

Chapter-6

Discussion and Conclusion

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The formation of new states in North East India appears to be a process of reformatting linguistic-cultural, ethnic and regional identities. The criteria for state formation and demarcation of border were never consistent. The present study takes into account mythical beliefs from the pre-colonial times to popular contemporary narratives about the border in the interstate boundary of Assam-Arunachal. It is obvious that the idea of borders, its functions and roles are being constantly redefined. In contemporary times, concepts of identity, control over resources, rights to land of the indigenous, are seen as important issues. These emerge quite clearly in the narratives of the people residing along the interstate borders of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. What might have been a mere cartographic exercise for the British has substantially altered the relationship between two neighbours who were historically and geographically connected.

The interstate border of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh is a reflection of the role the British played in establishing the hills-plain divide, creating borders and boundaries within a territory and between different groups who had interacted frequently in the past. Apparently, the British maintained that segregation of the hills and plains as a measure to protect the “exotic” culture of the hill tribes. However, the real intention seems to have been to keep the “troublesome” hill tribes away from their affairs with the resources of the region. The ongoing inter-state border conflicts on land ownership and right over forest resource is a by-product of this policy of segregation. The narratives from the field indicate that there were trade relations between the hills and the plains. The hill tribes were never considered to be British subjects; the plainsmen however were the British subjects that got due “attention” for the bountiful resources they were blessed with.

Sikdar (1982, 19) mentions,

The sparsely populated territories of the Arunachal tribes lacked enough economic potential to attract the immediate attention of the colonialists, but with the gradual consolidation of British rule in Assam, imperialism discovered new motives in an apparently barren area...But to conclude that British interests in the hills of Arunachal Pradesh were confined to the development of trans-Himalayan trade would be a gross over-simplification. This particular consideration was

reinforced by the possibility of collecting raw products from the hills through the frontier market and introducing European goods among the tribes themselves.

The policy of segregation of the British ensured that the tribes had little to do with the plains and were mostly left to manage their own affairs. People from different social backgrounds of Arunachal recount the fact that the hill tribes drew taxes from the plains, thus showing that they were the owners of the land. However, their counterparts from Assam do not conform to these claims and opine that ‘blackmailing’ and ‘attacking’ does not mean that the hill tribes were the aborigines of the border areas. People from both the states, however, identify some communities from both sides of the borders to have existed together. The inter-state Assam-Arunachal border is replete with such narratives of claim and counter claims which are often a generalised versions of the opinion of sections of groups. It would not be right to confine the narratives to claims over the land but also to look at how people maintain their identity in their social practices and social relation. Border here moves from the popular understanding as that of being a divisive force to a place of contact with shared history.

Borders come to life in the experiences of the people. Borders create, consolidate and negotiate the existence of individual and group identities. The cultural and social discourses in the Assam-Arunachal border narratives construct identities of tribals and non-tribals, “civilised” and “uncivilised”, hill tribes and plains, Assamese and Arunachalee, insider and outsider, land owners and encroachers, indigenous and migrants. The narratives help the people to map the contours of the border: what aspects of culture are to be considered as legitimately belonging inside and what are to be left out. The border may appear to be at the periphery of a society’s political, economic or cultural domains but actually stands right at the centre of human activities. Verghese (2012, 275) shared that as boundaries were being demarcated, borders were marking a cultural, economic zone, a continuum being divided by a political boundary.

It is observed that a place like Likabali in the Assam-Arunachal border generally thrives on the contrast between the ‘we’ and the ‘other’. This contrast, however, blurs during the activities in trade fairs, festivals and market along the borders. The tussle between the states does not really matter to the people living along the borders as they have been coexisting for years. Beyond the borders, people from both the states have developed a

unique relationship with each other. One such incident is that of Late Jarbom Gamlin, who was elected as Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh. This news was welcomed with joy in Assam. Some vernacular newspapers from Assam carried the news mentioning the relation he shared with Assam. He was married to Shakuntala Doley, a daughter of Assam. There was some sense of shared affinity in the relation between the states when the news was out. In saying so, a strong sense of brotherhood is also exhibited by both the states including other North Eastern states when it comes to ill treatment that the people of the region experience in other parts of the country. Racism and lack of funds has, in a way, crippled the development of the North East region. Thus, at times of ‘collective’ despair, the states in the North East region unite to fight evils of racism and stand-up against the “step motherly” treatment of the Centre. The people of the region often face subjugation and there is a feeling of ‘alienation’ when the Northeasterners are out of their states in the ‘mainland’¹.

