative interpretation of the data are not immune from challenge, along with the possibility of multiple and further interpretations from various perspectives.

The following section brings forward the detail of my ethnographic fieldwork. In doing so, it addresses various challenges and the process of negotiation with various stakeholders, building rapport and engagement with the cultural group.

4. Access to Work: Reality

Before I embark on my fieldwork, I wanted to gain some insights about the bordering area, but found very little information available. Insights from Willem van Schendel's authoritative book, (The Chittagong Hill Tracts Living in a Borderland, 2000) that described the remoteness of that part of Bangladesh and the lifestyle of the hill peoplewas particularly interesting, but did not cover Cox's Bazar and Teknaf areas. I had some idea from the media about the location of the two officially registered refugee camps, and had done some research on the population's humanitarian situation in areas where human rights organizations operated.As for the legal permission, at first, armed with an official letter from the academic institution I was working with at that time, I tried to obtain official permission through the relevant ministry in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. I realized that the bureaucratic process would be very lengthy for this sort of fieldwork, and yet I could never be sure that I would be granted permission ultimately. Everywhere I went for official permission, I was told that the refugee issue was a very 'sensitive matter'; therefore, to work on them would require legal permission, which could take a long time.Moreover, the stigma attached to Rohingya refugee status was clear in government media as they often project refugees as "problem" or as "threats to national security and the economy".

I tried to contact the UNHCR Dhaka Head Office, which administers relief distribution in the refugee camps. The Senior Protection officer declined to grant any official permission, on the premise that it was the Bangladesh government that gives permission to access the refugee camps. After so many delays and disappointments with the official process, I thought about a third alternative, which was to undertake fieldwork immediately, and to utilize any local alternatives to gain access to the registered refugee camps. At that point, I was not sure if this would work, but I knew that I was going there, and there must be some way around the bureaucratic mire. So, flexibility and persistence were very important attributes at this stage.

5. In the Field

5.1. Accommodation

In Bangladesh society, it is difficult for a female, unaccompanied by a male member to find accommodation outside home. So, I had to arrange my own accommodation in Teknaf, with precautions in mind, as I was a female researcher going to a remote, relatively peripheral area. A local non-governmental organization known as the Community Development Centre (CODEC) has an Integrated Protected Area Co-management Project (IPAC) office at Teknaf. I obtained their contact through a friend, and visited their head office in Chittagong before going on to Teknaf. It was through CODEC in Chittagong, that I was able to rent a house next to the IPAC office. At the beginning, for social safety and protection, I was introduced among the locals as a relative of CODEC's executive director and had come to do a research on the Rohingya issue. It is important to mention here that neither CODEC nor IPAC handles refugee issues or has any connection with the target group. Their work involves the development of fisheries, forest and the environment. Nevertheless, being introduced as a relative to someone in a high position gave me immediate credibility and acceptability among the locals, and provided me with social security and the freedom to move around on my own in that remote area.

Finding my own accommodation, and not taking shelter with local political notables in Teknaf kept me neutral and free from possible biases. Moreover, the reason I chose to stay in Teknaf, and not in Cox's Bazar (even though all the agency offices such as the UNHCR district sub-office and Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner(RRRC) office are located in Cox's Bazar) was because I preferred to stay close to the camps and to the undocumented refugee population. My *in situ* home was in Kaukkhali-para, known locally as K.K. Para (K.K. village) which is close to the Teknaf Bazar. It is in the same local area where some of the undocumented refugees live among the local village community. The Nayapara refugee camp was 13 km away, and many other undocumented refugee spots were very nearby and could be easily reached by local transport such as rickshaw, bus, and auto-rickshaw.

