



The Borderlands: A quest for State-Identity and Selfhood

Ankita Borgohain

Research Scholar Gauhati University

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Abstract:

With the mapping and re-mapping of borders time and again, the discourses that shaped the subjectivity of the borderlanders or the people inhabiting the borders have undergone various changes over time. The boundaries keep changing based on the needs and natural circumstances. Borders and borderlands seem like sides of the same pool and in between identities are shaped and constructed. This paper will primarily focus on the borderlanders of Nagaland and Assam. Two villages i.e, Naginimora and Anaki are taken into an account to understand the state identity and selfhood of the people inhabiting the areas. The paper will be divided into three sections. The first section of the paper will be a historical narrative of the pre-colonial and colonial ideas of border and identity, while the second portion will deal with the experiences of the shared history of the above mention villages and how the colonial state transformed their imagination and idea of the border. The third part will try to summarize the paper.

Keywords: Assam, Nagaland, Border, Boderlanders, Identity.

Introduction:

The understanding of borders and their discourses has a long history of their changes in meaning and character. The very perception of the border from mere lines on the maps to the real demarcation had impacted the inhabitants and the state, and the nation in different ways. Traditional cartographers created demarcation lines based on border typology. Geographers and statesmen were preoccupied in the years following World War I with portraying the changing geopolitical landscape of Europe and the numerous new borders that were established during this time. (Holdich,1916). Given the return to many of these same boundaries following the break-up of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia in the last fifteen years, the dynamics outlined here are a significant source of empirical data about modern political geography. In demarcating the borders both in the pre-colonial and colonial times, it is always power relations that play a significant role. (Das: 2014: 6)

The criteria for determining where and how the border should be developed in society or space were being constructed by societal managers, who are usually portrayed in their own political, economic, or institutional interests. This can be visualized in the bordering process of the colonial cartographers while demarcating the state border of Assam-Nagaland. They had delineated certain areas in the region based on ethnic identities and levels of socio-political organizations. Hence, to date, it can be seen a growing number of disturbances have occurred from time to time. Due to the mapping of the territories based on hills and plains, the identity of the people has changed and challenged over time. It seems to be contradictory the identity that is being created by the political administrators of both the states and the selfhood that is found and generated in the minds of the borderlanders of both the states that resides on the border and has to face the consequence of border in everyday activities, the problems they had to face, etc.

Historical background of the Colonial Exploration of the Naga Hills

Naga is a generic term. The term Naga has been found for the first time in the *Welsh Report of Assam* in 1794. (Acharya: 1983) The Nagas were described as freedom-loving people with their system of governance. They had a self-sufficient economy and adopted a policy of isolation. (Verrier : 1969: 10) The Nagas have been termed by various connotations by the Colonial administrators such as 'Head-hunter's, 'Barbaric', 'Savage' etc. they have been following a non-interference policy with the hill peoples. (Verrier: 1969). The people of the Naga Hills maintained varied contacts with the Indian territories in the past (the plains of Assam and Manipur) and were called by varied names. The Ahom kings, right from 1228, until the British annexation of Assam in 1826, had contact with numerous Naga tribes; certain Nagas had become "subjects" of Ahom kings, who often fought the Nagas to possess their salt wells. Ahom kings granted revenue-free canals and plots to Naga *Khats*.³ These were arranged with the understanding that the Nagas would refrain from "raids" in the Assam plains. Trade relations existed between them. Nagas favored barter trading of salt, cotton, medicinal herbs, ivory, and *daos* (adzes) for Assamese rice, cloth, and beads.⁴ The Nagas also had the tradition of exchanging tributes with Ahom rulers. After the British annexation of Assam in 1820, military expeditions were sent into Naga areas between 1835 and 1851, and subsequently, Naga areas had come under various political/administrative regimens as per British era documents. Kekhrietuo Yhome states formal fixation and division of the Burma-India borderline, traceable to the treaty of Yandaboo, ended the Anglo-Burmese war in 1826, thereby obliging Burma to relinquish Assam to India. (Kekhrietuo: 2010).

