

## Case Study

### Immersion of Durga idols in river Ichhamati on Vijayadashmi

#### -A challenge for District Administration

Ichhamati River (ইছামতি নদী) is a trans-boundary river which flows through India and Bangladesh and also forms the natural boundary between the two countries.

At the end of Durga Puja, on Vijaya Dashami, the river offers a unique spectacle when boats crammed with people from both countries converge to immerse their respective idols. Boats of all shapes and sizes can be seen on the river, as far as the eye can see — each one flying the flag of its respective country.



It is the only day during the year when border patrolling is relaxed and people can cross over to the other side of the river. Border Security Force and Bangladesh Border Guard keep on vigil by patrolling in boats. In previous years organizer of both the countries used to cherish the immersion ritual amidst relaxed restrictions to facilitate people of the two neighbouring countries to mingle with each other freely and

greet “Subha Bijoya” to each other. While earlier, after immersing their idols, people could even disembark from their boats on the other side, restrictions imposed by border officials in the last few years has put an end to this practice.

In Taki and adjacent areas of Hasnabad Block, the midstream of Ichhamati is the International Boundary (IB). Here the river stretches about 600-800 meter. The conventional spots of immersions are within a span of 3.5km-4 km, ranging from Sodepur Point to the T shaped trijunction confluence of river Dasa with Ichhamati. On the other side of Taki Municipality territory remains the Debhatta Upa Zilla within Satkhira District of the Republic of Bangladesh.

## **Challenges felt by the administration :**

Since 3-4 years last, it has been experienced that some elements take advantage of this large congregation and attempt to infiltrate/ ex-filtrate. During the mass celebration of the festival involving a trans border mixed crowd sailing in boats from the adjacent areas and also from the far flung areas of the Sundarbans using the river bed route of Hasnabad and Hingaljanj from our side and from Nurnagar, Khanpur ,Dakshin Sripur, Laxmikantapur, Nalta of Debhatta Upazila (Satkhira district), and also other places from the side of our neighbor nation. The boats were allowed go upto hand-shaking distance without any hindrance on part of the Border protectors of both the nations on the pretext of exchanging greetings and emotion of fraternity. But, all the persons are not so benign and serious crimes took place violating sanctity of the IB in the guise of cultural mingling.

Both the people have the same anthropological features, linguistic and cultural similarities and also likeness in social customs and manners. Due to these factors, it is often difficult to distinguish a Bangladeshi from an Indian.

Of all the activities carried on along the international border areas, seven distinct types can be categorized separately. They are (a) Infiltration for Food, Cloth, Shelter, Cheap-Labour and Job, (b) Illegal Trade, (c) Anti Indian Activities (d) Religious Fundamental Activities, (e) Human Trafficking (mostly women and children, (f) Arms and Drugs smuggling and (g) Theft and Robbery. Basirhat sub-division has earned bad name having the highest no of woman & child trafficking cases in this district.

The first one, namely 'Infiltration' has certain causes amongst, which prominent ones are infiltration for livelihood, infiltration for political purposes, infiltration for religious fundamentalism and infiltration for 'cheap-labour'. Among them infiltration made for political and religious purposes is both large in quantity and dangerous for Indians

### **Last Year Incidence**



In the year 2011, a pandemonium was created over these issues. As per media report, huge no ( More than 50000, as quoted in the Daily Bartaman dated 10-10-2011) of BD Nationals crossed IB in large size boats (called Bajra) without any resistance or challenge. Local residents who witnessed last year immersion opined that, the miscreants actually outnumbered the small groups of police force and BSF.

Unscrupulous intruders took advantage of the long cherished spirit of “Bijoya “ and the latest trend of “Indo-Bangladesh Moitree” and infiltrated /ex-filtrated across the respective territories.

It is also complained that, a heinous racket of illicit liquor and exchange of Bangladesh currency of unimaginable amount remain operative due to chaotic situation. Arson, torture and antisocial activities took place and local people got panicked and confined to their house. Some of Bangladeshis were stripped of their belongings. Incidences of ill behaviour with the ladies and even molestations were also alleged. A reign of terror, horror & fear psychosis prevailed on that auspicious day.

On that day, Sujoy Das (31), a research scholar of Indian institute of Chemical Biology gone missing and feared drowned after boat capsized. The country boat carrying 30 passengers capsized after colliding with a big Bangladeshi vessel. All other were somehow got rescued with the help of patrolling speedboats, the other boatmen and civil defence volunteers. Two days later body of Sujoy Das was recovered by BGB . News of casualty of Manas Halder (Aged 19 of vill- Uttar Chatra under Baduria Block) & Paritosh Munda ( Age 25 of Gaighata) was also published in Bengali Daily Anandabazar (dated 8-10-2011). Similar incidence happened for Bangladeshi boats but details of causalities are not available with us.

