

Geography behind the smuggling of Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN) in Malda: A border district of West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The cultural boundary of the undivided Bengal roughly corresponds with the state of West Bengal and present Bangladesh, drained and shaped by the mighty Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna river systems. With the partition of India, Bengal was divided in 1947. The western portion fell under the control of India, which created the state of West Bengal, while the eastern section formed East Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh, an independent country. The Malda district, situated in the northern part of West Bengal, lies at the interfluvies of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers, bordering Bangladesh. This district is relatively socio-economically backward and has a high incidence of poverty, especially in border villages. The rivers here appear to overflow and are sluggishly laden with the silt that is deposited to create *Char* land along the borderline. The Indo-Bangladesh international border is an imposed border without any physical or cultural boundary, which makes it difficult to identify a foreigner on either side, providing ample opportunity for illicit subsistence activities such as the FICN (Fake Indian Currency Notes) smuggling. The international boundary here flows across both land and rivers and is extremely porous, demarcated through the pillars of the land. Similar topography, language and culture on both sides of the international border play an important role in the emergence of Malda as a hub for FICN smuggling activities. This paper highlights the role of geographical factors in the growth of smuggling activities in and around Malda district, with an emphasis on FICN smuggling and its dissemination among the different police stations that cover the district's C.D. blocks.

Keywords: Indo-Bangladesh border, Geography, Dynamic rivers, Police stations, FICN smuggling

INTRODUCTION

Present Bangladesh and the state of West Bengal in India are contiguous regions with a distinct physical entity formed by the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna River system. With the partition of India in 1947, subsequent international border was thrust upon this area based on religion even though both West Bengal in India and East Pakistan share a similar history, culture and language, drained by the same rivers and having a similar topography [1,2]. With partition, the present district of Malda, which has been the heart of Bengal since ancient times (referred to as *Gaur*) has shifted overnight from the mainland to the periphery bounded by an international border stretching 172 km [3]. The Bangladesh-West Bengal border is peculiar in that, unlike other boundaries dividing two sovereign nations, the boundary between India and East Pakistan was vaguely demarcated as it was based on obsolete maps of *Thanas* and district boundaries that ran over rivers and large agricultural fields that are difficult to demarcate and are more like an abstract line [4]. The rivers in and around Malda change course and are often prone to floods, which are almost a routine annual affair. This results in perennial uncertainty about the disappearance and reappearance of land locally referred to as *Chars*. These *Chars* are also un-administered places that draw a number of nefarious activities.

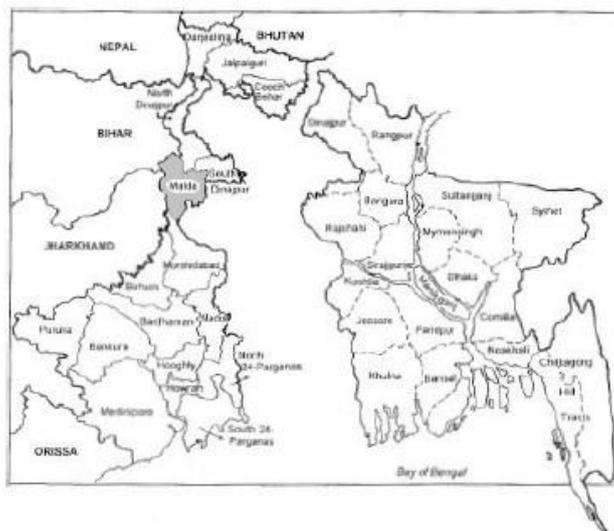


Fig.1. The split of the two Bengals became formalized with the Partition in 1947, when West Bengal (on the left) became a state within the Indian Union and East Bengal, a province of Pakistan. Eventually, Bangladesh (on the right) declared its independence from Pakistan's exploitative administration in 1971. Source: Sengupta, [6].

