# WOMEN IN INDIAN BORDERLANDS

Edited by
Paula Banerjee
and
Anasua Basu
Ray Chaudhury

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# Women in Indian Borderlands

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We hope that this volume will help those who work on feminism, partition, displacement and also those who strive to put an end to racist, sexist and militarist domination in the borderlands of this region and elsewhere.

Kolkata
August 2010

**Paula Banerjee**
**Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury**

# Introduction: Resistance in the Borderlands

*Paula Banerjee and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury*

This is an ethnographic collection on the complex correlation between gender and border. There is hardly any literature, other than one recently published volume by SAGE Publications entitled *Borders, Histories, Existences: Gender and Beyond*, on women's role in the borderlands of India and this collection is meant to address that lacunae. The present state system in South Asia, in particular the state system of the subcontinent, is a result largely of the partitions in the eastern and western parts of the erstwhile united India, giving birth to three states—India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The borders dividing these countries are markers of past bitter history, current separate, distinct and independent existence, and the sign of the territorial integrity/disintegration of these states. The bitterness of the past, the lack of mutual confidence at present, the security concerns of all these states, at the same time the existence of thousand and one linkages make the South Asian borders unique, both spatially and metaphorically, and it also makes this space or borderlands more complex. These spaces bear within lines of hatred, disunity, informal connections and voluminous informal trade, securitized and militarized lines, heavy para-military presence, communal discord, humanitarian crisis, human rights abuses and enormous suspicion that makes it particularly problematic for women. Recently, a few studies have appeared on the borderlands, but hardly any on the myriad roles that women play here. This collection of essays concentrate on every aspect of the borderlands on India. Paula Banerjee's volume *Borders,*

*Histories, Existences: Gender and Beyond* deals with the border and women's presence in it from a designated historical perspective and gives us a theoretical scaffolding of the subject. However, the present volume contains a host of ethnographic studies that at times supports Banerjee's thesis and at other times problematizes it through actual narratives and its analysis. Perhaps it will be correct to say that this book takes up from where the other volume leaves off; thereby it takes the narrative of women and borders further by foregrounding the element of justice in it.

The only borderland where a strong and separate discourse on women exists is the US–Mexico borderland. No one more than Gloria Anzaldua is responsible for the discourse to take such a trajectory. Anzaldua rebels against the cultural tyranny faced by women in this borderland, where anything that she desired for her improving her life was marked as her 'selfishness'. She creates the 'New Mestiza' who dramatically reclaims the ground for female historical presence. She is also the woman who lacks an official history but creates her own legacy. Anzaldua finds many followers, not least among them Vicki Ruiz. Ruiz studies women's border journeys not in terms of travel, but in terms of accommodating, resisting and transforming through migration. Their journeys are those of survival and resilience. But what about those that did not survive so well, did they not have histories? There is little discussion on such a history. A little later when Debbie Nathan writes about *Women and Other Aliens: Essays from the US–Mexico Border* (1991) she also speaks of how women in the borders transform not just their dress but also their stance towards parents, husbands, children, boyfriends and birth control. Nathan, however, is much less celebratory as she discusses on the one hand how immigration is transformative for both family and gender roles, but on the other hand also talks about a plethora of other challenges women on the border face, such as abortion of illegal and unplanned child, jail sentences for petty crimes and lack of jobs for illegal existences. Interest on gender and women's lives in the region has continued. Today there are a number of works such as Mattingly and Hansen's (2006) volume that discusses socio-economic conditions on the border as they shape and are shaped by both daily life at the local level and the global economy. They discuss the change in the maquiladora workforce, the political activism of women in the borders and role of women's non-governmental organizations. Perhaps no other borderland can claim such a rich feminist discourse. Our effort is

certainly not to replicate it. Our geographical location have some similarities but also many differences that create different histories.

