



Borderland: a Peril of Cultural Identities

Nyato Doji¹ and Dhritiman Sarma²

¹PhD Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Rajiv Gandhi University, Rono Hills, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh, India; ²Asst Professor Department of Anthropology, Rajiv Gandhi University, Rono Hills, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh, India.

KEYWORDS

Border, Borderland, Borderland Identity, Cultural Border, Arunachal-Bhutan borderland, cross-border Identity, Monpas, Sharchops, Indo-Bhutan Border, West Kameng-Bhutan Border, Kalaktang Circle, Samdrung, Warrangpam

ABSTRACT

The creation of a political border has led to the surfacing of many socio-cultural activities in all the borderlands across the globe, igniting the interest of social scientists worldwide. Borderland studies more than often accentuates the history of how the political border came into being and its impact on the ethnic identity (articulations, ambiguities, and contradictions of identity) of the people residing in the borderland (Berdahl, 1999). The present borderland under study has witnessed a parallel upshot of the political border on the identity of the people residing in the borderland between West Kameng (Arunachal) and Bhutan. The identity of the Monpas from West Kameng and Sharchops from the Eastern Bhutan has been jeopardized time and again. This paper is an attempt to understand the “Plurality of self” from the periphery of Arunachal-Bhutan Borderland from an emic perspective.*

**The term Monpa in the present study is used solely for the Monpas residing in the borderland between West Kameng in Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan and hence should not be confused otherwise.*

Introduction

In the last few years, an apprehension with the progression of global restructuring has led to a substantial increase in research on borderlands all over the world. Today, the study of borderlands is providing new insights into the relationship between modern states and transnational linkages (Schendel, 2005). “Borders come in many ways. Some are like earthquakes. When the world’s political tectonic plates move, they create fissures known as international [or interstate] borders. Many of these come about in ways that, for those who experience them are just as overpowering, devastating and unpredictable as an earthquake”, shaking and trembling the culture, identity, and life in general of the people residing near this political fissure (Schendel, 2005). When anthropologists talk about borders, it is not just limited to its territorial or spatial space. Geographical borders come many a time with cultural meanings, far beyond their political intentions (Berdahl, 1999). This scrupulous aspect of the border has drawn the inquisitiveness of anthropologists so as to see how borders though understood rationally as a physical entity in nature, are related to people’s socio-political system (Berdahl, 1999). Borderland demonstrates the notion of “the plurality of self” often synonymously used as Border Consciousness (Hammad, 2010). This border consciousness often generates an idea of oneness, a sort of “homeland nationalism” which originates via identity narratives of the borderlands. This ‘localism’ ideologies yield a “local system of governance” between cross-border state and non-state agents which supplements the countryside from inter-nation anomic diplomacy. The current study

focuses on the border between the land of Thunder Dragon King, i.e., Bhutan and the Kalaktang circle in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, India.

Methodology

The Indo-Bhutan Border is the international boundary between the Kingdom of Bhutan and the Republic of India. The border is 699 km long and links the Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and West Bengal.¹ Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan share an international border of 217 km². This border covers two districts in Arunachal i.e., Tawang and West Kameng. The present paper focuses on the borderland between West Kameng and Bhutan border.

The present study was conducted place in two villages i.e., Samdrung (pronounced *Cham-drung*) and Warrangpam, and the Kalaktang circle in West Kameng district, Arunachal Pradesh. Samdrung is the last village on the Arunachal side of the border situated 28 km from Kalaktang and 4 km (approx.) from Sodang, the last village in Bhutan towards the Indian Territory. All the aforementioned area under study is predominated by the Monpas. The Monpas are a Buddhist community in Arunachal Pradesh mostly settled in West Kameng, Tawang and Tuting in East Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Of the total 28 km stretch from Kalaktang to Samdrung, more than half of the road is in a very bad condition and extremely difficult to motor.

The present study is based on borderland narratives of older folks who have lived enough to witness first hand the cultural exchange between the Monpas and the Sharchops in Arunachal-Bhutan borderland. The data collected is purely qualitative in nature and no fixed sample size has been considered prior to collection of information. A total of 26 informants were interviewed for the current study of which the eldest member was 67 years old. A semi-structured schedule was used while interviewing the subjects.