The colonial expansion in the hill areas can be seen from the early nineteenth century, when the colonial maps showed some blank spaces and inscribed these spaces as 'Unexplored Hill Country inhabited by the Naga Tribes', which gave a clear reference to the Naga Hills. (kekhrietuo: 2010). These maps reflected the colonial lack of geographical knowledge of the spaces. The maps only indicated their expansion into the region, which on the other hand led to the political expansion and turning of the spaces into a colonial territory. The maps prepared by the colonial cartographers and the demarcation that they had made were based on their imagination rather

than any objective ground survey. This can be cited from Hamilton's work where he uses words such as 'probable' and 'undefined extent' which reflects his incomplete knowledge of the region and its people. It is important to note how Hamilton located the area by describing the neighboring territorial boundaries with other places. He wrote that the 'country' or region 'meets the northern territories of Ava, and is separated by an intervening space about 180 miles from the province of Yunan in China. This statement revealed how the colonial understood the area in the early nineteenth century, it was imagined as a space that connected with other places- as a barrier, as a vital bridge. (Hamilton: 1961: 611).

Without any clear historical basis, Hamilton's account depicts a colonial spatial imagination and an obvious understanding of the places and people. The process of colonization of the native land and the formation of place identity in the region began with the naming of spaces and the location of people based on their approximation of spatial reality. This starts the process of establishing a spontaneous link between the place and identity.

Each localized Naga "tribe", based in a village or a cluster of villages, had a blurred idea about its maximal tribal boundary, as inter-tribe relations existed in hostile terms only. Most tribes differently identified themselves and often placed claims on territories of neighbors. Indeed, the Naga "tribes" had a smaller territorial spread.

Identity discourses:

The word 'identity' means the state of sameness. It is always manifold, continuously constructed from time to time. According to Peter Robb, the analytical contradiction between long-term civilization continuities and emerging forms of constructed identity. (Robb: 1997:245).

The creation of 'identity' in North-East India did not exist in pre-colonial times. The colonial administrators have used the word 'border' and 'frontiers' concerning North-East India with a specific connotation of separation from the 'known' to the 'unknown'. The local principalities and chiefdoms of the pre-colonial times determined the identity of the people. They were being negotiated only with the local chiefs and chiefdoms such as Ahom rulers, Dimoria Raja, Chiefs of different groups of Nagas, etc. the identities of the inhabitants were unstable and shifting according to the shifting nuances of power. Thus, a large group of communities comes under one generic term such as the 'Nagas'. The shared cultural view forms their identity. This ability to 'communicate' through a shared perception of oneness is what has brought many people together under a common label. (Weber:1978:389)

The colonial administrators neglecting or without understanding the formation of the groups have demarcated the lands and the peoples. At the same time the knowledge was created from the vantage position of being rulers; from the top so to say. After the incorporation of the British-controlled areas in the Naga Hills, the question had raised as to how to maintain their colonial policies towards the unadministered areas around the vicinity of the Naga Hills. There was a

constant fear in regards to the governance of the Naga Hills due to continuous raids and disturbances that had occurred from time to time. Henceforth, the question of Naga's identity came into being. In a more general sense, the quest of being separate from other tribes and the ones that began as a mere indication of differentiation among them led to even towards the later periods, this identity construction came to be characterized by an assertion of rights, territorial units and so on.

The emergence of Naga identity and their selfhood can be understood it a case of ethnic identity. As the Nagas are an ethnic minority with a strong sense of their identity. Here, ethnicity means the feeling of 'us', or the common feeling of belonging to a common social group or tradition, beliefs, and practices. (Hutchinson: 1996: 4). Ethnicity can also be referred to as a term of elusiveness. It has been said to have a primordial or ascribed quality, but it is also true that ethnic identity is shaped by historical experience. Thus it is objective, given, and subjective at the same time. It is therefore a creation. It is the many possibilities of shaping ethnic identity, the combination of different primordial criteria, and their interrelations with a changing historical context, which make the concept both difficult and indispensable. (Kristof: 1959: 281)

The factors that determine ethnic identities are a sense of common belongingness in matters of common origin, culture, religion, language, etc. The distinction that has been created by the creation of borders and the feeling of 'us' and 'them' led them to search and bind together with an ideology of shared history, unique past, and symbolic attachment with the household. In due course of time, the quest for Naga identities has changed a lot from trying to identify themselves as separate entities not similar to other racial groups and then later to the demand for separate states, etc.

