



Culture and Identity of People Living in the Indo-Bangla Borderlands

Sharif Atiquzzaman

Professor of English

Government Brajalal College

Abstract

Borderlands are regions situated near the lines separating two countries or areas. Nations secure their boundaries by controlling the entry and exit of foreign citizens and protecting their people from dangers or threats posed by cross-border movements. In the Indo-Bangla Borderlands, numerous fragile and contested issues have arisen since the colonial demarcation in 1947. Each state frames its foreign policies with the intent of controlling its porous boundaries, though local realities often differ.

The porosity of these borderlands, arbitrarily drawn at some points, has encouraged infiltrations, primarily for illegal trades. This desperate act for survival has turned the borderlands into smugglers' paradises, but it also opens up possibilities for wider demographic and potentially dangerous political changes. As structural entities, borders can generate diverse effects by facilitating crossings that can either integrate or segregate people. Borderlands are also emotional spaces, connected to people through memory and identity (Ranjan 28). They are often termed 'peripheral' and 'marginalised' due to their isolation from the mainland.

For the inhabitants of these regions, the concept of a 'border' carries no political implication. Instead, survival is their primary concern. They coexist with their geographical environments to meet their basic needs such as food, clothing, and medical treatment. The modern concept of the border holds little meaning for the mass-dwellers in the borderlands. In many cases, the political and cultural boundaries of a country do not align with cultural fluidity, leading to reunification.

The people living in these border areas exhibit unique cultural prototypes in their lifestyle. This study will focus on how the culture and identity of borderland inhabitants have been affected by the borders.

Keywords: *border, borderland, porosity, culture, people, community*

Introduction

A 'borderland' is a zone or region within which lies an international border and a 'borderland society' is a social and cultural system straddling that border (Prescott 13). The Indo-Bangladesh borderlands host a variety of communities, each possessing unique traits. Despite their differences, these communities share numerous similarities due to their shared climate and geography. The people of India

and Bangladesh residing in these border regions are deeply intertwined, engaging in a common culture that is essential for understanding the cultural practices of the borderlands. Although political boundaries are present, the customs, habits, beliefs, and other cultural elements surpass these divisions. How does the border create? When the world's political tectonic plates move, they create fissures known as international borders. Many of these come about in ways that for those who experience them are just as overpowering, devastating and unpredictable as earthquake (Schendel 1). This human connection persists despite the modern notion of borders, which fails to account for the emotional bonds among individuals living on both sides.

Objectives

This study aims to explore the socio-cultural dynamics of the Indo-Bangladesh borderlands, identifying interconnections and areas of conflict.

Review of Literature

The existing body of literature on the cultural state of the Indo-Bangla borderland communities is sparse, with the majority of publications focusing on political issues related to the Borderlands. This gap in the research highlights the need for a comprehensive examination of the cultural dynamics within these communities. The proposed subject, therefore, warrants serious attention to better understand the intricate cultural practices and the shared way of life of the people living in these border regions.

People of the Borderlands: Crisis of Identity

The people living in the border areas are as ancient as human history itself. They have faced unique social problems since time immemorial. The term 'border' implies not only a conceptual difference regarding the precise location of borders but also a general meaning, referring to the dividing line between different peoples and cultures. The cultures on both sides of the border often mingle seamlessly with each other.

Borders reflect the mental images of both politicians and common people, yet the practical situations in the borderlands are quite different. Although borders are clearly drawn on official maps, with official restrictions imposed and vigilance tightened, people often break laws and ignore borders to meet their needs. By doing so, they always disregard the political status of the border. The states that came into existence in August 1947 shared a borderland that was anything but natural to them, and that was very difficult to control and defend (Schendel 102).

People use borders and take advantage of them in ways not anticipated by their creators. Borderland inhabitants frequently cross borders without legal permission to seek jobs, trade or smuggle goods, and offer shelter to revolutionaries. Even the 'group of immigrants clearly did not consider themselves trespassers on foreign soil; they ignored the border because they considered it irrelevant to their older claims to the land (The Pakistan Observer 1959). The basic needs, emotional expressions, and problems of individuals and communities are the same on both sides, binding them together. Despite having different political identities, the cultural identities of borderland people are similar in many respects.