Unlike the Indo-Pakistan border, which is highly fortified, the Indo-Bangladesh border, since its formation, has been porous in nature, enabling the movement of people and goods as regulations on property evacuation and compensation, remained flexible, but this was only in the form of paper and disputes occurred on both sides of the border [5]. By the time Bangladesh was established, the porosity of the Indo-Bangladesh border had begun to arise as security issues affecting both the states and the governments had begun to take measures to monitor cross-border movements. But this cross-border movement of people and goods is now an integral part of the border population on both sides of Bangladesh and West Bengal. Despite tight border rules, this well-connected movement across the border has not been halted, making the situation more difficult, leading to a number of illicit activities, including the smuggling of Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN). This paper highlights the role of geographical factors in the emergence of Malda, a border district, as a hub for FICN smuggling activities. An effort has also been made to determine the distribution and temporal variation of registered FICN smuggling activities reported by the respective police stations in the district. An effort was also made to identify and map the concentration of this nefarious activity from 2015 to 2017.

STUDY AREA

The Ganga River enters the Malda district of Bengal through the Rajmahal hills and is the first line of defence for travellers and invaders who have come to Bengal since ancient times. It is only in the recent past that the European powers have come to Bengal from the opposite direction through the sea [6]. It is therefore natural that important urban centres have emerged in and around Malda, prominent among them *Gaur*, *Lakhanoati* and *Pandua*. Malda and its surroundings are located in the command area of the Ganga-Bhagirathi-Brahmaputra river systems and are an extremely dynamic region where rivers keep changing their course [7]. The rivers are stagnant here, filled with silt, which continues to be deposited, resulting in new land locally referred to as *Chars*, which are highly fertile for agriculture. Malda, which was situated on the mainland of Bengal, turned overnight into a peripheral region, partitioning India and Pakistan in 1947, bordered by the poorly defined Indo-East Pakistan border, which later emerged as the Indo-Bangladesh border with Bangladesh in 1971 [8].

