Living in in-between spaces: A structure-agency analysis of the India–China and India–Bangladesh borderlands

Pallavi Banerjee a,*, Xiangming Chen b,c,1

a University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Sociology, 1007 W. Harrison St., Chicago, IL 60607-7140, USA
b Trinity College, Center for Urban and Global Studies, Dean and Director, 300 Summit Street Hartford, CT 06106, USA
c School of Social Development and Public Policy, Fudan University, 200433 Shanghai, China

Keywords:
India–Bangladesh Borderlands
Structure-agency analysis
Borderlands as in-between spaces
Relative urbanity

A R T I C L E  I N F O

Article history:
Available online xxxx

Introduction

Minhiri (1963, p. 407) argued that boundaries ‘are perhaps the most palpable political geographic phenomena’ because they mutate and evolve based on their history and natural and political sources. He argues that it is important to understand the context of boundaries, disputed or not, for explaining the ‘present-day situations’ (p. 427). Over the years scholars of different disciplines have perceived borders and borderlands through different, albeit not mutually exclusive, lenses. Sociologists and political scientists view them as politically and socially constructed boundaries that are contested and negotiated by different actors or agents. Historians treat them as a post-colonial phenomenon shaped by cumulative past events: whereas anthropologists define borders “as boundaries that separate social forms, peoples, and regions,” and a borderland as “a region and set of practices defined and determined by the border that are characterized by conflict and contradiction, material and ideational” (Alvarez, 1995, p. 448). With globalization, the conceptualization of borders has changed drastically. Newman (2000) stated that with globalization, international boundaries have geopolitically taken on new connotations. While some globalization scholars (Caney, 2005; Ohmae, 1990) emphasized the de-bordering and homogenizing impact of globalization on nations and localities, other theorists have incorporated historical, post-colonial, political, and socio-cultural factors to understand borderland interactions at the global and local levels. Some other scholars have contested this theoretical binary in the literature (Coleman, 2007; Newman, 2003; Paasi, 1999; Sparker, 2006), arguing instead that globalization has resulted in an uneven effect on borders, which have become more porous for the flow of capital, goods, and people for some groups and nation-states, but remain barriers for groups that are labeled as undesirable.

Borderland scholars such as Brunet-Jailly (2005) urged researchers to use multi-pronged analytical lens to study borderlands that involve examining global/structural processes such as market and trade flows and bilateral relationships, along with local processes/agent level process such as culture and politics of communities along the border. If we look at changing border regions as a mid-level, in-between dynamic between the global and local scales, we can identify a mix of factors that trigger and perpetuate a simultaneous process of de-bordering and re-bordering particularly in the context of informal trans-border (sub) regionalization on the Asia-Pacific Rim (Chen, 2000; Chen, 2009). An Asia-Pacific transborder subregion like the one comprising China’s Guangdong and Fujian provinces, Hong Kong, and Taiwan is a geographically expansive borderland, characterized by historical, political, and sociological conditions that create both barriers and opportunities...
for cross-border relationships (Chen, 2005). These regional/subregional borderlands highlight a variety of middle-range dynamics and relations between the global and the local scales in terms of their mutual consequences for each other that stem from and then reinforce cross-border flows and activities.

In this paper, we study the borderlands in South Asia – the rural and peripheral borderlands of India–China and India–Bangladesh. For both borderlands, we are interested in the geographically expansive territories that encompass two border cities on the Indian side – Tawang and metropolitan Kolkata, respectively. The inclusion of this pair of cities makes these borderlands geo-politically important for understanding how urban interjections help turn these otherwise peripheral borderlands into broadly contested, in-between spaces that shape the everyday life and fluid existences of their residents. Both borders have historical origins going back to British colonization of India and have been since left with a host of lingering economic, political, and cultural complexities. With the border regions of China and Bangladesh involved, there are three national contexts that bear heavily on four culturally and socially different but linked geographic spaces where interactions of the local peoples residing in these borderlands exert an upward influence on the larger politics of the three nation-states. Our central focus is on how the politics of the nation-states and the borderlands (the cities, towns and villages closest to the borders) as politically and socially contested spaces impact on the lives of people in the larger geopolitical context of globalization and its local imprints. In doing so, we extend the important benefits of studying borderlands to an urban understanding of them as lived places for their residents that are as complex and nuanced as large metropolitan cities. Given this goal, we adopt a primarily structure-agency approach to differentiating and re-integrating the structural constraints of layered contexts and the social agency of local residents in the borderlands.

In the rest of the paper, we focus on the socioeconomic, political, and cultural aspects of the daily lives of the local people even as they are vulnerable to the influences of the historical, national, and regional geopolitical forces. Given our keen focus on the local, we use a variety of localized sources including news reports, interviews with local residents, and observations of lived experiences in the borderlands. We introduce the concept of “relative urbaniy” to explain how certain borderlands that are semi- or quasi-urban assume urban meanings for the residents of those borderlands. The key finding from our structure-agency analysis is how the trans-local, cross-border mingling of daily life is sculpted by the structural influences such as colonial legacy, nation-state policies, global trade and local politics into certain agency-capable actors in these borderlands.

Globalization and borderland research

As academic interest in globalization grows, research on borderlands has begun to cover a greater variety of borderlands beyond European and US borders (Kearny, 1990; Alvarez, 1995). Of the work on Asian borderlands in recent years, most of the focus has been on the conditions and consequences of the formation of several transborder subregions across the border zones of East Asia and Southeast Asia (Chen, 2000; Chen, 2005; Chen, 2009; Newman, 2006; Pempel, 2005).