All the interviews were voice-taped so that no important information were missed out. The data had many local terms, which had been noted down properly cross-checking the spellings with the educated youths in the village. Multiple photographs has been taken in the village during the interview for proper understanding for the reader and for a clearer picture of the present borderland under study. Secondary sources from internet, books and archives from the monastery has been used for refinement in the present study.

The monpa and the Sharchop identity

In Bhutan, the administrators, scholars and historians used the Pelela mountain ridge to divide the nation into two halves i.e., west and east. This broad binary division gave rise to two separate identities for the people living in the east of Pelela and the west of Pelela. The western region came to be known as Ngalop and the eastern part was termed as Sharchops. (Gyeltshen, 2006). So people living in the eastern part of Bhutan are called the Sharchops now. But the Sharchop identity again got complex and got contested with time. Initially the term Sharchop was used to identify people living in the east of Pelela which includes the Mongar, Lhuntse, Trashigang, Trashi Yangtse, Pema Gatshel and Samdrup Jongkhar. (Gyeltshen, 2006) but now it is commonly used to identify people who speak Tsanglakha (which is the language spoken by the Monpas in Arunachal).

1 Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India, <[https://mha.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mha/files/pdf/BM_MAN-IN-BHUTAN\(E\).pdf](https://mha.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mha/files/pdf/BM_MAN-IN-BHUTAN(E).pdf)> accessed on 12/6/2019, 3:56 pm

2 Ministry of development of northeastern region, Govt. of India, <http://www.mdoner.gov.in/node/202>, accessed on 11/7/2019, 11:29 pm

It was informed that the Monpas of West Kameng and also the Tawangpa (TawangMonpas) have a common history of having migrated from Bhutan and Tibet, although there is no written records to justify the statement and all the information are on the basis of the oral history that has been passed on from generations. There is no record of the time period of the said migration but from what is heard it took place in waves over centuries. There are multiple histories of people who claim that Monyul (present day Tawang, West Kameng, the Himalayan range south of Tibet and parts of Bhutan and Sikkim) had its own King, making it difficult to trace the exact migration and history of Monpas in general. The term Monpa is said to have derived from the term Monyul. It is said that people living in the “Mon” region are called Monpas. “Pa” basically means people.

The stories from the periphery again is quite multifaceted.

- According to Tawangpa, “Sher” means East/the place of sunrise in their local dialect. For them, both the Sharchops in the Eastern Bhutan and Kalaktangpas (KalaktangMonpas) and Dirangpas (DirangMonpas) are Sharchokpas i.e., People living in the East.
- The Kalaktangpas again use the term *Nukchokpa* or *Sharchokpa* to identify the Sharchops in the Eastern Bhutan. The term “*nuk*” and “*sber*” is synonymous to the term “East” in the local Kalaktangpa language.
- The Sharchops in Eastern Bhutan again identify the Kalaktangpas as “*Sharpa*”.
- The West Kameng Monpas also identify themselves as Sharchokpa.

The geographical separation/closeness

Since time immemorial the Monpas of Kalaktang circle have always resided in close affinity with the neighboring Sharchops in the Eastern Bhutan. In fact, before the foundation of the physical/political border, history has it that some parts of Bhutan beyond Samdrung, (the last village near the Arunachal-Bhutan border in West Kameng) were under Monyul. The conception of a political border between West Kameng and Bhutan in the year 1973 has bifurcated the border population parting people from one geographical area into two different governments. The initial boundary, prior to the creation of the current border was up to Chettendzor (now in Bhutan). Samdrung, nowadays is the last village in the Indian Territory but the village is relatively new. As to the villagers, the last village in the Indian Territory was originally Warrangpam but, when people from Warrangpam later migrated from the village and created a village much closer to the Bhutan border which was named “Samdrung”. The village, Samdrung has an aggregate of 36 households and a total population of 163 at present and is the last village geographically in the Indian Territory towards West Kameng-Bhutan border.

