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Rethinking Borders vis-à-vis Theories of New-Regionalism

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ABSTRACT

The popular understanding that visits one's consciousness on being confronted with the terms border or boundary happens to be pretty much territorial. The dominant understanding concerning borders in a state-centric discipline, International Relations (IR) for that matter fails to go beyond seeing borders as lines demarcating sovereign control. With eventual academic endeavours however the understanding associated with borders has witnessed a major expansion. Borders now have become a topic of engagement for anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, political scientists, lawyers, psychologists and even specialists in technical sciences. This paper makes a case for seeing borders from the perspective of 'Regions' as understood by the New Regionalism Approach (NRA). To put forward the relevance of incorporating the literature on NRA into borders the paper takes up the northeastern periphery of South Asia as a case and studies the complexities associated with borders in the region. In the northeastern periphery of India, the physical demarcation of space as it appears on the maps fails to reconcile with the cognitive territorial imaginations of the people inhabiting those spaces. As a result, there arise a plethora of secessionist and separatist movements that intend to challenge the existing physical borders in favour of more discursive and cross-national imaginations. Such movements fracture sovereignty at the peripheries and give rise to transnational or postnational imagined communities. A probable solution to such complexities, the paper argues could be to see such spaces not as pockets of fragmented nationalism but as 'Regions' -as understood by the NRA - in making. The paper thus makes a case for incorporating the New Regionalism Theories to address the peculiarities in these borderlands Borders acquire completely different meaning in a cognitively imagined 'Region'.

Note: The word region has been used in two connotations in the paper. When used as region it simply implies a particular geographical area, for instance – northern region, eastern region, in this case the northeastern region of India. When used as 'Region' it implies a technical term as used by Regional Integration approaches. In this case the New Regionalism Approach.

INTRODUCTION

In a predominantly state-centric discipline, International Relations (IR), the understanding associated with borders is mostly as lines demarcating the territorial extent of sovereign nation- states. Borders for the discipline of IR therefore have remained the cornerstone of nationalism – as strict demarcations beyond which lies the ‘other’. The two popular catchwords associated with nationalism – sovereignty and territoriality – are inseparably associated with borders when seen from an IR centric perspective. For the project of nationalism to prosper, it is essential to sustain sovereignty within a specified territory that is to be demarcated by borders. Borders therefore justify the use of force to sustain the homogeneity within, while differentiating the subjects from the without. ‘Borders are popularly understood as the territorial limits of the state within which the entire gamut of social relations, institutions and spatial formations are subordinated and represented’ (Meena, 2014). When engaged with through the discipline of IR there appears to be no imagination of borders beyond lines on the maps. The emphasis has thus traditionally remained on the analysis and interpretation of the activities that occur on borders located at the edge of the state (Meena, 2014).

Nevertheless, beyond this overarching consensus over the understanding of borders, the twentieth century has witnessed an overwhelming interest in boundaries and frontiers across diverse academic fields. Boundaries and their meanings are historically contingent. They change over time and are part of the production and institutionalization of territories and territoriality (Paasi, 1991). ‘There is’ argues John Agnew, ‘nothing at all “natural” – physically or socially – to borders. They are literally impositions on the world’ (Agnew, 2008: 181). Borders as they appear in the maps at a particular point in time present a single story and thus undermine the alternative realities and memories of the times prior to the coming up of the border (Mallot, 2012). John Agnew (2008) calls for a change in the way in which we think about borders to openly acknowledge their equivocal character. With the debate over a ‘borderless world’ making way for a ‘world of borders’ in the post1990s, borders have seen an engagement from several academic disciplines. State borders have now come to be understood as one type of border among many (O’Dowd, 2010). That state boundaries are equally social, political and discursive constructs, not just static naturalized categories located between states has come to be widely accepted by now (Newman and Paasi, 1998). Borders have eventually come to become an interdisciplinary field developed in parallel by political scientists, anthropologists, ethnologists, lawyers, psychologists, sociologists and other social scientists, and even specialists in technical sciences (Kolossoy, 2012).