The borderlands within the purview of our discussion are marked by similar violence that plagues the US–Mexico borderland. In this site of violence a few get included but many more are left out, excluded as aliens, and most of those who are left out have feminine forms. They embody the difference that marks the borders. The border as the site where this contest over inclusion and exclusion is played out every day becomes a zone of endemic violence where masculinity is privileged. The states views them as territories that needs to be possessed by blood, if required, as they are thought to demarcate the inside from the outside, sovereignty from anarchy and the singular/pure from pluralistic/contaminated spaces. They construct the space of agency, the mode of participation in which we act as citizens in the multilayered polities to which we belong. Hence, borders to the state or its leaders are not merely lines. They are zones that situate the grey areas where the jurisdiction of the state ends and the other state takes over. They are the common ground of two or more states that share them and also interpret its meanings in very different ways to its citizens in their national narratives, history writing and collective spatialized memories. In the case of India, just like that of the USA, security concerns overwhelm all other equally legitimate concerns and values. Military security dominates over human security in the border region.

However, unlike the US–Mexico borderlands, none of India's borderlands have any industrial development. There are no common economic planning and no health services. Does one hear a sigh of relief? We can say with clear conscience that after all India does not treat its borders as vestiges of colonialism to be used and abused at will. But this does not preclude the fact that these borderlands remain as regions of endemic poverty and violence. Women living in Indian borderlands are not as fortunate as their mestiza counterpart, as they neither have a celebratory history nor have developed a celebratory discourse such as the Chicana women. Yet they survive the ordeal of violence and resist in their small ways the massive structure of state power, while some of their Western counterparts and governments are often more caught up in spending resources in trying to save them from fate worse than death or from being trafficked particularly to their respective countries and squander fortunes on anti-trafficking programmes

without considering how they can save themselves and their families from hunger deaths because such deaths are a reality in the world of our borderlands. So we feel the need to tell the story of these women who, albeit ordinary live in the borders, are its markers and resist everyday violence in all its multiplicities. These essays then concern themselves with women living in Indian borderlands and discuss how they negotiate their differences with a state, though democratic, but denies space to difference based on either ethnicity, religion, class or gender. Women living in the borders are the subject of this series of articles not only because they belong to these perilous territories or the borders but also because in many ways they form them.

The universalistic nature of citizenship that emanates from traditional liberal and social democratic discourses is extremely deceptive as it conceals the exclusion of women from national identities of citizenship. The nation and the state are both premised in particular gender identities. Thus the ideological constructions of the state are weighted against women who remain in the borders of democracy. Yet in moments of conflict at times women assume centrality. This is because in areas of civil conflict men withdraw from civic life for compulsions of war and self-defence, and borderlands of India are often spaces of conflict. In such a situation, the public sphere retreats into the private and women form the civil societies. They assume roles that are completely new to them and confront and negotiate with the massive power of the state machinery in their everyday lives. Further, as transmitters of cultural value, women construct differences that shape the future of the nation and the border. Yet in borderlands the feminization of civil space seldom happens, and when it happens, it seldom stays that way for long, as the recent history of Manipur suggests, which we have written elsewhere. Conflict here leads to further masculinization of the space as this is the space that demarcates the citizens from the aliens, and only men can be pristine or model citizens who can draw blood for the state, albeit the blood that is drawn can be and often is women's blood. Therefore, in fact most of our traditional efforts to make geopolitical regions such as borderlands more secure are nothing but attempts to privilege a masculine definition of security that result in only feminine insecurities. In addressing questions of security, the insecurities of women always remain in the back of beyond. In this volume we deal with insecurities of women posited on the borderlands and analyse how they deal with them. This volume is a collection of micro-narratives discussing different aspects of women's lives on