On that day the stretch of river alongwith Immersion took place was getting congested in the mid-streams as boats from both the countries are allowed to cross each other's marine territory. On that date due to huge influx all roads lanes/by-lanes, railway station were under the control of BD nationals. For that particular time roads were so thickly congested even an ambulance could not move resulting in death of one person.



### **Threat on a larger perspective:**

Apprehension is there, out of the large of BD Nationals having intruded, only 30-40% returned and a major part still remains in India and running cattle smuggling and other antisocial activities. A sizeable number of such populations engaged in different unauthorized brick kilns for their livelihood. Some of them are hard core fundamentalist and they proceeded to different parts of our country and mingled with us.

### **Reactions on threat perception:**

The Taki Poura Nagarik Committee , an apolitical organization meet sub-divisional and district authorities on a number of occasion with the demand to take necessary precautionary measure to avoid last year chaotic situation. Taki Poura Nagarik Committee also meet Hon'ble MoS( Home) Govt. of India Sri Jitendra Singh during his visit to Hasnabad BOP(on 13-9-2012 ) on that issue and requested Hon'ble MoS to pass on necessary direction to BSF. This organization also wrote to the Hon'ble CM GoWB, Hon'ble Home Minister GOI expressing their apprehension of similar incidence and sent request for remedial action. This organization took pioneer role in organizing people of Taki under a single umbrella of local citizen's forum.

**Steps initiated:**

Against this back drop to streamline this event in hassle free manner and without any untoward incident and to instill confidence amongst residents of Taki & surrounding area is a huge challenge for administration. We started preparatory work two months ago as per instruction of District Magistrate, North 24 Parganas. As a first step first meeting with puja committee was held on 13-9-2012 along with sub-divisional police administration, political parties, elected bodies and the Hon'ble MLAs at the SDO office Basirhat.

The other stake holders like, Puja-Samannay Committee, Poura Nagarik Committee of Taki , WBSUEDCL, Fire Brigade, Civil Defence & Excise also invited. The interactive session was aimed at chalking out a general outline. At this meeting we decided to hold another meeting with stakeholder including BSF. The SDM felt that without active co-operation & involvement of BSF it is impossible to check infiltration/ex-filtration and the SDM started developing rapport with senior BSF official like CO, DC, ACs of 18 Bn BSF & 47 Bn BSF. The area of immersion falls within the AOR of 47 Bn BSF.

This Co-ordination meeting with 47 Battalion BSF, 18 Battalion BSF, Taki Poura Nagarik Committee , Chairman, Police administration, Exercise, Boat Owner Association, BMOH, BDO and Savapati was held on 02-10-2012 at Hasnabad BDO office. In this meeting thread bare discussion was held.

**After threadbare deliberations, following steps have been ensured:**

- 1) Wide-spread campaigning in Taki Municipality and surrounding area from Mahalaya to be done. 10,000 No of leaflets are to be distributed for mass awareness amongst the Indian citizens not to cross the mid-stream and not to catalyst the infiltrating BD Nationals. All boat/vessel owners agreed not to cross mid-stream and they restrict their movement adjacent to bank.
- 2) A mock drill was planned before the Mahalaya. The OC Hasnabad was instructed to co-ordinate this exercise in consultation with BSF, Chairman Taki Municipality and BDO Hasnabad. Taki Municipality provided volunteers to OC Hasnabad & SOI Civil Defence also provided 30 trained volunteers. A rescue team of NDRF including professional divers with all equipment also pressed into service.
- 3) The BSF during their flag meeting shall request their Bangladesh Counterpart (BGB) to follow same thumb rule. It was a consensus that, Bajras (Large size mechanized boat of capacity 200-250) would not be allowed to cross mid-stream as they tend to act as a conduit to carry BD Nationals and also cause accidents by collisions and ripples. BGB will be impressed upon not to use large size mechanized boat during immersion.
- 4) Frisking operation will be taken up by Railway Police Force at Hasnabad and Taki Railway Stations. Police checking to be done at entry points of Municipality 2-3 days ahead. It is presumed that such checking which will send a message to trespasser.
- 5) Immersion at all places along the bank of Ichhamati to be done on the same date except for Basirhat Municipality which will reduce the no of boat and ensure better movement.

