

David Gellner, ed. 2013. *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan.

In between two different territorial enclosures lies the borderland. Borderland thus is often understood to be a place of contestation between the two states or nations. Contextualizing this contestation in the borderland areas has been a crucial theme in academic research on borderland. Adding up new themes and ideas to the contemporary discourses on borderland, *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia*, explores the importance of studying borderland academically in the Northern South Asian context. The concept of “Northern South Asia,” coined by Hiroshi Ishii, Katsuo Nawa and David Gellner, involves the nations-states of Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri-Lanka and India. Apart from Bhutan-China (Tibet) and Nepal-China (Tibet) borders, all these countries border India. Consisting ten chapters in total, this book comprises the multiple dimensions of borderland studies and tries to highlight the diversity in the nature of borders existing in the region. It delves into discourses that make the borderland study of this region different from other Western and South Asian borderland regions. This book also explores the border dynamics through the case studies of the borderland areas. Alongside, it contemplates on the existence and formation of borders on the basis of their social, historical as well as ethnographic processes. The book focuses

mainly on the interrelatedness and interaction between the citizen and the state; between people of the neighboring states; and between the bordering states. For this review, I have selected the chapters that deal particularly with issues concerning the Nepal-India border.

The introductory chapter entitled, “Northern South Asia’s Diverse Borders, from Kachchh to Mizoram” by Gellner explores the border relation of India with its neighboring countries. Though there are several issues relating to borders in the chapter, this review limits itself to his analysis of Nepal-India border in particular. Gellner states that India adopts a “paternalistic attitude” (p. 7) towards its neighboring countries. Contrary to India’s border relation with its other neighbors, India-Nepal border “for many reasons is not what we think of as a border at all” (p. 8). He mentions that the freedom that people of these two countries enjoy through the open border is unlike the strict border laws practiced by the Indian state with the other nations.

Gellner explores this unique nature of border-relation bringing the everyday experiences of the people who have established different levels of relationships using the open-border between Nepal and India. Elucidating the uniqueness of this border, he contrasts it with the ones where the patrolling of different military faculties frequently takes place. As explained by Gellner, the border practices of India can be termed as “hard” or “closed” border in the context of Bangladesh and Pakistan. In contrast the Indian border to Nepal can be termed as “soft” or “open” border.

Chapter three entitled “Naturalizing the Himalaya as Border” by Nayanika Mathur, traces the entire geography of Uttarakhand to show how the Himalayas have been termed as the “natural frontier” of India by the Indian state and by the general people of the area. The writer questions if the “natural” existence of the Himalayas exist as the frontier as understood generally. Going beyond this clichéd idea of “natural frontier,” Mathur projects it as the “bone of contention” between India and China. She brings up the history of India-China war on border and treaties signed to address the contention that existed between them. Mathur also traces the history of Kumaon and Garhwal’s subjection by the British and Gorkha rule in the past to show the border formation by the “state-led processes.”

Talking about Uttarakhand’s relation with Nepal, the writer notes the practice of smuggling of an expensive Himalayan herb, Yarchagumba, through the Indo-Nepal border and describes the Nepal-India border as

“the criminal border.” The smuggling, as Mathur mentions, is organized by Nepalis who find it easy to cross the Indo-Nepal border in Uttarakhand and sell the smuggled goods either in Nepal or China. While the act of smuggling has been going on for several decades, the security stationed at the border seems to be oblivious of this fact.

The chapter has tried to concentrate on the “carving of border as an outcome of historical and state-led processes” (p. 91) but it would have been beneficial for the readers if the ethnographic landscape too was dealt. Also while mentioning the Indo-Nepal border in Uttarakhand as a criminal border in particular, the affinity that the people of the bordering areas have should have been taken into consideration.

