

ABSTRACT

State borders are defined by its history, functions and roles. 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. The dynamic nature of borders that calls for a multidimensional approach in understanding it also indicates at reading the social and political construction of borders.

The history of hills-plain divide in North-East India conjures up a landscape of mixed memories in the narratives of the people residing along the Assam-Arunachal border. This demarcation of the hills and plain questions if it was for safeguarding the hills' cultural and socio-economic aspirations or restricting social mobility keeping the hills and plains divided. North East India is often defined as a British imperial construct that became part of the post-colonial nation-state.

The transition of the hill and plain areas to complete set for seven states (Sikkim joined later) appears to be topsy-turvy one. The States Reorganisation Act of 1956 which was the driving force for reorganising the boundaries of Indian states allocated distinctive space and place to the people of the states. Borders drawn because of the reorganisation of states are constantly being contested and renegotiated today. The new politics of cartography after independence ensured that barriers were created in places where few existed; the hills and the plains were not exclusive to people of any ethnic groups. From these emerged narratives of 'us' and 'them', 'we' and 'the other' that explains the discourse of mutually exclusivity that has from time to time surfaced in the borders.

This study is an attempt to see how borders shape narratives and how narratives in turn construct the identity of 'self' and the 'other'. The study lays emphasis on narratives for the obvious reason that borders and identities are shaped by/in narratives. The concepts of 'othering', 'bordering', 'belongingness' and studying 'the self' and 'the other' that emanates from borders are the constructed meanings that are often construed by the very people involved in the process. The proposed study is rooted in the foundation that

while border is a political, economic or cultural periphery it can also be understood as an important centre of human activities. Newman (2011, 36) says that once created, borders become transformed into reality as a default situation which impacts upon daily life patterns and social mores, determining the parameters of exclusion and inclusion, and creating the categories through which social and spatial compartmentalisation is perpetuated. The social practices, experiences and ways of life of people living in the borders are perceived as the key to make sense of the dynamic nature of the border.

Unlike the general understanding of border as a geographical entity, the study traverses through how identities are being shaped in Assam-Arunachal border narratives. It also highlights the flexible nature of borders. Territorialisation, social practices and discourses radiating from border areas give a conceptual perspective of borders in terms of how the 'self' and the 'other' are identified. The relationship between identity and territory has been well demonstrated and that it is becoming more complex in the case of Assam-Arunachal border wherein boundaries of all kind: social, political, cultural and economic – allocates identity to the people living along the borders. People's identities are territorially fixed but socio-culturally it goes beyond the general belief of how territories confer identities. At times boundaries have been re-narrated as new sites of Assam-Arunachal solidarity.

The generalised projection of borders as conflict zones seems 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. We are looking at how borders become markers of power and control and ethnic identity as being shaped by narratives on the argument that borders can further be presented more widely in other ways.

The nature of Assam-Arunachal border suggests that ethnic distinctions do not depend on the absence of social interaction and acceptance, but often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are based. Chaube's (1975, 199) explanation that socio-cultural aspirations of each ethnic group are perennially moulded and reviewed according to the circumstances proximal to the conditions of its existence can be expanded in the case of Assam-Arunachal border.

The interest and importance of this study stems predominantly from the understanding that border is an ideology and a context bound phenomenon that is objectified in our everyday social practices. In the social practices, land ownership becomes a key tool to assert one's identity and right over the border areas they believe to be theirs. There is more to boundaries than their role as physical separation of places, in that they produce – or at any event reiterate – people's notions of the 'other' and the 'self'. The study of Assam-Arunachal border narratives explains about social contacts and meaning inherent in the experience and socio-culturally constructed discourse. The study explores how interstate borders widen the territorial and cognitive distance between state subjects. It contests that borders and boundaries are not just demarcations but sets of practices and discourses rooted in the life experiences of the people in the borders.