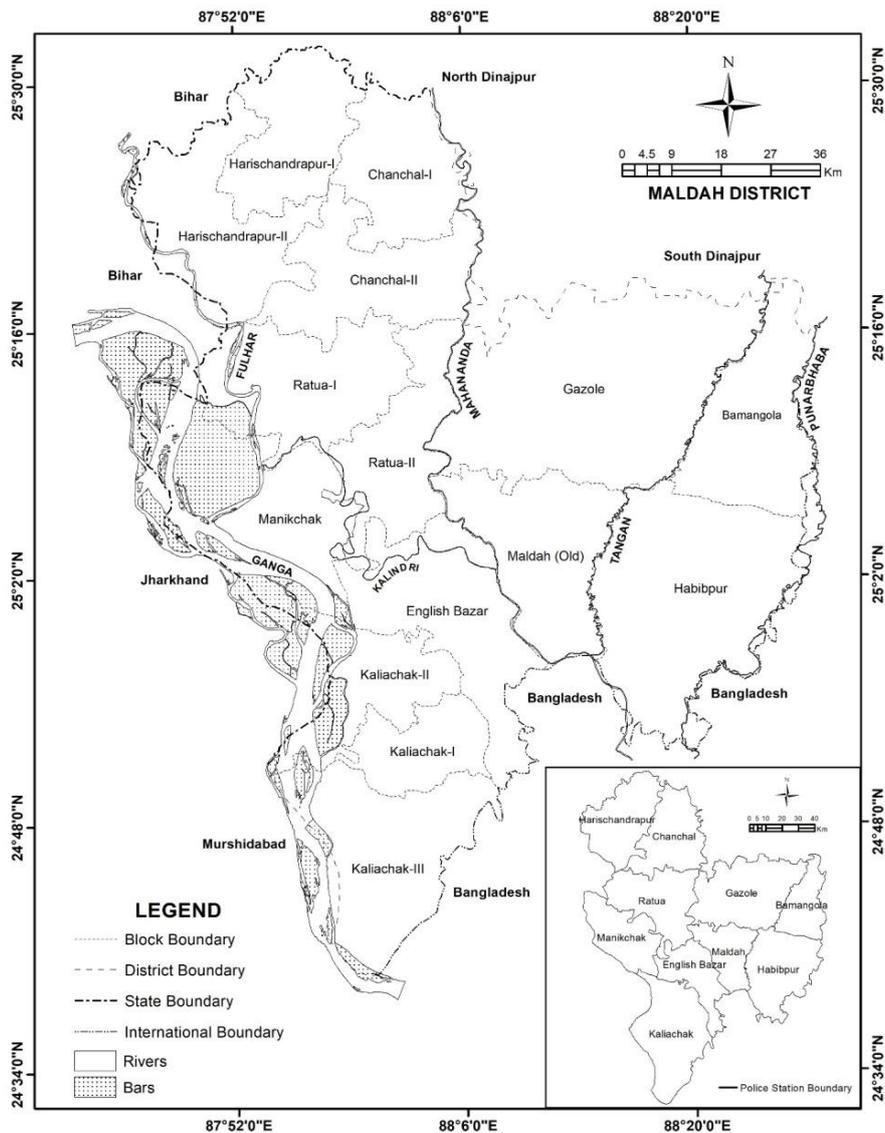


Fig.2. Location of the study area

This border is immensely complicated and, as has already been described, it is something like an imaginary boundary demarcating the same rivers, a common topography, culture and history of people who pursue similar livelihoods [9]. This border, as has already been described, is the product of a hastily formed border without a prior survey or information, which crosses the

houses, hearths and lands of rural communities dividing people from their relatives, towns from their hinterlands resulting in conflicts like Tebhaga[4,10]. This border has not only changed the lives of border residents, but also their livelihoods, their economy and their politics. The West Bengal-Bangladesh border can be seen as a typical example of what Martínez[11] defines as an interdependent border marked by symbiotic relations between communities on both sides of the border, resulting in a significant influx of human and economic goods that are considered illegal due to strict border rules on both sides of the border. Indeed, the geography of this region has conjured up the appearance of this border as an area of nefarious activity, including the smuggling of counterfeit currency, which silently hinders the Indian economy.

OBJECTIVE

To investigate the pattern of FICN smuggling activities over a period of three years (2015-2017), analyse and map the concentration zones of FICN smuggling reported by the different police stations covering the C.D. blocks of the district.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article is based on observation of area under five police stations viz. Bamangola, Habibpur, Maldah, English Bazar and Kaliachak covering six C.D. blocks of Maldah district, bordering the international border and assessment of secondary data, collected from various Government agencies viz. National Investigation Agency (N.I.A.), Criminal Investigation Department (C.I.D.), West Bengal, Border Security Force (B.S.F.) and related articles in journals and newspapers. Data on detection of FICN cases reported by the different police stations of the district has been collected from Criminal Intelligence Gadget [12] from the year 2015-2017.

The strategic location of Malda with its dynamic rivers especially Ganga changing its course and flowing towards Bangladesh has been mapped with the help of GIS software.

To measure the spatial distribution and concentration of FICN smuggling cases among the different police stations covering the C.D. blocks in Malda district, the statistical measure Z-Score has been applied. The probability value or P value obtained using Z-Score quantifies the score’s relative measure [13]. Higher the value of Z-Score suggests a higher concentration of reported FICN smuggling in the police stations covering the C.D. blocks of the district.

Z-Score has been computed as follows:

$$Z - Score = \frac{(X - \bar{X})}{SD}$$

Where, *X* is the raw score of the *i*th variable; \bar{X} is the mean score of the *i*th variable and *SD* is the standard deviation from the mean value.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Temporal variation of Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN) smuggling (2015-2017)

It is observed that millions of rupees are apprehended across the Indo-Bangladesh border of Malda district by security agencies (Fig. 3). Agencies such as N.I.A. (National Investigation Agency) have found that fake currency is also being used to fund terror activities in India [14]. Counterfeiting of Indian currency helps in funding terrorism activities and more importantly it is also used as a tool by Pakistan to destabilize the Indian economy[15]. National Investigation Agency estimates that 90 per cent of the fake currency entering India from Bangladesh is routed through Malda. Consequently, over a period of time, Malda has emerged as a hub for smuggling of counterfeit currency [16].