In the fourth chapter, jointly written by Sondra L. Hausner and Jeevan R. Sharma titled “On the Way to India: Nepali Rituals of Border Crossing,” the writers focus on the movement of people in the Nepal-India border and show how the border-experience transcends the notion of state through their ritual mobility. The basic issue in this chapter is migration where the writers highlight differences in crossing borders by male-migrants and female-migrants. Male migrants are most often unskilled laborers whose crossing is a ritual glorified in their place as a “*lāhure*” (even though people also cross the border as students, pilgrims, traders, or tourists). The women migrants’ crossing of the borders, the writers claim, is often linked with trafficking.

This chapter has unveiled the dark side of the border crossing from Nepal to India where unnecessary interrogations, and harassments by actors representing the state authority like the Armed Police Force and Custom Officials and staff representing Maiti Nepal (an organization working on anti-trafficking) in the Nepali side of the border is commonplace. This, however, is not restricted to the Nepal’s side of the border. Once migrants step to the other side of the border, they will be perceived as “others” and the “outsiders,” and the same kind of interrogations, harassments, unreasonable beckoning, looting, and bribing of the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) personnel begin. Often such harassments lead to the disillusionment with these migrants’ own status as citizens.

The writers have acknowledged that the study of the migrants crossing the Indian border to Nepal is not done. The understanding of border crossing acts as well as the states’ presence in the border areas through migrants’ experience would have been more balanced had the study incorporated experiences of both Indian and Nepali migrants crossing the border.

Chapter Five, “The Perils of Being a Borderland People: On the Lhotshampas of Bhutan,” written by Rosalind Evans discusses the fate of the Nepali speaking people of Bhutan (Lhotshampas) who were forced to leave the country and were considered as foreigners or non-Bhutanese. These Lhotshampas, who settled along the Bhutan-India border, had originally migrated from India and Nepal. The Lhotshampas, referred by the writer as “trans-border people” had affinity with the culture and language of the Nepali people of India and Nepal. This chapter sheds light on the experiences of Bhutanese refugees who were compelled to cross the border and become refugees.

Evans draws a parallel between the state of Bhutanese refugees and Madhesis of Nepal who are often viewed as Indians because of their shared cultures and languages with the people from across the border. Evans also recounts the experiences of Bhutanese refugees who had to leave everything they possessed in Bhutan. Since India was unwilling to grant asylum to the Bhutanese, it got rid of the huge refugee population by dropping them at Nepal’s eastern border. Unfortunately, issues concerning India’s role in sending Bhutanese refugees to Nepal is barely mentioned in the text which could have shed light on various aspects of Indo-Nepal relation.

A short afterword titled “Making the Most of ‘Sensitive’ Borders” by Willem van Schendel attempts to demonstrate the fruitfulness of the academic study of borders in South Asia and how they help us understand relations between different states. In doing so, he points out the causes that make any border “sensitive.” He also talks about the level of border control and the way borders are variously perceived as well as experienced in the Northern South Asia. Dealing with the question of the state’s “sensitivity,” he presents different dimensions affecting borders. For Schendel, “unequal level of control,” “divergent narratives” and “contestation at the borders” between two nations are the reasons for the “sensitivity” of any state. This variation, at the core, as Schendel writes, is what makes the study of Northern South Asian borderlands significant. He notes that the India-Pakistan (Kashmir) and India-Bangladesh borders are more concerned with the practice of territoriality and control of space. Territoriality in this case is linked to “fearful states” that suffer from “cartographic anxiety” and Schendel argues that “uncertain sovereignty and apprehensive territoriality lead to sensitive borders” (p. 269). Since sensitive borders are patrolled by armed men in state uniforms, it results in the volatility of borderlands.

The book in general projects several borderland issues, for example, relation between the state and the citizens, relation between the citizens of the bordering nations, migration in the border areas, and illegal acts like smuggling and trafficking that are significant in northern South Asia. In the Nepali context, the book unfolds both the negative and positive aspects of border activities created by the exceptional open border relation between Nepal and India. Overall, the book can be very important to researchers, scholars, students and general readers who want to explore more about borderland dynamics in the northern South Asian context.

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