5.2. Fieldwork Assistants

Being a non-native to the study area was my biggest disadvantage, as I was unfamiliar with the local language and heavily-accented dialect. To overcome this, and to facilitate my work, I hired three research assistants at different times, negotiating payment with each. As Scott *et al.* (2005) observed that the positionality, gender, age, status, and a clear understand of their roles as interpreters are very important. Thus, I have been sensitive to the positionality, ethical and relational issues concerning the use of interpreters. My first interpreter was a 22-year-old, local Bangladeshi woman named Atiya,[4] who had graduated from higher secondary school in Naitongpara of Teknaf. She worked with me throughout my time in the field. Her main job was to travel with me, and interpreting for me, and helping me to understand the Rohingya language to help explain my message to the people. Two other local assistants were men: 21-year-old Rezaul from Jaliapara (fishing village), and 25-year-old Sharif, who lived close to Teknaf Bazar; both were hired on part-time basis. Rezaul's job was limited to my work in the fishing village, whereas Sharif occasionally joined me in exploring crowded areas such as Teknaf Bazar and Teknaf Land Port, where many of the self-settled, undocumented refugees work. In hiring, I looked for three things - young and enthusiastic Bengali individuals who had no connections with the local or state authorities, familiar with the language (local dialect and proper Bengali), and demonstrated empathy for the Rohingya community. Before starting work, I briefed them about my research objectives and their job responsibilities.

Hiring Atiya, a female, gave me distinct advantages. As the Rohingyas are Muslim, the female refugees strictly follow *parda* (veil). They usually do not feel comfortable speaking to strangers, especially males. Therefore, it was easy for me to enter their homes with my female assistant. She introduced me to the locals and helped to talk to the females privately. Hiring male assistants gave me advantages in other ways. For example, Rezaul, who was from the fishing village, was familiar with the area and the people in his neighborhood. While visiting crowded places like Teknaf town bazaar, Sharif's presence helped, as the Rohingya men were more comfortable speaking with a male, rather than a female, stranger. Thus, understanding the different contexts in which I would be working with the interpreters enabled me to utilize their strengths and positions more effectively.

Other than the research assistants, several local Bengalis also helped. For instance, Atiya's mother knew some Rohingya individuals who had been living in a very remote area for many years, hiding in the mountain jungle close to her village in Naitong-para. She has a sympathetic spot for them, helping by giving the Rohingya some rice or lentil when the elderly women came down from the hills to her village begging for food. Once, she brought me to that remote area, where I found 45 self-settled undocumented refugee families living there, in an area that has not been covered by the media.[5]

6. Access to Undocumented Refugees

In dealing with the undocumented refugees, research was of a sensitive nature, in view of their highly vulnerable status and the need for confidentiality. For the first month, I mainly worked within the self-settled undocumented refugees in various places in Teknaf, as I did not need any formal permission to work in those areas, to become acquainted with the locality and the people. One particular problem was how to differentiate who was a Rohingya, as they look similar to the Bengalis in appearance. The fieldwork assistants were a great help in this regard. In some cases, the refugees voluntarily identified themselves as Burmaiya when they found me non-threatening; and in other cases, the local research assistants identified them and talked to them accordingly. The local Bengalis could easily identify the refugees by their accents and dialect as to who was '*e-parer*' (from this side of the Naff river/Bengali) and who was '*o-parer*' (from other side of the Naff river or Burmaiya). Although both the locals and the refugees use the Chittagonian dialect, some words, accent and intonation were distinctively different. For example: one day, I was sitting in the yard outside the home of my research assistant, Atiya. An elderly woman came, asking for alms. While giving some rice, Atiya's mother asked where she lived; she replied that she lived somewhere in the neighboring village. After a short chat, Atiya's mother asked again if she was Burmaiya, which the woman denied. Then, pointing in my direction, Atiya's mother explained that I was someone compassionate to the cause of the Burmaiyas in Bangladesh, and if she was interested, she could sit for a while and talk with me. She also assured the old woman that she had nothing to fear, and that nothing bad would happen to her. I was surprised to see that the woman decided to sit. Thus, we had a short conversation. Later, I asked Atiya's mother what made her think that the woman was Burmaiya. She replied, "it was her accent."

Then, the remoteness of some self-settled undocumented Rohingya locations such as Naitong Hills, Jalia para, and MithaPanirChora put physical challenges on me; to get there, I had to cross muddy narrow paths, hilly slopes, suspension bamboo bridges, and muddy-slippery stiffs completely barefoot. In terms of basic needs and services, undocumented refugees are more vulnerable. For those who are hiding in the hill top jungle area, life is even more miserable. Living conditions are so dismal that some have only a few branches of trees and plastic paper for cover and to make tents for a family of eight or nine. For food, water and work, they need to travel long distances, sometimes to the nearest town. And to get back, every time, they have to cross the remote muddy roads and climb the hills to reach their hiding place. During the rainy season, this path becomes very muddy and slippery.