With this broader geographic coverage, scholars (Alvarez, 1995; Coleman, 2007; Newman, 2003; Paast, 1999; Sparke, 2006) have debated about whether globalization has made borders more or less relevant geopolitically. Some argue that borders today are paradoxical in nature: while they can be insignificant for some, it can be concrete boundaries for others. Kloos (2000) argued that globalization and localization are interdependent processes giving rise to distinctive global and local identities that co-exist in various regions of the world. Building on this literature, Chen (2005) provided a more balanced perspective arguing that when local and global forces cause borders to push and pull, borderlands develop their own distinctive regional and local characters. Even for the peripheral border regions in East Asia, globalization can reach border cities that were previously guarded by national boundaries but their integration in the global economy depends on how well they are connected to the other localities through some sort of regional center. The localization of economic ties mitigates the integrating effect of globalization on borderlands, thus contributing to a local territorial confinement of social and economic transactions.

Brunet-Jailly (2005) offered a conceptual model to understand borders and borderlands, espousing that the interplay between four dimensions of structure and agency is important for understanding borders. The four linked dimensions are: (a) local cross-border cultural nuances such as common language, food, socioeconomic status (SES) providing a sense of belonging; (b) local level politics and political networks; (c) cross-border trade flows; and (d) governmental interactions and policies. Brunet-Jailly argues that these four dimensions (a and b at the agency level, and c and d at the structural level) influence each other in very intricate ways to generate a complex system of interactions in borderlands.

In this paper we move beyond a simple global-local perspective to empirically integrate the insights provided by Chen and Brunet-Jailly. In essence, we attempt to better understand the structural influence of historical and geopolitical dynamics associated with the two complex borderlands on people’s lives and their agency in terms of belonging to borderland places under the larger structural constraints.

A tale of two borderlands: structural processes

The India–China borderland

The India–China borderland encompassing parts of eastern and northeastern India (see Map 1) features a geopolitical “great game”2 played by both India and China despite the influence of globalization on the growing trade relations between the two nations (Scott, 2008). The security concerns at the borderlands still shape how the nations react to each other and affect the people living in the borderland (Banerjee, 2010; Scott, 2008). The colonial legacies of disputed drawing of the border and subsequent Sino-India frontier war of 1962 have shaped the current ties between people who reside on both sides of the borderland.

Following the border war with India in 1962, China kept most of her claim in Aksai Chin (marking the region at the junction of China, India, and Pakistan) but India maintained most of its claim on the Northeast Frontier – about 70% of the land that was under dispute before and after the independence of India in 1947 (Mehra, 2006). The armies from both countries remain deployed in the Tawang region in India. The India–China War in 1962 led both countries to treat their mutual borderlands as critical frontiers of national security policies (Calvin, 1984). After the war, India pushed toward building an artery of roads and military bases along the critical areas where it felt vulnerable to China. “The roads built at that time and in subsequent years were targeted only cosmetically towards development but were actually geared to facilitate India’s troop deployment needs” (Rahman, 2008, p. 1).

The economic reform of China since 1980 and the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s have led both countries to...
become economic competitors (Mehra, 2006) and also explore trans-border trade opportunities despite their longstanding border disputes. The Sino-Indian Bilateral Peace and Tranquility Accords was signed to maintain peace along the Line of Actual Control (LoAC) in 1993 and 1996 (Vasi, 2008). In an attempt to develop the underdeveloped regions near the border between Southwest China and Northeast India and increase trade linkages, China has been promoting the Kunming (City) Initiative that seeks to strengthen regional economic cooperation and cultural exchange between the contiguous regions of Eastern/Northeastern India, China’s Southwest, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. China has also highlighted the potential benefits of trans-border trade linkages, tourism and transport within this region. To overcome the location disadvantages of its southwestern provinces, China has...
investing in building access routes by land (railways) and sea to South Asia and the Bay of Bengal (Kurian, 2005; Times of India, 2010). In response, India in 2006 opened the historical trade route – Nathula Pass, which remained closed for almost 50 years as a result of the military disputes. According to a recent journalistic report on this diplomatic development, “the Nathula border trade has witnessed a tremendous growth with exports soaring from a mere Rs 8.87 lakh ($20,000 approximately) during 2006–07 to Rs 135 lakh ($307166 approximately) in the year ended 2009-10” (Global News Network, 2010).

Yet, the national and international media continue to highlight the border disputes between the two countries. “There have already been as many as 40 ‘intrusions’ by Chinese troops across the 206-kilometer border between Sikkim and Tibet since January this year” as Rajat Pandit reported in an Indian national newspaper called Times of India on April 6, 2008. Our case studies however show that the borderland communities on both sides co-exist peacefully and remain neutral to both the conflict and bilateral peace talks (see below).

**The India–Bangladesh borderland**

The India–Bangladesh borderland that runs through Eastern India and Western Bangladesh has lingering ties to colonial history, the post-independence war of 1971, geopolitical similarities of the communities across borders, and the strong influence of Kolkata (a metropolitan city in East India). The India–Bangladesh border (see Map 2) was created after the Partition of India in 1947 and was known as the India–East Pakistan border prior to the War of 1971 between East and West Pakistan. With India’s military support, East Pakistan broke away from Pakistan and became an independent nation-state called Bangladesh. Rahman and van Schendel (2003) pointed out that throughout the periods of 1947–1965 and later, incidences of local ethnic violence in East Pakistan and India forced people to take refuge in border cities on either side, often exchanging properties with residents who were now migrating to the other side. After 1971, when the nation-state of Bangladesh was created, migration, mostly undocumented, has continued albeit for more economic reasons (Samaddar, 1998).

