

Trans-border Communities, Connections and Bordering Belonging and political membership across India's borders

23 July 2021

Venue: Alte Kapelle, *Uni-Campus* Hof 1, Alser Straße 2–4, Vienna

Hybrid event

Entry under '3G' conditions, mask mandatory in the seminar room

Online via Zoom:

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Workshop organised by:

FWF Project “Trans-border Religion: Limbu Rituals in Nepal and Sikkim (P29805)”

CIRDIS, University of Vienna

Convener: Mélanie Vandenhelsken

Welcome address and introductory remarks	9:00
SESSION 1 – Discussant: Martin Saxer	
Willem van Schendel Transborder communities & beyond-human connections across India's easternmost borders	9:30
Aditya Kiran Kakati Between Connections and Closure: filling a Political 'Vacuum' with Culture, Coercion and Co-option	10:00
<p>This paper examines 'late' colonial frontiers where end of Second World War (WWII) and decolonisation led to the emergence of bordered-worlds in the China-India-Myanmar. Itinerant state and nation building here became concomitant with accommodating minorities in new nation-states by creating new forms of inclusion and connectivity, along with closures which were unevenly distributed. Ambiguities of bordering and resistance or acceptance of this, with 'development-like' activities created selectively securitized border-zones, and created enclosures of exclusion where conditions for armed resistance could emerge. Both 'coercion' and 'development-like' activities resembled characteristic features of state-making though negotiations with borderland societies, and resistance to this has been predicated upon politics of uneven access and intimacy with the 'developmentalist' state. These have created stakes in reifying some geographical spaces as 'dangerous' on the map, while over-looking the negotiated nature of the production of closures particularly at a time when newly formed international borders around India's far-Eastern Himalayan regions assumed new and selective significance. This affected cultural and internal political boundaries and norms of negotiating with the post-colonial Indian state, and is best exemplified by discussing bulk of cases from Naga 'tribal' areas across India and Burma, with comparative references to some adjacent others.</p>	
Mélanie Vandenhelsken and Prem Chettri Trade, Labour, Marriage, and Illegality: Experiences of Nepal-Sikkim Cross-border Mobility	10:30
<p>As far back as memory goes, local people have always crossed the border between Sikkim and east Nepal through several passes in the mountains as well as in the plain. This possibility of connectivity concerns in particular the Limbu people whose ancestral territory stretches across this border, drawn in the early nineteenth century in the frame of colonial expansion. Borderland people in this region, and Limbu in particular, imagine and experience this territory in various ways, revealing various overlapping 'geographies' more or less determined by the border.</p> <p>This presentation focuses on one of these layers of experiences: on the interaction between the fluidity of crossborder mobility and the closure of the border experienced by people who permanently settle on the other side through the presentation of several types of experience of crossborder mobility:</p>	

- The transformation of trade between Panchthar in Nepal and Darjeeling area in the last four decades, and the reconfiguration of inequalities it highlights;
- Experiences of Nepali labourers in Sikkim;
- Crossborder mobility of women for marriages.

These show that the coexistence of various regimes of law, in particular of the Indo-Nepal treaty and of the specific citizenship regulation in Sikkim, creates a hierarchization of mobile people based on their capacity to control mobility. The coexistence of fluidity and control over national membership benefits to a reduced number of local traders while also allowing subordination, indebtedness, precariousness, and illegality. In this way, this presentation highlights the articulation of mobility and connectivity, fixity, and power in the Nepal-Sikkim borderland people's experience of transnationality.

COFFEE BREAK (11:00-11:30)

SESSION 2 – Discussant: Aditya Kiran Kakati

Philippe Ramirez

11:30

**Do People Make Borders or do Borders Make People?
Small Scale Ethnic Geopolitics on Assam-Meghalaya Frontiers.**

Since the redefinition of colonial administrative breakdowns in the 1960 and 1970's, states of North-East India have been regularly involved in disputes over their mutual boundaries. Beyond the immediate material and political resources sought for, what has been at stake has been the assertion of legitimacies over space, which resorted to various idioms of historical, natural and ethnic rights. The history of Meghalaya-Assam geopolitical disputes over complex multicultural zones remarkably illustrates how the boundary might be seen as both a cause and a result of the shaping of the ethnic and cultural landscapes. The boundary might be seen as both a cause and a result of the shaping of the ethnic and cultural landscapes: imagined cultural geographies induced administrative delineations which constrained movements and identities. The data resorted to will be mostly ethnographical as well as historical.