Apart from these, reality TV shows has also fostered the identity of the Northeasterner. In Indian reality shows like *Indian Idol*, the ‘we’ feeling among the Northeasterners is exhibited in the form of support and voting, seeing one of their very ‘own’ perform in the show. The singing sensation from Arunachal Pradesh, Jeli Kayi, managed to reach the top ten of Indian Idol-2017 with plenty of votes from all the Northeastern states. There were many Facebook pages promoting and appealing for votes for Jeli Kayi irrespective of the state they belonged to in the North East. It is also during such occasions, the emotions among the Northeasterners trigger sense of belongingness. Many talents from the North East region got tremendous support from all the Northeasterners while performing in the national level.

And then, back in the interstate borders, there are reports of border skirmishes due to new settlements and encroachments. “Illegal” migrants are said to be the encroachers of the reserved forest areas and certain border areas in Likabali and Banderdewa. The indigenous people of the border areas are not tagged as encroachers as such. The question of indigeneity also came up in the narratives of the people living along the borders.

¹ The term usually used to describe places and people in India outside North East India

Identities being constantly created and contested, people in the border areas have their own stories of affiliation to the place. Settlers from both the states consider themselves to be, first of all, the original settlers in the area. The lifestyle across the region has been nomadic, in a sense that inhabitants based on requirements would move around their settlement and beyond. This signifies that land ownership and its pattern have its share of role to play in asserting one's identity and presence. Gohain (2007, 3281) shares that territoriality is an accident of construction of ethnic identity and ethnic groups. Now, the very idea of ethnic grouping relies on a lot of emotional investment in territoriality. He further writes that before the rise of nation-states boundaries between countries were defined in a rough-and ready fashion and they were not associated with military wariness and violence. As land resources have shrunk and as the population has increased, things began to change rapidly.

Talking of the settlements, Bezbaruah (2010, 5) writes, "The Abors (hill tribes) themselves were interested in settling at the foot of the hills in order to find cultivable fields deserted by the Miris. They not only claimed lands within the settled limits of the district but also levied taxes on the inhabitants." The extent of covering the plain area and setting rights over the settlers in the plains comes prominently in the political narratives of both the states. In the oral history of the border villages, people from different social and confessional backgrounds of Arunachal recounts that the fact that the hill tribes drew taxes from the plains shows that they were the owners of the land which was slammed by the government of Assam.

Perec (1992, 86-87) writes,

Countries are separated from each other by boundaries. Crossing a boundary always touches one's mind: the imagined outline takes the material form of a wooden barrier, which is never located in the place which it is thought to represent, but some tens or hundreds of metres to one side of it or the other. Yet it can change everything, even the landscape. The air is the same, the soil is the same but the road is no longer entirely the same, the graphics on the signposts have changed...The boundaries are lines, lines for which millions of people have died. Thousands of people have died because they did not succeed in crossing a boundary. Survival depended merely on passing some ordinary river, small hill, peaceful woodland...

This is true in the case of Assam-Arunachal boundary, where the geographical, cultural and social landscape of the border areas become the markers of one side and the other side. Before British discovered the region, the region was a confined area of tribes and plains. However, the narratives suggest that the hillsmen and plainsmen both existed in the region. Some of the people from Arunachal who speak about the trade relationship indicate that they have co-existed. The pre-colonial trade networks and economic relationship between the hill tribes and plainsmen are also mentioned in the administrative reports of the British officials. The British officials in a bid to administer the region declared all the country up to the foothills to be under British territory.

One of the officials Lancelot Hare wrote to the Viceroy on 24th November 1910;

I think I hardly brought out with sufficient distinctness one important consideration which should induce us to press forward beyond the limits by which under a self-denying ordinance our frontier is at present limited. We only now claim sovereignty up to the foot of the hills. We have an inner line and an outer line up to the inner line we administer in the ordinary way. Between the inner and the outer line, we only administer politically. That is our political officers exercises a very loose jurisdiction and to prevent troubles with frontier tribes' passes are required for our subjects who want to cross the inner line. The country between the two lines is very sparsely inhabited and mostly dense jungle. (Reid, 1942, 221)

The statement from the administrative report of Assam Secretariat suggests that British could not go beyond the foothills to administer the hill tribes. It also indicates that the line was demarcated to prohibit the hill tribes from settling in the plains. There were many hill tribes settled in the plains prior to British advent in the region. Reid (ibid, 231) also mentioned "Many of the weaker tribes had been quite debarred from visiting the plains in order to trade and had, in general, been tyrannised over by their moral powerful neighbours. The advent of the British and messages they conveyed made clear to all that weak and strong alike would be allowed to visit the plains and that no tribe was in future to be prevented from doing so by another, while our ability to enforce this could no longer be questioned."