India’s border with Bangladesh is about 4095 km. It is porous and zigzags through rivers, villages, agricultural land, and personal properties. As a result, the borders have been a cause of strain between India and Bangladesh and “remain contested, un-demarcated and volatile even today” (van Schendel, 2005). The longstanding issues between India and Bangladesh range from the sharing of common water-resources around the border and demarcation of maritime boundaries to unlawful cross-border activities and the granting of entry/exit facilities (Schedel van & Abraham, 2006).

To address issues of national security and unlawful cross-border activities, both India and Bangladesh have deployed Border Security Forces (BSF). The Indian government has also erected boundary fencing (see Fig. 1) and a boundary road to prevent ‘infiltration’ in many districts of West Bengal (Banerjee, Hazarika, Hussain, & Samaddar, 1999; Krishna, 2001). The fencing is not along the international zero line and cuts through basic public facilities such as schools, temples, mosques, and farmland. Incidences of human rights violation by the Indian BSF near the fences have been reported by news agencies and human rights organizations (The Asian Human Rights Commission, 2006). Yet the people living in the borderlands have normalized the concept of the border. According to Samaddar (1998), they look at it as another barrier to overcome. Poverty and disenfranchisement of residents in these borderlands drive them to attach a normal informality to the border such that borders no longer remain exceptional to the lives of these people.

The trade bloc – South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) – was an attempt at formal regionalism in 1985 by providing a platform for South Asian countries to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust, and understanding. SAARC has led to the implementation of the South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA), signed in January 2004, and steadily enhanced formal trade between India and Bangladesh (see Table 1) (Bhattacharyay & De, 2005). SAARC however has failed to improve the border situation between India and Bangladesh. Border disputes including the construction of a fence to stop undocumented migration and deployment of paramilitary forces at the borderlands continue to cause human rights violation (Noorani, 2003).

The Indian Chamber of Commerce and the Bangladesh Development Series Report archived by the World Bank (2006), reports that 75% ($1.65 billion) of the total illegal trade volume of India ($2 billion) come from these borderlands. Tables 1 and 2 show that while the legal import volume between India and Bangladesh in 2004–2005 was $59.26 million, the total illegal trade volume between the two countries across borders stood at $500 million in 2004–2005 (Pohit & Taneja, 2003; Das & Pohit, 2006). According to Chakraborty (2009), informal trade happens in two forms – one in the form of bootlegging, the other is when large quantities of goods come across borders through illegal practices. Illegal migration and human trafficking are also part of the realities of this border region. Chakraborty (2009) however did not explore the impact of such trade on lives of people living in the borderlands.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year*</th>
<th>Export</th>
<th>Import</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995–1996</td>
<td>1049.1</td>
<td>85.90</td>
<td>1135.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998–1999</td>
<td>995.64</td>
<td>62.40</td>
<td>1058.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000–2001</td>
<td>935.04</td>
<td>80.51</td>
<td>1015.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003–2004</td>
<td>1740.75</td>
<td>77.63</td>
<td>1818.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004–2005</td>
<td>1606.56</td>
<td>59.26</td>
<td>1665.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006–2007*</td>
<td>1892.55</td>
<td>121.91</td>
<td>2014.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India; and IMF, DOTS CD-ROM, 2006. * Refers to the calendar year.
To balance the above discussion on the structural factors, we conduct a bottom-up analysis\(^3\) of the two borderlands that covers the district of Tawang in the India–China border and several border villages and towns including the border city, Kolkata, on the India–Bangladesh border. The agency-structure approach allows us to examine how agents at the micro level interact with macro structural forces (global trade and national policies and politics mentioned above) that unfold in two borderlands across three countries. We argue that local life in the two borderlands has a dialectical relationship with the global economy and national polity, and thus helps shape the nature of the borderlands and geopolitics of the nations involved.

**Everyday life in the two borderlands**

In light of the theoretical perspectives on borderlands and the historical context introduced in the previous section, we present two parallel case studies to explore the relationship between larger geopolitical forces affecting the borderlands and everyday interactions of the borderland residents. The borders are different in their demographic features and geopolitical situations. Adopting the agency-structure analytical model proposed by Brunet-Jailly (2005), we examine structural factors such as the geopolitics of the borderlands, larger economic and political exchanges between nation-states involved and how that affects the lives of the people therein. We also decipher the stories that local residents told to us about their experiences with the borders, while examining how colonial legacy, formal and informal trade and bilateral political relationships shape lives in the borderlands. We intend these micro–macro relationships, either similar or different between the two borderlands, to open a new theoretical–empirical dialogue that will advance research on borderlands.

**Data sources**

We have used several sources of information to understand each borderland.\(^4\) We have looked through about 60 articles and reports on the India–Bangladesh and India–China borderlands in leading English newspapers and current-event magazines of India, Bangladesh, and China during 2007–2011. The newspaper articles were of two kinds—one that reported on the day-to-day happenings in the borderlands and the other that reported the bilateral and global/structural exchanges regarding these borderlands. The reports on the day-to-day happenings were fewer in number. Personal interviews with individuals were used to supplement this. To collect the personal experiential narratives concerning the borderlands, the first author conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews which were between one and three hours long with 20 individuals. The pool of interviewees consisted of Indian Army personnel deployed at the Indian–Chinese border, retired Indian Police Officers who have worked with Bangladeshi immigrants (both documented and undocumented) in large cities close to the border, small border towns and villages, customs officers from the Bangladeshi border, local migrant residents in each category; political leaders from the India–Bangladesh border area; professors of a university located in city near the India–China border; UN personnel working in the India–China borderland, and NGO workers in both borderlands. The interviews inquired about how these individuals perceived the border and about their experiences of living and working in the borderlands.