In matters of Naga ethnic identity, in the past, they didn't know each other and preferred to remain aloof. There's no collective identity existed among them. Nagas were tied to a loose administration after the British administration, so their incorporation into the framework of the nation-state could not be effective. They were forced to remain as closed economic and political groupings as a result of this issue. As a result, the Nagas have survived as autonomous and homogeneous peoples living in discrete territories impacted by distinctive topographical conditions. Despite their similar settlement pattern and overall physical and cultural viewpoint, the Nagas remained independent entities for a long time, within the zone of their respective clan, village, and tribe, until a sense of Naga identity gradually dawned on them amongst the colonial ambiance. It was after the arrival of the British, that they started to document the Nagas as a tribe in all the official documents and administrative proceedings. Thus, a newly administrated, annexed tract came to be named the Naga Hills District. Within the colonial framework, they came to know each other and the name 'Naga' was used eventually for all the tribes which on the other hand helped them to create one identity in general. (Verrier: 1969) Thus it can be said that it was instrumental in foregoing a common Naga identity.

With the growth of Naga identity there emerged the idea of separatism among the Nagas. With their divergent cultural identity and unique history, they from the very beginning wanted to

remain aloof and never treated themselves as a part of India. They oppose the assimilative process of the Indian Union. The Nagas did not believe that neither by consent nor by the process of accession did they have become the part of Indian Union. (Nag; 2002: 30). At the outset of Indian independence, Nagas did not turn violent against the Indian government regarding their demand for a separate sovereign state. But gradually when they realized the importance that the Indian Government has not responded positively to their demands, they started to choose the violent path and took up arm movements to get fulfilled their demands. In 1963, Nagaland State was formed to pacify its demand but this political settlement brought rather brought more political problems as many Naga tribes remain outside the Naga State as they were scattered in the neighboring states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur. (Alexander: 1994: 55). The Indian Government did not give a good response to the Naga movement that had begun and they thought that it would be easily restored by the Indian Arm Forces. Moreover, contrary to this, the situation had worsened with time and the Naga separatist movement had raged for more than six decades.

Subsequently, the Indian government realized that the Nagas were causing increasing disruptions. Therefore, they attempted to talk with them to bring peace. In 1997, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) faction signed a cease-fire agreement, and in 2001, the Khaplang group (NSCN-K) signed another. (Srikanth & Thomas: 2005:2).

Many factors gave rise to the separatist idea of Nagas. The term used by the Britishers such as the 'excluded' tribe etc raised the feeling of a separate entity among the Nagas. For the Nagas it became difficult to accept that they would be a part of the sovereign Indian Union as they were always of the view that historically and culturally they were different and therefore should be granted freedom, and status of a sovereign state. Although Nagaland State was formed in 1963, the struggle continues and the consequences of this struggle can be seen and felt by the people residing in Nagaland and the areas adjacent to the borders. here, as mentioned above, the borderlanders are the worst sufferers of the border demarcation and the long bloodshed struggle because they survive with the dual identity of statehood that the state has assigned to them and the selfhood or the self-identity that they pose.

Anaki

The rich oral sources and narratives provide the shared history of the regions, arguing the overlapping notions of the territory and political authority that were prevalent in the pre-colonial times, a concept that was very different from the unitary notion of sovereignty and territoriality associated with the colonial state. The relations the Nagas had with the Ahom rulers in the pre-colonial times were that of friendship and hostility. They also depict how both were dependent upon one other. Both had their system of governance and didn't interfere in one other matters. Their relation can be found in the Ahom *Buranjis*.³ (Barua: 1930). The tribute system is also characterized by variety and ambivalence. The *Posa* and the *Khel*⁴ system introduced by the Ahom rulers with the hill peoples led to a strong economic relationship between them. Thus one

can find that in the pre-colonial times, their relations were of interdependence, superiority, and reciprocity. In the pre-colonial era, power was grounded much more in the reach of the ruler than the notion of territory. Power was concentrated in the center of the head of the governance or the king. With the creation of the borders, the binary of 'us' and 'them', 'outsider' and 'insider' came into being. Once bound by the socio-economic, and cultural ties came into conflict with one other and treated each other as an outsider with the colonial demarcation.

