

Boundaries and Frontiers in South Asian History

Concept Note

In recent years the concept of boundaries and frontiers has been at the centre of many debates and researches. Anthropology, History, Political Science, Economics, Social Psychology and Sociology are some of the disciplines, which deal with the idea in a more direct sense. The idea is indeed very relevant to the study of relational processes of change. At various socio-political or mental locations, individuals and institutions are in an endless process of interaction which entails developments in boundaries and frontiers.

Historical writings on South Asia have celebrated boundaries and frontiers. Geographers have pointed out that frontiers characterized the pre-modern world. Frontiers have been replaced by boundaries in the modern world. While frontiers were connected with the notions of something unknown and imaginary, boundaries were well-defined and were based on the assumption of similar political/social/cultural entities. Many historical writings on South Asia have not been sensitive to this important distinction between boundaries and frontiers. Kingdoms, religious bodies, Varna-jati structures and regional groups have drawn the attention of the scholars as entities having well-defined boundaries. Similarly the idea of literary traditions and production of books with attendant notion of author and authority have led to the production of 'critical editions' of pre-modern texts like the Mahabharata. Such an idea of the construction of bound entities has been additionally applied to notions of construction of 'Self' and the 'Other' in History; when one talks about the 'other' the connotation differs at different points of time. In pre-modern times, there were many 'others' where race, ethnicity, lineage were the major determinants. In ancient Indian conception, truth and moralities decline in successive era, and one of the main symptoms of Kali age degeneracy was the growing strength of foreign dynasties. Therefore, the Puranas reflect the anxieties of Brahmana composers in the period between 2nd century BC to 3rd century AD when numerous people entered India from Northwest and which was also the period when Buddhism flourished. For the composers they were the 'other'. Aloka Parasher's *Mlecchas in Early India: A study in Attitudes Towards Foreigners* and Romila Thapar's 'The Image of Barbarians in Early India' in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* are examples of such assertions. On the other hand, a Vilasa grant; a copper plate grant written in Sanskrit issued between 1325 to 1350 by Proyaya Nayak, a Kakatiya chief of the fourteenth century Andhra echoes fear of loss of status of the Brahmanas. This time the 'others' were Turks as cited in Cynthia Talbot's 'Inscribing the Other, inscribing the Self: Hindu –Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India'. In modern times this phenomenon is often understood in terms of religion especially in South Asia.

Physical boundaries and frontiers, in the context of countries, states, cities, towns, villages or households are probably the most obvious and easy to grasp, but they all put together would probably not make even half of the beliefs which exist at the psychological, socio-cultural or symbolic levels. Often the invisible boundaries and frontiers fight the visible ones and

individuals as individuals or groups believe that their idea of fixation of a certain boundary or frontier is the right one. Any agency that rejects their idea is looked upon as a potential threat and war is on. Like the boundaries which exist only in minds the wars too are sometimes only at an intellectual level to begin with but they have the lethal potential to grow and envelop a lot of others who were not even vaguely involved with the idea to begin with. The invisible, unenforceable and may be undesirable boundaries and frontiers can cause substantial chaos in the declared and known realms of the same. Some of these arbitrary mental constructs start eroding the established limits of space. This transition at times begins with simple propaganda of redefinition and gradually a public opinion is formed which then itself becomes a force to carry through the change. Alternately, if another individual/individuals or group/groups feel threatened by this change, a similar process is unleashed for the retention of earlier constructs. The sense of identity and security of most people is dependent on a sense of clean and secure boundaries and frontiers; be they territorial jurisdictions or mental spaces. However the paradox is that some others may achieve the same kind of identification and security if changes occur. Borders and frontiers operate both in public and private spaces and therefore it is no wonder that while nations fight expensive wars for frontier claims, individuals kill each other for the same in a different space. Sometimes internal agencies get into a conflict with their own governments for demands over boundaries and frontiers.

Historians' preoccupation with the idea of boundaries has translated into invisibly crossing, questioning and redefining of frontiers and boundaries. What seems likely is that like political frontiers pre-modern structures too were fuzzy and porous. When Barani was talking about Turkish blue-blood he was restricting and creating a boundary the circumference of which was much more limited and narrow. According to Norman P. Ziegler in "Some notes on Rajput loyalties during the Mughal Period" (in J.F.Richards, *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*) several centuries later, when Rajput nobility integrated into the Mughal administration, it led to a comparable recognition of Muslim elite as subset of Rajputs. A productive field of enquiry could be the transcendence of religious boundaries by communities and individuals belonging to the Buddhists, Jains, Brahmins and Islamic traditions. Such an enquiry need not be a study of short term creations of anti-structures and limitations, but an attempt to recover arguments invoked to interpret competing traditions. These interpretations became the bridges for crossing over to new worlds of ideas and actions. So, the emergence of the Mahayana tradition in Buddhism, Shrivaisnava Bhakti in Hinduism or the Sufi traditions needs to be understood as crossing the boundaries of earlier traditions. Proponents of the 'Segmentary state' model have been talking about fudgy boundaries of kingdoms. It should direct us to reexamine the idea of boundaries of kingdoms and regions. In the South Asian tradition notions of authorship need to be examined. Scholars have pointed to the fluidity in the structures of texts like the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Production of the written text did not stop oral traditions from experimenting with the story line. So the boundaries of texts were continuously and variously redrawn. For instance, culture transcends a boundary and moves beyond it. It has its own demarcation. When Mulla Daud wrote *Chandayan*, he assimilated three literary traditions, Persian, Sanskrit and

Awadhi. In the process, through his cultural setting, he pushed the boundary further where three cultural zones were combined into one. Enquiry into the idea of authorship and production of books could give us useful insights into history.

The theme of the seminar is about the creation of boundaries and frontiers, more importantly, their making and breaking. The present seminar attempts to study the various facets in which the term 'boundaries and frontiers' could be perceived – anthropological, ethnic, psychological, cultural and literary. The contrast between traditional and modern concepts of frontiers and boundaries is also to be highlighted.

Presentations can be made on the following themes:

1. Making/breaking of Socio-Cultural boundaries
2. History of physical boundaries and frontiers
3. Regions and boundaries
4. State formation and the idea of boundaries and frontiers
5. The idea of boundaries in mystic and spiritual contexts
6. The play of boundaries and frontiers in economic history