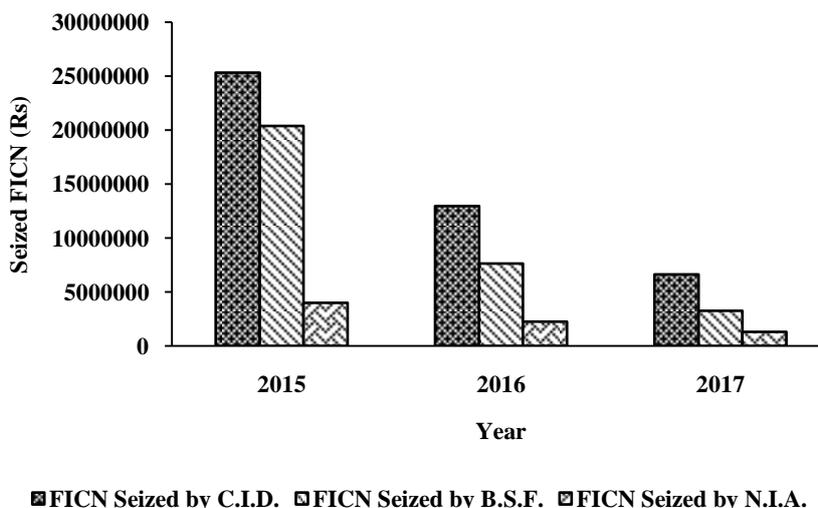


Fig. 3. Recovery of FICN by the Different Security Organizations in Malda district (2015-2017). Source: Different security organizations (N.I.A., B.S.F., C.I.D.)annual reports from 2015-2017.

Distribution of reported FICN smuggling cases (2015-2017)

In order to assess the distribution of FICN smuggling cases reported by each police station of Malda district, the Z-Score technique has been used for each year (Table 1, 2 and 3). Further, the Z-Score values for each year of the different police stations have been categorised and mapped into three zones suggesting the pattern of the reported FICN smuggling cases in the district (Fig. 4).

Table 1: Police station wise reported FICN Cases in Malda District (2015)

Police stations	Seizure of FICN(in RS)	No. of cases	Z-Score of No. of cases	P value of No. of cases	No. of person arrested
Kaliachak	23071000	55 (53.40)	2.76	0.002890	77 (54.23)
English Bazar	607000	13 (12.62)	0.17	0.432505	15 (10.56)
Chanchal	556000	9 (8.74)	-0.08	0.468119	19 (13.38)
Ratua	464500	9 (8.74)	-0.08	0.468119	13 (9.15)
Manikchak	310000	6 (5.83)	-0.27	0.393580	6 (4.23)
Maldah	107000	4 (3.88)	-0.39	0.348268	4 (2.82)
Gazole	95000	4 (3.88)	-0.39	0.348268	4 (2.82)
Harischandrapur	57000	2 (1.94)	-0.51	0.305026	2 (1.41)
Bamangola	42500	1 (0.97)	-0.57	0.284339	2 (1.41)
Habibpur	0	0 (0.00)	-0.63	0.264347	0 (0.00)
Total	25310000	103 (100)			142 (100)

Source: Criminal Intelligence Gadget (C.I.D., W.B., 2015), Z-Score and P value computed by the authors, figure in parentheses are the percentage to total.

