



SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE BORDERLANDS OF INDIA AND THEIR ROLE IN THE HISTORICAL PROCESSES

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Abstract: This paper demonstrates the importance of borders, as a topic of study and tries to understand how the characterisation of borderlands based on their selection of themes which inaugurated a new agenda to the study of borderlands. It also provides insights into the workings of present governance and will trace the shifting interactions between the states in the monitoring of space and territory.

Keyword: Borderlands, Inner Asia, India, Tibet, Mughals, China, Himalayas.

INTRODUCTION

David Szanton, while approaching the regions of Asia opined that if we fold the paper into four, on one side would be East Asia and below it would be Southeast Asia and to the left would be South Asia and to the north would be Inner Asia¹. Such a geographical scenario has come alive to us when we try to look at the eastern Himalayan borderlands as the regions bordering the eastern massif merge into the Tibetan highlands and become part of China which is in East Asia. The southern part of the eastern Himalayas proceeds towards Southeast Asia which is where Myanmar is located. Taking a similar exercise to the north-west, we find Tibet and Inner Asia emerging as the most important points of connection for the polities and peoples of the western Himalayas apart from India in the pre-modern period.

Therefore, a survey of the different borderlands to the north and east of India help us to place the question of alliance in proper perspective. It would come as surprise that in pre-modern period, there are no borders between India and China whereas there are clear borders between India and Russia and this was during the

¹Szanton, David L. (ed). *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, in, "Introduction: The Origin, Nature, and Challenges of Area Studies in the United States". University of California Press, 2004. P 1-3.

period of the rule of the Czars. British India border Tajikistan and the Tajiks had a history of cultural interaction with India in the ancient period where they were known as Tajikas during their pre-Islamic past². Even in the literature of ancient India like the Smriti literature and even in the texts like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, we find clear references to the borderlands. In fact, the regions are referred to as Shina, place from where the famed silk came and it was identified as China and the silk was known as Shina Patta³.

What has added new relevance to the debate is the nomenclature of the term Chin. The Cambridge history of China volume 1 which deals with the early period of the Chin and the Han empire from 211 BC to A.D. 220, the derivation of the term China from Chin had been taken up for discussion. It is suggested that the term China came from Chin as early as 1655 by the Jesuit missionary Martin Martini in his *Novus Atlas Sinensis*. It was based on the identification referred above by the Indian text titled *Arthashastra* and this was supposed to have mentioned silk. The point of dispute was that silk would have travelled to India from China or the land of Shina as it was written in the text if only the country was unified by the Chin Dynasty in 221 A.D.

The other important relation with India and the borderlands of Inner Asia apart from Tajikistan and Tibet is the ancient transmission of Buddhist religion from India to the regions of Inner Asia and from thence to China. We have a fair amount of literature on the spread of Buddhism in Inner Asia but very less information on the exact mechanism of how the spread occurred. Most of the remains are in the form of literary texts, inscriptions and more importantly material remains. One of the points here is that the difficulty of reconstructing the borderland of Inner Asia with India as most of the ethnic groups have become islamicized. We also have the entry of new ethnic groups and entry of many other groups of people like the Turks, Mongols who displaced the earlier Indo Greeks in regions like Xinjiang which was earlier known by various names to ancient Indians as Bactria and Sogdiana and which today comprises regions of Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Xinjiang. Compounding this problem is the fact that many of the languages also had gone extinct along with the ethnic groups.

A new chapter is etched and continues with regularity with the rise of Islamic Central Asia and the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, where we see the regular interaction in terms of movements of people, including migration from the regions of Tajikistan, Afghanistan and the borderlands of Iran along with Uzbekistan to India and also from the other places through a smaller scale⁴. Most of the Turkish slaves of the Delhi Sultana had been identified as coming from Iran but were in reality Turks from Nishapur like Balban and most of his predecessors and successors⁵. These Turks were actually under the cultural influence

²Chattopadhyaya, Brajadulal. *Representing the Other? Sanskrit Sources and the Muslims (Eighth to Fourteenth Century)*. Manohar, 1998.p 36-39.