[4] I refer to her by a pseudonym, as she was concerned about her safety. The male assistants consented to letting me use their real names.

[5] Usually undocumented refugees are the most vulnerable as they do not get any protection or assistance from Bangladesh government or other agencies. Being illegal, some are hiding in risky places where no NGO or media camera visited them. They only come out from there to the locality for jobs.

I found profound challenges working on site. For example, in Jaliapara, one of the fishing villages in Teknaf, where thousands of undocumented Rohingyas live among the Bengalis, is divided into four sections: North, South, Middle Jaliapara, and Chowdhury Para. Initially, I wanted to work at Chowdhury Para section in Jaliapara. Selecting respondents from this area, with the help of my male assistant, I sought to prepare a list of Rohingya households from a particular street so that I could distinguish the locals from the Rohingya families, based on my criteria.[6] Ultimately, it was not possible to prepare that list, because one local landlord objected, as he has "illegal" Rohingya tenants on his land. Therefore, I decided to move towards Middle Jaliapara for my research.

In Middle Jaliapara, I faced challenges of a different nature. The local Bangladeshi villagers objected to our approach, as they believed it would bring aid only to the Rohingyas. The local villagers wanted us to include their names in our list so that they would receive help. A group of villagers insisted that we do so, or they would not allow the Rohingyas to be part of the research. This example clearly illustrates the tensions that can arise during ethnographic fieldwork, and localized misinterpretations of scholarly, non-official research. I could not convince them that our activities were just for research. The villagers thought that there must be some development assistance or other official purpose. Subsequently, I was forced to abandon the list-making, and moved on to the South section of the village, and interviewed some Rohingya families at their convenience. Thus, it was a better strategy, and indeed a safer one, to adopt a sample of convenience, enabling some interviews to be conducted ethically and with relative ease (Babbie, 1990); (Mutchnick *et al.*, 1996).

6.1. Learn from Mistakes

While working on the undocumented refugees, I was also in search of avenues to access the "official" camps, since official permission was needed to enter the registered refugee camps. While working with the undocumented refugees, once I visited the Leda refugee camp,[7] which was not a registered refugee camp, but after moving from its previous location from Tal, it came under the management of two non-governmental organizations, Muslim Aid, and Islamic Relief Worldwide.[8] On the first day, when I approached the main entrance of Leda in the early morning, I was stopped by the guard and told to sit outside the camp office. After clarifying their various queries for more than an hour, they denied me access, and told me to obtain official permission from Muslim Aid. Later, when I met the Project Officer of Muslim Aid at their local office in Teknaf town, I learned that they had already heard that I had tried to enter the camp without their permission. They seemed suspicious of my research motive, although verbally expressing an interest to help. I was invited to visit the camp only with them the next time they visited their Leda site on official business. That implied that I was not permitted to visit the camp alone, and even visiting with them was delayed on purpose. Thus, I had to compensate for lost time with some rearrangements on my part. As the Leda residents were not registered by the UNHCR, they were not officially "refugees," and thus, they were not restricted from going out to look for jobs. Taking advantage of this loophole, I met with Leda residents who worked outside the camp in different professions as petty retailers, rickshaw-pullers, and beggars. The lesson I learned from the entire process of seeking official permission was that entry has to be carefully negotiated (Feldman *et al.*, 2003). I should not make the same mistake while approaching the registered camps. It is important to have a good negotiation meeting with camp officials from the beginning. Therefore, I started a careful search for the proper channels in which to approach the registered camp officials.