Table 2: Police station wise reported FICN Cases in Malda District (2016)

Police Stations	Seizure of FICN(in RS)	No. of Cases	Z-Score of No. of cases	P value of No. of cases	No. of Person Arrested
Kaliachak	11659700	57 (66.28)	2.95	0.001589	79 (66.95)
English Bazar	455500	11 (12.79)	0.15	0.440382	15 (12.71)
Harischandrapur	215000	4 (4.65)	-0.28	0.389739	6 (5.08)
Gazole	150000	4 (4.65)	-0.28	0.389739	6 (5.08)
Maldah	131000	4 (4.65)	-0.28	0.389739	4 (3.39)
Chanchal	123000	2 (2.33)	-0.40	0.344578	2 (1.69)
Ratua	120500	2 (2.33)	-0.40	0.344578	2 (1.69)
Bamangola	109000	2 (2.33)	-0.40	0.344578	4 (3.39)
Habibpur	0	0 (0.00)	-0.52	0.301532	0 (0.00)
Manikchak	0	0 (0.00)	-0.52	0.301532	0 (0.00)
Total	12963700	86 (100)			118 (100)

Source: Criminal Intelligence Gadget (C.I.D., W.B., 2016), Z-Score and P value computed by the authors, figure in parentheses are the percentage to total.

Table 3: Police station wise reported FICN Cases in Malda District (2017)

Police stations	Seizure of FICN(in RS)	No. of cases	Z-Score of No. of cases	P value of No. of cases	No. of person arrested
Kaliachak	6076000	41 (87.23)	2.82	0.002401	58 (89.23)
English Bazar	548000	5 (10.64)	0.02	0.492022	6 (9.23)
Gazole	8000	1 (2.13)	-0.29	0.385908	1 (1.54)
Harischandrapur	0	0 (0.00)	-0.37	0.355691	0 (0.00)
Chanchal	0	0 (0.00)	-0.37	0.355691	0 (0.00)
Ratua	0	0 (0.00)	-0.37	0.355691	0 (0.00)
Bamangola	0	0 (0.00)	-0.37	0.355691	0 (0.00)
Habibpur	0	0 (0.00)	-0.37	0.355691	0 (0.00)
Maldah	0	0 (0.00)	-0.37	0.355691	0 (0.00)
Manikchak	0	0 (0.00)	-0.37	0.355691	0 (0.00)
Total	6632000	47 (100)			65 (100)

Source: Criminal Intelligence Gadget (C.I.D., W.B., 2017), Z-Score and P value computed by the authors, figure in parentheses are the percentage to total.

High concentration

The Kaliachak police station emerges as the zone with the highest concentration of FICN smuggling activity, ranked 1st among the police stations of Malda for all the three years under investigation viz. 2015-2017 (Fig. 4). This police station has the highest Z-Score values for the reported cases for all the years under investigation (Table 1, 2 and 3). Three blocks under this police station i.e. Kaliachak-I, Kaliachak-II and Kaliachak-III, are drained by the river Ganga (characterized by big *Char* lands) and the international boundary with Bangladesh also passes through this area, rendering it favourable to various nefarious activities, including FICN smuggling (Fig. 2).

Moderate concentration

Moderate concentration of FICN smuggling incidents differ over a span of three years (Table 5). In 2015, moderate concentration of FICN smuggling cases were found in areas covered by English Bazar, Chanchal and Ratua police stations (Fig. 4). The English Bazar police station reported the second highest recorded cases of FICN smuggling in 2015 (13 cases), accounting for 12.62 per cent of the total cases registered in Malda. The Z-Score of the registered cases of this police station is 0.17 and P value is 0.432505, ranking 2nd in Malda (Table 1). In addition, both Chanchal and Ratua police stations also reported a moderate concentration of FICN activities with fewer recorded cases of FICN smuggling (Fig. 4).

