

(Draft Paper)

Borderland Geographies of the Sikkim Himalaya

Uttam Lal

ulal@cus.ac.in

(Abstract)

The Himalayan borderlands have been distinct in its physical and socio-economic attributes. This landscape of dramatic diversity have been a channel of trans-ecological flows and exchanges. Thus, witnessing rhythmic but considerable footfall across the frosty heights. Consequently, it transformed the fragile mountain ecosystem and its wilderness into an area of humane-wilderness rather than an absolute wildscape. Such places of wilderness have been significant but frequented and interfered at the same time in the era of modern nation-state. Despite this, the Himalayan borderland geographies have been relatively less understood. The borderlands have had markers both tangible and intangible cultural signs. As people moved across valleys and ridges, they transmitted various signs attributed to their socio-cultural traits. With the changing geo-political realities of the recent decades, such signs often got either transformed or got reduced to mere symbolism. The geo-political changes made the Himalayan region sensitive because of the presence of international borders in the region; it altered how people moved and who moved. Accordingly, the narratives around various signs has been gradually shifting in the Himalayan borderland.

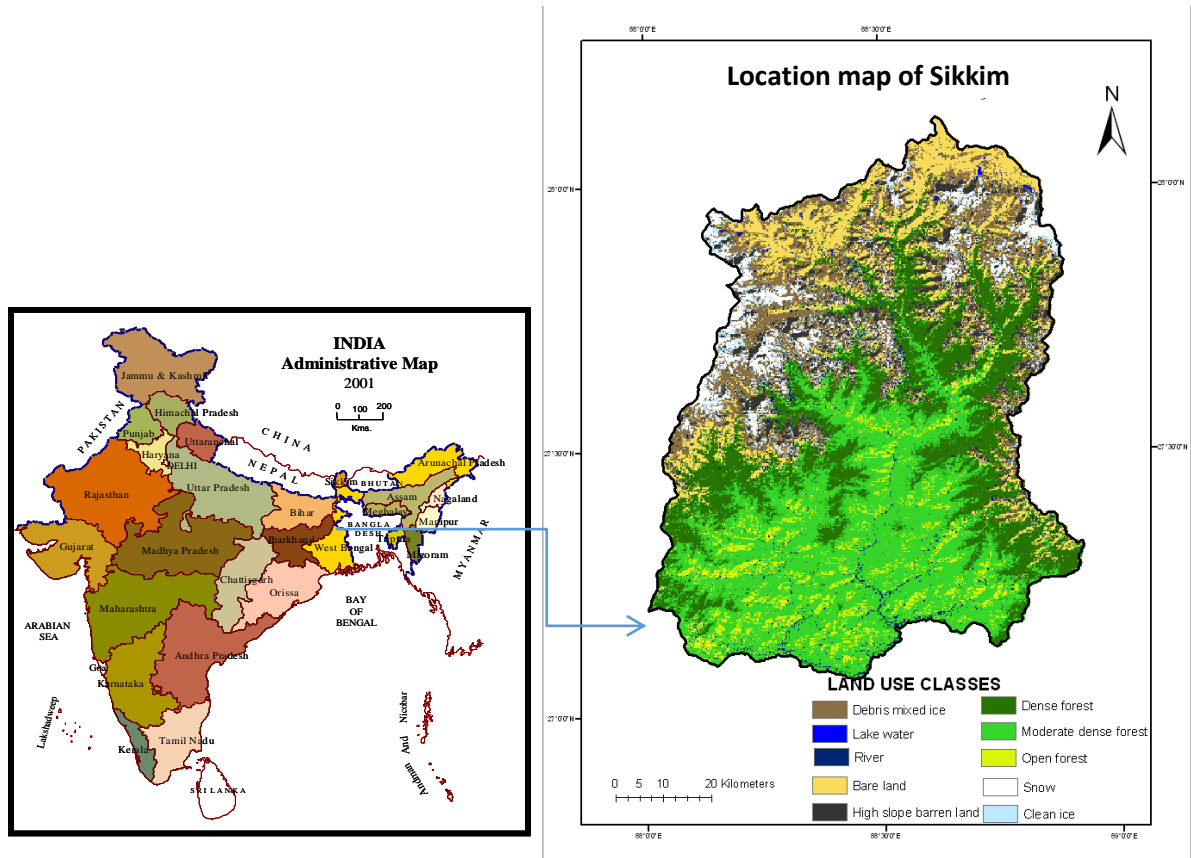
This paper is set in Sikkim which is a part of Indian section of the Eastern Himalayas. As departure from often the unidimensional perspective of security, it treats borderlands as homeland and probes various signs of the society in their space-relation through the cartographic readjustments. Accordingly, it incorporates participant observation as well as snow-ball sampling for in-depth interviews conducted in the region.

“In trans-border relations, there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies or even permanent borders. There are only permanent interests and everything should be done to secure these interests.” — Chanakya

Introduction

On my way down to bagdogra airport in West Bengal from Gangtok, I boarded a shared cab for a 124kilometers drive to the airport where I ran into a young couple from Delhi; as they requested me to swap our seats we began talking. The couple confessed that they

had a very stereotypical image of the borders and the Himalayan state. They said they were pleasantly surprised to reach the zero point on the borders, seeKupup and Gnathang villages and Sherathang market near the Indo-china border. The couple said they were impressed with the traffic sense of the people and their dressing (fashion) acumen which according to them were better than Delhi. They confessed that they had a very stereotypical image of the border areas before they visited Sikkim in general and nathula pass in particular.