7. Access to the Registered Refugees

Almost a month later, I was able to contact a Bangladeshi army officer through "a relative of a friend of a friend"; and through that officer, I obtained the name of another contact in the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI),[9]Teknaf branch. The district-head of DGFI, Teknaf happened to know the Camp in Charge (CIC) of Nayapara. On our first meeting, I was informally introduced by the DGFI to the CIC as his cousin doing research on the Rohingyas. In the presence of the DGFI, the CIC immediately became friendly, and formally discussed the intricacies of my work. However, similar to other government officials, he also mentioned the sensitivity of the refugee issue; yet, he showed positive attitude to help by providing information. The manner in which I was introduced to him gave me the opportunity to bypass the bureaucracy of trying to arrange a meeting with the CIC, and for that, I am thankful to the DGFI for his support in the negotiating access. I was able to speak to the CIC quickly, and asked some basic questions about the official structure in managing the camp.

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[6] By Rohingya family, I mean either the husband or wife, or both, were of Myanmar origin.

[7] This camp is located at Lada Bazar area in Dumdumia village, 7 km away from the Teknaf Bazar.

[8] Muslim Aid is a charity organization based in Britain, and funded by European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office. In Bangladesh, it addresses the poverty and disaster management issues. For more information: http://www.muslimaid.org/index.php/about-us/where-we-work/bangladesh. Islamic Relief Worldwide is an international, independent non-governmental organization established in Britain in 1984. For details: http://www.islamic-relief.com/Default.aspx?depID=1

These two NGOs helped the refugees relocate from the Tal area, which was often flooded by the tidal wave from the river Naff. In July 2008, they relocated a total of 1972 refugee families from this site to the Leda area, now known as the Leda camp. Under its humanitarian assistance program, these NGOs occasionally provide support with nutritious food and small amounts of cash to Rohingya refugees at Leda site Teknaf, Cox's Bazar.

[9] The Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and the National Security Intelligence (NSI) are the two intelligence agencies of Bangladesh.

Initially, I did not ask many questions, preferring to let the CIC take the lead, as he was interested to share information about the timeline and chronological history in establishing these camps. Although he had only been in charge of the camp for the last three years, I found him knowledgeable on the basic history and related information about the camp. He discussed, at length, the Bangladeshi locals who have lost their farmlands to the refugee camps in their areas, and yet no one cared about the reasons they were upset with the refugees. He suggested that I look carefully at the Bangladeshi side of the story as well.

Meanwhile, the CIC gave me a five-page printed copy of the Bangladesh government's general information on the Nayapara Refugee Camp, Teknaf, Cox's Bazar. He then offered his hospitality with tea and some snacks. I was carefully observing his courtesy, being well aware that it was only because of the authoritative figure behind me, and that the next time, I would have to take care of this kind of temporary relationship to keep my access channel open. As the support of the CIC was central to the negotiation to access, and the CIC seemed supportive, I anticipated that, from here on, it would be relatively easy for me to gain access to the camp. Immediately I was proven wrong. As I asked his permission to meet some of the older generation refugees who had gone through the experience of migration to Bangladesh, the CIC commanded one of his officers to bring 10 male and female refugees from one block to his office. I could not apprehend this move, but I kept my resentment inside. Then, I was asked to go to the next room so that I could have "a private conversation" with the refugees; yet, one official was sent with me to help as an interpreter. What I realized was that he wished to maintain control over the refugees, and with regard to what was said; I knew then that I had to be patient, and look for alternatives later.

As I talked to these individual refugees, I found them prepared and comfortable talking to me, even though I was an outsider and was meeting them for the first time. They started by giving me a consistent picture about their migration but stopped short of going into the details. I came to know that some of these male refugees are, or were, part of the Rohingya representatives in camps locally known as *Majis*. Thus, they were quite aware of what was going on outside the camp, as they interact with camp and UNHCR officials. Talking to the female refugees, I understood that some of them were interested to tell me about the problems they encounter in the camps. When they mentioned these issues, I realized that the camp official (serving as my interpreter) had pressured the refugee into providing minimal information. How did I understand their dialect? It was because of my experience with the undocumented refugees in the previous month that had made me a little more familiar with their language and gestures. As the authority figure was the one who decided on which refugee was to come forward to be interviewed, I suspected that these individuals may be giving a distorted version of the histories, either being professional or because they were under pressure in front of the camp officials. Therefore, I considered this meeting as a starting point to know some of the registered refugees in camps. I observed and talked to them in an informal way, but did not include these interviews in the study.