In 2016 and 2017, only English Bazar police station reported moderate concentration of registered FICN smuggling incidents (Fig. 4). Again, English Bazar registered the second highest confirmed cases of FICN smuggling in the district, accounting for 12.79 per cent and 10.64 per cent of the total cases in 2016 and 2017 respectively. The Z-Score of reported cases in the English Bazar police station ranges from 0.15 to 0.02 with a P value of 0.440382 and 0.492022 respectively in 2016 and 2017 (Table 2 and 3). It is interesting to note that for the years 2016 and 2017, the Chanchal and Ratua police stations record fewer FICN smuggling incidents. Resultantly, for two consecutive years, i.e. 2016-17, they are not included in the range of moderate concentration.

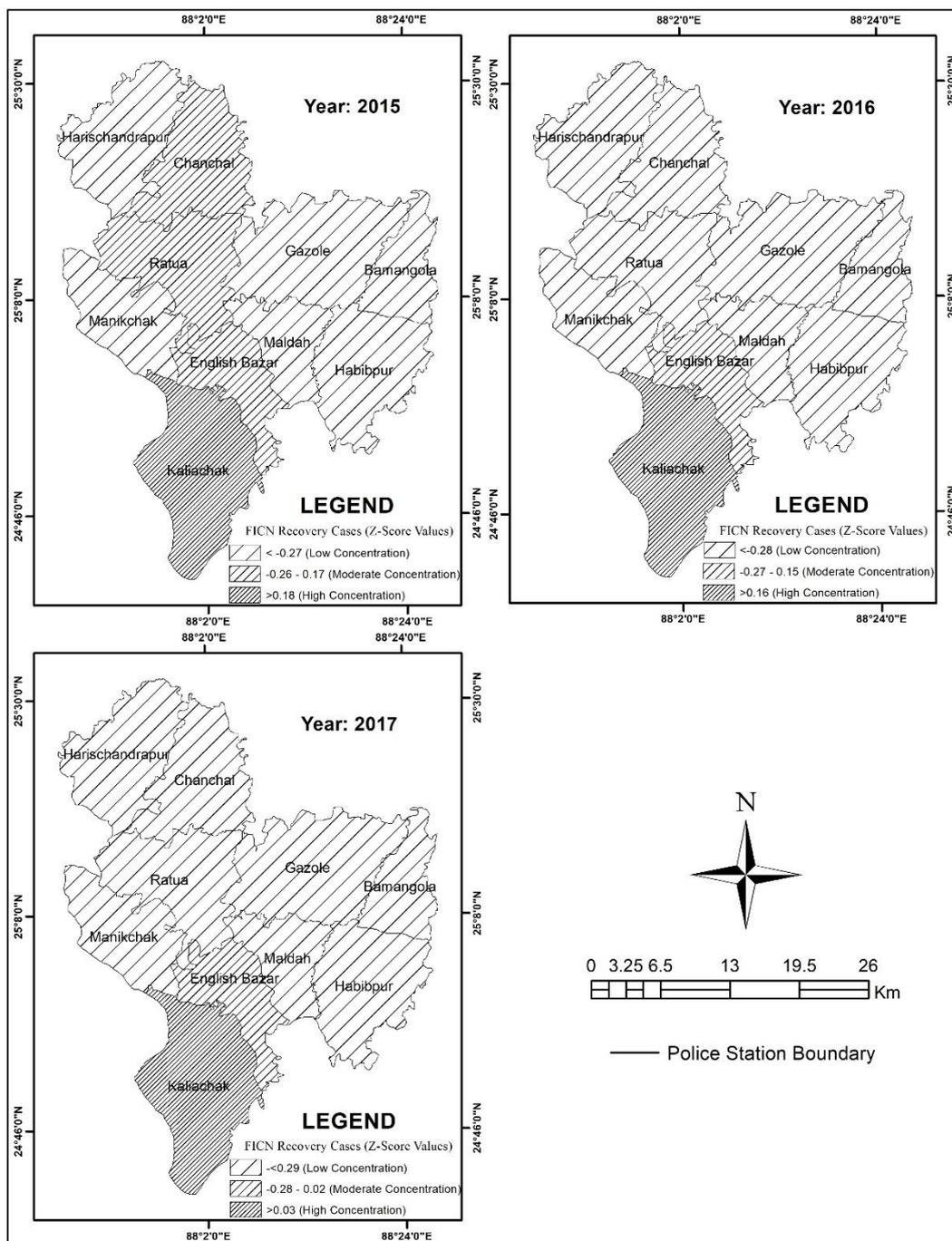


Fig. 4. Spatial distribution of recovery cases of FICN over the police stations of Malda district from 2015-2017.