- 6) Local civic body will illuminate all the ghats (used for big boats) and other de-boarding points used by small boats. Police force along with BSF shall be deployed for checking and frisking .Since AOR of 18 BN BSF starts from the tri-junction (Machranga Dweep) to south ward and AOR of 47 BN BSF starts from tri-junction towards north, both shall remain alert at their respective jurisdiction. BSF is also requested to pull their resources from other battalion to augment strength on that day. BSF took up speed boat patrolling in the mid-stream so that none of our boat crosses the mid-stream and not to allow boat of neighboring country to cross the same.
- 7) On the date i.e. on 24-10-2012 (Wednesday) the notional boundary demarcation over the mid-stream is to be made visible through launch/vessel of BSF, Police, Taki Municipality, Irrigation, PHE, District Administration, Civil Defence standing in the front row near to mid-stream at spacing of 150-200 meter.
- 8) Over the river, Police took up frisking at two junction points (a) at Machranga Dwip and (b) at Sodepur point in co-ordination with BSF personnel. This deterrent exercise will be commenced from 9.00 a.m. The boats of Police and Municipality are to be equipped with public address for frequent announcement warning people not to cross mid-stream or the international boundary. The OC, Hasnabad will co-ordinate the frisking operation. Vessel of Municipality will work as camp office. Staffs of this camp office will all stakeholders.
- 9) All boats shall carry tricolor national flag and other signage to facilitate identification. Sufficient life jacket, tubes etc. are also made mandatory. No boat will be allowed to carry excess passenger and message was passed to the effect that, strict action would be taken against defaulter.

**Execution of action plan:**

As a follow up a joint mock drill held on 16-10-2012 from 2-30 pm. onwards instead of Mahalaya. BSF, Local police, Civil Defence, Local Municipality in addition to local Civil administration took part in the mock drill. **We jointly surveyed the entire area with the fleet and located the strategic points of barricading and points of interception. On Municipality boats mike were fitted warning people not to cross IB on that date. On the same day a meeting with local bazaar committee, clubs were organized to involve them so that we may get information about illicit liquor dens, places where illegal foreign exchange might happens.**

The Battalion Commander level flag meeting held with 38 Bn BGs and 47 BSF on 18.10.2012 at Taki BOP in which most of the decision taken in the Co-ordination meeting is approved as the problems and points raised were of mutual interest and importance of points was realized and appreciated by both the border guarding force.

As a sequel to flag meeting mock drill with civil administration with boat and vessels was carried out on 22<sup>nd</sup> October at 2-30pm.in the river. All took part in that drill; we assess our strength and resources and chalked out our plan for 24-10-2012.

**For rescue operation we requisitioned the service** of NDRF teams District Magistrate. NDRF consented to provide a team of professional divers headed by a Deputy Commandant. They reported on day ahead with a team of 37 personnel along with boats and other equipment.

**On the day of immersion :-**

On the Immersion date everything was put in place at scheduled time. Two floating BOPs and speed boats over placed one day ahead by BSF along with speedboat. Parallel to the notional IB line towards 25 meters inside, in the middle a camp office is opened in the vessel of surface transport department which was brought from Hasnabad Ferry-Ghat. In two sides of Launch of Municipality, Launch of PHE deptt, Irrigation Deptt were placed at regular interval in between two floating BOPs. These vessels act as a notional demarcation. Mike are fitted in the vessel with continuous warning not to cross IB. Manpower from all deptt like BSF, Police, Civil administration, Civil Defence, Taki Municipality ,Poura Nagarik committees were drafted.



The Guarding Forces of Bangladesh placed their boat in the midstream. Watchtowers of BSF were also functioned as joint control room.

BSF and BGB placed joint barricade on the river Ichhamati on their half up to IB near BGB BOP Debhata and another joint barricade near BSF BOP Sodepur.

No boats from Indian side were allowed to cross the mid-stream and vice versa. All boats starting from Hasnabad point were restricted at the tri-junction point. Similarly

all boats entering from Basirhat side got intercepted at Sodepur BOP point, resulting in minimal Indian cruise near the barricaded zone.

District Police also restricted the movement of vehicle by putting NAKA at main entry points and started frisking. In the morning about 120 suspicious persons were detained for interrogation in our territory as they were trying to cross IB for ulterior motive. Out of these about 40 persons are found Indian national on verification and rest are detained and brought to court. On the very next day all 80 nationals are sent to jail custody as per order of court. These 80 BD national came to Indian at different point of time and attempted to return their motherland on this occasion as they used to do on earlier Vijaya Dashmi date. The early detention works as a deterrent and send a message to all concerned. On that day though it was not a dry day by local order shop of country liquor and foreign liquor in an around Hasnabad is closed to maintain law & order. In co-ordination meeting local BMOH suggested from his working experience for last three years that other than overloading, incidence of drowning or boat capsizing took place in those where either the boatmen or the passengers were intoxicated. We used this as input to prepare our plan. Some mischievous person used to hoard huge amount of foreign & country spirit few days ahead for that day and sell it at high prices. Excise Official also deployed to stop such hoarding as huge consumption of

liquor is the root cause of capsizing. Regular raid are conducted in dens one week before.