That first visit to the CIC office lasted nearly 2½ hours; and I expressed my interest to visit the camp. Perhaps as a courtesy to the DGFI, the CIC sent one of his officials to see us off. We-the DGFI and his bodyguard, the camp officer, my research assistant (who had waited outside the office throughout the whole time), and I-went around to see camps I and II, and I took some snapshots using my camera. I greeted the guards on duty as we approached the camp entrance. My purpose for doing so was to draw their attention to us, and make myself a familiar face to them.

On the second day of my visit to Nayapara camp, I went to the CIC office first. My assistant Atiya was not allowed to go inside, so she waited patiently in another room. In this second meeting with CIC, I explained my fieldwork in detail and requested his help in carrying it out. After a brief conversation, he offered me some tea. That day, I asked for permission to go around and see the camp. The CIC agreed, but he called one of his officials and advised him to show me the camp. So this official and my assistant were with me during our second visit to the camp. I again took the opportunity to say hello to the guards who were on duty.

It was raining heavily when I visited the camp the next day. I smiled at the guards, and they did not question me. After finishing my work in camp-I that day, I paid a courtesy visit to the CIC office at camp-II before leaving. I informed him that it was raining and I had stopped at Camp-I before coming to his office. He casually asked what information I had obtained that day. I informed him that I had made small talk with the refugees and observed what they were doing. The CIC did not question me about visiting camp-I and bypassing his office. Establishing good rapport with the officials enabled me to overcome the resistance I had experienced earlier. Perhaps my gender also worked in my favor. As a female researcher, I was able to gain formal and informal access to the camp, as "women are perceived as 'warmer' and less threatening than men" (Reeves, 2010) in such situations. That was how I was able to gain access to the registered refugee camps, and I utilized the channel throughout my fieldwork. From then on, I was able to work inside the camps through frequent visits to camp-I, with only intermittent meetings with the CIC in Camp-II after work. It may be important also to mention that, at the beginning of my formal access, I dressed carefully to present myself as a professional; however, after gaining permission, during my fieldwork I dressed as simply as possible so that the refugees would view as an ordinary person, rather than as an official.

7.1. Interview

As a female researcher, I had more access to the female-bounded space of women, and identify the pain and anguish inscribed on the bodies of the women. These refugees of mixed generations have been crammed in these camps for more than two decades. It seems that privacy is an unknown word to the Rohingya refugees, particularly for women. The division between public and private spheres disappears in camp life. Men ideally have no public place where they can go for work and return home after work. It is within the boundary of the camp that they move around. For women, there is little privacy in the hut, and the moment she comes out of that *Jupri*, it is a public space. It is not only her neighbors who are passing by, but also the government security personals and patrol police are

stationed inside and outside the camps. In such a situation, where there is no division between private sphere of women and public sphere for men, violence that occurs is mostly directed towards women. Ordinary refugees face teasing, bullying, torture, humiliation, and even rape. That is why we find UNHCR display boards inside camps making people aware of this crime with statements like "Protect your community. Stop rape! The punishment for rape is life imprisonment." These indicate that the situation is no different for the women from their life in Arakan.

However, it also appears that this situation makes some of the refugees courageous and tough. For instance, some of these registered female refugees know how to use a mobile phone, and can also recognize local and foreign call numbers. They can pronounce the names of various countries as many of them are interested in the Bangladesh government's third country resettlement program. Sometimes they know how to react collectively against an unfavorable situation. For example: Anwara (35) is from one of the registered refugee camps. Her husband recently passed away. The CiC called her to the office. She went, and realized it was nothing about any serious talk. The man asked about her situation ... how she was doing … Then, on another day, two camp guards came again asking her to meet CiC. She refused and did not visit them.

Anwara shared this story with other females at the female community centre inside the camp. The next time the guards came again to take her, other females came forward, jostling to protect Anwara until she was in the middle, and then they shouted that Anwara would not go, "let's see who comes to force her again." The guards had to leave.