Low concentration

Low concentration of cases of FICN smuggling varies (Fig. 4). In 2015, six police stations such as Manikchak, Maldah, Gazole, Harishchandrapur, Bamangola and Habibpur registered low Z-Score values ranging from -0.27 to -0.63 and P values ranging from 0.393580 to 0.264347 respectively (Table 1).

In 2016 and 2017, it has been found that the low concentration region of FICN has been expanded (Fig. 4). FICN smuggling incidents have been recorded in eight police stations with low Z-Score values ranging from -0.28 to -0.52 and high P values ranging from 0.389739 to 0.301532 in 2016 and Z-Score values ranging from -0.29 to -0.37 with P values ranging from 0.385908 to 0.355691 in 2017 (Table 2 and 3). Consequently, there is a low concentration of FICN smuggling incidents in the region served by these police stations. The study reveals that Bamangola, Habibpur and Maldah police stations are all situated in near proximity to the Indo-Bangladesh international border, however, these areas have a lower incidence of FICN smuggling instances (Fig. 2).

Geography behind smuggling of Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN)

Location

As already mentioned Malda occupies a strategic location as the mighty river Ganga enters Bengal through the Rajmahal hills and flows in a south easterly direction for about 56 km to reach Mithipur where Ganga divides into two branches viz. Hugli/Bhagirathi flowing south towards Kolkata and river Padma taking a south easterly direction flowing into Bangladesh the main channel of the river as river Hugli suffers from siltation [7]. Malda and its adjoining areas have been settled right from the medieval period emerging as an important urban centre but with time due to the dynamic nature of the course of Ganga which is shifting its course here, leading to bank erosion, the old urban centres have decayed out and at present Malda is predominantly a rural district bordered by Bangladesh having dominance of vast agricultural fields which stretches across the vaguely demarcated international border [17].

Topography

The topography through which this border passes can be categorised as vast fertile plains with numerous rivers, having negligible physical obstacle/boundary. As already stated the population here is mainly rural in character reporting very high density with land being cultivated till the last inch of the border. The land border is usually demarcated by pillars passing right through settlements and agricultural fields but the rivers cannot be easily demarcated and present the major obstacle for the security forces patrolling this border [18].

Drainage and technological innovation

Malda district of North Bengal as already mentioned is located in the interfluvies of Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers, known as the *Barind* tract which is a depositional fan formed at the end of the Pleistocene ice age when the mighty Ganga-Brahmaputra carried huge rain and snowmelt water with substantial load to be deposited here [7]. This district is drained by numerous rivers like Ganga, Mahananda, Fulhar, Kalindri, Pagla, Tangan, and Punarbhaba. Most of these rivers are flowing in a south easterly direction towards present Bangladesh. River avulsion is common here, as studies [19,20] suggest that rivers along the plains of North Bengal have for centuries been shifting and eroding their banks regularly. As already mentioned about 40 km south east of Farakka near a place called Mithipur the river Ganga bifurcates into two branches viz. Bhagirathi also called Hugli river flowing south and the Padma river which takes a south easterly direction and flows to Bangladesh [7]. River Hugli suffers from siltation affecting the navigation of Kolkata port. In this connection, the Farraka barrage (2.64 km length) has been constructed between Malda and Murshidabad district in 1970s by the Government of India where a perennial link (Feeder canal) has been established by diverting 87 cubic meters of water from Ganga to feed river Hugli. This has not only created a dispute between India and Bangladesh border but has also changed the geo-hydraulic regime of river Ganga [19,21,22,23]. Eventually, Ganga is forming new roots here, as the river has to adjust to the current hydraulic mechanism leading to bank erosion and floods resulting in submergence and emergence of land locally termed as *Char*. Thus natural factors, technological intervention, global warming and climate change are all playing a role in increasing the frequency of floods and associated sufferings on both sides of the border but also creation of new land called *Chars* which are highly fertile settled by the marginalised located in the riverine border emerging as centres of nefarious activities [24]. Each monsoon the major rivers of Malda break their banks causing extreme floods washing away settlements and infrastructure and valuable agricultural land, pushing the marginalized population further into the vicious cycle of poverty and to eke out a livelihood they often fall prey to various illegal activities including FICN smuggling.