³Twitchett, Denis, John King Fairbank, and Michael Loewe. *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 1, The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 BC-AD 220*. Cambridge University Press, 1978. p 22.

⁴Kumar, Sunil. *The Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate, 1192-1286*. Permanent Black, 2007. p 72,127.

⁵Ibid.,p 163.

of Iran and therefore introduced Iran in Indian institutions. Before the rise of the Mughals in India, we find a small interregnum in the Mongol invasion though not directly affecting India of the present but Afghanistan on a large-scale.

The rise of the Mughals in India not only updates a new chapter in India and world history where it is known more popularly as heralding the period of the gunpowder empire along with the Safavid dynasty of Iran and the Ottoman dynasty of Turkey. In a recent book titled, "The Mughals of India", the celebrated Indian historian Harban Mukhia dwells at some length on the title of the book trying to explain that the term of India is actually anachronistic to the Mughals and is a modern day need and construction. He explains it based on the fact that no one would ask the Mughals during the period whether they were from India or from any other foreign country⁶. Most of the important travel writings of the period attest to this fact that there are considerable exchanges in the borderlands between India of the Mughal period and Inner Asia which is populated by the Turkic people with the exception of Tajikistan which is predominantly Persian⁷.

Barth in Encyclopaedia of Islam gives considerable treatment to the Central Asian region which is also echoed by Sharin Akiner another leading scholar on Central Asia who also devotes considerable spaces to the movement of nomadic groups and their sedentary settling down under various polities⁸. With the establishment of the three empires, the gunpowder empire is of the Ottoman Turks, Safavid Persian's and the Mughals of India, the borderlands of these empires were ruled by various chiefs known as the Khans and the Emirs who ruled over the various khanates and Emirates⁹. Most of these polities continued to exist till the modern period like the khanate of Astrakhan in the Caucasians region of Russia to the Emirates of Bukhara. The sudden rise of Asia under the Czarist expansion saw large-scale incursion into Inner Asia with the objective of finding warm water ports that Russia severely lacked and felt the need desperately. As the largest empire in the world, the British Empire was very much aware of the Russian designs and we enter a new phase of conflict between the Crown and the Czar. Matters came head-on with the famous great game that inaugurated a new phase of conflict in Inner Asia. The term great game coined by Rudyard Kipling signified the contest between Britain and Russia for control of Inner Asia. It brought into effect the exposure of three important regions-Afghanistan, Xinjiang and Tibet forcibly into world politics¹⁰. The great game ended in 1907 with the Anglo Russian Convention of 1907. By this time Great Britain ceased to have a border with Russia as some territory was added to Afghanistan and this territory in the north-eastern corner of Afghanistan is known as the Afghan finger and a geographical oddity. This small strip of land is only 13 km wide and populated by non-Pashtun people and predominantly inhabited by nomads from Kirghizstan.

⁶Mukhia, Harbans. *The Mughals of India*. John Wiley & Sons, 2008. p 1-2.

⁷Soucek, Svat. *A History of Inner Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. p 334-335.

⁸Ibid.,p 334-343.

⁹Fromkin, David. "The Great Game in Asia." *Foreign Affairs* 58, no. 4 (1980): p 938.

¹⁰Ibid., p 936-41.

Thus, the borderlands of South East Asia had profoundly shaped Indian history and also inaugurated the rise and fall of many different polities. Therefore, the political history of northern India from the earliest period to British India and the postcolonial period is largely shaped in terms of international relations by interactions with the neighbours from the western region of Inner Asia. The region of Tibet is taken up for special consideration as a whole and is therefore excluded from this analysis as it fits into a different mode of analysis and is thus taken up in a section on borderlands of Inner Asia and India. One may conclude by invoking the people in India from the earliest period to the transmission of Indian influences to Central Asia and vice versa in terms of the establishment of the polities in India culminating with the Mughal rule. The legacy of this is seen in the inheritance of the problem of the Mughals by the British and by the postcolonial state and of noteworthy mention would be the problem with Pathans of north-western Pakistan and Afghanistan and this has led to an intractable situation with no solution in sight till date. We therefore have three borderlands in the north-western region-the Turkic borderlands, the Tibetan borderlands of Ladakh and the borderlands of the Indo-Iranian region that encompass Iran and Afghanistan and Tajikistan in earlier date. Collectively this was known as the Gateway of India and more specifically the passes.