Sometimes the community comes forward like this. At other times, the community itself abuses its own people. There were cases where female refugees were used to confiscate general refugees' ration card to force them to repatriate. Therefore, it shows that the camp life itself is complex and within the small boundary, relationships between and among people are as complicated as in a larger social space.

7.3. Observation

As discussed in another article Farzana (2011) that verbal expressions (songs/*Taranas*) play important role in refugees' life. Although, it remains informal and non-confrontational, it servers the purpose of ventilating their frustration, and giving messages to the outsiders.

I observed that within the desperate situation of camp life, people do have a cultural life. The use of songs is quite common among the Rohingya community. Even an undocumented beggar would come for alms singing a song. Song or *Tarana* has been a vehicle for them to ventilate their frustration out and express their mind in a way which is non-confrontational. Many of the sorrows that people could not say it openly were said in songs. It has been a medium for both documented as well undocumented refugees to keep their memories alive. Through cultural life people erected their own creative private space within the limited public space of camp boundary. The day when a refugee family in Nayapara camp brought their hidden musical instruments out of the sack and played them for me, I realized that my position and relationships with people in the research site not only helped me in terms of data collection, but also helped to uncover aspects of the community that would otherwise be impossible to find.

8. Leaving the Field

Every fieldwork has an end, and for me, it was not unexpected; rather, the length of time spent in the field was a strategic choice at every phase, because I had other responsibilities and involvements with my academic institution. In every phase of my fieldwork, my participants knew clearly that I was there for a certain period of time. My relationship with the respondents was not the same for all participants. With some respondents, my interaction was only limited within the interviews and discussions; with others, a friendship relationship developed over the period of time. Therefore, leaving the study site was particularly difficult because of that relationship as, by then, many had disclosed their personal, sensitive information to me. For many respondents, I had been their only opportunity to talk freely about themselves, their gender specific experiences in refugee camps, and their worries about their future. As I assured them, I always treated their data with confidentiality and respect. With a couple of individuals and families, I have maintained, and still maintain, certain level of communication even after leaving the field site for some time. It has been possible, due to the technological advancement of mobile communication. It has mainly happened with those families where at least one member can communicate in the Bengali language at least a little, as many of them have now lived in Bangladesh for more than a decade. Until August 2015, there were a few families in Nayapara and Jaliapara from whom I continued to get updates.

I felt that I was able to maintain a positive, temporary relationship with the CIC throughout the field study. For instance, in the later stage of my fieldwork, one day, while meeting the CIC, some refugees gathered outside his office and started a commotion. The CIC asked about the noise, and one official replied, "They [refugees] are fighting." The CIC ordered him to "call the camp police and beat them." He did not show any interest in getting to know the reason for their fight.

I narrate this incident because, to my mind, it illustrates two points: one is that sometimes I felt conflicting emotions, such that I found it difficult to maintain rapport with the CIC; yet, I was also constantly aware of my role as a detached observer in the field. The second is that this incident showed how, in the later part of my fieldwork, the CIC had become open and less concerned about his actions in my presence. After ordering the police to beat the refugees, he told me that such fights were common, everyday occurrences in refugee camps. However, he also sounded sympathetic, when he added that he understands that it was because there were so many living within such small, tight quarters. On my final day, the exit process from the CIC of Nayapara was quick and simple. We said goodbye to each other, following the local custom of saying *salam*.[10] He mentioned that a new CIC would take over

[10]*Salam*, Arabic for "peace be upon you".

in 2011. I knew that would mean another new process would be required if I wanted to gain access again to this registered Nayapara for another round of fieldwork. This also illustrates that things change so frequently in the field, that every follow-up field trip came with new trials, challenges, and experiences.[11]

This section of the paper I discussed my experiences being a researcher working in a remote area. There was a time when I found myself placed into a risky situation - possibility to get abducted, being too close to drug dealers, or even face psychological pressure like anxiety. In many ways, I had to compromise my personal comfort in terms of food, water, as well as extreme weather.[12]I did not focus on these matters much, because of my involvement with various important issues in the field. The hardship of refugee life, and the participants' personal stories encouraged me to keep going and do better. I was involved with them in such a way that as a listener, after having heard their stories for a period of time and having known their very personal and horrifying stories, I too, started to experience bad nightmares, centered around snake bites, death, and physical torture.

