

Culture in the Border Regions of West Assam

A Study on India-Bangladesh Border

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Abstract: Border is a very clean and clear in outer glance for everywhere it is separated, but in inside it come across to afar from the imagination. Mind-status of any individual and of any accumulation is not very decisive to clear the word 'border', words fall apart to explain it, which defines it as a limit of across. On the other hand, from the time immemorial men have tried to co-exist with the geographical environment for their very essential necessities, like— food, dress and safe heaven. Indeed, the modern theory and idea of 'border' do not matter for them. In the same way, mass dwellers of the border lands are still unaware about the modern concepts about border and problems; mainly about the burning problem of migration, which is creating hazardous chaos in the whole world.

Keywords: India-Bangladesh Border, Culture in the Border Regions, West Assam.

1. INTRODUCTION

In many cases the political and cultural boundaries of a country and people does not neatly match. This fluidity of culture have led to a reunification, spread to the crossways of different political boundaries of any state or country borders, which is considered to hinder the free growth and development of the cultural group concern. The people inhabiting in the border areas display some unique cultural prototypes in their life styles. Though one particular community may differ from another in many terms, yet they share at least some common responses which originate from their participation in the same climate or geography. An Indian living in the border area of Bangladesh is intricately linked with a Bangladeshi living in the same border area. They may be seen as participants in the same culture, and this may be seen as an important factor while any assessment is to be done on the culture of such border areas. This means that the habits, customs, beliefs and other cultural aspects of the border societies always have crossed the boundaries set by political or geographical barriers. That beyond border bond of feelings attached with humanity, though it may not be the solution of the modern political issues, but may be a positive angle for discussion towards the burning problems.

1.1 The Field area for the Study:

The field areas for this paper is selected from the areas of the frontier districts of Assam of India, allied to the Assam-Bangladesh border are—Bongaigaon, Chidley, Chirang, Dhubri, Gouripur, Chatrasal, Goalpara, Dudhnoi, Krishnai, Dhupdhora as well as the places like New Jalpaiguri, Kochbihar from the West Bengal-Assam border. Birjhara, Dhaparbhita, Kukurkata from Assam- Meghalaya border also included in this field study.

1.2 Aims and Objectives:

The comparative phenomena of North-East India naturally demand for study on the border areas. Especially this border study will be a fruitful step—

- 1) To bring into focus on inter and intra socio-cultural thoughts of the bordering states of India and Bangladesh.
- 2) To explore the cross border sentiments of the ethnic inhabitants of the border and trace out an identifying link to them.
- 3) To detect a right track through which the inter-social conflict among the occupants of the border can be solved.

1.3 Methodology:

For investigating the actual fact and observing the daily life style of the bordering people have been used the suitable field methodologies. Like- observation, investigation, opinion collecting, use of questionnaires, evaluation, gathering and editing of data etc.

Comparative study has been followed to find out the pluralistic as well as unique identification of the feelings and sentiments of the people of the border. The findings have been put over on the virgin data and information's from the field, libraries, website and any other sources have to be accepted through proper experiment and evaluation by using the analytical methodology.

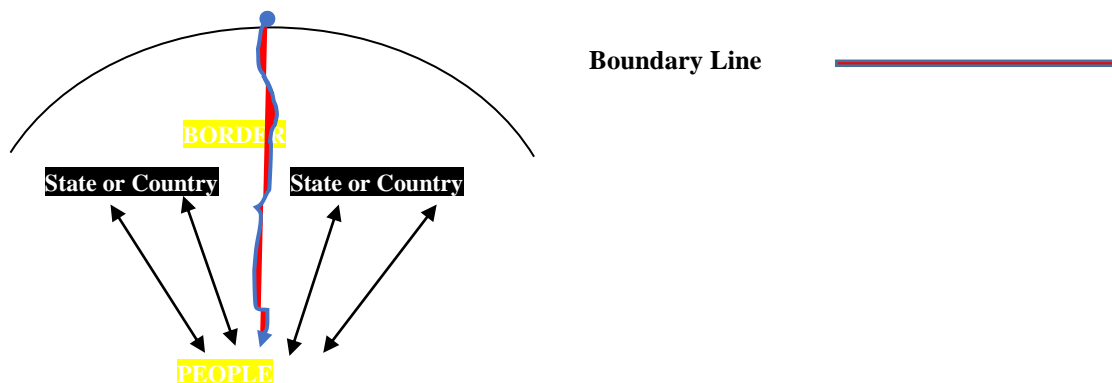
1.4 Review of Literature:

There is a large number of books on border studies as well as the critical studies on culture of India or world could be found in the Indian literature, but no cultural studies have been conducted on the proposed point of perspective of the border areas of Assam-Bangladesh, Assam-Meghalaya, Assam-West Bengal-Bhutan. On the other hand, there is a huge number of writings on the point of execution to be found, which emphasized on various angle of the Assam-West Bengal and Bangladesh bordering situation, but no any organised approach to be found in any book or other writings, where discussed about the recent burning problems and their mode of solution. As that desired point of view of the proposed subject is not yet been discussed anywhere, so it demands a serious study.

2. BORDER AND BORDERING PEOPLE OF ASSAM-BANGLADESH BORDER

Border, the term indicating the limits of social groups is as old as the human history. All languages have evolved such terms. These often refer to different ways of conceptualizing the contrast between “self” and “other”, so that translating them is full of pitfalls. Border, the term also has implied a conceptual difference. The precise location of borders, but it also has a more general meaning, pointing at the dividing line between different peoples or culture.¹ Common people of the borderlands have faced some unique social history. Their relationship with the regional elites and the two states that claimed the borderland largely determined the social dynamics that unfolded in the region.

The study of border itself is a vast fertile area for justification and it may be mushrooming vivid stunning atmosphere of discussion focus on the beyond border mentality of such people. Both sides of the border the states or countries culture unseemly mingled with each other—



2.1 Border to beyond border in Assam- Bangladesh Border:

Although the border appear on maps in unrepresentatively accurate forms, they reflect, at least initially, merely the mental images of politicians, lawyers, intellectuals and of course the common people also. Their practical consequences are often quite different. No matter how clearly borders are drawn on official maps, how many customs officials are appointed, or how many watchtowers are built, people will ignore borders whenever it suits them. In doing so, they always challenge the political status of the boundary, which are ultimate symbol. People also take advantage of borders in ways that are not intended or anticipated by their creators. Revolutionaries hide behind them, seeking the protection of sovereignty; local inhabitants cross them whenever services or products are cheaper or more attractive on the other side; and traders are quick to take advantage of price and tax differentials.

¹ Antony P. Cohen, ed., *Symbolizing Boundaries; Identity and Diversity in British Cultures* (Manchester University Press, 1986); Raimundo Strassoldo, “Boundaries in Sociological Theory. A Reassessment,” in *Cooperation and Conflict in Border Regions*, edited by R. Strassoldo and G. Delfi (Milan : Anggel, 1982), pp, 245-71.

The nature of the fundamental need, not only of food but also security of life, sensibility of human expression and even the problems of individual and society are almost the same in the both side of the border lands, which bind them with each other. This study examines the interface between the cultural and political identities of people living on the international border between India and Bangladesh while discussing how the micro-differences of ethnic and cultural identities are governed by the religion of the people living on both sides of border have been institutionalized by the state in manifesting its political identities.

3. REFLECTION OF THE MASS MIND IN THE FOLK CULTURE

The Northeast is a compact geographical unit and isolated from the rest of India, a slender and vulnerable corridor, the Siliguri Corridor flanked by alien territories. India and Bangladesh's, the both culture has encompassed the diversity of several socio-cultural groups. Like India the culture of the Bangladesh over the centuries has assimilated influences of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Islam. It is manifested in various forms, including music, dance and drama, art and crafts, folklores and folktales, languages and literature, philosophy and religion, festivals and celebrations and in a distinct cuisine and culinary tradition.