Anuradha Sen Mookerjee

12:00

**Overlapping Political Membership in the Chhit Mahals:
The Transnational Paper-Citizens of India**

The one hundred and sixty-two border enclaves along the India-Bangladesh border known as the 'Chhit Mahals' in Bengali, with the word 'Chhit' in Bengali meaning a drop and 'mahal' meaning a building or district, no longer exist since 1 August, 2015. As sovereign territorial pockets completely bounded by another sovereign jurisdiction existing since colonial times, they became part of two different postcolonial states after the border-making, following decolonisation of British India. They were exchanged after the land boundary between India and Bangladesh was finalized on 6 June 2015, following the sudden ratification of the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement between India and Bangladesh in the Indian Parliament on 7 May 2015. It was ratified 41 years after it was originally agreed upon by the Indian and Bangladeshi Head of States. The Chhit Mahals as cartographically 'sensitive spaces', were home to people who lived effectively 'stateless' lives, as the residents had no option but to live transnationally across two sovereign jurisdictions on a daily basis in the absence of the state in these territories. This paper drawn from my PhD thesis which is an ethnography of newly documented Indian citizens of the former Bangladeshi border enclaves in the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, India. In this paper, I discuss the transnationality that was historically practiced by the dwellers of the former enclaves and their experience of multi-level politics and identity as borderland people, in context of their historical struggles with the social boundaries enforced by the border since the Partition of India. As people who took to collective organizing advocating for state presence in the Chhit Mahals and contested the illegality of their physical presence in territories of their host states, the Chhit Mahal residents also accessed documentary political membership bypassing the criteria of territorial presence. In the period 2005-2015, majority of the residents of the former Bangladeshi Chhit Mahals in Cooch Behar district of the Indian state West Bengal, had been issued Indian Election-Identity cards based on Indian address of their relatives or friends, even though they lived in Bangladeshi Chhit Mahals and the district authorities were aware of it. This paper argues that the Chhit Mahal residents had created a new frame of overlapped political membership, making legible members out of territorial non-members on the premise of a moral economy of defacto statelessness. It argues that the Chhit Mahals represented a frame of legal legibility and political membership that was furthered by

the interests of Indian political parties locally and the massive discretionary power of both street-level and district-level state agents.