The various challenges (physical, ethical, emotional) that I encountered, highlighted in this paper, from moving into the field, to exiting the field site indicates overcoming various political, legal and security jurisdictions. As such, the bureaucratic hurdles for securing permission for a non-party individual to the refugee issue were lengthy, conspicuous, difficult, uncertain and risky, and involves going through layers of administration located in different places. It discussed the right and wrong moves, the negotiation process with different stakeholders, the qualities that a researcher would need to work in such as location.

The following section deals with some suggestions for future researchers.

9. Recommendations and Conclusion

Teknaf is located 510 km from the capital city of Dhaka. It takes 13 hours by bus to reach this destination.[13] There are no direct flights between Dhaka and Teknaf. One alternative is a combination of air and bus routes. Taking this long distance journey by bus, particularly at night, is not advisable as this Dhaka-Chittagong route is known for robbery. I also had a chilled experience once on my way to Teknaf from Dhaka. Our bus started at 10 pm. A middle-aged female co-passenger sat next to me on that journey. Some passengers were talking to each other. I became acquainted with my co-passenger. She told me that she was a local Bangladeshi, has three children, and lives at ShaplaCottor (Oliyabad), a place close to the Teknaf Bazar. She mentioned that she often travels between Teknaf, Cox's Bazar and Dhaka to meet her husband, depending on where he was located for his business. She was excited that I went to that remote part of Teknaf for my study.

After midnight, it was mostly calm environment inside the bus as most people perhaps fallen to sleep. Around 2 am, a discussion between the bus driver and conductor alerted the passengers that we have being chased. Some passengers shouted 'robbers' 'robbers'. We noticed a green-colour microbus, with 6 people in it, displaying arms like big dagger, pistol and iron-rods towards us calling the driver to stop. The microbus tried to block our bus by cross taking left and right lanes. This back and forth went on for nearly half an hour. In the midst of shock, confusion, and shared panic, some passengers were screaming, some were calling to their relatives. At one point, our bus stopped, and opened the door. My heart stopped for a while thinking the worse that was about to unfold in front of me. To my utter surprise, two police officers got into the bus, and we noticed a police van parked next to our bus. We were lucky that someone was able to call the nearest police station, and the police were on time to capture that green-microbus. After that incident, I befriended with my co-passenger, exchanged mobile numbers, and I started calling her Parul aunty[14]. Since then, I never took that route at night.

Secondly, while doing fieldwork in this bordering area we also need to remember that drug trafficking remains as an issue forthis area. Various newspaper reports have highlighted this (The Daily Star, 2014); (Kaladan Press Network, 2014). This has increased when I came into direct contact with a local drug dealer, as the following incident illustrates. The aunty I mentioned earlier, over time, my rapport with her developed and she invited me to her house and introduced me with her children. After some time, I felt that the aunty was gradually becoming over-protective and over-concerned about me. She started to call me more often, asking about my work, and especially about when was next time I would be going to Cox's Bazar or even Dhaka. Twice, we visited Cox's Bazar together. I needed to go to Cox's Bazar to withdraw some money from my Bank, which has a branch there. Being in a fieldwork setting, I did not like to keep a lot of money with me; rather, I preferred to withdraw from time to time, as needed. Her purpose of going to Cox's Bazar was supposedly to meet her husband, so usually after reaching the Cox's Bazar bus stand we departed for our own business and did not get back together. I preferred to get back to Teknaf immediately after my work, as it is only a two-hour journey. But I noticed that she was interested to join me at Cox's Bazar, at my convenience, and once she mentioned that her husband actually advised her to travel to Cox's Bazar only with me. I remember one incident when our bus was stopped at one checkpoint (out of three checkpoints)

[11] During my follow-up field trips the IPAC office moved out from the area, and I had to find another in-field accommodation. By then as I was familiar with the place and some people, finding a place was not so difficult.

[12] The summer in Bangladesh is usually hot and rainy, with temperatures ranging from 38 to 44 degree Celsius.