The place of settlement of considerably larger groups of human population was geographically determined by the border valleys throughout the world. In this paper emphasized on some vital point of folk life of that bordering people, in which have found various factors of assimilation at different points-

- 1) Daily Life and occupation
- 2) Religious belief
- 3) Folk speech
- 4) Food habit and folk cooking
- 5) Dress and ornament

3.1 Daily life and occupation:

Every person of the border trying to co-exist and adjust with nature and environments started at both sides of the boundary. In case of Assam and Bengal border which is pre-dominated by and saturated with border all aspects of life of man including individual, social, cultural, economic and political have been influenced by the border environment. Generally border areas are situated far away from the cities and other developing areas. The occupations of the border people are mostly agricultural, fishing, animal rearing among others. They have also concentrated on only one business, how to produce food and where to get a shade to live.



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Agriculture living life from 'Chatrasal', the Assam-Bangladesh Border of Dhuburi

These people of border villages are below poverty line, they live a very struggling daily life for food and shelter; each and every moment they are trying to go there where to get food for living. As shown in the above pictures, they have to cross the border under the protection of the Border Security Force for cultivation in the morning in between 7 A.M to 8 A.M. Such kind of permissible border crossing is perceived, but regularly unseen river ways of the Brahmaputra is open to all to cross the geographical as well as political boundaries.

Though, farming is a major source of their livelihood for the nearby rural population of the border, they also supplies fruits, vegetables and fishes to the urban places. Some sections of peoples from the rural and semi-rural society are

² The Assam-Bangladesh border from 'Chatrasal' of Dhuburi district

involved in small transportation business, running small shops and doing manual labour in construction. As the West area of Assam is nearer to the national and international border, various goods are also smuggled.



During the time of field study we have seen the common life of the border, there have no difference in the vital point of life struggle for food, dress and shed. They always carry out tremendous hard work from morning to midnight to earn for their living. All of them, either inside or outside border live in small huts. Life has no other meaning too hard work for food, they only know to work hard at uninteresting tasks and give birth to a multitude of children. Some pictures of their dwelling taken during the field visits are given below –



They simply live, have no education nor any high standard of living—they simply live for live sake. It was another area for research that we have found there some similar tune of expression related to food, sex and other emotions of fundamental needs in their folk literature. Not only in the snapped areas but in the other states of the bordering areas of Assam and Bengal we have found the same.

3.2 Religious Belief:

Religious belief is a strong belief on a supernatural power or powers that control human destiny.⁶ Such a state may relate to the existence, characteristics and worship of a deity or deities, divine intervention in the universe and human life, or values and practices centred on the teachings of a spiritual leader.



Murti-Puja (Worship of Statue)



Batchora



Guru-Ashan



Statue of Lord Krisna with Radha and other women

Another noteworthy instance could be seen in Bangaigaon, Dhuburi and Gowalpara; though, the Vaisnava’s have demanded that, they have no other ‘Guru’ and are true followers of the great Sankardeva, but various receptions of the great Chaitanyadeva’s beliefs and culture could be seen there.

³ Soil-art of Asharikandi of Dhuburi district

⁴ Koch Rajbabsi woman in fishing from Boitamari

⁵ From the field investigation sight from Bhutan-Chirang border

⁶ Religious belief. Dictionary.com. WordNet@ 3.0. Princeton University. November 08, 2011

⁷ Worship of Statue Photo from Mahamaya mandir dham, Way to Bangaigaon to Dhuburi, Kokrajhar district

⁸ ‘Amguri Madhavdev Sattrā’ Baitamari, Bangaigaon.

Both the Assamese and the Bengali Vaisnavite cultures are honoured there. In this Sattrā the Vaisnava followers settled 'Guru Ashan' of the great Sankardeva culture and the sculpture of the Lord Krishna with Radha and other women as a symbol of love, which is also recognised in the Vaisnavite philosophy of Bengal.