The art of imposing new identities and artificial boundaries has indeed been the focal point of statecraft. It is nonetheless important to recall that the rationale of territorial integrity is not the end, and neither is it absolute in itself. (Holdich: 1916). Shared humanity is made possible only when one group exercises its right to self-definition and to be the maker of its own culture. It fundamentally involves determining the nature of the relationship between the groups, which means addressing perceptions of boundaries. There may very well be a perception that boundaries are soft, flexible, and fluid rather than rigid geographical lines. Shifting positions from limited perceptions of shared boundaries can open up possibilities for dialogue and mutual understanding between the caravans, providing a sustained and enduring approach toward shared humanity. (Longchari: 2008).

Anaki exists side by side with the village of Galeky, where the former is in Nagaland and the latter is in Assam. The border town of Geleky (situated in the Sivasagar district of Assam) shares its boundary with the districts of Longleng and Mokokchung (Nagaland). The two villages have a long tradition of shared boundaries and relationships and their inhabitants have landed on either side of the boundary. They share a varied relationship with Assam. Dolly Kikkon in her work, has dealt in length with the border village of Anaki, starting from shared memories of matrimonial relations between the Assamese and the Nagas to the growing economic importance due of the tea gardens. (Kikkon: 2008). Geleky is an important coal-trading hub as well as an oil exploration site. The area is rich in natural resources which attract both sides of the people. A weekly market at Atkhel takes place where villagers from the neighboring Naga villages come down to sell their products.

The area as it is rich in all sorts of natural activities; this entire area is under extra-constitutional regulations like the Disturbed Area Act (19580). (Kikkon: 2008). The community experiences of the two areas can be seen in the weekly *Haats* or markets.⁶ The womenfolk in general plays a pivotal role in the markets, they bring all sorts of locally produced items such as chilies, cherry, tomatoes; herbs, etc, and in return also take back items sold by the Assamese vendors. The interaction among the two groups takes place in the everyday experiences of the communities of both the Naga and the Assamese residing in the foothill areas. *Haats* became a community place where inhabitants of Assam, Phom, and Ao villages used to gather. (Kikkon: 2008)

While the weekly markets emerged as a significant part of the political and cultural intermingling between the hills of Nagaland and the plains of Assam, these relations were not always friendly.

Sometimes various challenges and hardships were faced by the two groups as fights and misunderstandings among the groups create lots of disturbances.

The villagers of Anaki also face lots of hardship in communication due to bad conditions of the roads and proper infrastructure, marketplace places, etc which made them largely dependent on the markets of Assam.

So in many ways, their boundaries are overlapping. But what happens when the state imposes itself? The boundary stops being fluid and flexible; it becomes rigid and impenetrable, to the extent of destroying relationships between the two communities. The relationships they have shared, endured, fostered, nurtured, and nourished have existed for generations. Then suddenly one becomes the encroacher when crossing over to the other side to cultivate one's land. The state-people conflict conveniently becomes a people-to-people conflict. This demonstrates the politics of boundaries. (Longchari: 2008: 28).

Naginimora

The town of Naginimora is considered the economical corridor of Assam and Nagaland. It is situated in Nagaland and is 11 km away from the konggan village in the Mon district. It shares a border with Bihubar in Assam. Naginimora is on the bank of the river Dikhu. The town population is predominantly inhabited by the Konyak tribe of Nagas. It is considered the biggest trading center of Nagaland. The only coalfield in Nagaland was founded in 1907 by the East India Company and is at Borjan and Kongan soil near Naginimora respectively. The local weekly market held on Saturdays and Sundays is a witness to an overflow of both Assam and Naga people. Simaluguri⁷ can be considered as the nerve center for both the inhabitants bordering Assam and Nagaland in regards to economic activities.

Naginimora has a long shared history with Assam. They traced their age-old relations with the Ahoms of Assam. The borderlanders of Naginimora question the very existence of a rigid border between the neighboring state of Assam and Nagaland. Because for both the states, Naginimora holds an important place that has a rich history of linkage with Assam. The inter-marriage relationships, trade relations, and mutual dependence of both the states provide us insight as to how Naginimora becomes a common place of interest for both states. Although with time, during the colonial as well as post-colonial times, many changes were seen to be taken place with the new administrative system, the spread of Christianity, and the growth of educational institutions; however, the relationship between them tends to remain one of the mutual dependence.

