

# CHANGING THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF BORDER STUDIES: A POLITICO-GEOGRAPHICAL INVESTIGATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Border studies are fundamental to the discipline of political geography. With the advent of globalisation, spatial processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation have gained significance. There has been a substantial change in theoretical underpinnings pertaining to border studies. Initially boundary study was descriptive in nature and focused merely on the study of its history and location. The approach has transformed with the growing importance of the function of the boundaries. Its significance was appreciated in the form of circulation in the frontier region which resulted in the shift of focus from boundary studies to border studies. With the advent of post-modernism as the dominant paradigm, the discipline of social sciences is also witnessing 'cultural turn'. Earlier border studies were preoccupied merely with the question of 'where' of borders. The significant shift in the terrain of mode of interrogation is apparent with the focus on 'why' for borders.*

**Keywords:** Abstract Territoriality, Check Points, Concrete Territoriality, Cultural Turn, Mental Map, Othering, Social Bordering.

## INTRODUCTION

Boundaries, the lines that enclose state territories, have constituted a major theme in the study of political geography. Boundary is the effect of territoriality. The process of boundary formation is accompanied by the sense of territoriality for a place or territory. Historicity suggests that boundaries are never static and permanent rather it changes and adapts to the changing conditions. Boundaries are in fact largely explained in the terms of political realities existing at particular time and space. A political reality associates itself with concepts such as power and sovereignty. It has been considered that power shifts never express at the same place again. A boundary is the most palpable political geographical phenomena and hence is most worked upon and taken up for the study by the political geographers.

## FROM STATIC TO FLUID UNDERSTANDING OF BOUNDARIES

Initially, boundary study focused on the study of its history and location. This was too descriptive in nature. The approach transformed, acknowledging the importance of the function of the boundaries and the significance of circulation in the frontier region. It was acknowledged that boundaries are not just lines on the map and is rooted physically but it also

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facilitates functions (economic, socio-political, cultural etc.) which are very important for the viability of the boundaries. During the early 1960's, the field of border studies was pre-dominantly focused on the study of the demarcation of the boundaries, the lines. But, the field of boundaries and border studies has arguably shifted from boundary studies to border studies. The attention has moved away from the study of territorial line to the border, now the phenomenon is considered as a verb signifying an unstoppable process of *B/ordering*.

To understand the concept further it is pertinent to highlight the fact that there are several boundaries other than the political one. Borderland witnesses several boundary functions and circulations which accentuates political boundaries, geographical boundaries, demographic boundaries, cultural boundaries, and economic boundaries. For instance, demographic boundary between Indo-Bangladesh extends beyond the geographical boundary, similarly the situation can be much more complex when political boundary does not respect the geographical boundary of the area, this often give rise to border disputes like in the case of India and Pakistan. European Union is example where economic boundaries extend and encompasses all other boundaries in Europe. There has been growing realisation that there is significant differences and similarity between the socio-political communities that a boundary divides. Cultural landscape approach is also applied to understand the processes better.

## MAJOR STUDIES PERTAINING TO BOUNDARIES

One of the earliest systematic studies of boundaries is to be found in *Semple's* (1911) famous work, *'Influences of Geographical Environment'* in her chapter on "Geographical Boundaries". She postulated that "*nature abhors fixed boundary lines*". Boundaries are never in equilibrium and are always fluctuating and the frontier, that is, the uninhabited area between two civilisation forms the best scientific boundaries which are prior partitioned and protected. The dynamic view of boundaries is not as of artificial lines but as variable zones, and always under pressure from the cultural and physical environment. This was in close accordance with Ratzel's "*Organismic Theory of State*". She developed the very idea advocated by Ratzel (*Mingi, 1963*).

Much of the boundary studies have been written during the period of First and the Second World War and its aftermath. These studies were largely utilitarian in character. The researches were busy in analysing 'goodness' and 'badness' of a boundary for the military purposes. These were part of the search for the causes of friction between the nation and for finding means of avoiding the worse. The post-war bordering initiatives and manoeuvres led to unprecedented growth in border related studies. The restructuring of post-colonial world of Asia, Europe, Latin America and Africa saw emergence of new boundaries and dissolution of the other. During the dissolution of colonial boundaries and onset of the Cold War, boundary studies further gained significance. The delineation and formation of boundaries for the new post-war countries required in-depth and multifaceted study of processes and phenomenon of the region; this also enhanced the scope of border studies.

During the classical era of border studies, "*Where*" of borders was focused upon. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the study involved questions such as, *where* is the border located, *how* did it come about, evolve, change over time or became the topic of (military) disputes and *what* are the consequences of its (change in) location.