'Sri Sri Dham Ramarai kuthi' of "Sattrasāl", which situated in the border line of Assam-Bangladesh border. The Rajbongshis are the major part of the population area of study. We have found there, the Rajbongshis were primarily animist, but later on they followed Hinduism/Sanatana (both Shaiva and Vaishnavite). A few section of Rajbongshi's are followers of Christianity, both Roman Catholic and protestant.

On the other hand Muslims and the Sikhs also dwell there. They, are trying to intermingle there life hood with one another peacefully. Either consciously or not, we could not define that, but the people of the border areas have considered a peculiar assimilation in their religion. The Sikhs, the Hindus and of course the Muslims have received various elements from each other in their beliefs, ideas, customs and behaviour. Some unique characteristics in the religious places - temples, mosques and gurudwaras could be seen. We went to the 'Panch-Peer- Dargah', of great Muslim saints; where we have seen 'Chandratap' which used in the Vaisnava tradition; adaptation of Mughal structural design could be seen in the 'Namghar' of the Madhupur Sattrā of Kochbihar. Exceptional assimilation of religious thinking in the border inhabitants was observable. It is generally seen that, though there are no separate feelings among the people but during unrest instigated by the evil inspiration, they forgot about any kind of incorporation.

On the other hand, most of the villagers of the border areas also believed in a variety of religious faiths and they put into practice of worship to the number of additional images as gods -Big Trees (as the God of Shelter), Bamboo (Bānsh-puja, as the God of_ crativity), Soil ('Hudumdeou' as God of Fertility) etc.

3. 3 Folk Speech:

No one learns his native language in any formal school.⁹ He or she learns by kind of linguistic understanding of expressions and language patterns from his family, his friends and associates, who, in turn, are circumstanced by their own cultural environment. Sometimes it is called oral language, a term that is indefinite with vocal language. It was found in the districts of Bangaigaon, Dhuburi, Goalpara, Kokrajar, Chidly, Chirang use a common language, it could be said as a vernacular of Assamese, but it should be mentioned that it has been enriched by the border state and country. They have used one common language recognized by themselves as lingua franca, the 'Deshi bhasa' ; which one is enriched by the some common expression with the language type of border districts of West Bengal also; it may be similar in word and pronunciation but different in task and articulation . Like,

English—	<u>I don't eat</u>	<u>You don't go</u>
Deshi Lanuage—	Mui NaKham	tui Najabi
Koch Rajbanshi Language —	Mui Khamu na	tui Jabi na ¹⁰

In this way all the belonging communities of west Assam mutually share their expressions with words of harmony and they lived in amalgamation of culture, which may be recognised in near future as new vocabulary of people dwelling in the borderlands. No doubt it is another aspect of research and must be established through proper research with proper methodology.

3. 4 Food Habits and Folk Cooking:

Food of man, as of any place, is largely influenced by its climate, soil and vegetation. And of course the habit of food also reflects the nature of society and culture. It was found that rice is the principal food crop in the bordering region. But other food crops are also very important in their daily food menu, these are— oil seeds, wheat, barley, tobacco, sugarcane, potatoes and other vegetables etc., so all of these food crops are also cultivated in the bordering areas. Folk cooking is another point of attraction, which can be voluntarily defined as traditional domestic cooking marked by regional tradition. The study of folk cooking includes the study of the foods, their morphology, their preparation, their preservation, their use in social and Rice and fish are the traditional favourites for the border people of different race or communities, like - Koch Rajbanshis from both Bengali to Assamese, Bodos, Rabhas and others. Boiled rice constitutes the staple food, served with

⁹ 'Folk Speech', W. Edson Richmond, FOLK LORE AND FOLK LIFE, an Introduction, Richard M Dorson (ed), The University of Chikago Press, Chikago and London, 1972, p-145

¹⁰ Source Person : Ambikacharan Choudhuri, Retired Principal, Bangaigaon Higher Secondary, Age- 82, Bangaigaon

variety of vegetables is a popular and daily habit of the border people from the both side of the border areas of Assam-Bengal and Bangladesh.