One limitation of our study was that the information on the borderlands of interest was gathered from the Indian perspective. Besides a number of printed sources from China and Bangladesh, all the other qualitative data came from the Indian side of the borderlands. This is mainly because the first author only had access to the Indian side of the borderlands, while it was very difficult to directly access the remote border areas of China and Bangladesh. This limitation is mitigated by the fact that the people whose lives we have studied are mostly migrants from across the borders, which in a way renders our analysis pertinent to cross-border human interactions.

**Local voices from and the geopolitics of the borderlands**

**The India–China borderland**

The India–China border stretches across the entire snowy range of Himalayas from the North to Northeast regions of India (Map 1 and Fig. 2). For this analysis, we focus on the Tawang sector, particularly Tawang district in the state of Arunachal Pradesh due to its more urban/semi-urban character than other towns in the area (see Map 3 and Fig. 3). Compared to Kolkata, Tawang is only a small-sized city/large town but the local residents of the India–China borderlines use Tawang for all urban purposes that border residents of the India–Bangladesh borders use Kolkata for. For instance, for the residents of the India–China border, Tawang provides the main market space for buying and selling goods and services in medicine, education, cross-border tourism, and transportation facilities. Given the scarcity of urban spaces in the India–China borderlands, we argue that Tawang provides an urban setting for the border residents such that the residents associate Tawang with urbanity. We characterize the attachment of urban meanings to a semi-urban place by the local people, in relation to the larger geographic landscape of remote border regions they live in, as “relative urbanity.”

Tawang district occupies an area of 2173 square kilometers at an altitude of 2000–6600 m (Das, 2007). The district consists of three peri-urban towns and the rest are small villages. Tawang is about 100 km from the Line of Actual Control (LoAC) and is part of the disputed border-region claimed by both countries and hosts the Indian military base in the region. According to the 2011 census of India, Tawang district has a population of 49,950, which is relatively low, compared to other Indian districts. A little less than half the population of Tawang district lives in the town of Tawang. The ethnic composition of Tawang is spread among two regional ethnic tribes and a few thousand Tibetans. The economy in Tawang district is largely agrarian but it is also dependent on Indian tourism to a large extent (Indian District Census, 2011).

An interview with a military service person reveals that although the Chinese government claims the “city of Tawang,” it is a popular tourist spot for mainland Indians. The economy in Tawang runs on tourism and local markets selling Chinese goods to tourists and the army. The Chinese goods however are not transported across the border but are imported to mainland India and then transported to the local markets. There is practically no legal trade across the India–China border due to the rough terrains, deployment of armed border forces, and lack of government support. Captain Raja, an officer in the Indian Army who was in charge of one of the border security battalions, remarked, [...]

---

\(^3\) A bottom-up sociological approach helps us understand what happens at the ground level— that is at the level of individuals and make it the basis to understand the larger structural phenomena in this case the nation-state, the border, bilateralism or regionalism and how the individuals negotiate the existence of these structures in their everyday interactions.

\(^4\) We used newspapers, journals, and magazine articles to extract evidence on the current geopolitical situation of the borderlands and media discourses around the borderlands. We employed in-depth interviews with border residents, border security force, police officers, and military personnel to understand how border communities and residents view and experience the borderlands. The first author also conducted observations of daily lives in five border towns in the Bangladesh-West Bengal border and one town in the Arunachal–China border. We used archival data on trade flows to understand the influence of the market forces in shaping the respective borderlands.
...the terrains are very rough...it’s more costly to transport goods either legally or illegally across the border through this terrain...moreover because of the army deployment, cross-border illegal activities are largely discouraged. Also this borderland unlike our borders with Bangladesh is so removed from mainland India and China that it is hardly lucrative to carry on cross-border trade...People do travel back and forth across borders (illegally of course). They do bring back stuff from the other side on the sly but in small quantities.

Although the overall trade volume between India and China was estimated at $50 billion for 2008–2009 by Business Standard, one of India’s leading business magazine, on May 2009, border trade stood at approximately $196,000 in 2005–2006 (Xinhua News Agency July 7, 2007), indicating a minor portion of border trade in overall trade. Border trade was however projected to increase with the opening of the Nathula Pass. The illegal border trade however is estimated to be at as high as $1 billion. In a news article about the region, Kondapalli (2006) comments, “Dumchile in Ladakh, for instance, is a smuggler’s haven. The volume of illegal trade in the Tawang region is considerably low due to the terrain conditions and army deployment.”

Contrary to the popular perception in both countries that the borderland is rife with bilateral disputes and conflicts, interviews with local people including army officers reveal that the region is peaceful and free of continual active violent conflicts. Captain Ishwar who the first author interviewed in 2010, affirmed:

All we do here is chase Chinese Yaks that wander into the Indian territory. We have not really used our guns and missiles to fight with people in a long time (laughs).
The military deployment is viewed by the local people as a source of income. The military often employ local youth for various odd jobs in the army barracks. The border conflict so highlighted in the global media does not seem to cause much tremor among the local inhabitants. When asked about border disputes, Lao Pung, who is a local vendor/trader in Tawang, responded,

...We don’t care, if we are part of India or China...for us nothing changes. We are Arunachalis (the regional identity) and that is what we will be. We speak a little of Chinese/Tibetan and the local language...so it doesn’t matter... Our region is beautiful but it is very hard to survive economically and climactically. All we care about is not losing the tourists and the military...on both sides...they make for huge customer base.

Lao Pung also pointed out that the remoteness of the border region reduces the control of the central government considerably such that local organizations and local economic and cultural ties gain more currency than the national interest of either country. The local people view the government on either side as redundant or irrelevant when it comes to local cross-border economic exchanges. One local resident and businessman Hiru says:

Barter has been a historical phenomenon in the region. I know, it continues now on much lesser scale. Traditionally it had been salt for wool, brass ornaments and beads and now it includes other modern stuff like cameras and beer etc. I don’t understand why the government on either side should have any say in such interactions.