Most of the boundary skirmishes in the Assam-Arunachal interstate border are in the foothills like Likabali, Banderdewa, Tarasso and so on. The people from the Arunachal side of the border recount that the hill sides being steep and the practice of *jhum*² cultivation often left the land barren for five to six years. In situations like this people from the hills would also go down to the plains for alternative modes of cultivation and that it was the practice even before the British had come to the region. As such, they claim that the existence of hills has always been there. To this, people from the Assam side of the border takes a stand that they have also been in the region and to support it they refer to the supplies of salt, turmeric, iron materials to the British administration.

Talking of reserve forests, Nongbri (1999, 11) shares, “Prior to colonial rule each community managed their forests in way according to the norms and their conventions after the region's annexation to British India in the early times did not sufficiently attract the economic interest of the administration.” The Subansiri Reserve Forest along the Assam-Arunachal border was notified in the year 1927 when the North East Frontier Tract was an excluded area and was not under the regular administration of the state of Assam. It was claimed that the reserve area at that point of time was already inhabited by the Adis, based on numerous references like grant of Posa since the age of Pratap Singha (1603-1641) appointment of Kotokis of Ghasi Miri by the British in the year 1862 and so on.

Captain Nevill had also made a statement, “We shall probably in near future be compelled to exercise some kind of control over the Dafla [Nyishi] and Abors living near the head waters of the Borelli, Subansiri and Khru Rivers.” This indicates that the hill tribes had existed in those areas which also found settlements of Assamese.

In the Topographical, Political and Military report of the North East Frontier of India 1751-1882, it is mentioned that the Lakhimpur area was bounded on the north by the Abors, Miris, Daflas [Nyishi] and Mishmi tribes and on the east by the Mishmi and Bor Khanti Hills. Chutiyas, a race also inhabited in the area which was conquered by Ahoms in the fourteenth century. Scattered villages of the Assamese were also found in

² Jhum cultivation is also referred to as shifting cultivation, the slash and burn agriculture, is the process of growing crops by first clearing the land of trees and vegetation and burning them thereafter.

the area, according to the report. The report of the British administration indicates the existence of hill tribes as well as the plains. In the popular narratives in Arunachal, it is said that the residents now along the interstate borders are a mix of migrants from other parts of Assam and some genuine Assamese settlers.

Informant¹ in a personal interview shares,

People who are residing in the border areas are Nepalese, Santhals. During the expedition Gurkhali coolies from Shillong were used by the British officials. The main Assamese are settled in main towns of Assam. These people are mostly migrants and people displaced due to developmental projects and natural calamities.

It can also be said that border inhabitants are miffed at new members and ones who with vested interest try to grab the lands from the real owners. Affiliation with land is an emotional connection. Any threat to the land by an outsider is not acceptable to the people in both sides of the border. The people from Arunachal side of the border claims that due to rapid depletion of resources and vast number of illegal migrants in Assam, the foothill areas are becoming vulnerable. They view these outsiders as an undesirable entity. Back in colonial days, the tribal people were then considered to be “undesirable” and that is what made the British administration put a control over their movement. In present day, the nature and pattern of the border and border demarcation has affected the way of life of the people.

HFG Burbidge in his report of 1930-31 writes, Civilisation does not appear to have touched the hillsmen who possesses every primitive instinct. Dafla [Nyishi] settled in the plains in Darrang and North Lakhimpur are often seen as an undesirable entity. The hillsmen have been away from the hills for many years and some were born in the plains. They have naturally acquired many of the vices of the plains people and am of opinion that it should now be considered whether they should not be brought under the ordinary law in the district in which they live or their villages broken up. These people cannot however be influenced by the ill advice of outsiders and they must come into contact with the ordinary workings of the law.