This paper makes an attempt to look at borders from the perspective of ‘Regions’ as understood by the New Regionalism Approach (NRA). Dhananjay

Tripathi (2015) makes an attempt at looking at borders from the perspective of regional integration. This paper in a way goes ahead and tries to look at the possibilities of employing the NRA and its theoretical postulates to think of an alternative imagination about borders in South Asia. In an integrated 'Region', borders acquire a different and more interdisciplinary understanding compared to areas where integration is still in a nascent stage (Tripathi, 2015). In a well integrated 'Region' the obsession with national boundaries fade away allowing multidisciplinary engagement with borders. Whereas in less integrated 'Regions' the national borders hold strong bearing thereby restricting any discussion on borders to matters of security and control.

To put forward the argument, the paper takes up the case of the northeastern periphery of India, which in a way is a meeting point of three area studies formations of the present time – South, East and Southeast Asia. The first part of the paper introduces the region of study and highlights the complexities associated with borders in the region. In the subsequent section the paper makes a case for incorporating the New Regionalism Approach (NRA) to address the complexities associated with borders in the region.

The Northeastern Periphery of India

Subir Bhaumik calls the northeastern region of India, 'a region rooted more in the accident of geography than in the shared bonds of history, culture and tradition' (Bhaumik, 2009: 1). Comprising of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim, the region constitutes an area of about 2.6 lakh square kilometer with a population of approximately 39million. The region forms a part of the already existing categorization called the Zomia. 'Zomia is a new name for virtually all the lands at altitudes above roughly three hundred meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India and traversing five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma) and four provinces of China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and parts of Sichuan)' (Scott, 2009: ix). The region under study is a conglomeration of around 475 ethnic groups and sub-groups, speaking over 400 languages or dialects. More than 200 of the 635 communities listed as tribal in India are found in the region and 175 out of 325 languages of the Tibeto-Burman group listed by the 'People of India' project are spoken in the region (Bhaumik, 2009).

Despite having such rich cultural diversity, the region has been in the headlines for several wrong reasons. The region has been a home to numerous insurgency movements since the very formation of the post-colonial state India – with most of the movements being driven by the claim for sovereign homelands, i.e. to say with a contradiction with borders. Separatist movements with the demand for sovereignty – with whatever varied understandings about the term sovereignty itself – have affected at least four states in the region: Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland (Baruah, 1999). Following are some of the major insurgent groups in the region: Assam – United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB); Nagaland – various factions of the National Socialist

Council of Nagaland (NSCN); Manipur- People's Liberation Army (PLA), United National Liberation Front (UNLF), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPaK), Manipur People's Liberation Front, Revolutionary People's Front and others; Meghalaya - Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council and the Achik National Volunteer Council; Tripura – All Tripura Tiger Force, National Liberation Front of Tripura (Cline, 2006). Each one of these in one way or the other strives for a homeland or autonomous state challenging the existing borders – either domestic or international.

Although not the majority voice, separatism is still a considerable voice in the complex political landscape making it a localized but serious and sustained issue. Driven by the historically constituted subnational ideologies, the region exists in a dialogical relationship with pan-Indian political institutions, process and values (Baruah, 1999). The demand for autonomous homelands coupled with the strategy of the post colonial Indian state to create new states and autonomous units to fulfill the aspiration of the battling ethnicities has made the region a perennial home to movements demanding 'ethnic homelands' (Bhaumik, 2009). Hence contradiction with existing borders has become a perennial phenomenon in the region. Such strategies of the Indian government in a way provide leverage to the secessionist groups demanding for alteration of borders in a way claiming repetitive reorganization of space.