LUNCH BREAK (12:30-14:00)	
SESSION 3 – Discussant: Mélanie Vandenhelsken	
Martin Gaenzle Itinerant Religious Leaders in the Nepal-India Borderland	14:00
<p>Most renouncers in South Asia, such as Shaiva or Vaishnava ascetics, Sant gurus, bhaktas etc., traditionally follow an itinerant life-style and thus have always tended to be ignorant of borders. They can be seen as a particular type of “trans-border individuals.” It is well known that in South Asian history this type has often been used to play the role of spies and informants. But apart from “fake sadhus” there are also those itinerant religious leaders who have a genuine cause of faith and some other agendas which they propagate while moving from village to village or town to town. This paper will look into the lives of two important individuals in the late 19th and early 20th century who began their career in East Nepal and also moved across the border into Darjeeling and Sikkim to gather a following. One is the Josmani leader Gyan Dil Das, who was a Brahman who spread bhakti ideas among Rai and Limbu villagers and eventually settled in Sikkim. The other is Phalgunanda, the Limbu founder of the Satyahangma religion which is mainly popular in Nepal but has also some followers in India. Both traditions can be seen as “trans-border religions”, but their history shows that their transmission and development can take very different turns.</p>	
Grégoire Schlemmer Possible Impacts of States on Rituals and Ethnic Belonging Among some Kirat Populations of Nepal	14:30
<p>This presentation will deal with the Kirat group of Eastern Nepal and the various political entities that have surrounded and controlled them (Dolakha, Sen State then Gorkha, Sikkim). We will suggest possible effects of these state powers on ritual life and group membership. More precisely, the attempts to ritually connect to certain centres of power (especially through ritual journeys), but also the possible impact of administrative boundaries and new land management practices on ethnic boundaries and ethnic labels. These points will be illustrated with a few cases studies and through maps.</p>	
Bernardo A. Michael Dwelling, Assemblages, and State Spaces: The Anglo-Gorkha Borderlands, 1750-1816	15:00 (online-GTM-4)
<p>This paper will explore the tangled histories of communities and states along the Anglo-Gorkha frontier in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Dwelling in the Anglo-Gorkha borderlands was the product of assemblages or emergent interrelations between entitlements to agrarian resources, human populations, and political strategies to gain access to and control over them. Kingdoms, ruling elites, and their dependent populations competed for control over these agrarian resources, creating a patchwork of jostling and overlapping territories and jurisdictions. In the early 19th century, these dynamic state spaces would become the subject of dispute between the English East India Company and the Himalayan kingdom of Gorkha (present-day Nepal), culminating in the Anglo-Gorkha war of 1814-16.</p>	
COFFEE BREAK (15:30-16:00)	
SESSION 4 – Discussant: Bernardo Michael	
Mark Turin Language Boundaries and Borders in Northern South Asia: Fluidity and Plurality beyond the Nation-State	16:00 (online-GTM-7)
<p>Drawing on examples from the linguistically-diverse region of Northern South Asia, in this presentation I explore three main questions. First, I ask how language boundaries both contribute to and defy the imagination of the nation-state. Second, I investigate how such boundaries are transcended and become redefined through increased mobility and technological innovation. And third, I examine what it means for languages to become detached from the landscapes in which they were traditionally situated and historically spoken. Unfixed and unfixable, languages resist the limitations and constraints of nation-states—both colonial and contemporary—that strive to delineate their boundaries along “clear” and often monolingual lines. In the Northern South Asia, plural linguistic identities challenge reductive</p>	

national logics that seek to bind or appropriate languages for hegemonic and ideological goals. Not only are national borders decreasingly relevant for the maintenance and transmission of languages, but the global dispersal of people and the languages they speak are combining with accessible digital media to transform internally-maintained language borders as well.

<p>Sara Shneiderman The Irony of Open Borders: Mobility, Citizenship and Ethnicity in Himalayan South Asia</p>	<p>16:30 (online GTM-7)</p>
<p>In this era of travel bans and renewed populist nationalism, arguments for open borders and global citizenship appear ever more compelling. Yet the actual effects of open borders in shaping prospects for inclusive citizenship may not always be as imagined. Drawing upon 20 years of ongoing ethnographic research across the borders of Nepal and India, I show how the political-historical reality of the postcolonial open border between the two countries has yielded unexpected results for many people who live along it.</p> <p>In both contexts, members of marginalized communities are often unable to gain full recognition from the state in which they are born, due to ethno-racialized frameworks for regulating citizenship. I ask: in such contexts, how do the experiences of both those who negotiate multiple citizenships, and those who possess no citizenship (de facto stateless people), complicate state-promoted narratives of singular citizenship and nationalist belonging, yielding their own forms of political action? How have global discourses of indigeneity and marginality worked to counter neocolonial forms of cultural imperialism, challenging nationalist claims to territory through locally-emergent social movements? I consider what it means to examine these questions within non-diasporic contexts of regular regional mobility across land borders, where many of the received analytical frameworks for understanding the histories, politics, and socialities of settler colonialism and trans-oceanic migration may not apply.</p>	
<p>Martin Saxer Book presentation: Remoteness and Connectivity in the Himalayas and Beyond</p>	<p>17:00</p>
<p>Concluding remarks and discussion</p>	<p>17:30- 18:00</p>