Scholars believed anti-structural borders as bad borders. These do not correspond to the physical condition of the earth surface or to the distributional patterns of the socio-cultural areas. They do not have a true frontier where the state borders can act both as a bridge and a filter, protecting the state organisation at the same time that it allows inter-state interaction trade to flourish. Typical of such borders are those established after wars by victorious powers. These bad borders, having violated the natural laws of border-formation would be the source of instability and conflict in future in Maul's opinion (*Houtum, 2005*).

The classical era started with Friedrich Ratzel and his view of the borders of nation states. If Ratzel is compelled to be considered as the father of modern political geography of borders, then the scope and ambit of border studies shrinks. This misconception is heavily criticised by John Agnew who called it as "*territorial trap of the state*". Needless to say there were existence of borders and political boundaries before the advent of nation- states and each had some stories attached to it. There are memoirs and monographs written on the validity and significance of these boundaries. In the meantime, the discipline and approach of political geography in general and border study in particular has evolved and developed. Now the focus is given on the question pertaining to "*How*" of borders. Though the study pertaining to "How" of borders are majorly taken up by the other disciplines not pertaining to political geography but still political geography is catching up in the academic race. One of the key merits of past few decades is the widening of epistemology and ontology of borders (*Houtum, 2005*).

## BORDERING: A DAY TO DAY ATTEMPT

In past few decades, discipline of geopolitics and political geography has turned focused from boundaries as the political limits of the states, to borders as the socio-territorial constructs. The interest for the studies of border, in the meaning of the construction and the representation of difference, could be considered as the off-spring of the post-modern turn in the social sciences. Questions such as, *how* borders are made in terms of symbol, signs, identifications, representations, performance and stories have become of paramount interest. There are two important things, "*Mental Map*" and "*Check Points*" which are considered important for the borders to function and to maintain its viability (Migdal, 2004). Mental map is basically the shared history and geographical experiences of a community, accentuating the feeling of oneness. Narratives and stories play a dominant role in its formation. For example; partition of India and Pakistan had left many stories which are fiction as well as non-fiction. Such narration of the past impinges on our minds and strengthens the *Mental Map* making Indo- Pakistan border harder. *Check Points* can be actual as well as virtual. Actual check-points are in the form of passport and visa check points and virtual is the *otherness* induced by the language ascent, dressing, and food of a particular community.

Such epistemological awakening has changed scope of whole discipline of border studies. Post-modern turn is accompanied by the philosophy of post-structuralism in which major contributions have been made by Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, Guattari and a horde of French thinkers "*where they decode and deconstruct the day to day attempts of bordering where X tries to border or territorialise Y*" (Houtum, 2005). State acts as a bordering agent for the citizenry. Various policies and local laws make people of the respective area feel the functioning of exclusion and inclusion.

The border study cannot be separated from identity and territorial questions. Unlike early morphological border studies, nowadays much engagement is taking place between students of nationalism and territoriality and those who study borders. Nationalism always involves a struggle for land, or an assertion about the right to land. In the primordialist tradition of nationalism, the concept of "*homeland*" was the central focus. The geographic outcome of national conflicts is often new borders, new borderlands and new relations between bordering neighbours. A starting point for border studies therefore should be analysis of identity formation and change, with territorial dimension as the central theme. Rather following the primordialist tradition of equating national identity to a specific piece of land based on a historical claim, we ought to see borders as the social construction of recent origin and therefore place the study of borders into the World-System tradition of political geography.

The important development of subsequent century is the unstoppable attempt to convert boundary zones and frontiers to smoothen and straighten boundaries so that the problem of overlapping sovereignty comes to an end. The medieval to modern concept of boundary is bound with the rise of Nation-States. People in the medieval age were known for changing alliances and loyalty. Rise of the nation-states was preceded by the rise of national consciousness that came as a consequence to the advent of scientific revolution and technical innovations making the 'simultaneity of experience as a collective' possible. This accentuated the end of Dark Age in Europe and advent of the Renaissance. Collectivism was replaced by individuality. As the Nation-State emerged, the old concept of boundary had to be changed.

Post-colonial boundary formation in the continent of Africa by the European colonisers was the most pathetic and deplorable attempt on their part. These were geometric boundaries (non-representational) carved out on African landscape. These borders did not respect the geographical realities of the region. The divided cultural areas of Africa present continent-wide problem. Many national politicians would regard attempts to unite culture areas as pandering to tribalism and as being diametrically opposed to their central task of nation building. Simple new-line solutions are not always possible as people are often inter-mingled and spread and scattered geographically. And if a central government arrive at the decision to evolve a new line or boundary, they are in fear of negating their sovereignty and projection of their weakness (Griffith, 1986). The recent balkanisation of Sudan into two countries can reveal the realities persisting in these areas. North Sudan is ethnically different than the South Sudan. There were continuous incidents of ethnic violence in Sudan for a decade or so. Geometrical boundaries also make resource viability of this region complex. While demarcating boundaries in Africa, natural ecosystems were not taken care off and were arbitrarily divided. Consequently resource politics in this region has gained currency ranging from hydro-politics to mineral politics.