Warrangpam has its own history of how the village came into existence. For an enhanced understanding the migration can be divided into three distinct phases.

1. **The First Phase:** During the 1962 Indo-China war, some of the families residing near the Bumla border in Tawang district absconded from Tawang and settled in Warrangpam. There were 4 families in Warrangpam during the first migration and people started settling in Warrangpam thereafter.
2. **The Second Phase:** A second phase of migration took place from Warrangpam to Samdrung. After the people started settling in Warrangpam, some villagers found an area suitable for settlement and hence gave birth to a new village closer to the border.
3. **The Third Phase:** Another phase of migration took place from Warrangpam to Kalaktang as

the road connecting to the nearest town Kalaktang was not motorable and a mere 28 km took hours. People had to travel hours for clothes and other essentials and consequently some families migrated to Kalaktang for to get everyday necessities easier.

Although there is no motorable road connecting Arunachal to Bhutan, but foot route is centuries old. The Monpas residing on the border have always travelled to the other side of the border trekking the hilly terrain and vice-versa. The trek route approximately takes about 3-4 hours to reach the border. Before the creation of the political border in this section of the country, people from Samdrung and Warrangpam and the entire of Kalaktang circle for that matter, have always travelled to the neighboring villages in Bhutan, the only change after the border conception is that, now they have to mark an entry at the SSB (SashatraSeemaBal) gate bordering the two nations. The duration has to be specified whilst making an entry at the SSB gate.

There are instances where the present border has divided families. One such case is of Mr Tashi Dawa's (a 62 year old, an ex Anchal Samiti member from Samdrung) grandfather, who had land possessions in different zones, half of which is now in the Indian Territory and the other half in Bhutan resulting in his sons to separate and live in two different nations. There are multiple cases of such families whose relatives both maternal and paternal are in different nations now because of the border. But the border has never clogged them from visiting the other side to meet and greet with their kins. The kinship ties has been very amicably maintained.

The current foot route from Samdrung is-

Samdrung(Arunachal) - Sodang (nearest village in the Bhutan territory) - Restong -
Sherdzong - Gonong - Bitchiling - Dungmanma - Zomompa

As to the statement of the villagers, ZangthiSherdzong (now in Bhutan) was once part of Monyul and was the starting point of the ethnic boundary but because of amicable political negotiations it was shifted to Bhutan. The people residing in this area belonged to the similar ethnic group with the Monpas of the border at one point of time and there are many people in the village who still have relatives in Indian side of the border. The current border between India and Bhutan in West Kameng is at Kekpakchu, where the SSB gate is built.

Cultural exchange

Both the Monpas in West Kameng and the Sharchops in the Eastern Bhutan are Buddhist by religion. Both communities follow the Nyingma sect of the Tibetan Buddhism and a few of them practice Gelugpa. In the two villages under study not even one family was found to practice a religion different from Buddhism. The religion practiced prior to Buddhism seem to have lost its history because Buddhism came in around 7th century A.D. and no living inhabitants of the two villages under study have any solid knowledge of what animistic religion was followed or what totem was worshipped prior to Buddhism. "Bon" is the shamanistic form of Animism which was practiced in this region as informed by few. But this form of animism have been long disappeared from the lives of the people and hence a very little significance has been given to it with almost no oral or written records. In terms of religion both communities are very similar because of the influence of Buddhism in full swing.

In the past, prior to the boundary demarcation, marriage was common between the two communities. In fact one of my informant's grandmother was a Nukchokpa (as I was told) who had

passed a fortnight prior to my visit to the village. Multiple similar stories can be found in almost all the families residing in Warrangpam and Samdrung. The inter-marriage between the two communities has subsided to an extent to almost nil today. People are nowadays reluctant in giving their surnames to the neighbouring Sharchops of Bhutan. There were times when Sharchop women married to Monpas had the right to vote and had an Indian voter ID but now in the last 10-15 years villagers are a bit averse in giving the right to vote to someone who do not belong to the village or to the same community. There are few older folks who have their relatives in the other side but the young generation do not seem to know of any as restrictions has been imposed at customary level.