As Kurian (2005) argues, given the geographic location of the India–China borderland, the ethnic composition of its peoples reflects century-old process of co-mingling and migrations such that local people barely form any national allegiance to either side. When asked about whether he identifies himself as an Indian citizen, Lao Pung, a resident of a village near the city of Tawang, said:

...I felt Indian the one time when I voted, when they came in with helicopters to get our votes...we don’t have good colleges or hospitals here, it’s funny to think of it but the young people go away to India to study and older people go to China (the transport system on the Chinese side is better than on the Indian side) to get medical assistance when they need it urgently...we kind of live in two countries...it works for us... (laughs).

However, people residing in a relatively more urban location (cities such as Tawang near the borderland) and who have mainstream jobs are less ambivalent on questions of identity and citizenship. Koelia Barua, a UN worker, and Dr. Kibu, a faculty in a local college – both local residents of a nearby city, identify themselves as Indians. The latter explains,

This region was never part of India or China but had its own distinct culture – people are not passionate about their Indian identity...but as for me, there is no question about my Indian identity. Yes in a border state there are displays of dissatisfaction about neglect by the Indian government. But other than that, China is not something that is on our radars in our everyday life.

Most of border residents in our study seem to be in denial of the contested characteristics of the India–China borderlands particularly near the Tawang region. There can be two explanations for this: (a) given the structural constraints of colonial legacy in India and bilateral tension between India and China, the only way individuals have any agency in the area is by making the border and border conflicts disappear in the popular imaginations; and (b) there is a large disconnect between the political processes in mainland India and how the Indian government view the contested borders when compared to how the local residents who live the conflict in their everyday lives perceive the borders. An example of such a disconnect was visible in the 2004 general election where the winning party from the area was Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) which took a hard nationalistic and militaristic approach on border security (Sagar, 2009). This seems to contradict the public opinion – that borders and border conflicts are insignificant in daily lives is on the political radar of local residents as expressed in this research. The disjuncture stated here emerged from perhaps a lack of proper democratic process in the region as the first author’s interviews indicated. Dr. Kibu’s sarcastic terminology for the election process “helicopter elections” reflects the popular perception of how elections are conducted in the region by the mainland.
Indian political parties. This sense of disconnect from the mainland politics and the development of sub-regional nationalism and citizenship identities (neither Indian nor Chinese/Tibetan) has been a trend in the Indian political processes particularly in regions that are disengaged from mainland India both discursively and materially (Bhaumik, 2005).

When asked if the India–China border is perceived as an opportunity area or a barrier to development, most informants were of the opinion that the terrain maybe a barrier but “there is no war between the people living on either side of the border. The war is between governments.” People like Ms. Barua and Dr. Kibu emphasized the fact that the area could become an opportunity zone if road systems were developed and the “farical border disputes” resolved between the two nations.

There have been some gestures toward opening up the borders for greater connectivity with Southeast Asia such as the ASEAN car rally from Guwahati in 2004 and the reopening of the Silk Road through the Nathula Pass in Sikkim in 2005 (see Map 2). But these remain nascent and feeble attempts. The surge in trade between China and India, with China now being India’s second largest trading partner after the United States, can pave the way for further cross-border trade and other economic transactions. This demonstrates the strong interplay as well as a contradictory relationship between the structural factors such as trade flows and policies of global, regional, and governmental institutions and local cultural nuances in shaping the characteristic of the borderland. Given these macro-structural relationships and the local cultural and social ties already in place among the border residents, the nations states must be proactive in resolving the geopolitical border conflicts at the state/structural level to encourage closer and more positive cross-border relationships. This will ensure better living conditions and more engaged civic life for the border residents on either side.

The India–Bangladesh borderland

Bangladesh is locked in by India along the west, north, and northeast sides, except for a small section of its far southeast region, which borders Myanmar and the Ocean (see Map 2). The entire eastern region of West Bengal and some Northeastern States of India share border with Bangladesh. While focusing on segments of the India–Bangladesh border in the West Bengal region, our analysis also incorporates Kolkata, the dominant metropolis in eastern India. Despite the fact that Kolkata is 75 km away from the border, we view it as a border city because its large markets for labor and goods are closely linked to the border. Kolkata is often the pull factor for cross-border migration (both legal and undocumented) and informal trading. Kolkata takes on much of the impact of the economic interactions and pressures stemming from unstable situations at the borders. The existence of a large labor market and informal urban spaces for eking out a living makes Kolkata an attractive destination for migrants and as well as goods. In this sense, Kolkata functions as a central node and magnet of economic and social interactions across the Bangladesh–West Bengal border. Going beyond the notion of “relative urbanity” in the remote India–China borderland, the geographic presence and long-reach influence of Kolkata render the India–Bangladesh borderland more urban in a regional context.

The India–Bangladesh borderland also differs considerably from India–China border in several other ways. The India–Bangladesh border has a rather flat terrain and is easily traversable for the people of similar demographics on both sides. The 2001 Indian Census recorded 3.3 million documented migrants from Bangladesh to West Bengal with more male migrants than female migrants in West Bengal and its districts. This number was deemed higher given the high rates of undocumented migration. Migration has been concentrated in North 24 Parganas, Kolkata and Nadia districts of West Bengal. This borderland has also received much more news coverage due to the regular violent conflicts that plague the region. The long borderland is also marked by the trafficking of adults and children, goods, cattle and cross-border violence on both sides (Kulbir, 2001).