INNER ASIA-EASTERN BORDERLAND

When we talk of the eastern borderlands of Inner Asia, the central Himalayas and parts of the eastern Himalayas come into focus. This area had received a new lease of life owing to the rise of regional studies and new concepts like non-states. A recent article by Sara Schneiderman raises the question of whether the central Himalayas are also part of Zomia¹¹. The second stimulus for scholarship on Inner Asia is aggravated by a crisis that began with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of new actors in Inner Asia on one side and the posting of China on the other side. Both these factors had led to a re-orientation in area studies with newer definitions of Inner Asia and Central Asia that are sometimes used with the change and sometimes to the exclusion of vast regions depending on the geopolitical realities of today that condition the approach in recreating the pre-modern. How valid is this approach of imputing presentist bias that rise from contemporary anxieties? Many of the modern-day textbooks reflect this attitude¹². How does this operate in real world and what are the implications for borderlands studies are clearly evident when we deal with the borderlands of Eastern Inner Asia.

Vladimir Putin termed the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical disaster of the century and suddenly in the wake of the USSR occupying much of the cartographic space, a large number of new entities came up and these nation-states known as the Commonwealth of Independent States reformulated the Asian boundaries not fully on national realities but on models that are acculturated due to their seven decades of existence as part of the USSR¹³. It is this problem that is replicated not only in western Inner

¹¹Shneiderman, Sara. "Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia? Some Scholarly and Political Considerations across Time and Space." *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 2 (July 2010): p 289–312.

¹² Soucek, Svat. *A History of Inner Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. p 289.

¹³ Kreutz, Andrej. *Russia's Place in the World*. Algora Publishing, 2015. p 25.

Asia but also in Eastern Inner Asia and the main problem here is the non-recognition of other geographies like sacred geography etc. This crisis emanating in Ukraine and the Caucasian region is replicated in Afghanistan and Tajikistan on account of the problem of minorities and their homelands. Similar such resonances are seen in Eastern Inner Asia and article by Sara Schneiderman is one such attempt to understand this problem.

A recent textbook titled Inner Asia by Svat Soucek includes an update rendering of the history of Inner Asia from the earliest times. The central focus is on the modern period including the emergence of the postcolonial states of the USSR and also the Xinjiang Uighur autonomous region of the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of Mongolia. As a result of this book and its impact on the image of Inner Asia is reproduced from this perspective with the notable exception-Tibet¹⁴. This exclusion of Tibet from Inner Asia and by extension Inner Asian academic concerns would then push Tibet and the Tibetanized regions that form the borderlands out of the preview of Inner Asia. They then become part of East Asian studies and the core area of East Asian studies includes China, Japan and Korea.

When we speak of the Tibetan borderlands that constitute the Eastern inner Asian borderlands, we are in terms speaking of the coalescence of two borderlands-the physical and the cultural. The Tibetan plateau is the physical borderland and the people who live on this are the components of the cultural borderland. What is the Tibetan borderland and who are the Tibetans and where is Tibet? The official narrative of the People's Republic of China and the Central Tibetan Administration popularly known as the Tibetan government in exile. This is a subject of a book by John Powers who unpacks the rhetorical strategy of both these parties¹⁵. For China, the Inner Asian borderlands comprising the regions of inner Mongolia, Sinkang and Tibet along with two other regions Ningxia Hui autonomous region of the Chinese Muslims and the Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region are all part of the autonomous regions that were given for the ethnic minorities of China. One of the major problems here is that all these regions are distinct from the majoritarian Han inhabited regions of China in terms of ethnicity and forms of production. While rice is the major crop of China, Barley is a major crop of Tibet and the borderlands surrounding it¹⁶.