Burbridge's statement is an account of how the people of hills and plains had co-existed and had an influence on each other. The actual extent of the British jurisdiction is defined by an 'inner line' however they have considered the entire stretch of the foothills to be under them following the treaty (posa system) with the hill tribes and inheritance from the Assam government.

Some of the narratives also suggest that the hill tribes were the allies of the pre-colonial Assamese government. In the same report of 1751-1882 it has been mentioned that "...a large body of them, to the amount of 20,000 or 30,000 came down to assist the Bura Gohain in repelling the Moamorias, who were devastating all the country east of Jorhat."

In the present day, the interstate borders are inhabited by various tribes from both the states. Multidimensional identities are emerging from the borders. The people in claiming themselves to be the aborigines of the place refer mostly to the cultivation practice that is continued till date in the borders. While they are at it, they also refer to the trade practice to prove their existence. During the colonial days, Kotokis (mediators/spokespersons) were from plains as well as hills. Their duty was to look after parties of Abors wishing to cross the inner line. The establishment of check posts in the hills often irked the hill dwellers as there were settlements of hill tribes in the plains.

The generalised projection of borders as conflict zones has been partially proven erroneous. The border areas are not always about conflicts but also about social contacts, hybrid cultures and about co-existence. Borders as 'barriers' or 'filters' protecting from the outside world and at the same time acting as 'bridges' or 'gateway' to it indicates that border has a lot to do with community. This indicates the dichotomy of borders and the possibility that while borders divide they also provide gateway to connect to the other side. Elwin (2005, 3) shares, "When we look back over hundreds of years of constant conflict and compare it with the astonishing friendliness and every growing co-operation between the people of the Hills and Plains that we see today, we may well take pride in the achievement of India since independence." There are accounts of boundaries not being as rigid as in the present time. The colonial rule fortified boundaries with Inner Line Regulation limiting mobility and interaction between the people of the two states.

In the political report of the Secretariat Administration of 1751-1882 it is mentioned that there was formerly much greater interaction between the tribes and people of Assam than there is in the present day.

The study also explains the rhetoric of neglect and victimhood in the border areas. The British administration had always wanted to teach the hill tribes a lesson in order to make them submit to their authorities. In the popular narratives, the people of Arunachal Pradesh till date live with the feeling of neglect. Schendel (2005, iii) writes memory inevitably gives way to history as we lose touch with our past. The memory of being left to fend for themselves still disturb the people of Arunachal.

When the British started drawing the Inner Line near the Himalayan foothills in 1875, their purpose was to bring ‘under more stringent control the commercial relations of the British subjects with the Frontier tribes’, to prevent the operation of tea gardens beyond the fiscal limits of settled areas, and to lay down rules for the possession of land and property beyond this line (Chaube2012, 182).The present-day scenario is such that there is a standoff between the two states in the judicial battle. Both the states are on a legal war over areas they claim to be theirs. The state of Arunachal is challenging the commission report alleging it to be one sided. The state is of the view that the notification of 1951 which divided the areas of the region was actually for easy administration, not for setting complete demarcation.

On the one hand, the state government of Arunachal Pradesh claims that they were not taken into consideration while declaring the 1951 notification. On the other hand, the state of Assam slams the claim and informs that in the letter dated 5th March 1957, it was stated that “objection if any, to the proposed definition of the boundaries of the said district may be submitted in writing to the state government within one month from the date of publication of this notification”. However, the popular narratives are mostly about how the administration has been treating the people living along the borders. One of the inhabitants from the Arunachal side of the border on condition of anonymity shares,

To gain popularity and promotion the officers from Assam try to bring as much land as possible under their fold. It is not the people who live in the border areas

that create chaos. It is to do with officers. They come for few years and destroy our relations by illegal evictions.

Residents from Assam side of the border share that they never try to illegally occupy the place of their neighbours from Arunachal because of age old relationship. It is a misconception that the Assam people are the ones to be illegally taking away their lands and this misconception has soured the relationship.

It is noted that the practice of eviction carried out by the state administration does not necessarily irks people of other states but also people of the same state. The evictions are carried out on places encroached by the locals of the same jurisdiction. It is a misconception that the “others” are targeted by the state administration. Any areas that fall under the Reserved Forests Protected Area and are seen encroached by the local or people from the neighbouring states are evicted. Often the people who have been living in a given forest area, claim that it is a community land that belongs to their forefathers.