According to the World Bank Survey of the National Council of Applied Economic Research (2006) (NCAER) of India, Bangladesh’s smuggled imports from India during 2002–2003 were worth approximately $500 million, or about 40% of recorded imports from India, and approximately 30% of total imports. Bangladesh’s unrecorded cross-border trade with India was estimated at about $25 million, which was about three-fourths of the legal trade between the two countries (Das & Pohit, 2006). As Table 2 shows, the trade volume between India and China (at $11,617.88 million in 2009–2010) was much larger than the India–Bangladesh border trade (at $2,432.51 million in 2009–2010). There is no recent estimate of cross-border trade, but according to Kurian (2005), “the two-way border trade between India and China in 2004 reached $110 million for the first time” (China, Ministry of Commerce, 2004).

As an ex-social worker working with migrant women and children residing on the borders, the first author of this paper visited these areas, particularly villages in the Nadia and 24 Parganas district borders on a regular basis during 2003–2004. The personal interaction with residents in the border area has allowed us to uncover nuances and subjectivities of border life that have not been very visible in other research. These subjectivities emanate from the presence of state power at the borders, cross-border kinship and commercial social networks, and cultural nuances. Our interviews and observations in line with the popular media and political discourse on the Indian side suggests that economically underprivileged migrants from Bangladesh cross the borders and often squat in towns and villages close to the border in West Bengal. Many also migrate to Kolkata to explore more promising economic possibilities. Most of these migrants come to escape dire poverty, in search of work with the intention of return when they have “saved enough to return home.” Undocumented migrants often depend on existing social capital of families and friends who have already migrated to find work in the region or in Kolkata. These migrants work in low-paying and unstable jobs such as daily wage laborers, housemaids, janitors, sanitation workers among others. Given their legal and class location, Bangladeshi immigrants are subject to exploitation and oppression at the hands of employers as well as state and local authorities. Political parties often illegally solicit undocumented immigrants to vote for their party promising them citizenship through voter registration. The promise mostly goes unfulfilled. This also makes migrants vulnerable to inter-party political conflicts that usually take violent shapes during elections. Our migrant interviewees revealed merciless beatings by party workers (who are mostly local mobs) because they fell prey to another part...

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>2008–2009</th>
<th>% Share</th>
<th>2009–2010</th>
<th>% Share</th>
<th>% Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India–China</td>
<td>9353.50</td>
<td>5.0479</td>
<td>11617.88</td>
<td>6.4977</td>
<td>24.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India–Bangladesh</td>
<td>2497.87</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>2432.51</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>-2.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ties’ solicitations of voting. The Bangladeshi migrant workers are subject to the wrath of the local Indian population in the border towns who, while exploiting their labor, also harbor deep anti-immigration sentiments against them.

Over the past decade the West Bengal government has been trying to curtail the entry of undocumented immigrants and intercept those already in the country. Several orders for raids of Bangladeshi enclaves have been issued. However the local police, both in the districts and the city of Kolkata, have been slow to implement these orders. Inspector Das, a retired city police official, says,

We have been seeing these people for years...they are really poor, they come for work and then go back after a few years...they are not terrorists...they are after all Bengalis...it doesn’t make sense to arrest them...when we find Bangladeshis working illegally, we usually leave them with a warning...and then they get lost in the sea of people...and then they are gone...

This statement is theoretically interesting because it shows how borders take on contradictory meanings in the minds of people including the police. While cross-border undocumented immigration is constructed as a problem in the social and political psyche, the cultural affinities with the migrating population as well as the history of these borderlands render the borders insignificant for both the people crossing them and those who guard them.

While cross-border migration is more in the direction from Bangladesh to India, Hussain (2007) indicated that there are many foreign workers in Bangladesh who are Indians and many are undocumented. However, unlike the Bangladeshi in India, the Indian migrant workers in Bangladesh work mostly in white-collar jobs or are small-business owners. Hussain writes,

“...small businesses and private sector jobs are the backbone of any economy, and it is in these sectors that the largest numbers of people are employed in every country. The invasion of Bangladesh by Indian workers not only means job loss for Bangladeshi people, but also some sort of economic backtracking and stagnation too. The most detrimental effect of this situation is that some wealth is siphoned out of the country by these foreign citizens, and the Bangladesh economy does not get the impetus which it would have if foreigners would have spent their earnings here” (Hussain 2007, p. 27).

While resentment against migrant workers persists on both sides of the border, Indians exert more power and influence in Bangladesh than Bangladeshis do in India. Bangladeshis who cross the border are at the mercy of various forces that make them physically, politically, psychologically, and financially vulnerable.

Porous borders, geographic proximity, and cultural similarities make other covert, illegal cross-border processes possible such as human trafficking and smuggling of foreign goods. Meghna who works with sex-workers in Kolkata says,

...about 30 to 40 percent of sex-workers in the red-light areas of Kolkata are from Bangladesh...they live in horrible living conditions, get tortured and beaten but being illegal are too scared to talk...

Malini Sur (2006) corroborates the story of the trafficking of Bangladeshi women to India. Since Bangladeshis are similar to Indians both culturally and in physical appearance, it is difficult to distinguish between trafficked women and local women, which make it even harder to stop trafficking. The only identity that possibly could give them away is their Muslim names. Thus many of these women are forced to change their names to generic Indian female names to cover their identities as well as solicit non-Muslim clients. The women often travel back and forth between the two countries bribing the Border Security Forces (BSF) either with money or sex. The BSF are the largest customers of Bangladeshi sex workers at the border areas (Rai, 2011, *The Hindu Magazine*). Besides, trafficking, very young Bangladeshi girls, often minors, from families living in extreme poverty are bought and sold to northern Indian farmers who procure them as brides and use them as slave labor (Shamim, 2001, p. 11). Their families force these girls into contractual marriages. The girls’ experiences tell a story of gross violations of rights as a minor, as a woman and as a human being (Deol, 2007). The violations largely go unaddressed because of their immigration status and poverty and viability of border crossing makes such atrocities rampant.

