Borderwork and Borders in South Asia through Structuration

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It is now universally accepted across social sciences that borders are not merely lines at the edge of the polity. Instead, borders can be found everywhere as Etienne Balibar famously announced in the early 2000s (Balibar, 2002). Roughly since then, the field of border studies has gone through a 'paradigmatic shift' as scholars started putting nuanced attention to the everyday borders and acts of bordering (Kuhn, 2012). Thus, any discussion on borders demands a focus on both the process of bordering and the way people interact with such processes. Interactions can take place at the boundary of a state, at an airport, at a supermarket, and even well inside a state's capital depending on whose body such practices are performed (Johnson et al., 2011; Jones, 2012a). The practices of bordering mainly stem from structural rules and institutions such as a state and its efforts to distinguish its borders. Their executions, however, vary depending on the nature of the border itself, the authorized personnel, the characteristics of borderlanders, or the personal background of individuals such as their citizenship status, ethnic identity, or religious affiliation. The outcome of such interactions between the people and the structural factors finally determine the nature of a given border. Therefore, we must focus both on these structural factors as well as the way ordinary people deal with such factors in order to have a holistic and dynamic understanding of borders (Brunet-Jailly, 2005; Ferdoush, 2018). Such an approach effectively helps us to avoid what John Agnew would call a 'territorial trap', the notion that states are fixed territorial units that contains the society (Agnew, 1994). My aim thus is to briefly discuss how such practices and interactions result in a complex, violent, and at the same time porous borders in South Asia. Before that, I shed more light on the two key terms 'borderwork' and 'borders'.

Chris Rumford is one of the pioneers who steered our attention to the ordinary people and their daily activities by which they take part in shifting, recreating, changing, and constructing the meaning and idea of everyday borders. Rumford coined the term 'borderwork' to denote such acts by 'ordinary people'(Rumford, 2006). For Rumford, people who take part in borderwork, are 'borderworkers.' At the same time, he claims that borderwork will not necessarily influence national security aspects of a state in every instance. Instead borderwork will provide borderworkers with new political or economic opportunities (Rumford, 2012). For Rumford, theorizing mobilities and networks is to theorize borders. He argues that state-centric understandings of borders are not helpful anymore for three major reasons: borders are moving themselves, borders have been diffused into the society more deeply, and borders have a permeable nature (Rumford, 2006). In contrast to this argument, Liam O'Dowd contends that contemporary border scholars have overemphasized the role of individuals and underestimated the influence of state and state mechanisms in shaping the nature of a border (O'Dowd, 2010). For him, there are two primary reasons behind this: a) ahistorical study of borders resulting in a failure to realize the evolution of nation-states and b) the lack of historicity leading to an ignorance of the complexity and uniqueness of each border. As I mentioned earlier, a holistic and dynamic understanding of any border would require equal attention both on the borderwork and the structural factors that bring that border into being. Thus, in the next section, I offer a framework that bridges both these ideas and demonstrates how one influences the other. After that, drawing from scholarly works, I describe how everyday interactions between people and the state makes South Asian borders a critical site of study not only for its diversity but also for the insight it offers.

Structuration Model of Borders

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Anthony Giddens argues that individual agents, using their agency and power, influence the social structure while interacting with it. In turn, the social structure affects the behavior of agents since it provides rules and resources for such interactions. Both agents and structure keep influencing each other which brings changes in the social structure and the way people act. This is, according to Giddens, an ongoing dual process that should be the focus of attention to develop an inclusive understanding of society (Giddens, 1984). Drawing on the same idea, I argue that borders are results of the interaction between ordinary people and the structural rules and resources of bordering. Thus, understanding a border would require an understanding of both the borderwork and the rules and resources of bordering (Ferdoush, 2018).