The reserve forest notifications were pronounced by an imperialist power. As such, the people of the states are calling for its modification in free India. People of the two states have stressed on the need to consider ethnicity and traditional heritage of the indigenous people in declaring forest areas as Reserved Forest area. People from Arunachal have reiterated their rights over the forest in the border areas and expressed that the reserve forest was arbitrarily passed or transferred to the state of Assam. The narratives further reveal the discontentment over undermining the fundamental rights of the indigenous people of the region over the inherited land and forest.

On the other hand, people from Assam have also expressed the same thing stating that the lands and forest belong to them but was forcefully taken by the outsiders. Large-scale encroachment is creating an alarming situation in both the states. Public activist Prof Deven Dutta in a press statement on June 12 in 2011 said, “On the one hand, successive governments, political parties and other organisations (both political and non-political) call for protection of forests, wildlife, biodiversity and the environment and on the other, the same apostles would support the illegal encroachers by siding with them when it comes to evicting them. They would demand a solution to artificial floods in the city and at the same time would support those illegally settling on hills and wetlands and drains...these are double standards.” (The Assam Tribune)

People from Arunachal have very clearly mentioned about the forceful settlement of migrants and how the administration works hand in gloves with the political leaders to create prospect for huge voting banks. It came up prominently in the narratives that the administration would insist much on getting people's name in the electoral rolls. Such an approach to people living along the Arunachal side of the border was creating a situation of chaos and confusion.

Pointing out that the landless were free to apply for government land through a due process and not fall upon government land or forestland in their hordes, Prof Dutta said that unabated encroachment by both local people as well as outsiders, including from neighbouring countries, was pushing the state of Assam into sorry state (The Assam Tribune).

Similar is the case with encroachment and eviction in the state of Arunachal where people are standing up against the administration on the ground that their community lands are being targeted. There is suspicion on the opportunistic stand of late settlers along the interstate border area. The sensitive border areas are marred by land grabbing and encroachment complicating the life in the borders. The late land settlers are identified mostly as the immigrants from Bangladesh.

The villagers of Arunachal side of the border claim that till about 1972 there were no Assamese settlements up to a distance of 8Kms from the hills along the Arunachal-Assam boundary. Post 1972 many illegal immigrants from Bangladesh came to the foothills side. Initially they had come as daily wage labourers working in the fields of villages of Arunachal and later settled in the area. The villagers also claim that the population of Assam has been ever increasing and as such the people of Arunachal have to suffer by losing their lands.

The state of Assam and the villagers of Assam side of the border referring to old dynasties like Chutiyas, Ahoms, Bodos, Koch and Barahis claim that the Assamese society along the Assam-Arunachal border are a composite people sharing a common history and culture. Villagers of Arunachal side of the border also stated that the state government of Assam has trained its administration and police department to push their population towards the foothills. Often areas thinly populated by the Arunachalee have been targeted. On the other side, villagers from Assam side of the border informed

about their owning land beyond their territorial jurisdiction. They said that most of the people from Arunachal have “extra” land and properties in their side of the border. These people accuse such people of Arunachal of having permanent settlements in Arunachal while grabbing land that was freely available on the other side of the border.

For both Assam and Arunachal, there are Assamese villages within the territory of Arunachal Pradesh and Arunachalee villages within the territory of Assam. These villages irrespective of their territory are administered by their respective states. Chaube (1975, 195) says that "tribalism" is out of tune with the modern political order which is based on kinship relations, and territorial loyalty. Quite evidently, that there are still villages outside Arunachal Pradesh based on 1951 notification but these are under the administrative control of Arunachal Pradesh. The territorial loyalty irrespective of the notification by the government lives on. Chaube (ibid) also points out that in the case of Assam-Arunachal border, “political boundaries inevitably cut across the ethnic, religious or linguistic boundaries, and create minority problems.”

While villagers residing along the interstate borders consider themselves neglected, the environmental activists view the Reserved Forests along the borders as being more neglected. The Local Commission Report mentions that “The reserve forest along Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border have been denuded and encroached upon by the people from both the states. Due to non-demarcation of the boundary between the two states, people of both the states have developed mistrust among themselves and also there is a trend of competition among the people of the two states to encroach upon more areas in reserve forests.”