Some recent newspaper reports (Dhar, 2011; Rai, 2011) have raised the issue of children being used for bootlegging at the border to escape absolute poverty and the abuse of these children by the BSF mainly on the Indian side. “Many children face abuse – physical or sexual...” says Tariqul Islam of Rights Jessore, a group working to protect children and trafficked women of Bangladesh in the borders (Rai, 2011).

The smuggling of goods, ranging from daily produce, fish and dairy to electronic items and drugs, by both children and adults is widespread at the borders and often takes place in full knowledge of border authority personnel. Shuman Kar, an experienced customs officer at the border checkpoint, states in his interview:

We have the hardest jobs, there are so many people trying to go across the borders...and they smuggle everything...starting from (Hilsa) fish to foreign soaps to gold to heroine and of course humans....People cross with their little bags and trucks crossing with loads of goods...Just between you and me...we usually let farmers go by...they pay off giving a couple of fresh Hilsa to the officer (laughs). It is of course a different story with bigger stuff like gold, drugs, rice going across...they are trouble...These have powerful people involved. We want to do the right thing but we fear for our own lives too. Life in these borders is dangerous madam.”

These stories point to the volatile and violent nature of border life and continuous violation of human rights at the borderlands. Instances of murders, rapes, child abuses and extortion are common and are perpetrated by local gangs, political party workers as well as the border security personnel.

Thus structural factors that govern the borderlands such as state policies, border security mechanism, the local State politics and powerful international bootleggers, shake the lives of people residing and working in the borderlands. Rahman, who lives in a border village and works as a daily wage-laborer, says:

...we are like street dogs...always being driven around for food...We are poor so we go searching for work to feed ourselves and our families. For us, countries don’t matter....if crossing over to the other side prevents us from starving, we will do it. After all we are the same people, why such restrictions then, why the police and military. No one asked us if we wanted to be different countries. It makes me cry. The other day, a BSF police shot my cousin who crossed everyday to sell produce and returned. Poor people don’t have choices...I wish borders cease to exist...we are after all the same people...we speak the same language, eat the same food...our only fault is we are poor...

Rahman’s emotional narrative reinforces the paradox that these borders represent for the people living in these in-between spaces where they experience the border as a barrier but at the same time are constantly dismantling this barrier both physically and psychologically.
Discussion and conclusion

The two cases have been analyzed to understand South Asian borders and borderlands through a multidimensional lens provided by Brunet-Jailly (2005) and Chen (2005) featuring the interaction between structure and agency. We have examined how larger structural and geopolitical forces affect the lived interactions and experience of people in the two borderlands. Concurrently, we have investigated the meaning that borders take on in the minds of border residents in the light of the borders’ histories, the geographic realities, the current economic needs of residents, the in-between nature of their lived spaces, and the politics of the nation-states involved. We also have looked at how the borders, as a concurrent barrier and opportunity and relatively urban spaces in the contemporary context of globalization, feedbacks on both formal and informal regional development in South Asia.

Our findings corroborate Brunet-Jailly’s theoretical claim that no analytical ‘dimension is exclusively structure or agent oriented; instead, each dimension provides a historically variable expression of agent power’ (2005, p. 643). The formal regional groupings such as SAARC and SAFTA have had little influence on either borderland with no trickle down effect at level of local ties and networks. Informal regional tendencies in the form of the transborder subregions in East and Southeast Asia (Chen, 2000) have taken some hold in South Asia, although the colonial-historical divisions remain the main influence on the (re)construction of these regions as low-opportunity areas. Our micro-level analysis shows that the lives of local people in both borderlands are linked culturally, socially, and economically, even as their daily spaces of existence and interaction are bifurcated into two geopolitical realms. Formal cross-border regulation and control is weak relative to the informal and unregulated flows and interactions between and through the borderlands.

We argue that there are varied cross-border social networks enumerated in the literature as kinship, ancestral, and friendship (Chen, 2005). We also found an additional form of network that we call “informal organizational network,” which manifests in an embedded engagement of local residents within local economies rather than the area being used for larger bilateral trade and direct investment. People in both borderlands have kin, friends, and sometimes ancestral homes and properties across the borders. The kinship networks facilitate local people in crossing over to access scarce economic and civic resources. There are also informal trade networks controlled by large businesses and local political clouts mostly in the form of illicit organizational ties. Our analysis helps reveal the nuanced agency rooted in the local economic processes in the face of structural constraints impinging on the borderland in question.

The informal organizational network consists of local power groups like the political parties, the military, the borderland officials, and local mob. Most of these groups operate covertly, but have a strong influence on both local and national economic and political decisions. People in both borderlands are forced to build ties with these power groups in order to survive in these in-between spaces. In the India–China borderland, for example, establishing social ties with the military is important for the local businesses to survive. In the India–Bangladesh borderland, the Border Security Forces (BSF), the local mob, and political leaders control the socioeconomic interactions, and maintaining ties with these actors is critical for the local residents to survive and sustain different kinds of cross-border interactions. This adds another layer to the structure-agency dichotomy critiqued by Brunet-Jailly, as the varied bottom-up dynamics complicates how power is organized and wielded at both the structural and agentic levels in these borderlands.