Looking at the borderlands from afar people often construct a unidimensional perspective such as spaces near borders with supreme concerns of sovereignty for countries which share the border. However, the truth is borders are merely imaginary cartographic lines which are represented on land either with mutual agreement of the parties involved or unilaterally by a dominant side. Thus, borderlands are frequently viewed as spaces with restricted accessibility, barbed wire, no-nonsense meaning hardy armed forces and military equipment's, camps and their posts. However, long before these spaces become axis of competing and colliding sovereign claims, these have been places of cross-cultural currents, conduits of economic exchanges, ecological corridors and home to the highlanders. Thus, the Himalayan highlands have been the homelands too where

communities resided for centuries. Therefore, the borderlands comprise of farmland, pastures, villages, towns, trails to and across non-inhabited places as well as sacred landscapes.

Various issues pertaining to the Borderland geographies emanate from cartographic anxieties and associated consciousness or ignorance and thereby cartographic claims and counter claims.

Cartographic adjustments:

With our smart devices such as phones, camera with geotagging, watches with GPS, not only maps are there in hands of everyone but also have ability to generate near accurate personalized maps. It has transformed how we see and understand people places and their perspectives. However, can it be applied to borders and border areas?

The imaginary cartographic line 'Borders' have traditionally been visualized either to fence-in or fence out people. While in reality, borders could rarely be summed as a cartographic line which is depicted on the ground by barbed wires, walls etc. It has instead been discussed as border areas rather than a mere line. In that, any border area always has an environmental make-up, social, cultural and economic set-up as well as political nuances to it. Consequently, what is border areas or borderland are in fact the places where people lived. As borderland has also been the homeland, it has not only their own geography but also its own share of human history and present. In broad-spectrum, borderland histories suggest there have always been space-relations between and across such areas, where social institutions shaped connectivity. Thereby being the formal conduits of cross-border exchanges. For a nuanced understanding of a place, it is tenable and desirable to comprehend it as a "landscape of the people", rather than simply as "people's landscape" (Heijgen 2013).

Democracy in the Himalayan Borderland

Even though democracy doesn't belong to certain geographies only cartographic consciousness runs deeper; pronounced elements of nature seem to influence/gear people of ecologically fragile areas such as in mountain ecosystems to remain more as tolerant societies and accord dignity to 'others' as well. Bestowing respect to 'others' means being open to accommodate the 'others'. Interdependence and trusting others naturally lead to accepting others' identities. Isn't accommodating 'other' is one of the fundamental traits of democracy? While democracy tends to be more accommodative of the 'other' and accord respect for their being, a non-democratic setup tends to homogenize and segregate more often by pronouncing 'the other'. Mountains essentially nurture ecological diversities with myriad ethnic societies. Such societies have a different level of connectedness through valleys despite their range of diversity. Himalayan Rivers being the trans-ecological entities serve as the conduits of

transmitting ideas and institutions, thereby bringing societies together across valleys through different ecologies.

Likewise, the rest of the Himalayas, in Sikkim society had to brave arduous living conditions and traditionally had to survive with relatively smaller carrying capacity; such areas, consequently, forged trans-ecological space-relation as means of adaptive response. Ascertaining geography may require greater interdependence than others because of being more ecologically tenuous, hence, it is more taxing in terms of adapting themselves. Communities in such geographies may appear to be spatially secluded, socio-economically segregated, and rather self-sufficient on the surface, they largely remain friendly (read open) to contact from outside. It is the cornerstone of democracy is to remain open and accommodate 'the other'. In other words, finding space for minorities, digressing opinions, etc. is inherent in a democratic setup. Thus, most democracies seem comfortable in comprehending their diversity and governing it.

However, the more diversity, the more are the dimensions of security issues that a democratic society needs to negotiate. In the context of the Indian Himalayas, insecurity from being over-flooded by outsiders and rather limited economic benefit being diluted by opening state borders for the rest of Indians runs deeper in some of the states. While it opens up a debate of differential citizenship within the same nation. It also brings one face to face to the diverse terrain of (un)equal development overseen by governments so far. In a state like Sikkim, it may appear paradoxical to some that while the feeling of being Sikkimese and Indian* (read non-Sikkimese) are rather commonplace, there is a strong undercurrent of Nationalism as well. The strong nationalism runs through the state because of the perceived and now kind-of-real threat of the Chinese expansionist state. A section of the citizen sees the threat of losing their freedom, land, property if Chinese venture into Sikkim. So the dual threat is at play in state's politics; one- real threat of being outnumbered if too many people venture into the state from the rest part of India, two- if the expansionist nation takes over the state.

In light of the above, one might wonder how to gauge democracy in the Himalayas. As Himalayan states are part of the Indian Union, procedural democracy cannot be any different from the rest part of the country. However, substantive democracy does present a different sight. While Women politicians are less despite the Himalayas being perceived relatively more egalitarian. There has been a general lack of national-level academics and other institutions. It in a way influenced the fine-tuning of democracy in the area.

Religion in the Borderland:

Buddhism and Christianity both connect the area with the outside, while Hinduism looked at the region from within and outside both. Christianity exposed the regions to western values of equality & dignity of work since the days of early missionaries in the area. Thereby making people more aware of power centers and instilling a kind of confidence to approach those institutions with the newer education system it imparted. Whereas Buddhism helped in being open to space-relation and forging egalitarian values. Buddhist monasteries functioned as numerous miniature democratic institutions. It is not only the missionaries, monks, and ascetics who were only moving through the Himalayas, with them the governance system and information of the institutions also got indirectly transmitted.

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