Culture and complex border issues

Both sides of the border are habited by Bengali-speaking population who not only have same history and culture but also practice similar religion [9]. As borders are territorial delimitations of a state, they are spaces that mark the strongest manifestations of a state's sovereignty. Thus, they are also the spaces which witness the most visible presence of state machinery in terms of border fences, border guards and surveillance mechanism. The West Bengal-Bangladesh border is no exception to this but surveillance becomes difficult here due to its geographical character [25]. Field observation suggests that the vegetation cover of the newly created *Chars* is usually tall and thick grasses which enable the criminals to hide from the authorities. Dense fog and dark nights make it difficult for surveillance, especially on wintery nights. The socio-economic development of the Malda district is also relatively low and the border villages are lacking in development activities, there is a symbiotic relationship between the border people here, as this border has been extended to people who share the same culture, language and religion, whose families have been artificially cut off from the international border created without any prior survey and knowledge. Hence, on both sides of this international border, live families connected through marriages and kinship. From 1986 onwards, the government of India is under the process of constructing a border road and border fencing which as per agreement lies at a distance of 137 meters from the zero line or the actual borderline [4]. Hence, many agricultural lands of the villagers of India lies across the fence and these

villagers need the permission of the Border Security Force guards to work in their fields which involves cumbersome process, this often distracts the villagers from seeking permission from the authorities and they take recourse to illegal activities including crossing the border. Bundles of FICN are exchanged and sometimes thrown over the fence and delivered into the villages of Malda district bordering Bangladesh. Coupled with this, the peddlers collect the FICN and distribute the same to the agents spread all over the country, consequently, such counterfeit currencies come into circulation impacting the economy of India [26].

CONCLUSION

The district of Malda shares 172 km of the international border with Bangladesh. As per the Border Security Force (B.S.F.), 81 km of this international border passing through this district is not fenced. The numerous rivers flowing towards Bangladesh cannot be fenced which makes the boundary extremely porous. Thus smugglers often use the Malda border as a secure transit point for the entry of counterfeit currencies. Eventually, Kaliachak Thana records the highest amount of FICN smuggling activity in this district. It's three C.D. blocks under this police station, Kaliachak-I, Kaliachak-II and Kaliachak-III, are bounded by the river Ganga, and the international border with Bangladesh. These blocks are also affected by bank erosion due to the shift of the river Ganga, making the borderline extremely vague, resulting in numerous nefarious activities along the borderline.

It is interesting to note that since the formation of this border dividing India from East Pakistan, which later emerged as Bangladesh, and the deployment of the Border Security Force, followed by the fencing done by the Government of India from 1986 onwards, it has not been possible to stop the various nefarious activities like cross-border smuggling of narcotics, weapons to smuggling of household goods, from counterfeit currency to the smuggling of cattle. Incidentally, after the demonetization of Indian currency by the Indian Government in September 2016, it can be said that the activities of FICN smuggling across the Kaliachak region have significantly reduced. It should be noted that the location of Malda, along with its geographical character, has encouraged illegal subsistence activities by the people living here who have used this border and the peculiar geographical character of the region to their benefit by using FICN smuggling as monitoring of this international border is extremely difficult due to its location, physical and cultural factors.

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