In the magazine Himal, an article titled "Whither the Tsampa Eaters" created a minor sensation and has now become the official position of the Central Tibetan Administration who defines Tibetans as people who eat barley in contrast to the Chinese who eat rice¹⁷. This rhetorical assertion by the Central Tibetan Administration and the consequent narrative had created an acceptable climate of opinion for this claim in voting for the ethnic individuality of the Tibetan nation.

As mentioned earlier, that the erasure of eastern Inner Asia from the modern curriculum deprived of this region of its agency and home as the state is a part of a larger political unit-the People's Republic of China

¹⁴ Ibid., vi.

¹⁵ Powers, John, and David Templeman. *Historical Dictionary of Tibet*. Scarecrow Press, 2012.p.44.

¹⁶ Ibid., 44.

¹⁷ Shaykya, Tsering, *Whither the Tsampa Eaters*, Himal, 1996.

and at the same time the 'State of Exception' had also cast its shadow. One is struck not only by the different ethnicities and forms of production but also by the weight of history and more importantly by the imposing geographical divide. It would be prudent to quote Nichola J Spykman, the famous Dutch geographer who said "Geography does not argue, Geography simply is"¹⁸. This is such an apt statement to summarise the historical isolation of Tibet as it was an inaccessible region on account of its high altitude and impossibility, compounded also by the Conservative nature of the Buddhist Lamas whose worldview dominated traditional Tibet¹⁹. It's essential nature and orientation towards India had made this borderland the least explored and also the least dangerous. While invaders and immigrants poured into India from both the north-western and north-eastern borders, through the Himalayas and the other mountain ranges, the exact opposite is seen in case of the Eastern Inner Asian borderlands namely Tibet. It would be worthwhile to explore the historical factor and account for the historical gap when we deal with India, China, Tibet and the borderlands associated with these three regions from a historical perspective.

One is sharply struck by the geo-body of the Indian and Chinese nations on one hand and the Tibetan nation on the other hand. While the geo-body of India is feminine and India is metaphorically imagined as a mother and the same is the case with China which is also feminine, Tibet from the earliest period when the region came into historical notice was self-represented as a fatherland-Phayul²⁰. It consists of two components father and land the suffix Yul means land and is added to many of the lands that are part of the Tibetan culture area.

The rise of the Tibetan Empire was only one in a long series of rise of nomadic empires all over Asia starting with the Xiongnu configuration and later the Mongol's after Tibet's collapse as an imperial power²¹. We also have the other nomadic empires in the borderlands of China who also ruled over China for a considerable period of time and this is reflected in contemporary textbooks on Chinese history as a period when people of ethnic minorities participated in the unification of China. To return to the point, we see that the collapse of the Tibetan Empire and the rise of the Mongol brought an extra territorial actor into Tibetan politics. Thus, Tibet was forced to depend on the Mongol armies for its own survival²². Therefore, the

¹⁸Kaplan, Robert D. *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate*. Random House Publishing Group, 2012. p 29.

¹⁹ Laird, Thomas. *The Story of Tibet: Conversations with the Dalai Lama*. Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 2007. 283.

²⁰"The Statement of Sikyong Dr Lobsang Sangay on the 54th Anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising Day - Statements & Press Releases - Phayul.Com".

²¹Di Cosmo, Nicola. "Ancient Inner Asian Nomads: Their Economic Basis and Its Significance in Chinese History." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53, no. 4 (1994): p 1092-4.

²²Laird, Thomas. *The Story of Tibet: Conversations with the Dalai Lama*. Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 2007. p 104-5

relations between Tibet and eastern Himalayas were mediated largely by the chiefs of the borderlands and it is one of these chiefs in the easternmost region who became the ruler of the Monpa people²³.

To sum up the whole discussion, the entry of the Mughals marked the integration of India into the world economy and one of the important exports to the west was the shawl known as pashmina known in Europe as cashmere which acquired the status of a fashion statement²⁴. The closure of Nepal after the fall of the Malla dynasty and the rise of the Gorkha dynasty led to closure of trade routes and a trade route from the western Himalayas was discovered rather restarted²⁵.