To elaborate, I contend that three major factors determine the action of the ordinary people or agents. These are their socio-political background, economic condition, and cultural factors. How an individual or a borderlander would interact with a border will largely be determined by these three factors. On the contrary, seven structural determinants shape rules of bordering, and in turn, the nature of a border. These are: a border's relationship relative to its own state region(s), relationship to the bordering state or region, nature of the central state institutions, levels of governance operating on that border, state economy, the political strength of the country, and market forces. These factors do not work on their own or are not independent of each other. All the structural factors affect one another as well as influence the state's rules and resources of practicing bordering. They also impact the ordinary people's lives and interactions related to that border. At the same time, these practices and structural factors get influenced by the ordinary people and the way they interact with those. The entire process can be summarized as below.

Structural factors mostly play the crucial role in determining the nature of a given border. Ordinary people, including border crossers and borderlanders are reflexive human beings who decide whether to reproduce the established practices of bordering depending upon their socio-political status, economic conditions, and cultural background. These reflections occur within the limit of the rules and resources they are entitled to. Results of such interactions yield bordering practices and ultimately bring a border into being.

Borderwork and Borders in South Asia

Among the top ten countries in the world producing the highest number of migrants in 2017, three are from South Asia. India holds the top position, followed by Bangladesh at the fifth and Pakistan at the seventh with 16.6, 7.5, and 6 million migrants, respectively. Afghanistan follows closely at the eleventh place with 4.8 million migrants (United Nations, 2017). On top of this, India, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan make into the list of the fifteen largest countries of migrants with a single origin living in a single host country. India alone sent 3.3, 2.3, and 2.3 million migrants respectively to the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and Saudi Arabia until 2017. India hosted 3.1 million Bangladeshis while Iran hosted 2.3 million Afghans until the end of last year (United Nations, 2017). The previous year also observed the biggest ethnic cleansing and quickest growing refugee population as the Rohingyas flew in hundreds of thousands from Myanmar to Bangladesh. Furthermore, the longest border fence in the world (Bangladesh-India), two of the most heavily fortified and most violent (Bangladesh-India and Pakistan-India), as well as open borders (Afghanistan-Pakistan, India-Nepal, Myanmar-Bangladesh) are also present within the region (Jones, 2016). Thus, South Asia remains one of the most fertile grounds for the study of borders and borderwork both in terms of the people who move across borders and the way bordering is done.

Bangladesh-India

The Bangladesh-India border presents an instance of both how state mechanisms determine the nature of a border and at the same time, how individual agents find their own way of negotiating such borders in their daily lives for numerous purposes. The Bangladesh-India border has one of the highest death rates in the world where the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) are instructed to shoot first and then talk making it a 'permanent state of exception' (Jones, 2009, 2012a). At the same time, scholars show that micro-negotiations of borders are also happening, in instances where the established practices and rules of bordering are not necessarily reproduced.

Reece Jones offers such a case where a Bangladeshi woman regularly crosses the border to visit her son and grand-children in India (Jones, 2012b). She 'manages' *dalals* (agents) on both sides to cross the border. Thousands of

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others like her cross the border for numerous purposes every day. Citing similar examples, Jones argues that such acts of transgressing and subverting state authority cannot be merely explained as a conscious and active act of protesting. Rather these are acts of refusal to submit to the arbitrary rules of the state making such borderlands a 'space of refusal'.

Azizul Rasel offers an example of the *Lushai* people residing in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh bordering Mizoram of India. The *Lushai* people of Bangladesh are ethnically similar to the *Lushai* of Mizoram and historically they have had a closer connection to Mizoram than to the lowland Bangladesh. Thus, even these days they regularly cross the border between India and Bangladesh to connect with their relatives, friends, and for better opportunities in life. The state troops on both sides remain well aware of such crossings and assume a less active role in stopping such 'illegal' border crossings (Rasel, 2018).

Edward Boyle and Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman provide examples of cross-border *haats* (markets) along the Meghalaya-Sylhet and Tripura-Comilla borders. Cross-border *haats* are examples of small-scale weekly markets where residents from both sides of the borders are allowed to buy and sell their goods. The total transaction taking place in these *haats* are insignificant compared to the total cross-border trades between Bangladesh and India. However, both the state of India and Bangladesh took the hassle of adjusting their structural practices and rules of bordering in recognizing the tradition of cross-border markets as well as to present each other as friendly neighbors. Therefore, Boyle and Rahman argue that such acts by the state demonstrate the complex 'layered borders' that helps us understand the contradictory nature of borders and bordering in South Asia (Boyle & Rahman, 2018).