Folk and Religion Dominated Culture

The border regions of India and Bangladesh are not homogeneous. For instance, the North-east border (Assam-Meghalaya-Tripura) is geographically isolated from the rest of India. This porous border area sees people from both sides depending on each other for survival. Both countries encompass the diversity of cultures. Before the partition of India in 1947, Bangladesh was an integral part of India, thus embodying religious influences from Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Islam, which are prominently reflected in its art and literature. The people living in these borderlands share occupations, religious beliefs, dialects, and other cultural aspects such as food habits, dress, ornaments, festival celebrations, and the environment.

Borderlands are usually situated far from cities and are among the least developed areas, except for a few regions adjacent to West Bengal. The primary occupations of border people include cultivation, fishing, animal husbandry, and smuggling. Their main focus on life is earning a livelihood and finding shelter. The border people on either side strive to maintain peaceful coexistence and adjust to nature and their environment for mutual benefit. The environments of the Bengal and Assam borders are almost identical, with people living below the poverty line and struggling to survive. In the Assam-Bangla borders, farming is a major occupation, and people cross the border under the protection of the BSF (Border Security Force) for cultivation. This permissible border crossing and unseen river-crossing are open secrets. They also supply fruits, vegetables, and fish to the cities. Some people are involved in small transportation businesses, grocery shops, and manual labor at construction sites, but many are attached to smuggling syndicates. For them, life is merely a biological entity without an urge for education or a high standard of living. They work hard to secure food and shelter.

The people living in the borderlands are predominantly Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Vaishnavas. Besides religious ceremonies, they perform rituals that are not strictly religious. In the Assam-Bangladesh border, Vaishnavite cultures are honored, and the Rajbongshis, though primarily animists, also follow Hinduism. A few people are followers of Christianity. An interesting fact about the people living in the borderlands is their peculiar religious assimilation. Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims have incorporated various elements from each other's religious practices. For example, in the Dargah of Muslim saints, elements of the Vaishnava tradition, such as 'Chandra tap,' are found, and villagers of different religions worship various images like big trees as gods of shelter, bamboo as the god of creativity, and soil as the god of fertility. Both Hindus and Muslims venerate the tombs of certain pirs (Muslim saints). People often spoke of how they felt they were at the margins of mainstream Bengali, with their rustic-sounding names and rural occupations, sharing more in common with each other than with those who, on either side of the border, at the regional or national level, represented what it meant to be Bengali (Eaton 310).

People in remote borderlands do not have formal schooling; they learn from their families and society. They use a common expression supported by their culture, an oral language called 'Desi bhasha,' enriched with common expressions of the borderlands. All communities share these expressions and live in a highly amalgamated cultural environment, developing a new vocabulary suited to their needs.

The food habits of people in any place are largely determined by the soil, vegetation, and climate. The nature of a society and culture is reflected in its food habits. In the Indo-Bangla borderlands, rice is the main food crop, along with wheat, oil seeds, potatoes, vegetables, sugarcane, and tobacco. Their cooking techniques differ from those of city dwellers, with traditional folk and domestic cooking

on both sides being almost similar, though tribal tastes are a bit different. Boiled rice with fish curry and vegetables is a popular daily food. Small ethnic groups love to drink wine, which is sacred and important for their religious occasions, forming an inseparable part of their worship. This similarity in food habits has fostered a bond among them.

The dress and ornaments worn by border people express their identity. Most of their clothing and ornaments are self-designed, mainly using cotton. While men's clothing has little variety, women's dresses are distinct in appearance. The dress patterns and styles of people on both sides of the border are almost identical, with fabrics made by handloom. They use the same materials for ornaments, deeply connected to the culture of the neighborhood.

Conclusion

Despite the legal frameworks that the two countries aim to follow strictly, the people living in the borderlands have created a friendly atmosphere by sharing many cultural and social aspects. Ethnicity, a common feature among people living in these border areas, is of significant importance to them. The customs, habits, beliefs, and other cultural aspects of border people, whether in mono-ethnic or poly-ethnic societies, always transcend boundaries. The socio-economic change of borderland people is now a pressing need, demanding attention and action to improve their living conditions and opportunities for advancement.

Works Cited

Ranjan, A. *India-Bangladesh Border Disputes: History and Post-LBA Dynamics*. Springer, 2018

Cf. J. R. V. Prescott. *Political Frontiers and Boundaries*. Unwin Hyman. 1987.

Schendel, Willem Van. *The Bengal Borderland Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. Anthem Press, 2004.

The Pakistan Observer: 21 February, 1959

Eaton, R. M. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, University of California Press, 1993.