The informants share the historicity of the place. According to the informant, the meaning of the name Naginimora is "Nagini Mara or NaginiMora", which means "the death of a Naga Woman", here they refer to the Naga women as Watlong or Dalimi.

As the place has economic significance it has been subjugated to violence many times resulting in killings, looting, threats, etc. the inhabitants residing in the areas accepted the border lines between the two neighboring states. But the question that possesses in the minds of the people is the correct mark or demarcation that states the separate identity between the states. The question

over and again creates the problem of ownership of land. The boundary falls between the Bihubar tea estates, ⁸ which on the other hand creates the major problem of both the states calming their rights over the land of the tea garden.

While focusing on the issues of border, the narratives evident from the field sites manage to give us a picture of the social, political, and economic conditions and their role in the borderlands. Social contacts and experiences within the borders gave a varied meaning to boundaries. Here, the inter-state border seems to be peripatetic. The texture of the border changes over time. The border sometimes emerges as a hard entity in terms of purported territorial control and state ideologies. However, the same border is sometimes soft in the sense that there is greater social interaction amongst people. This view is expressed by the inhabitants that reside on the border. To them, the state boundaries from marking the separation of administrative units have also evolved from the state of separation to a state of the interface.

While highlighting the trade activities the narratives of both the states opines that the no doubt there have been raids and troubles among the Nagas and Assamese from the pre-colonial times but one cannot deny the fact that, there has been a long history of trade between the peoples of the hills and the plains. During pre-colonial times, the foothills were considered the boundaries. The boundary at that time was the center for bartering and was considered the center point for a meeting of the peoples of hills and plains. However, in the post-colonial period, the meaning of border changed. The inhabitants were restricted by the center to cross the border for their security. But the narratives differ in their opinion regarding the restriction of crossing each other boundaries, especially in the border villages as they were dependent on each other for a long in respect to the economy, education, matrimonial relations, etc. The common linguae fungal i.e., Nagamese is the common medium used for daily communication. (Baruah: 1993: 7) This seemingly indicates a cordial relationship that contradicts the textual narratives of the British administration.

The state government's involvement in minor incidents such as individual fights had made major border issues. One of the narratives residing in Naginimora states that small fights could have been solved mutually but with the involvement of policemen and government bodies the issues become bigger which on the other hand helps escalate tensions among them.

The role of the borders keeps on changing from harsh borders of political issues to common cultural and economic ground. The contrasting notion seems here is the border as understood in the textual forms to different interpretations in narrations. The border seems to appear and disappear at times. The inhabitants seem to struggle to specify their identity or selfhood from the one assigned to them by their states. Unlike imaginary borders that the people talk about, in all these conflicts borders reappear as a rigid demarcation. However, there are occasions when these very boundaries tend to disappear such as in weekly *ha*, fairs, and festivals. During the weekly *haats* or markets, the disputed areas become a place of reconciliation.

The weekly *haat* is suited on the side of Assam. Nonetheless, the vendors are both from Assam and Nagaland's sides. The *haat* by its nature appears to be symbolic of 'togetherness' as well as 'division'. Togetherness in the sense one can visualize the cooperation and active trade among both the states and division too as latter loses its hold with much activities of the former taking the lead as the *haat* falls on the Assam side. The existence of the *haat* to some extent appears to strengthen and cultivate a bond. The kind of products demonstrated by people from respective sides attracts people from another side, which in turn paves way for a cordial relationship. It is not just an exhibition of products but also an exhibition of the age-old trade relation the two states had shared. During such times borders seem open and movements free. According to the vendors, the border issues do not seem to be disturbing to them as it is just a man-made issue to suit their interests.