Complexities of Borders in the Northeastern Periphery

The region provides a bewildering case to engage with in terms of borders. The borders in the region, in themselves, constitute a paradox of continuity and discreteness. The imaginations about borders that the subjects inhabiting the region bear are contradictory to the physical borders that lie on the ground. While the physical borders are very comfortably demarcated on the map, such representations provide a very superficial understanding in the region. As an undercurrent to the comfortably existing borders that systematically divide the region as a whole from the rest of the India and from each other and finally from the international neighbours, exists contradictions at the cognitive level. The coincidence of physical and cognitive borders in the region has been incomplete as a result of which the post-colonial Indian state has suffered serious setbacks in sustaining its legitimacy over the frontier region. The historical, cultural, ethnic, linguistic and other commonalities do not stop at the physical borders and the understanding associated with borders for that matter has altogether a different connotation for the inhabitants. The cognitive imaginations of the people inhabiting these spaces transcend the physical borders. The predominant literature on border studies comes to be challenged under such peculiarities.

As rightly argued by Mallot, 'post-independence maps deny or diminish important truths about the past' (Mallot, 2012: 181). First thing first there exists a major centre-periphery contradiction in terms of the borders in the region. This divide in a way is very typical of the divide existing between the centre and peripheries of the modern nation-states. Most of the region's

‘turmoil in the last few decades’, argues Nandana Dutta ‘has been the result of narratives about it generated by the centre and narratives about it generated in response’ (Dutta, 2009: 124). While policy planners and social scientists for a considerable period tended to club together the different states of northeastern region into the bracketed category called North-East the people from within the region consider such plain generalizations as greatly problematic (Misra, 2000). While the centre sees the international border at as far as the end of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur or Mizoram where it meets the neighbouring nation-states, the periphery however perceives it at a different location altogether. This is explicit from the demands on the one hand by a section of people to impose and sustain the provision of Inner Line Permits (ILPs) and on the other hand by a section of people against fencing of border with Myamnar. ‘The ILP is a special permit required to enter certain restricted areas in the country — usually states close to the international border. Indian citizens require an

ILP to enter states such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram. The system was first introduced by the British, restricting entry into these areas to protect their commercial interests’ (Roy, 2016). It is ironical how a colonial policy of keeping out the frontier tracts which was once a prerogative of the ruler has in the present times become a prerogative of the ruled to keep the ruler out. So despite the existence of the physical international border – for instance – between Manipur and Myanmar, a cognitive border at the same time exists between Manipur and rest of India as a result of which a considerable faction of the Manipuri society is taking to life and death to ensure implementation of ILP in the state (Roy, 2015). Second, the contradiction associated with international borders is even more perplexing in the region. While a section of the population in Assam demand for strict international bordering with Bangladesh, some sections in Mizoram, Manipur or Nagaland on the other hand stand up against fencing of border with Myamnar.

Assam has seen a decade long protests in the 1970s-80s, that culminated in signing of the Assam Accord which contains fencing of border with Bangladesh as one of the primary clauses (Assam Accord, 1985). Erecting of border fence between India and Bangladesh has been a major issue for domestic politics in the state and present political dispensation appears to be way more concerned with the matter (Phukan, 2016). On the other hand considerable factions in Nagaland denounce the arbitrary international border with Myanmar. They consider the 1914 Shimla Accord and later arrangements between Nehru and U Nu in 1953 to be unitary and having nothing to do with the people of the region (Anand, 2017). Very recently, in January 2017, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, Isac-Muivah (NSCN-IM) and the Naga Hoho – the apex body of tribal organizations in Nagaland opposed the construction of border fencing along Myanmar and Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur. The Naga Hoho in a statement said that the Nagas can’t allow any authority to divide their history and remove the feeling of oneness among the Naga family between India and Myamnar. The NSCN (IM) which presently is under a negotiation with the

central government entered to last year said that at a time when the two sides are at a threshold of a final solution, the motive behind the construction of artificial fencing along the Naga areas is highly questionable and unacceptable (Anand, 2017).