In addition, the lived experiences of residents in both the India–China and India–Bangladesh borderlands don’t seem to escape the shadow and grip of historical and current global events. In the India–China border region, despite the India–China War of 1962 and the continued bilateral disputes, local life has remained peaceful and conflict free. The India–Bangladesh border, on the other hand, has been more volatile politically, economically, and geographically. There is no question that the realities of these historical, geographical, and political forces affect how people in these borderlands lead their lives. Our study also shows that people use whatever little agency they have to render these borderlands insinificant in their minds and in their daily exchanges. For them the borders are another hurdle they must negotiate just as they deal with poverty, hunger, illness, and other challenging living conditions on a daily basis. Sometimes they do this by developing sub-regional citizenship identities (Bhaumik, 2005) that allow them to mute or soften the conflicts and contestations bulldozed by the nation-states in question. Cultural affinities, co-mingling and colonial history of these regions (before the political borders were formed) provide shared identities to these very poor and powerless border residents to dismantle the notion of borders as national and local barriers enmeshed in geopolitical disputes.

Our two cases also confirm some theoretical advances in border research (Chen, 2005) in that they have some existing local resources of cohesion such as cross-border social networks and cultural ties (language, food, lifestyle) among border residents, the existence of big and small, albeit mostly informal, trade ties, viable terrain conditions (in the India–Bangladesh borderland), and the existence of roads and railways, infrastructures that can create cross-border regionalism and economic development. These borders share some features with what Nijkamp (1998, p. 1) called the ‘network economy of the globalized world’ that penetrates the low-opportunity and peripheral border areas and drive them towards development through industrialization and cross-border trade. Yet the far reach of global economy has yet to strongly influence the two borderlands and move them beyond low-opportunity and peripheral status despite proximity to urban hubs in the case of India–Bangladesh borderland.

We argue that borderlands fraught with complex histories such as the two cases in this study open up a new theoretical discussion about their contradictory nature and impacts on local lives. A visible contradiction that the two cases bring to light emerges from the contested nature of the borders and the geographic proximity, the border porosity, and cultural similarities between the people residing on either side of the borders. The porous nature of the borders acts as “contact zones” (Chen, 2005, p. 51) for poor migrants in search of economic opportunities and social interactions. While the borders make it easier for people to co-mingle and build localized social capital, they also increase the chances of human trafficking and undocumented migration that invariably results in militarization and hyper policing, multiple forms of exploitation and abuse, and human rights violation of the border residents and migrating population.

Our cases additionally reveal that local residents in the borderlands tend to be flexible and ambivalent about their cultural and national affinities. Border residents in the India–Bangladesh borderland emphasize the same and shared cultural roots of people on both sides and yet they talk about returning to their ‘own land’ some day. The nationalistic allegiance is more questionable for people in the large rural portions of the India–China borderland; however the urban-dwellers who are parts of the mainstream Indian economy assert their allegiance to India despite recognizing the fact that they are politically alienated from the mainstream Indian society. Border residents in both cases use their cultural claim to the borderlands as their spaces to demystify the powerful influence of these
disputed, political boundaries on their everyday lives. In this critical sense, the borderlands are a distinctive kind of in-between space that allows their residents to carve out an existence and attachment against and across split and competing political boundaries.

Our study also suggests that the histories of colonization and decolonization and their associated contemporary geopolitical issues are capable of undermining both structural forces (global economic networks) and local resources (the existing socio-cultural-economic networks) that otherwise affect national and local development. What is equally interesting to us is that while the nation-states in question base their homeland/border security policies (often making them more stringent) on graphically localized concerns such as the border-crossing of illegal immigrants and fear of terrorism, these policies have little accountability to the violations of human rights and dignity of border residents that their implementation often perpetuates. Our research also shows that the local people's lives are almost always adversely affected by the policies of fencing or militarization of borders. Yet there is no attempt from the nation-states involved to assume responsibility for the people living in the border areas. People – border residents – for whom these borders are of utmost consequence, are rendered completely invisible in the making of bilateral policy decisions. This reinforces the severe imbalance between the realities of trans-local human interactions and the indifference of national geopolitical decisions regarding these in-between spaces.

Finally, we conclude that these two borderlands, with their intersections of contemporary geo-economic and political realities and a certain kind of historicity (decolonization and the consequential disputes), produce complex contradictions for the people living in the area as well as the nation-states involved. While these borderlands lend currency to traditional perspective on borders as boundaries that govern communication, settlement patterns, and economic livelihood of local people, we found a strong demystification and dismantling of boundaries by people who have figured out how to navigate these in-between spaces in their everyday lives. These spaces also carry the geographic affinity with the limited role of a small city (Tawang for the India–China borderland) vs. the much stronger influence of a major metropolis (Kolkata for the India–Bangladesh borderland). While not urban in the sense of large and dense settlements, these borderlands feature semi-urban or relatively urban attributes in a relational sense that complicates their nature as in-between spaces.

Most importantly, we found that the binary perspectives on agency versus structure and global versus local are limited in helping us understand the complexities of these two cases. The empirical reality of both borders exposes the dualities by demonstrating how structural factors are reconstituted into social processes that inform individual actions. Therefore, our research provides new empirical evidence for building off and going beyond the agency-structure model of borderlands (Brunet-Jailey, 2005). The interplay between historical legacy, geopolitical dynamics, and local cultures offers a key analytical tool that pushes us to think harder about borderlands as in-between spaces. It is in these spaces that social relations, economic exchanges, cultural ties, and political negotiations intersect and mediate across the global-local divide in shaping the material and social lives of borderland residents.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our interviewees for their responses to our questions and Vijay Prashad at Trinity College and several anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the workshop “Eurasian Borderlands in Theory and Reality: People, Borders, and the States,” University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, April 13, 2007.

References


News and Web References