Once the borders are open more people come together. The feeling of belongingness and the exchange of culture can be seen. The connecting links between the two states are the fairs and weekly markets that happen in the boundary area. Inhabitants of Naginimora were of a similar view that the *haats* bring people together. People tend to value each other during the exchanges of goods. Apart from the *haats*, the coal and stone queries play a major role in understanding the appearance and disappearance of borders. Due to intense commercial establishment in the Bihubar and Naginimora areas, people are economically inclined which has in a way blurred the existence of rigid boundaries. The mobility factor here is commercial and socio-economic which bring cross-cultural contact and interaction. The idea of a threat from outside appears insignificant to the people, which is evident from the way the locals have been coexisting for decades.

Conclusion

Thus, borderlanders tend to produce and reproduce meaning from the material condition apart from the social condition. In the cultural and social discourses, meanings attributed to the interstate boundaries suggest that it fluctuates; on occasion, it appears and disappears. In the daily life practice of the people of both the villages i.e. Anaki and Naginimora, on one hand, appears to be coexistence and on the other hand that of territorial assertion. It can be said that borders give social meaning to physical elements. On the other hand, borders as being a point of contact depending on the role it plays as that of a 'bridge' for social interaction. When there is fewer social contacts misunderstanding takes a toll on the bonhomie shared between the people of the two states.

The border areas are not always about conflicts but also about social contacts, hybrid cultures, and co-existence. Borders as 'barriers' or 'filters' protecting from the outside world and at the same time acting as 'bridges' or 'gateway' to it indicate that border has a lot to do with community. This indicates the dichotomy of the borderlanders and the possibility that while borders divide they also provide a gateway to connect to the other side.

The two Naga villages helped to provide initial insights into how state identity has fragmented peoples' identity and the right to self-definition and how state-building has destroyed nations. State identity creates the idea of 'us' and 'them', 'outsider' and 'insider'. It has turned the state-people conflict into people-to-people conflict, destroying a rich heritage of good relationships between communities and across state boundaries; and eventually, it introduced the politics of geographical boundaries. The question arises as to how this complex predicament can be transformed in a way that is inclusive and recognizes the rights of the people who are being affected.

There is such thing or concept as the 'good' or 'bad', rather they are the entities vested upon them by political relations. They are ignorant of the realities associated with the borderlanders. It is thus, essential to accept the dichotomy of borders that is in reality and the one on the maps. Overlapping identities are being made by the political necessity and not by the people within it. The conflict of selfhood of the borderlanders is always being challenged by the dynamics of the ever-changing political relations of the States. Therefore, it is seen that in the end, it's the ultimate dividing line that determines the state's identity and self-hood.

Endnotes:

1. *Khats* refer to the free lands allotted to the Nagas by the Ahom rulers. During the reign of King Susengphaa alias Pratap Singha (1603-1641), Naga *Khats* were established and *Kotokis* on behalf of the Nagas were entrusted to look after the *Khats*.
2. *Doa* means sword. The *Doa* usually has a wooden hilt a unique square form used for various kinds of agricultural activities, forest clearance, and hunting as well.
3. *Buranjis* are historical chronicles of the Ahoms, originally written in the Tai language and later translated into both Assamese and English respectively.
4. The *Posa* system was introduced by the Ahom King Pratap Singha. It was a tribal appeasement policy to stop the tribes of the nearby hilly regions from the raids of the hilly regions. According to this system, certain villages were selected and were made to pay for certain commodities. These villages were exempted from an equivalent amount of tax. For further details see, E. Gait, *A History of Assam*, EBH Publishers, 2013 (Reprint), Guwahati, Assam.
5. *The Paik* system was a unique administrative unit of the Ahoms. It was a compulsory labor service of the Ahoms. Introduced by Momai Tamuli Borbora during the reign of Ahom king Pratap Singha.
6. *Haats* refers to the market places in the foothills of Assam-Nagaland.
7. Bihubar is a small town in the Sivasagar district of Assam., Geleki is one of the major oil fields of North Assam, it has a rich history of oil fields and tea gardens, and the oil fields share proximity to the Naga thrust and have an aerial extent of 27sq Km. These two places have historic importance as all together 23Naga *Khats* were given to the Nagas by the Ahom in places such as Geleki, Rajapar, Naginijan, Naginimorah, and

Merapani, where various kinds of trading activities were held. Although with time the Naga *Khats* lost their importance, the market activities in the weekly *Haats* can be seen till the present day.

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