[13] By bus, [Dhaka to Chittagong = 275 km (6½ hours); Chittagong to Cox's Bazaar = 150 km (4 to 4½ hours); Cox's Bazaar to Teknaf = 85 km (2 hours)].

[14]Parul is her pseudonym. In Bangladeshi culture, ever one is an uncle and aunty if they are senior.

on our way to Cox's Bazar, the check post guards were checking others, but somehow did not check us.[15] At that point, aunty said that "While I am with you, no one will check as we dress like smart, educated people."

I became suspicious about her, and started to observe her words and actions with more caution. One Friday (as Friday is weekend in Bangladesh), she invited me for lunch. That afternoon, two of her male cousins came to her home. I was talking to her children while they were having their conversation. I could not help myself overhearing their conversation about their business. Although they were talking in Chittagonian dialect, due to my interview experiences with the Rohingyas by then, I started picking up some words. I could not understand them fully, but I understood that they are talking about her business and mentioned the term W.Y. several times, which I knew was the local term for a drug called Yaba. At that point, I became sure that she was a Yaba drug dealer.

Later, I brought the issue to the knowledge of the head of DGFI, and he said he was aware that there were some local dealers, both male and female; but in most cases, they were not captured due to the lack of hard evidence against them. From then on, I started avoiding her on pretext of my busy work schedule, and after some time, stopped receiving her calls. But I realized that it could have been worse. I could have fallen into the trap of a local drug trafficker. My insider story demonstrates an important issue here, that often, it is the Rohingyas who are blamed for illegal activities, ignoring the fact that these refugees who are basically without any protections could not possibly be in this business, unless in collaboration with, or under protection of the locals.

Following the mid-2015 (May-July) regional migrant crisis, Bangladesh government tightened its security system in the bordering districts.The district intelligence police arrested–some listed human traffickers from that area, but the number of people involved in human trafficking and drug business is not limited to any list. It is now an establishedknowledge that local Bangladeshi villagers are also involved in the human trafficking and drug syndicates. Theybrought in *yaba*from Myanmar, and its main customers are the young and wealthy in Dhaka and Chittagong.

Thirdly, for future researchers, as you prepare for your fieldwork, I would suggest that you start planning first and communicate with the relevant officials ahead of time. If face non-cooperation from any of those institutions, do not wait too long. You may still carry on and be there in the field and search for other options. Difficulty has not been able to prevented researchers from seeking alternative opportunities to carry on with their studies.I would also suggest to keep some connections with the refugees after the fieldwork is over. In this age of technology, keeping communication is not so difficult. I am still able to converse with some of the refugees over phone.

Doing fieldwork in danger areas on cultural community has never been a simple endeavour. However, there is an urgent need for research in all the conflict prone, dangerous locations where people are suffering. Researchers should not stop themselves from doing fieldwork in these areas on the basis of social stereotypes, or media image concerning the dangers involved, because in most cases the representation is partial as it is controlled by the authority. When researchers are passionate enough for their work, they would somehow learn to manage the danger of ethnographic fieldwork. Nonetheless, we should do so rationally by taking precautions and planning ahead.

This reflective account of undertaking ethnographic research with documented and undocumented refugees in camps has highlighted some of the underlying issues that any female researcher going to undertake a fieldwork in this remote area would face and reflect upon. Theseexperiences(practical, ethical or emotional) should not be stripped from fieldwork accounts. This might be useful to draw many parallels in a different setting of fieldwork with refugees and displaced communities in other parts of the world.Moreover, risks and challenges are methodological issues, inherent in ethnographic fieldwork, and we cannot avoid them. The intention of this paper has been to share such experiences, as the more expressive and sharing we are the more we prepare ourselves for such fieldwork by developing ways to minimise risks and protect ourselves while in the field.

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[15]There are three checkpoints on the Teknaf - Cox's Bazar main road, which is the only highway there, where vehicles are routinely stopped and checked for illegal goods. From Cox's Bazar to Teknaf these check-posts are: Moricha Kandi, which is guarded by the police, Border Guard Bangladesh, and Army; second is Balu Khali, guarded by customs and police; and third is Whykong, guarded by Border Guard Bangladesh.

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