One may conclude that this pattern of trade between India and Tibet-between India and the borderlands of eastern Inner Asia replaced religion and continued till the colonial period. During the colonial period it acquired a new dimension with the establishment of two wool marts in eastern and western Himalayas namely Darjeeling and Leh. The Inner Asia borderlands thus functioned as conduct of trade and the special character to transnational linkages formed important components of the economic structure of the Mughals and also the regions of Kashmir and Bengal in addition to Nepal that were the direct beneficiaries of trade directed to Tibet.

SOUTH ASIA- NORTH EASTERN BORDERLAND

In today's context, the term north-east in India refers to the eight states or provinces of India which are geographically situated on the eastern most extremities of the Indian subcontinent and now referred to as north-east India. The term north-east itself is a postcolonial construction that has become perpetuated due to governmental intervention and subsequent internalisation of this term as a category of reference. In sharp contrast, in pre-modern India these terms and regions were not fully imagined in such a way as the process of the spread of Indic culture on one hand and relative isolation of the societies going hand-in-hand.

In the northernmost part of north-east India lies the region of Arunachal Pradesh that came into history in a big way via the sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gaytso, who took the throne and Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. Similarly, the process of Indic influence is also seen in the state formation among certain regions like Tripura and Manipur and also the Chakma Kings to build a stable polity. The geo-body of India was identified as feminine and a recent article contrast this with the geo-body of north-east India. However, it takes into account aspects of difference in the local perception of region. One of the important points is that as elusive as the relation between these regions in the state formation process on either the Hindu or the Buddhist model as the above three cases have shown. The states had a clear idea of the relations with the hill People's and like all political relations these were also power relations which are codified in many

²³Mullin, Glenn H. *The Fourteen Dalai Lamas: A Sacred Legacy of Reincarnation*. Clear Light Publishers, 2001. P 244-5.

²⁴Maskiell, Michelle. "Consuming Kashmir: Shawls and Empires, 1500-2000." *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (2002): p 27-30.

²⁵"III Tibetan Trade".

different ways but more fluid than codified. It existed largely in the realm of rituals and practices and for practical reasons included aspects of material redistribution. The classic example of this is the *posa* system instituted by the kings of Assam to pacify the tribal raiders from the hills. Similarly, a recent article on trade in Zomia also questions the myths that the hill regions were totally self-sufficient. Salt was one of the most important commodities needed for survival and with the exception of evidence of salt making in Manipur, most of the salt were obtained by trade. The exact mechanism was through fairs and festivals and we have a large number of fairs stretching from Udalguri in the West and Tawang in the East.

All these larger questions cannot be ignored and one may conclude by saying that the linguistic groups show the diversity and their multiple locations of coalition in the pre-modern period before the sharp break with colonialism. Secondly and most importantly there was a lot of fluidity in case of both the state and non-state actors and societies in this region functioned in pre-modern period. This is acknowledged to large degree also by James Scott who talks about the loose knit political systems of the Highland societies. Some of these also went onto create stable polities as in the above mentioned four cases. Another important case is the story of the aspirations of the Hmong people of south-east Asia who are the largest non-state ethnic group, but always had dreams of a kingdom as elaborated earlier.

SOUTH EAST ASIA- NORTH WESTERN BORDERLAND

One of the important rationales for including the north-western borderlands of south-east Asia as distinct from the north-eastern borderlands of South Asia is a problem of perspective primarily. In its path breaking work on the geography of south-east Asia titled “Thailand: the navel of Asia”. Similarly, the view from beyond the borders of India and the Indic are slightly at variance with regard to migration and territory. It is noteworthy to mention here that most of the migrations to India occurred only from the north-western borderlands and the north-eastern borderlands and mention may be made here of the Ahom Kingdom created by the originally Thai people who settled in the region of the Brahmaputra valley and established a stable polity.

