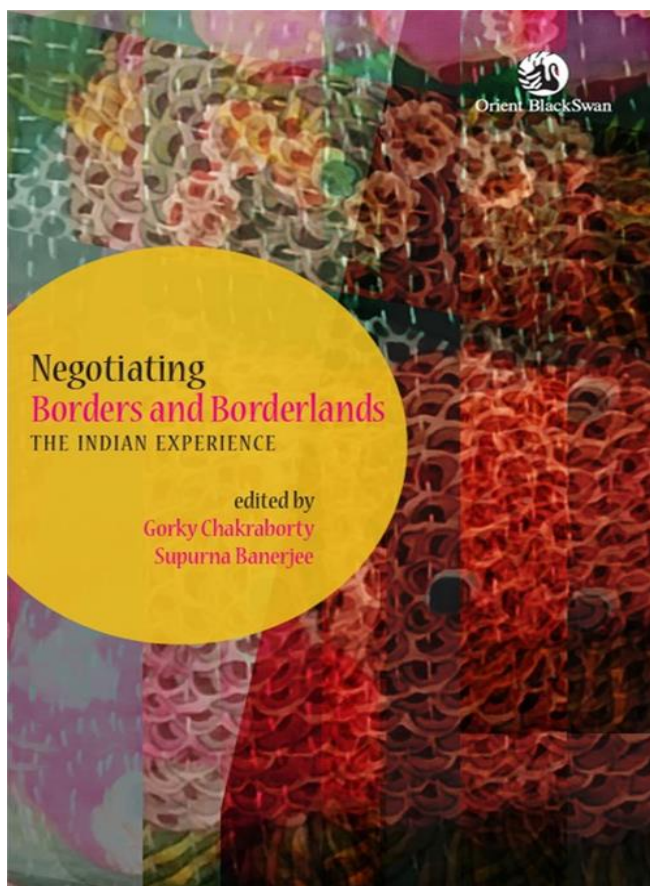


Gorky Chakraborty & Supurna Banerjee (eds), *Negotiating Borders and Borderlands: The Indian Experience*, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2023, i-xvii+ 370 pp. ISBN: 978-93-5442-374-1.



*Negotiating Borders and Borderlands: The Indian Experience* edited by Gorky Chakraborty and Supurna Banerjee re-views the Indian experience of border creation and border negotiation from fresh perspectives. Conceived from the vantage point of the contemporary times, the book tangentially explores the role of British colonialism in the cartographical refashioning of the country but primarily investigates the post-colonial experience of negotiating newly drawn borders on important territorial segments of the nation-state. One can hardly ignore the territorial aspects of a nation-state, borders of which are often targets of foreign aggression. India had experienced tense situations in Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh along the Indo-Chinese borders, and in Kashmir and other

places on the Indo-Pakistan borders. It is thus quite justifiable that the volume concentrates on territorial border zones: India-Bangladesh (Part I), India-Myanmar (Part II), India-China (Part III), and India-Pakistan (Part IV). But the volume goes beyond the concept of ‘border’ exclusively in the territorial sense and includes the ‘invisible,’ yet intensely ‘felt,’ borders manifested in select urban and rural spaces of the country. This broadens the understanding of ‘border’ to encompass not only material and visual dimensions, but also affective experiences. Historically, border-crossing has been a highly sensitive issue, specially since the 1947 Partition and the 1971 Bangladesh War which had significantly affected inter-community relationships. Memories of displacement, border-crossing, camp life, rehabilitation, and attempts at acculturation and assimilation evoke intense emotions in migrants but also create hostility among members of the host society. The discussion of such ‘felt’ borders has also figured in the volume.

This brings another dimension of the volume into focus. The concept of ‘border’ spills into that of ‘borderlands’ which has broader spatial, social, and emotive dimensions. Instead of training its exclusive attention on the artificially drawn geographical border which is construed as ‘a physical limit’ that emphasises ‘the difference between the sovereignty of “us” and “them”’ (Elbert Decker and Dylan Winchock 1), the concept of ‘borderland’ underscores the importance of the continuity of social interactions, cultural networks, and human relationships. Borderland as a dynamic space, argues Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), fosters ‘cultural cross-pollination.’ It also facilitates the formation of a ‘new people and their culture’ (Bohdan Cherkes et al. 4). Several articles in this volume under review illuminate such dynamic aspects of the borderlands in Northeast India, Kashmir, and the Darjeeling hills. The authors of these chapters argue that the communities in the borderlands defy the artificially fixed borders and continue relationship as ‘imagined community’ across the demarcation lines through cultural and social networks. They effectively challenge the statist perceptions of the borderline. In his book *Borderland Anxieties* (2023), Matthew Wilkinson aptly asserts, “Communities at borders offer their own alternative border maps, rejecting those drawn by the state. Jurisdictions overlap, and local communities often find themselves living across multiple overlapping sovereign projects, including those of their own making” (22). Emphasising the core arguments presented in the chapters, the editors of the volume assert that the ‘divided communities’ in the borderlands, near the ‘recreated political borders,’ try to transcend the ‘ruptures’ and “interpret the borderlands as social spaces ... maintaining the transborder continuities” (9).