The encroachment and eviction carried out along the interstate borders takes the shape of border dispute with resistance from the people residing in the area. The Deputy Commissioner of Dhemaji District, Ajit Kr. Bordoloi responding to the Supreme Court of India in a letter writes,

The government of Arunachal Pradesh has been assisting and encouraging systematic and unabated encroachment in the areas of Dhemaji district within the constitutional boundary of the state of Assam. (State of Assam, 1989)

The people of Arunachal and the state government has never agreed to the constitutional boundary and claimed that the 1951 notification was colonial in nature, exploiting the natural resources of the tribal areas like the Britishers did to Assam. The present day contention in the borders has much to do with the notification.

Geyom Karlo from Arunachal Pradesh in a personal interview opined,

The fundamental injustice of the notification is evident because the wishes of the local people of Arunachal Pradesh were not taken into account. Because of that the people were deprived of cultivable land (areas of influence over which they had traditionally enjoyed rights).

The year 1991 gave some hope that the more than fifty-year-old boundary dispute would come to an end. It was in August 1991 that the chief ministers of both the states met. The Assam Chief Minister had then said that it would examine the claims of the state of Arunachal Pradesh for transfer of 900 sq km of land against the claim of 3648.85 sq km of land to Arunachal Pradesh for resolving the issue and setting up permanent demarcation between the two states. However, the consensus that emerged in this meeting between the two states was never followed (LCR). As such people living along the borders are concerned with the encroachment tactics of either sides which they believe has also create an environment of enmity between the people of the two states. Villagers of Assam side of the border have also expressed that because there is no concrete boundary, there is always an air of suspicion and that this feeling of insecurity was to stay for long. Similarly, people of Arunachal express that they are being deprived of cultural and social practices in their own community land.

Discussing the issue of borders and boundaries further, way back in the year 1976, during the meeting between the chief ministers of the two states it was resolved to identify families involved in permanent cultivation in the notified forest areas prior to August 1973. It was decided that such families would be allowed to continue their agricultural practices without any encroachment from either side of the state. This, however, does not seem to have taken any shape and people remain confined to their own set of discourses that the land belongs to them and that they would die protecting their lands. Borders may appear static but they come to life in the experiences of people. The narratives from the border areas also suggest the sentiments of neglect and victimhood with conflicting stories of rights over the lands and its resources.

While the rhetoric of neglect and victimhood is quite evident in the narratives of the people, it also diverts the attention on how administration and state government views borders. The narratives suggest two key aspects of reappearance and disappearance of boundaries. The boundary issue surfaces when there is a conflict like situation in the border area. Even a conflict of minor scale is given the shape of a border dispute by the media. Encroachment and eviction in the border areas result in rigidification of boundaries. Cases of suicide committed in the borders are also seen with suspicion and become an issue of conflict between the people of the two states. There are cases where a person from one side of the border would hang themselves in the forests of the other state. Cases like this tend to become an issue of discord. However, the presence of rigid boundaries gets blurred during festivities, trade fairs and weekly markets. People during gathering of this kind give the impression of their life being untouched by the adversity of borders and the politics of bordering.

Borders, as said, tend to melt at the time of fairs and festivals. The fair organised in the interstate border area is considered as a space to meet and greet people from both the states. The fair sees business communities coming from Assam without carrying the baggage of borders and boundaries. However, boundaries are seen in the form of material constructs with various stalls put up in the fair area by the natives and the non-natives. The kinds of products sold in the stalls are markers of material boundaries. On such occasions, borders are performed – it is an ethnic performance in which each participating community tries to establish its uniqueness. Handmade products, special raw materials for clothes, jewellerys, food items, and utensils are the kind of products sold by the business communities from Assam. An Arunachalee stall on the other hand sells ethnic attires, handicrafts from Arunachal and local brew.

The nature of the inter-state borders is not constant. It changes with time and situation. At times, the border areas seem hostile and other times it cannot be made out if there exists any kind of conflict. Tensions along the inter-state border develop from time to time and sometimes take a violent turn. Borders seem to evoke so much passion, as people tend to be too conscious of what needs to be done or performed to gain acceptance as belonging to them. The imagined sense of establishing an ‘us’ appears to have motivated identity assertions.