On the other hand, tribes like the Bodos and the Rabhas, which are the border dweller of the border of Assam, prepare a kind wine from rice. Not only in Assam, but also in Bhutan we have found the same kind of wine which is prepared through the same process with same preparing process, which is also prepared from rice.¹¹ All the ethnic tribal groups of the borders use a kind of homemade wine for their daily use. They prepare such wine through fermentation of rice and some medicinal leaves. The preparing method of such kind of considerable wine are almost the same with little variations in the use of raw materials. All of them consider the home made wine as sacred and important for their religious occasion and they use it to project for worshipping of their God. psychological functions, and their implications into all other aspects of Folk culture.

Preparation of Wine from Rice



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Rice & medicinal herbs are fermented in a pot and left for few days. The juice thus formed

In this way we have found equal and similar food habits among the various border inhabitants of both side. Basically, all the village people of border areas are non-vegetarian. Every man and woman do fishing in their daily life. Not only they use the fresh fish for cooking, but also dry it for preservation and future use.

3.5 Dress and Ornament:

Dress and ornaments of the bordering people have also represented their own concerning society, which may be identified as their self-recognition. During the field study period we have noticed dresses and ornaments of the border people are self-woven. They mainly use cotton dresses. Dresses of men are almost equal, but the dresses of women's are different in look—some of them have worn saris, some mekhel-chadar and others dakhana etc.

We have found that the most of the dress-habits of different people of the different races are almost similar. Mainly, the poor village people of any race or group use not only cotton material but also depended on the handloom. In case of the women costumes we have found that, raw materials are used by most of the communities for weaving used almost similar materials. They also used similar materials for ornaments or for preparing ornaments, which is the sign of inter depending culture of the neighbourhood.



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4



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Women's uses are generally same, they use same kind of ornaments and knick-knacks, from which it could be ascertained about the common choice of the underprivileged people of the bordering areas. They have used almost similar quality of materials for the ornaments.

¹¹ Zatchoo, around 30 km. inside Bhutan

¹² Wine preparation in the 'Kukurkata' village of Assam-Meghalaya border.

¹³ Photo No.1-A Muslim woman with cotton sari, 2- adibasi woman with cotton mekhela-chadar, 3- village women with cotton Mekhela-sadar Bodo and 4-5- Rabha women with cotton dakhana



Earrings



Nose-ring



Kamar-bandh



Kharu



Nakeles



Tickly

They use not only gold, but silver and other materials as ornaments. In this way the villagers of the border area are living a very struggling common life with some common traditions.

4. CONCLUSION

The study will put emphasis in creating a friendly environment among the various groups of the bordering people. Ethnicity also has emerged among the bordering people as one of the most significant social issues. Boundary of an ethnic group is not a static phenomenon. Depending upon the circumstances and specific goal, division and amalgamation may take place to find out the solutions of the border conflicts. Following significant findings we have found in this attempt.

- In mono-ethnic situation, the maintenance of ethnic boundary is simple. But in poly-ethnic or plural society like the North-east India, diverse factors play their roles in moulding ethnic inter group relations.
- The habits, customs, beliefs and other cultural aspects of the border societies always have crossed the boundaries set by political or geographical barriers.
- Identification of the unseen thread of cultural fluidity in the bordering society and its offerings towards a pronounced solution to the harsh realities of border chaos these days.
- The attempt of submission of a cultural variability is not at all abstract and impossible to reach, instead it is all concrete characterised by an equivalent and trouble-free exchanges in the border environment.

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¹⁴ The Bodos, Rabhas Koch Rajbansi and other Bengali women's are used similar ornaments.

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4. Dilwar Hussain, Retired Agriculture Officer.
5. Kshirod Kalita, Folk Artist.
6. Khermohara Banikanta Rabha, School Teacher.
7. Dhaparvita Swapna Rabha, House wife.
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