the borders. We ask how women deal with the multiple hazards that these borders present. We do not question whether women's negotiations with the borders as bordered existences are merely an act of coping or of agency. We assume all forms of coping contain within it some form of agency. We question how women deal with perennial conflicts that are found in Indian borderlands. Whether their acts of resistance mark them as feminists or not is something that does not perturb us. We wish to recover all acts of resistance feminist or otherwise. In our essays we ask whether the effects of the border are restricted only to the borderland. We also look at bordered people, especially refugee women and analyse how the act of migration affects women's abilities to negotiate complex social, political and economic relationships? A further question that we pose is how globalization impacts on all of this. Does it in any way help us to move beyond cyclical patterns of violence? This collection of articles try to interpret these issues from new angles and locations if not answer these questions in proper social science terms. The essays throw up many issues that should interest social scientists such as how the paradigm of trafficking homogenizes offences against women, how the border becomes both a reality and a metaphor, how migration is transformative for women, how violence percolates borders, how the urge to control resources pushes matrilineal tribes to margins, etc. Spatially also this collection of essays is varied and interesting as it includes two articles that are located on the Bengal–Bangladesh border, two on Kashmir–Pakistan border and two others on Northeast–Myanmar–Bangladesh border. The last section is entitled voices. The volume gives us glimpses of the 'real' women living in the border dealing with complexities much larger than themselves creating, resisting and transforming their realities in their own terms. The kaleidoscopic images disturb, excite, confuse but always push us to know about these women a little more.

The first chapter is entitled 'Bengal–Bangladesh Boderland: Chronicles from Nadia, Murshidabad and Malda' by Paula Banerjee. Banerjee refers to three major works on borderland, including her own book entitled *Borders, Histories, Existences: Gender and Beyond.* Besides which the other two publications include *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal* written by Ranabir Samaddar, and *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* by Willem Van Schendel. Banerjee states that she wanted to move away from meta-narratives and look at borders from the perspective of capillaries of political and historical spaces.

In this chapter she addresses a vexed issue that she has not previously dealt with. She looks at the notions of flows, and how that impacts on notions of security. With every election and every census, borders become an issue. The concern remains over undocumented migrants and whether their arrival threatens the nation. She also addresses notions of increasing violence in the borders as tool of managing and the paradigm shift in what is considered crime as a result of these flows. She looks at fencing as a marker of such violence and discusses women in this border and the evolution of their relationship to the border. She argues that violence in the borders priveleges certain forms of crime. She discusses how stopping trafficking became part of the international agenda whereas all other crimes become negligible. She returns to an intensive demographic study of the Bengal–Bangladesh borderlands in the three districts of Nadia, Murshidabad and Malda. Instead of meta-narratives she comes back to the question of micro politics and questions whether present-day flows have any relation to past histories or not. Her argument is that borders have historically evolved as gendered entity and thereby these have become spaces of extraordinary control and violence against women. Concentration on trafficking does not give justice to women but rather creates more unjust border regimes for them. All other offences are forgotten while trafficking assumes the centre stage.

Are borders real or metaphors is the question addressed in the next chapter. This chapter is entitled 'Narrated Time and Constructed Space: Remembering the Communal Violence of 1950 in Hooghly' and in it Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury argues that borders are not just lines in the landscape, they actively shape the societies and cultures that they enclose. Borders denote a spatial dimension of social relationships that are continually being configured and, in this process, the meaning of borders is produced, reconstructed, strengthened or weakened. The notion of borders in today's world is a testimony to the importance of territoriality with the creation of the 'other'. The imagery of borders has become a popular metaphor in the study of socio-spatial development in post-partition societies. In this study, Basu Ray Chaudhury unravels the stories of three Muslim women of Hooghly, an otherwise calm and quiet place, during the turbulent years of partition. Anasua's study captures the lives and experiences of the people who live through the 'partitioned time', of the way in which the events accompanying the partition constructs in their minds, and the identities or

uncertainties that partition creates or re-enforces. The main purpose of the study is to enquire on how women negotiate borders—borders of sect, community, patriarchy, and of conflicts not only in their own land but also in an alien land away from their homeland. She analyses the self-representation of the Muslims once displaced. She focuses on their narratives of victimhood, which tends to be framed in rhetoric of Hindu–Muslim differences. She argues that their memories may be subjective in nature, but their selective memories help us to understand how the displaced women negotiate. In this article she attempts to deal with the inner process of 'line making' and 'line negotiating' based on the narratives of those women, which shapes their memories of displacements with the gender-specific experiences as 'returnees'.