Traces of discontent and discomfort concerning the erection of border fence at the Indo- Myanmar border had earlier come up in 2013 when similar protests were witnessed in Manipur (Das, 2013). Above that, the NSCN-K has as one of its primary demands the unification of all Naga inhabited areas across border. Its leader SS Khaplang being a Hemie Naga from Myanmar it is however obvious for the faction to be opposing the arbitrary divide between India and Myanmar (Deka, 2015). This is one of the primary reasons that prevent any further negotiation between the group and the government of India (Boruah, 2015). Groups such as the NSCN and the Naga Hoh pose an outright challenge to the arbitrary colonial and post colonial cartography and provide fierce resistance to the physical borders. As yet another symbolic denunciation of the arbitrary borders four of the most furious insurgent groups in the region came together to form a conglomeration in 2015.

The National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Khaplang (NSCN –K), the United Liberation Front of Asom – Independent (ULFA-I), Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland – Songbijit (NDFB-S) came together in April 2015 to form the United Liberation Front of Eastern Southeast Asia (UNLFW) (Kalita, 2015). The conglomeration in a way reflects the postnational or beyond national imagination of the insurgent groups which in a way is an outright contradiction to the physical borders demarcating the nation states.

While at once a faction of the populace denounces the international borders separating their kinfolds, on the other hand there are protests for imposing strict borders vis-à-vis India. There are protests for reorganizing the borders with neighbouring states. Then again there are protests for setting up autonomous regions within the particular states creating a phenomenon of othering again within the very same state. All these complexities in a way provide a curious yet confusing case for those who wish to indulge with study of borders and challenge the linear understanding of borders as mere lines demarcating nation-states.

Fractured Sovereignty, Imagined Nationality:

The contradiction in relation to borders in the northeastern region brings to light in various ways, the questions of fractured sovereignty and imagined nationalities in the peripheries of the modern nation-states. The popular models of nation-building in multi-ethnic polities confront with serious challenges in the peripheries of the modern nation-states. If a section of the population in the peripheries of a nation-state fails to connect itself with the dominant narrative of the nation, it in a way signals the resounding failure of the project of nationalism. Benedict Anderson (1983) argues that the nation is an imagined community and for that matter a move beyond the nation has

also to be imagined, proposes Arjun Appadurai (2003). The postnational or beyond national imaginations of the subjects inhabiting the spaces at the periphery of the nation-states repeatedly come to confrontation with the notions of nationality, territoriality, sovereignty and borders.

The search for homelands and autonomous states by various groups in the northeastern region of India in a way represent their imaginations for respective national space for themselves, outside the sovereign reach of the Indian state. Under such circumstances, the Indian state has come to face what Arjun Appadurai calls, 'serious crisis as a compact and isomorphic organization of territory, ethnos, and governmental apparatus' (Appadurai, 2003: 337). One possible way of addressing the contradictions associated with borders in regions as one under study is to look at borders not as concrete realities on the ground reinforced by hegemonic cartography but as fluid categories that can be lifted and reorganized in accordance with the imaginations of the people that live with those borders. The idea is to move beyond seeing the spaces as pockets of fragmented nationalism towards seeing them in the light of cognitive 'Regions' in making in their own right. The term 'Region' has come to be defined variously by various approaches to Regional Integration but the definition that appears relevant for a case as one under study seems to be one provided by the New Regionalism Approach (NRA).

Addressing the Complexities: Incorporating the New Regionalism Approach

'For more than a decade, regionalism has now "been brought back in" to international studies, after sometime of almost complete neglect. The "new-regionalism" began to emerge in the mid- 1980s in the context of comprehensive structural transformation of the global system' (Hettne and Soderbaum, 2000: 33). The NRA sees 'Regions' not merely as geographical or territorial construct but also as cognitive imaginations of the people inhabiting those spaces. Some of the influential proponents of the approach are (Hurrell, 1995), (Hettne and Soderbaum, 1998), (Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel, 1999), (Hettne and Soderbaum, 2000), (Langenhove, 2013) and others. The NRA claims to be different from and an addition to other theories of Regional Integration in several respects. Andrew Hurrell (1995) lists five major distinctions. The primary departure with which the paper is concerned is the attempt to go beyond the territorial obsessions of other dominant theories. The NRA has eschewed focus on official state-driven process of studying regions and the phenomenon of regionalism in favour of a more dynamic process. 'The new regionalism is a comprehensive, multifaceted and multidimensional process, implying a change of a particular region from relative heterogeneity to increased homogeneity with regard to a number of dimensions, the most important being cultural, security, economic policies and political regimes' (Hettne and Soderbaum, 1998). The NRA is driven by a multiplicity of actors, both state and non-state, and processes, both formal and informal (Rainford, 2011). 'There seems to be a consensus that regions are more than just territorial spaces, but it remains difficult for geographers