In India during the ancient period according to the literature of the Shasta’s expounded by the famous lawgivers for example, Manu, Gautama and Apastamba, is the country of Bharata later known to the Greeks as India extended as far as the black gazelle roamed and as far as the Munja grass grew. Beyond this is the land of the Mlechas variously referred to as barbarians or unclean people. This is the dividing line between people of the inside and outside. However, we see that many dynasties came to India from the north-west in the north-east and these dynasties included the Kushanas, the Sakas, the Parthians and also most famously the Indo-Greeks. There was the chance for these groups to regain their Kshatriyas status and legitimately stake their claim as rulers. But this process of reclaiming their status also involved the acceptance of Indian values and the Indian cultural system and thus their distinctiveness as foreign ethnic groups from a different borderland was sufficiently compromised and they became part of the Indian tapestry.

In conclusion we may say that the perspective from south-east Asia including both the mainland and the Highlands of the Indian region had various nomenclatures like Swarna Bhumi which is used by the Buddhists or the settled agrarian land or plains for which various binary opposites existed in the dialects of the hill People. In this context mention may be made of the difference between the zou dialects of the Lai or the Hill and the Vai or the settled region which is mainly used to refer to the plains of Bengal²⁶.

EASTERN HIMALAYAN BORDERLAND

The rationale for breaking up the Himalayas into different borderlands becomes clear both on physiographic and cultural categories as the Himalayas tapers down and creates many new passes. This region comprising of the borders of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan have acquired regional particularity and it is this aspect that had led us to club these regions as the unit. As mentioned in the earlier unit, in addition to the rise of wool, horse was another important commodity of trade and most of the horses came to India through two regions-north-west India and the eastern Himalayas²⁷. The two types of horses were known as the Kohi from north-west India or originating from the Persian borderlands. The other variety was known as the Tangan horses or originating from Yunnan region of China. The Tangan horses form the mainstay of Bengal and Bengal is the only region where the two varieties of horses were in circulation²⁸. It is also important to mention that horses and gold were the only two commodities in which India was deficient since ancient period. It is therefore the flow of horses through the Eastern Himalayan region and it possess a unique vantage point²⁹. Horses were also important for all state societies till the advent of the wheeled vehicle and the second Industrial Revolution that led to the popularity of the internal combustion engine. China, therefore also depended on the Mongol horses and the horses of the various nomadic groups that were sold in the markets. In fact, since ancient period, China had created a famous department known as the tea-horse department to sell tea to the nomads in exchange for horses³⁰. This is a very important point as we see the peoples of the borderland procuring and supplying a very essential item that was the mainstay of the military machine on which the states were founded. Most of the Tangan horses to India from the eastern Himalayan borderlands actually originated in the region of Yunnan in China where they were bred by non-Chinese and partially Tibetanized people³¹. This is the subject of an interesting paper by Bin Yang titled "Horses, Cowries and

²⁶Dubey, S. M. *North East India: A Sociological Study*. Concept Publishing Company, 1978. p 107.

²⁷Sen, Jahar, *Sikkim and Himalayan Trade*. Namgyal institute of Tibetology, 2012. p 11, 14.

²⁸Chakravarti, Ranabir. "Early Medieval Bengal and the Trade in Horses: A Note." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42, no. 2 (1999): p 201.

²⁹Ibid., p 194

³⁰Yang, Bin. "Horses, Silver, and Cowries: Yunnan in Global Perspective." *Journal of World History* 15, no. 3 (2004): p 295,301.

³¹Ibid., p 201

Silver in Yunnan”³². In addition to trade, religion was a major element in the polity which supported Sikkim and Bhutan and exerted enormous influence on the populations and also in the neighbourhood³³.

The passes of these regions were surveyed by many of the European travellers and thus form representations in good number which will be the focus of analysis. One may conclude this section by saying that the regional particularity of the eastern Himalayas arose on account of the stable polities of Sikkim and Bhutan and the territorial integrity of Nepal and religion was supplanted by trade. Trade and religion could not be separated as we see that most of the convoys in the caravans were composed not only of merchants but also monks, pilgrims and many other people.

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³²Ibid., p 299-302.

³³Sen, Jahar, *Sikkim and Himalayan Trade*. Namgyal institute of Tibetology, 2012. p13-14.

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