Media texts indicate the construction of institutionalized forms of 'We' and the 'Other'. The history of what is now known as the North-East Frontier Agency goes back hundreds of years into the mists of tradition and mythology. Of the vast hinterland, there are only recent accounts, but a number of ruins in the foothills suggest some contact between the ancient rulers of Assam and the tribesman living near the plains (Elwin, 2005, 1). Banderdewa is a commercial hub located at the border. According to Elwin, trades along the border of Arunachal and Assam were a traditional method to create friendliness calling for some interaction. Sharma, (2017, 3) writes, "During pre-colonial times, the foothills as fluid boundaries served as critical sites of hills-plains interaction under the aegis of the medieval state formation in the Assam valley. However, the colonial regime stifled this system of interaction by turning the foothills into hard boundaries and an instrument for controlling the hills. Such a measure understandably created deep asymmetries between the existing social landscape and the emerging politico-administrative arrangement." Banderdewa seems to retain a vestige of the age-old interactions between the members of the two states even though one might argue that this has more to do with economic compulsions.

Unlike the media narratives, the narratives of the people have more to do with the sense of 'belongingness' and the process of 'othering' giving impetus to ethnic identity. The narratives speak in volumes about how borders become a shifting space at times appearing and disappearing. It is this bordering process and practices of border-ness that border have come out as a marker of a particular cultural space. It can also be said in the words of Verghese (2012, 267) that North-East's diversity makes identity a marker of self and community. In Barth's explanation, ethnic boundaries canalize social life that entails complex organization of behaviour and social relations wherein identifying an individual as a member of a certain group implies evaluation and judgement. Ethnic boundaries and territorial boundaries however get merged in the case of Assam-Arunachal interstate border.

The study presents how border areas have become more vulnerable due to population explosion as these areas are often seen as providing an opportunity by the immigrants to settle down. Consumerism, hunger for land, poverty, shrinking land resources and other aspects of development have magnified the problem. It is also noted that in the boundaries there are unwritten codes of membership: there are the old and the new

members. The new members are often seen to be the migrants from other parts of the two states and some from Bangladesh. This elucidates instant reaction of old members against the sudden arrival of a new crowd. The narratives as such do not rule out the relationship between immigration and boundary. Chaube (1975, 193) shares that from the colonial days, the need for administration, tea plantations and oil industry had caused the bulk of immigration, adding that the immigration was so huge that the 1961 census showed the urban areas of Assam as mainly non- Assamese. This implies that the foothill areas witnessed settlement of new members.

It is noted that the concept of borders as being a source of tension and dispute is related to its role as 'barriers'. On the other hand, borders as being a point of contact depends on the role it plays of a 'bridge' for social interaction. When there is little social contact, misunderstanding is easy. And these social contacts have been made limited with physical barriers in the forms of check posts, concrete walls and barbed wires. People tend to identify who the locals and non-locals are in cases of conflicts. Such identification process is not carried out when they co-exist. Differences will still persist but the differences will be in terms of identity not in terms of witch-hunting and locating a villain. The 'self' and 'other', 'here' and 'elsewhere', 'known' and the 'unknown', territoriality are undoubtedly the gifts of boundary narratives.

To conclude, the relationship between the states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam has been a rather strange one. To some extent, it is comparable to the separation of siblings. There is an obvious bond of affection and friendliness. However, there is also a sense of deep hurt and resentment. The British successfully installed a sense of suspicion between the members of the two states which was unwittingly carried forward by the postcolonial Indian state. In a way, the story of the relationship between the two states is related to the post-colonial Indian state's search for a balance between the extremes of "unity in diversity" and of "celebration of difference". While the "unity in diversity" slogan threatens to gloss over all differences, the "celebration of differences" threatens to bring about absolute balkanization of identities. In such a precarious state, ethnic identities are left with very little options other than clinging fast to a ritualistic and emotional display of asserting territorial integrity. The game of identity after all is about locating the immediate 'other', forgetting the threat posed by bigger, more threatening 'others'. However, the need to counter a bigger 'other' still ensures the continuation of solidarities

that extend beyond territorial boundaries. It remains to be seen, however, to what extent these solidarities are organic and to what extent these are 'forged'. One cannot, after all, read too much into market-created solidarities that are created by satellite channels to popularize their reality shows. This is much unlike the traditional relationship of mutual dependence that existed during the days of the Ahom kingdom. There is no point in romanticising that relationship and to say that relationship was of bonhomie. But it was organic and it was a part of the lived culture of the people of both the states.

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End note

¹ Kai Ngulom, Likabali. Personal communication, April 17, 2014.