Boundaries are very much related to the idea of nationality. Ideas about boundaries vary in space and time, and reflect differences in national goals and objectives. The French (who possess somewhat geographically well-defined territory)

were pleading in favour of natural laws to be the basis of national boundaries, but the Germans, who were not fortunate in this respect, when faced with the task of creating a unified Germany, pleaded in favour of the concept of boundary on the basis of folk and nationality. Many German philosophers like Fichte believed that common language and culture constituted a natural law, higher than that of rivers and mountains (*Dixit, 1987*). The principle of self-determination on the basis of linguistic nationality, established at Paris in 1919, became the guiding principle for fixing boundaries not only for the post-First-World War Europe, but worldwide.

Border studies have traversed from the old inquiries to the new one. During the Cold War and immediately after its end, border research focused on sharpest lines which were highly militarised. These zones were mostly in East Asia, between Israel-Palestine or South-African fences with Zimbabwe. The focus is now shifting towards new fences which are being made in the present world order. For instance US-Mexican border, where there are new issues which are coming up and which needs a thorough attention. Research requires scrutiny of zones pertaining to maritime boundary issues developing between European Union and Africa, Arabia and Horn of Africa, new issues like 'Global Apartheid' of the EU's external border regime. European scholars express these phenomena as "*gating of EU space*". European Union though boasts itself to be the epitome of liberal society and democracy and acclaims itself to be much better than the American standards. But from the vantage point of immigrants seeking economic appraisal and rehabilitation, discrimination is rampant. The external borders of EU have stringent checkpoints where biometric analysis is used to segregate the one who are considered as others. It can be said though EU internal boundaries are fading away but the external boundaries are becoming much more sharp and impregnable (*Sideway, 2001*).

### **BORDER STUDIES: A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH**

Other trends in border studies are now in favour of inclusion of various methods so as to give colours to this field of study. Methods like ethnography, photography, archival analysis, local histories are included. Basically mixed method is being developed to get a better picture of the area or the borderland in question. For several decades, there is academic anxiety regarding whether to carry on with "Case Study" approach for the study of borders or to situate these border peculiarities in broader and structured politico-geographical theory and discourses. Nowadays "Case Study" method is considered to be below standard in academic pursuits. It is considered to be very descriptive lacking explanation and insight. Further it is thought that what the use of case study, when it cannot arrive at certain generalisations. Due to the intrusion of cultural studies and other social sciences in the border studies the field is been re-energised. More multi-disciplinary the border studies will become, more it will turn towards situating itself in the wider politico- theoretical framework.

Border study in the current dynamic world of flows and networking has to be related with issues pertaining to changing spectrum of sovereignty. Social bordering has now gained enough attention in the academia. This is very interesting field of study where day to day human constructions are being analysed. Such bordering can range from studying symbols used in demonstrations to the government statistics about displaced communities. A temple in the middle of a village or in that case a church or masjid can infuse the feeling of otherness to some people who do not belong to that community. A skeleton symbol with red background can alert one to not enter into that vicinity. Religious rituals can accentuate the process of '*Othering*' and consequently bordering in the society. Nuances in dressing can lead to this process. The tradition of 'Hijab' and 'Burqa' worn by Muslim women, the turban worn by Sikh community, saffron attire worn by Hindu men, all differences creates a type of *boundedness*. Statistics as the science of State has played havoc in the societies. Statistics of human beings enumerate borders. For instance, census in India was adopted by the Britishers so as to divide Indian masses. It was considered to be the most important tool for this purpose. Still today, numbers are being played upon by the politicians to garner support of a particular community in the election but eventually creating a social separation within the community.

### **CONCLUSION**

Borders are the product of interaction between concrete territoriality and abstract territoriality. Initially the border studies largely focused on the study of concrete aspects of borders but after 'cultural turn' in social sciences, abstract aspects of borders are rigorously worked upon. Border is no longer the boundaries of nation-state to be guarded by the standing armies. It is ubiquitous. To fend off the threat to the borders, the State deploys the surveillance system from micro to macro-level, thereby hardening the State's control over the populace. The State no longer governs through the might of the static armies, rather it has developed the pool of dynamic resources to guard, erect and erase borders within its territoriality at its will. The emergence of Benthamite Panopticon has become reality. The concrete and abstract couldn't have better handshake than in the realm of political geography.

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