Much has already been written on Kashmir and its women but very little is known about the women saddling the India–Pakistan border. In the next section there are two narratives from Kashmir. The two chapters are namely 'Women's Voices: From Jammu and Kashmir' by Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal and Suchismita and 'Renegotiating Internal Boundaries by Women of Jammu and Kashmir' by Sumona DasGupta. Anuradha in her chapter highlights women as the major victims of warfare. One of the most obvious examples of specific victimhood of women in armed conflict, she argues, is their vulnerability to sexual assault and rape. Rape and sexual abuse is nothing new in the history of warfare. Marauding armies have through different periods of history, around the globe, taken advantage of women in the course of military conquests. What is new is the role of media. Instant reporting from the field results in rapid sensitization of public opinion. It greatly reduces the time lapse between the perpetration of such tragedies and their responses to them and thereby generating responses from the people very quickly. However, in the case of borders, lack of access and no reportage make the consequent sensitization elusive. She argues that the victimization started when the borders were carved out in 1947–1948, when people living in fairly peaceful areas suddenly found themselves on the fringes of nowhere, close to places that had become simply lines drawn on a map for everybody else in South Asia. The brunt was borne not only by women living on the borders; the prolonged trauma was also shared by women living away from the borders but affected in many ways by the sudden carving of new boundaries, dislocation and its

multiple consequences. For the majority population of India and Pakistan, the traumatic memories of partition have become historical narratives, but in Jammu and Kashmir because of the disputed nature of its borders, these memories are a festering sore, which continues to bleed and makes people suffer in the form of displacements and dispossession on account of border skirmishes between the hostile neighbours. She claims that weird border contours on the maps of J&K intensify the militarization of borders on both sides, thus adding to the insecurity among the border population in general and women in particular. A continuum of tragedy and victimization has followed till date due to constant hostility and wars that have adversely affected the border people in many ways. In her chapter she gives examples of great onslaughts that these border people witnessed in 1965, 1971 and in the post-insurgency period of 1989 and beyond. Through narratives she argues in her chapter that violence and victimhood at the borders does not stop at the borders but percolates deep inside the nation form adding to the gendered dimension of the Indian nation.

At the very outset Sumona DasGupta identifies the term 'border' not just as physical boundaries represented by *de facto* and *de jure* cartographic lines that separate the sovereign writ of one state from another, but also as other fault lines generated or accentuated by a conflict. Acknowledging borders as lines that separate and delimit spaces, she goes beyond 'cartographic anxieties' and physical landscapes to 'non-cartographic anxieties'—borders that are etched on mindscapes—lines that separate 'us' from 'them'. In doing so she recognizes that there can be an overlap between these two sets of anxieties, and that where they intersect, fault lines come into even sharper relief. In her research she portrays how these borderlines are mediated by gender. Gender is used not just as a descriptive category but as an analytical tool that is as much about men and masculinity as it is about women and femininity. A gender perspective consequently explores how men and women's roles are constructed in society and gender sensitive conflict analysis looks at ways in which gender roles, gender identities, gender ideologies and gendered power structures may be altered in the course of a protracted conflict. Informed by this, the chapter explores some of the fault lines/borderlines in the iconography of the contemporary conflict in Jammu and Kashmir, using gender as a cross-cutting variable rather than as a separate, add-on issue.