From Afghanistan to Europe

We already know that Afghanistan is one of the largest migrant producing countries in the world. While a vast proportion of the Afghan migrants move to Iran, Europe remains an attractive destination for them even though the journey is often risky and, in most cases, 'illegal.' The journey itself offers insights into numerous agents including, but not limited to traffickers, border police, taxi drivers and state structures such as detention centers, refugee camps, temporary shelters. James Weir and Rohullah Amin track a young Afghan man's journey from Kabul to Frankfurt with fascinating details (Weir & Amin, 2018). The first-hand narrative of the journey provides insights into the risky route, the exploitative traffickers, violent borders and border guards, and the motivation behind such a risky endeavor.

Gendered borders

From 23 million in 2000 to 34 million in 2017, there has been a 48 percent increase in women migrants in Asia alone (United Nations, 2017). Migration within and beyond South Asia therefore, is a gendered experience, an avenue that has not been explored to its fullest potential. Exploring experiences of undocumented Bangladeshi women workers in India, Ananya Chakraborty contends that the state has made it difficult for women to migrate and seek work outside their countries. At the same time, Bangladeshi women who work in numerous sectors in India enjoy a higher level of freedom and possess a stronger voice in family matters than those who do not have a means of earning for themselves (Chakraborty, 2018).

Bringing together the historical and contemporary narratives of trafficking, Andrea Wright examines how gender, sexuality, and religion influence the post-colonial laws of migration in India (Wright, 2018). She argues that contemporary migration and trafficking laws in India are inherently discriminatory against women, especially Muslim women. Wright contends that the Indian government uses the colonial laws to regulate the movement and labor of women. Moreover, Indian nationalist attitudes and rhetoric stigmatize unskilled and semi-skilled women who seek work outside the national boundary making migration harder and unsafe for women.

Beyond South Asia

Once migrants from South Asia reach their country of destination without a legal status, they face the 'daunting life of scraping by on the edge of the society, relying on the existing community for shelter and work opportunities' (Jones &

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Ferdoush, 2018, p. 12). For them, life remains a constant battle with fear of deportation, survival, as well as pressure to make money and send home. Even for workers with legal status life remains a constant struggle to make ends meet living in sub-human conditions in the Persian Gulf (Gardner, 2010).

South Asians display a great degree of effort to gain legal status and take advantage of the nooks and corners of migration law, especially in European countries with more tolerant laws. Malini Sur and Masja van Meeteren draw on the struggle of Bangladeshi migrants in Belgium without a legal status and their *struggle to integrate* (Sur & van Meeteren, 2018). They demonstrate that a study of such struggles offers greater insights into troubled border-crossings, anxious arrivals, organized protest, and even civic participation of the migrants at their country of destination.

South Asia remains a region where people are killed almost everyday along the border, states invest immense amount of resources to 'protect' their borders, state officials assume the role of petty sovereigns, states undertake contradictory steps of changing rules of bordering, and at the same time, people refuse the arbitrary restrictions on their movements, ethnic and cultural ties linger across the border, and (crossing) borders offers better opportunities and freedom in life. Both state mechanisms and individual agents shape the characteristics of the border in South Asia by their own ways. Individual agents, based on their socio-political backgrounds, economic conditions, and cultural factors, reflect back on the border and bordering practices. In so doing, they either reproduce, partially reproduce, or refuse to reproduce the established rules of bordering. Such reflexive agents influence state mechanisms and state officials who, in turn, reflect back and influence the individual behavior, established rules and resources, and the border itself. As a result, borders in South Asia keep evolving. Thus, neither a state centric approach nor an interactionist approach alone serves the purpose of understanding borderworks and borders as they tend to overemphasize one over another. The structuration approach offers a lens to understand both borderwork and borders while not losing the sight of each other. Therefore, the structuration lens remains a useful tool in understanding how ordinary people's interactions with the state determine the nature of borders and borderwork in South Asia and beyond.

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