Based on the cognate ideas of borders and borderlands in India, the volume is divided into five parts: four parts dwelling on four specific territorial borders (India-Bangladesh, India-Myanmar, India-China, and India-Pakistan) and one section addressing ‘invisible’ borders. The introductory chapter provides a historical overview of the emergence of these borders in the context of nation-state formation, theoretically reorienting readers to the unique dimensions of the Indian nation-state and establishing the tone for the volume. Nimmi Kurian in Chapter 1 investigates the ‘flawed frames’ of statist discourses and academic interpretations that naively simplify the complex nature of Indian borders and borderlands. She analyses the nature of India’s engagement with regional partners, and foregrounds the “quotidian processes at the borderlands that are scripting a bottom-up vision of India’s regional engagement” (39). It is followed by three essays on India-Bangladesh border/land in Part I.

In the first chapter of this section, Debdatta Chowdhury convincingly argues in favour of a dialogue between partition studies and border studies. She asserts that it is high time that we move beyond nostalgia and our dependence on memory, and realise the materiality of our bordered lives. Deboleena Sengupta focuses on the lives of the *Chitmahals* (as the enclaves along the India-Bangladesh borders are called) dwellers. Border is a daunting presence in their constrained lives, and their plight and precarity remain largely unknown to the world outside. Binayak Dutta then explores the profound impact of Partition on the lives of people in Northeast India. He elaborates on how the shadows of Partition still haunt individual lives, affect inter-community relations, and complicate the citizenship status of countless individuals.

The two chapters in Part II deal with India-Myanmar border/lands, a sector often overlooked in Indian historiography. Pum Khan Pau explores the community lives of the Zo people (Kuki-Chin) and analyses the social and cultural networks they maintain despite the presence of international borders that divide the same ethnic community. The chapter highlights the unique nature of community life in this borderland which is further consolidated by N. William Singh’s chapter on the Mizo community, divided across the same international border, which continues to foster social and cultural linkages. The third section too contains two chapters. In the first, Sarah Hilaly delves into the history of ‘frontier tracts in colonial Arunachal Pradesh’ and narrates how it underwent spatial and political reconfigurations from pre-modern times, making map-making a problematic exercise even in the post-colonial period. In the next chapter, Biswanath Saha and Gorky Chakraborty explore the problematical ethnospace of the Darjeeling Hills and show how Gorkhaland Movement tried to project the impression of a uniform community as part of its political strategy.

In Part IV Tarif Sohail and Asifa Zunaidha focus on the Line of Control in Poonch, Jammu, and Kashmir. They argue that in the state-centric academic discourses that privilege the statist and Valley-centric views, the voice of the common people gets submerged. Despite the political borders, ethnic conflicts and divided families across the borders, social interactions and cultural networks continue to flourish in the social space of the borderland. In the next chapter Zahida Rehman Jatt focuses on the religious practices of minority communities in post-Partition Pakistan and argue that they maintain their unique identity and socio-cultural interactions in innovative ways.

Part V, the final part of the volume, contains three essays on ‘felt’ borders. Subhasri Ghosh dwells on the cultural divides between the *Bangal* (migrants from former East Bengal) and the *Ghoti* (locals of West Bengal) in the metropolitan space of Calcutta. Drawing from a variety of sources including oral narratives, memoirs, government documents, and fictional accounts, she traces the fault lines in the social relationships between these groups who, ironically, speak the same language (albeit with dialectal variations) and predominantly share the same faith. The focus of the next chapter, authored by Thanggoulen Kipgen, shifts to Delhi where he identifies symbolic borders between Kuki migrants and the host residents. Kuki migrants are subjected to stereotypes and harassments. Consequently, they tend to live in the same neighbourhood and take help of ethnic networks. The volume concludes with Abhijit Guha’s chapter on the legal status of emerging *chars* (mid-river land formations) and the local people’s efforts to cultivate in the char lands. Guha argues that *chars* present unusual conundrums for government officials and illustrate how local residents creatively address social issues arising from disputes related to these new lands.

The volume represents a significant departure from the conventional treatment of borders and borderlands found in mainstream historiography. The chapters have not only analysed major borders and borderlands of India but have also identified problematic border spaces such as *chars* and *chitmabals*. The dynamics of the metaphorical borders have also been thoroughly explored. From all these perspectives, this volume is undoubtedly an important contribution to border studies. This reviewer, however, feels the absence of critical discussion on the real and ‘felt’ borders in South India. The question of Tamil identity, for instance, in Sri Lanka, specially during the Civil War, had significant reverberations in South India, raising important questions. A chapter or two would have further enhanced the value of the book.

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