The next section is composed of two articles from the Northeast India–Myanmar and Northeast India–Bangladesh borders. The Indo-Myanmar border is considered a fairly safe and friendly unlike the previous two borders that we discussed. Sanitized or not, even this border has its own compulsions. Sahana Basavapatna in her chapter entitled 'Sanitized Society and Dangerous Interlopers: Law and the Chins in Mizoram' analyses from a legal perspective the experiences of Burmese women who in migrating across international borders problematize democracy, identity and citizenship. She explores the theme from two perspectives—first, how the legal frame and, second, how cultural and political ties of Mizoram themselves affect the Burmese migrants in India. A host of factors lead to the migration of the people from the Chin state to Mizoram. The Indo-Burma border thus becomes extremely significant for continuing migration and cross-border terrorism. Sahana focuses on the experiences of women crossing these borders and the responses of both the state and the central governments. It is through the legal frame that she seeks to analyse how women who have been forced to migrate negotiate the complex social, political and economic web of relationships of being branded as foreigner and in many cases illegal. She argues that the law being rooted in the patriarchal mindset is inadequate in perceiving and responding to women's needs. She concludes how Mizoram through its restrictions of foreigners become another example of how a state seeks to sanitize society. At the focal point of Sahana's research are the Chin refugees. By considering the issue at a more transitive level where it is more than purely a struggle for ethnic and cultural rights, Sahana argues that the case represents a control over circuits of legal and paralegal trade and other transactions. Within the problematic, gender is not yet another site of difference but it is an inseparable constitutive element of the conflict itself. And here, trade and other transactions figure as processes where the element of gender plays a role.

Anjuman Ara Begum in her chapter entitled 'Engendered Lives: Women in the West Garo Hills' argues that partition is conceptually distinct from population transfer, though in most cases, it is accompanied by substantial sorting of populations. Partition is a political outcome that impacts social life tremendously. With partition, the border creeps in, creating lines that divides people, society and nation. The border becomes physically visible when it is fenced. Fences along the border lines make the border a concrete and fixed structure representing control of land and people. Border gives

birth to the extremities of particular forms of violence that are enacted in the name of security and well-being checkpoints, walls, fences, technologies of surveillance and governance. Physical borders create metaphorical borders between people living in the area of West Garo Hill. Here the border is between the tribal Garos and the non-tribal Muslims. Each community looks upon each other with extreme suspicion, thereby always making violence a possibility. Other than that paradigms of control over borders create regimes of violence. With newer forms of border protection, women face new inequalities. For example, Border Security Force (BSF) put a stop to historical flows across borders and fencing put a stop to women's economic activities through bartering of goods across borders leading to their further pauperization. Any violence lead to backlash against women and tribal women, who are matrilineal, and are forced so that they give up their symbolic control over land and non-tribal women are forcefully pushed out of it. The author says that women's lives in the borderlines of West Garo hills reflect their sheer resilience, silent tears and a burning desire to put a step outside the line called 'border'. It also reflects their sheer energy and will to overcome all inequity and injustice.

In the section on 'Voices' we have brought together interviews of women from the Bengal–Bangladesh and the Northeast–Myanmar borders. This is a project of recovery. We hope to recover the feminine voices of resistance in the borderlands. In formalistic, institutional and militarized spaces that privilege the masculine what gets primarily lost is the feminine voice. By speaking about their lives, the women regain some of the agency that had been lost. Through this process of auto-ethnography we hope to recover the lost voices of women in this highly masculine and militarized space called the 'borders'. These interviews are brought to us by Aditi Bhaduri and Chitra Ahanthem. Aditi conducted her interviews in villages of Jayantipur, Hatkhola, Petrapole, Shutiya and correctional facilities in Kolkata. By the act of speaking, women invoke justice and resist injustices that they face in their everyday lives as marginal beings. Chitra focuses exclusively in the plight of women in the border town of Moreh. The everyday life stories of these women reflect not only their identity as women but how these realities are shaped by their location near a porous international border town where the border not only divides the lives of 'women' but plays a crucial role in joining them in their labouring lives as women. The border that Moreh women traverses is supposedly as safe but does it lead to feminine securities? We leave it as a question for the readers to address.