Introduction

International borders, in simplest terms, are about the demarcation of territories. However, borders not only define territorial limits but also imply the extent of state sovereignty. On an uncritical analysis, the border appears necessary to ensure order in the international system. The real complications emerge from a deeper analysis of the concept, how it originated and became characterised in different regions. In this special section, New Border Studies in South Asia, the main objective is to engage with some of the distinct challenges border management faces in this region, and how the borders influence social, cultural and everyday life of individuals.

Borders in South Asia: Colonial Construct, Violence and Artificiality

When we discuss borders in South Asia, there is an interesting contradiction not discussed much by the scholars in both IR and Border Studies. This is not surprising because Border Studies itself is a new subject for the region, which mainly was part of the British colony until the first half of the twentieth century. The contradiction concerns the cultural and political history of South Asia and how the border—the way it was introduced/created in South Asia has permanently altered the region. As a matter of fact, contemporary borders in South Asia were drawn in the last two centuries by the British primarily for political, administrative and strategic considerations (Tripathi & Chaturvedi 2019). In 1816 for the first time, the India–Nepal border was established after signing the Sugauli treaty. This treaty marked an end to the Anglo-Nepali war started in 1814 and popularly known as ‘Gurkha War’. There was no strict border between India and Nepal before 1816 (Tripathi 2019). Likewise, one of the most controversial borders in South Asia is Durand Line, dividing Pashtuns into two different countries—Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Durand Line was also drawn by the British in 1893. The primary reason was to make Afghanistan a buffer state. While

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The British left this region in 1947, the Durand Line is still a cause of contention between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The British created another crucial border during the end of their rule in India. This border divided India into two different states—India and Pakistan in 1947. As Brunet-Jailly identified, “there are complex social processes that establish borders” (Brunet-Jailly 2005, 643). The India–Pakistan partition should be regarded as among of the most “complex social processes”, some still reverberating in Indo-Pak relations, not least the issue of Kashmir. Also, the creation of the India–Pakistan border concerns uncontrolled communal violence and traumatic displacement of people. Scholars of Border Studies view borders differently, “not just hard territorial lines—they are the institutions that result from bordering policies—they are thus about people” (Brunet-Jailly 2011, 2). In the case of India and Pakistan, we can notice that the border is also psychological. Chaturvedi explains that the India–Pakistan border “is a good example of how peoples and places with distinctive histories, cultures and ethno-linguistic identities can be reduced to the status of mere ‘issues’ in the geopolitical imaginations of the intellectuals and institutions of statecraft. At the heart of the dominant Indian discourse on Kashmir lies the polemical two-nation theory” (Chaturvedi 2003, 336). If borders are about exclusion, inclusion and othering (Newman 2003), we can see this clearly in the case of India and Pakistan.

Another border that emerged in South Asia after the departure of the British is the India–Bangladesh border. This border was created in 1971, after a determined struggle of the people of Bangladesh against the control of the Pakistani state. The liberation of Bangladesh is not a simple episode in South Asian history. In the 1947 partition, “15 million people were displaced and one million dead”. Similarly, “horrifying numbers of people were killed and many hundreds of thousands of women raped in 1971” (Ghosh 2017, 26 ). These horrific events that led to physical borders also profoundly impacted people’s minds, creating some permanent mental borders in South Asia.

In brief, most of these borders created in South Asia narrate the tale of war, conflict, and brute violence. No wonder these borders reveal “cartographic anxieties” (Krishna 1994) of South Asian states. Thus, it is not a giant puzzle for a student of South Asian borders that the South Asian region is one of the least integrated in political and economic terms, contradicting its deep socio-cultural connection. The highly securitised, state-centric understanding of borders in South Asia inhibits integration efforts. Regional integration requires cross-border political, social and economic ties. Interestingly, South Asian states hardly hesitate in embracing globalisation, linking themselves to the international economy. Still, there is a visible political aversion noted in every South Asian capital pertaining to regionalism. This is quite perfectly captured by Banerjee (1998), who believes that border politics help us understand the contours of relations between the South Asian states. So even when the British left the region, the South Asian states have not taken policy initiatives to bridge the borders. On the contrary, most of them maintained these hard artificial borders endorsing and propagating the idea of security compulsion. Thus, South Asian states essentially maintained the artificiality of hard borders by negating the natural linkages between the culture and people of South Asia (Tripathi 2021).