to grasp that extra-geographical element'(Langenhove, 2013: 474). The NRA in a way builds on the constructivist idea that 'Regions' are not concrete geographical realities but can be constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed through interactions of the people inhabiting the spaces.

'A Region constitutes an open process, and can only be defined post factum. Regions are social constructions and to observe and describe regionalization is also to participate in the construction of Regions. Since there are no given Regions, there is no given regionalist interests either. But the interests and identities are shaped in the process of interaction and intersubjective understanding'(Hettne and Soderbaum, 2000).

Luk Van Langenhove proposes that providing the definition of a Region should start from the observation that the concept of Region is not only used by social scientists and scholars but also by people inhabiting those regions in their everyday life discourses (Langenhove, 2013). Despite being a geographical area, a Region does not exist without people. The American philosopher John Searle uses the term 'institutional fact' to refer to those portions of the world that are 'facts' only by human acceptance (Searle, 1995). A 'Region' is thus always an institutional fact and therefore also an idea. And because 'Regions' are ideas they are being talked about. It is not because 'Regions' exist that they are talked about, rather it is because they are being talked about that they start existing (Langenhove, 2013). Following the meta-theoretical postulates of the NRA as proposed by Hettne and Soderbaum (2000), we may take a view beyond state-centrism to explain Regional Integration. The global sociological theory of Hettne and Soderbaum abandons state-centrism in an ontologically fundamental sense and calls for studying social processes delinked from nation states (Hettne and Soderbaum, 2000).

'The nation state has become an unnatural, even dysfunctional, unit for organizing human activity and managing economic endeavor in a borderless world. It represents no genuine, shared community of economic interests; it defines no meaningful flows of economic activity. In fact, it overlooks the true linkages and synergies that exist among often disparate populations by combining important measures of human activity at the wrong level of analysis' (Ohmae, 1993).

It appears that the international borders in the region of study have somehow faced trouble to restrict the cross border linkages. Thus seeing the region under study as a 'Region' in making would allow agency to the cognitive imaginations of the people and help redress their anxieties over nationalism and sovereignty. The new cognitive 'Region' so formed shall transgress the limits of national and domestic borders and give a new understanding altogether to borders.

CONCLUSION

The northeastern periphery of India witnesses a bewildering contradiction between physical borders as represented on the maps at a given point in time and the cognitive territorial imaginations of the people living with the borders.

Maps present a single story as the only version of truth thereby denouncing the memories of a prior time when the borders were non-existent or perhaps existent at an alternative location. Considerable sections of the society in the region have failed or may be refused to go beyond the memories of prior years and hence find it difficult to reconcile with the hegemonic and arbitrary cartography slicing them off their kinfolds. The contradictions concerning borders have resulted in fractured sovereignty and rise of several imagined transnational or post-national communities. Under such circumstances, the post colonial Indian state has failed to sustain its legitimacy over the peripheral region resulting in serious setback to Indian nationalism. To overcome such complexities it is necessary to see the region not as pockets of fragmented nationalisms but as a 'Region' in technical terms as defined by the New Regionalism Approach. Doing that implies seeing 'Regions' not as strict geographical realities but as categories that may be constructed and reconstructed by interaction. This in a way will ensure agency to the cognitive imaginations of the people inhabiting the spaces and give newer meanings to borders.

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