People started assembling around the bank from morning. The *naka* check-post could ensure posting no vehicle save and except government vehicles & vehicles of VIPs allowed to move within 500meters of river bank. Police starting frisking and checking of vehicle from wee hours. So with the help police administration we are able keep the road free from congestion so that no incidence of stampede allowed to happen and can view the immersion ceremony .On that day many VIPs visit Taki to witness Vijoya Dashmi and cultural mingling. NCC boys with uniform are drafted to augment police force. They helped police in traffic, checking & frisking. Due to close vigil, movement of boat is regulated and no unauthorized boat is allowed to enter. Only boat carrying Idol and boats of administration, police, civil defence, NDRF and BSF were there. So there was no scope for collision. NDRF team took position in different places as a small team. Traditional Ghats & other de-boarding points were illuminated from evening for clear visibility. Barricades were raised at important places to avoid untoward incidence.



Durga idols commenced arriving for immersion 3-00 pm. On the other side, the boats from Satkhira seemed to be much larger in number as compared to our end. As the notional international boundary was maintained strictly, intermingling or unnecessary congestion could be curbed properly.

As per decision people are allowed to do immersion in river channel while remaining in their respective half and not to venture near IB. Immersion also took place in a time bound manner

before 17.30 IST i.e. before visibility is low.

At the end an exchange of greeting took place in the midstream without crossing respective IB with Bangladeshi counterpart.

## Reactions on part of the spectators:

Unlike the previous few years, celebration of Bijoya Dashami by exchanging greeting and sweets was in a mellowed tune. Even, it was a sad day for some who had gathered on either side of Ichhamati with hopes to meet their friends and relatives across the border.



An elderly woman in her seventies was trying to locate something among the crowded, mostly overcrowded boats floating on the other side of the border. She took her trembling hands close to her eyes and trying to look into the battery of Bangladeshi boats loaded with the Bangladeshi people and Durga idols. She was accompanied by her grandson, holding a jar full of naru, which he had brought for his kaka living on the other side. The mother could not find her son this year. "All the boats are requested to abide by the order of the administration" - blared out the of the speakers, tears welled up in her eyes. *"It's sad that these people have been deprived of a re-union with their friends from across the border. But apart from the security threat to our nation, the huge infiltration every year on this day is also harming our population balance and economy,"* an eye witness reasoned.



*"Aaji Bangladesher Hridoy Hote Kakhon Aponi/ Tumi ei aporup rupe bahir hole janoni.../ Tomar duar aaji khule gechhe sonar mondire..."* the Tagore tune was reverberating the riverside from the announcement podium. A senior solicitor from Kolkata came to Taki to witness the splendid cross border immersion ceremony. He was also dissatisfied like thousands of people assembled by the both side of

Ichhamti. He reflexed, "We are deprived of the sweet thing of congregation of people from both countries but apart from the very chance of security threat to our nation, the huge infiltration held every year on this day is also harming our balance of population and economy".

An amateur photographer comes from Salt lake with her husband to experience the unique immersion. Though she got disheartened for a faded fabulous event, agreed to the cause of ground reality of Infiltration and security threat.

Though it was emotional and touchy to some people, international law cannot be violated and also we cannot allow gathering of such a huge number of people from other side. Be that what it may, the Bangladeshi people enjoyed in their side and our people in our side amidst strict vigil.

The event continued up to 6.30 p.m. Local people appreciated our joint effort we are receiving good feedback from local people. The entire day passed off without any hassle or untoward incidence. The people Taki enjoyed immersion without any tension or panic,

This is indeed a joint effort and all stake holders played their part within their limitation .At the end of the day

no challenge/stress as such could be felt. It is a learning experience for all of us as we took it as a challenge and it also enhanced credibility of all stakeholders.

At the end of the event, it was a cherishing experience and good lesson, what result can yield if we follow the thumb rule – **“Plan –Discuss- Check – Recheck- Act “**.



#### **Lessons Learnt:**

- 1. Advance Planning is the most important**
- 2. Involvement of all stakeholders**
- 3. Mock drill helps in improving the plan**
- 4. Review and assessment by senior officer imparts strength to the plan**