**Studying South Asian Borders**

While borders in South Asia explain so much about the region, there is still a lack of academic engagement. This has been noted by scholars from within and outside South Asia. Moreover, there is a need for expanding the canvass of academic inquisitiveness by going beyond the security-centric understanding of borders. South Asian scholars must focus on equally relevant themes for generating a clear intellectual and much-needed debate on borders. It is also imperative that young scholars get involved in Border Studies in South Asia. Without new scholarship and research, we risk boxing ourselves into overly conventional descriptions of borders in South Asia that primarily revolve around state and national security. In this respect, this collection is an attempt to draw the attention of scholars to focus on South Asian borders. There is much to learn from each of these studies about the wide-ranging borders of South Asia.

This section has five papers on themes pertinent to South Asian borders. The first paper in this section is on Bengal borderlands bringing out the living experience of borderland communities. While the border is a security concern from national capitals, it is about life and livelihood at the periphery. Sampurna Bhaumik, through her field study of two border districts, Cooch Behar and South Dinajpur (along the India-Bangladesh border), presents how people in borderlands remain under constant check by security agencies that only add complication to their life. This is prior to recognizing that the India-Bangladesh border is not as intricate as the India-Pakistan border. The second paper in this section is again on a borderland that is regarded as one of the most securitised borders of the world. Politics amongst states have repercussions on borderlands. It is first and foremost theatre of state politics, which is quite apparent in the paper by Malvika Sharma. She maps how state politics influence identity formation in the borderland. This is quite evident in the Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir. In this district, the India-Pakistan partition
deeply impacted the identity formation process. While there is a history of community cooperation, it is entirely changed in the Poonch district. This borderland is somehow made to bear the burden of the power politics between the states.

In the present global context, any discussion of borders must discussion of the essential issue of refugees. For some humans, Border border crossing may be for leisure, business, or education, but not for those forced by political and economic circumstances. For the forcibly displaced, crossing the border may be necessary for survival. While privileged travellers with valid documents may be welcomed culturally and economically, the perception of foreigners changes when a person or a group enters the border under a distressing situation. Refugees are not so welcomed by many states and are viewed as an economic and political burden. They are also vilified in local politics, and excesses against refugees at times go unnoticed. In short, refugees cannot be ignored in Border Studies, and in this section, we have two captivating papers on Rohingya refugees. The Rohingya community is from Myanmar, a country of the Southeast Asian region. The international community are well aware of their ordeal, and they have crossed borders to save themselves from persecution. South Asia is a populated developing region, and therefore, any such mass influx of refugees from outside is likely to give birth to several controversies. Rohingya refugees are mainly concentrated in two South Asian countries, Bangladesh and India, and the following two papers of this special section are on this subject.

Rachel Irene D’Silva conducted a field survey of Rohingya refugees settled in Hyderabad, a capital city of Telangana, a southern state in India. D’Silva interviewed refugees staying in this city and brought out some of the important issues generally not covered in news stories. Sariful Islam authored the next article in this section. According to the Bangladesh government, more than one million Rohingya refugees are in Bangladesh. This is a large number for a country like Bangladesh that has recently graduated from the least developing country to a developing country. This number of refugees is likely to create political and social tension, which is quite well addressed in the paper. The paper is conceptually engaged with the Border Studies literature by looking into the differences between territorial and mental borders. Islam draws from the analysis of Azmeary Ferdous into how insiders and outsiders shape the overall discourse on borders.

The last paper in this section is from Uddipta Ranjan Boruah, and it is on one of the most debated subjects in the region: the management of the India–Bangladesh border. India–Bangladesh is the fifth longest land border globally that runs across more than 4000 kilometres. India fenced this border with Bangladesh giving security reasons to check infiltration and smuggling.

While it is easier said than done, India–Bangladesh border fencing is a complex process like the riverine sector, which Boruah considers as a non-human actor. This is a good paper to comprehend the artificiality of human-made borders. Also, the paper reflects how rivers change their course and keep creating difficulty for human ambition to fence the border completely.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, all five papers are on themes that are much discussed and will add to the Border Studies literature in South Asia. I hope this collection will generate the necessary debate, discussion, and curiosity in South Asian borders and draw young scholars towards this subject.

**Note**

1 These papers are the outcome of the South Asian University (SAU)—Borders in Globalization (BIG) Border Studies scholarship. Though I was also responsible for coordinating the SAU-BIG scholarship, as SAU was the implementing institute, the BIG team, especially project lead Brunet-Jailly, was particularly supportive. I would also like to thank colleagues in my department, particularly Dr. Jayashree Vivekanandan and Dr. Nabarun Roy, for helping me during this project. A special thanks to Prof. Sasanka Perera, then the vice-president of the SAU, when SAU signed this project with BIG. I would also like to thank Prof. Sanjay Chaturvedi, a prominent Border Studies scholar, former Dean of our faculty and senior colleague, for extending his support and guiding me throughout the project. Lastly, a big thank you to the SAU administration, SAU finance department and office staff of my department for their contribution and for making this project a success.

**Works Cited**