Crossing the border is not uncommon in this part of the nation. People travel to and fro from both sides with ease. And there is a cultural event called “Bardo”, which basically means dance in the Kalaktangpa dialect; that happens in Zangthi Sherdzong (Bhutan) once a year for a period of 2-3 days wherein Monpas from Warrangpam and Samdrung and other places cross the border on foot, to attend the program. To reach the place of the event by foot takes around 9-10 hours of trekking the hilly terrains of Bhutan. Whereas coming back, it’s a 3-4 hours route as it is downhill towards this side. In a similar scenario people from Bhutan come towards the Indian side for parallel events. One such event is the “Bardo Cham”. It is a three - day event that happens in Warrangpam in the month of January before the Losar festival. Usually those who come are Lama (Nyingma Lama). For crossing the border, the Indians do not require any physical pass. One has to simply enter one’s detail in the SSB gate and the time period has to be mentioned for the travel. For the Sharchops coming towards the Indian side, they need to show their Voter ID which is then registered by the guards (details collected from regular traveler in the village). All these cultural events are the time when the frequency of crossing the border is at the maximum. And when the Monpas travel to Bhutan, they usually stay in a Bhutanese house for which they pay a minimal fee of their choice and when the Sharchops come to the Monpa Villages this reciprocity is maintained.

The trade route is centuries old and till date people from both the side travel to and fro for business purposes. Initially the Bhutanese presence in the Kalaktang market was a normal scene but in 2013 on the Bhutan side the construction of road from the last village in Bhutan till Trashigang has made it convenient for them to go to Trashigang for their daily needs. Prior to the road construction, Kalaktang was nearer for them and hence they preferred travelling for business here than to Trashigang. There is another activity that takes place between the two nations. There are a bunch of Bhutanese pastoralists called Brokpas who come to the Indian side to sell “ghee”. The Brokpas come to these border villages by the end of September and pay a tax to stay in these lands for 3-4 months (the whole of winter). They come with their cattle as the snowcapped mountains in their area gets too cold for their cattle and for no trace of grazing land for their cattle because of the snow cover.

Acculturation and Diffusion no doubt are the biggest factors causing similarities in people living geographically close. But the environment also plays an equal role as it dictates the clothing and food habits of the people. The food culture and the language of the two communities is similar to an uncanny level as described by the villagers who have travelled and witnessed these similarities firsthand. The Monpas in Arunachal based on their geographical location can be broadly categorized under

1. The TawangMonpa (people living in the Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh)
2. The DirangMonpa (Monpas from Dirang region)
3. The KalaktangMonpa (Monpas from Kalaktang region)

According to the informants there is a place called “Mera Sakteng” in Bhutan where people speak the Tawangpa language. And the rest of eastern Bhutan speak a language which resembles almost 80% with the Kalaktanpa and Dirangpa languages. In fact the language between Kalaktangpa/Dirangpa and Sharchokpa is more similar than the language between Kalaktangpa/Dirangpa and Tawangpa even though they belong to the same community and the same nation.

Present disposition and summary conclusion

The cultural resemblance and lifestyle of the Sharchops and Monpas in general is uncanny but the creation of a political border has changed the current scenario. Of course the change is valid as both the nations are run by two different governments and the imposition of certain social norms has changed the social set up of the villages but a diverging link between the two communities is very prominent from the narratives of the borderlanders. Till very recently say 2-3 years back, Ngultrum (Bhutanese Currency) was accepted in the Kalaktang market and in both Warrangpam and Samdrung. But this has changed now as the villagers complained in the complexity of exchanging these notes. Initially they accepted Ngultrums because the trade between the two communities was regular and the Monpas used the currency to exchange with other Sharchops coming for trade.

Because of constant travelling and interaction between both the communities the villagers under study claimed to have many friends in Bhutan where they stay during their visit to the Bhutanese villages for whatever reason they are travelling for. Since the language that they speak (Tsanghla) is almost same with just slight variation in the pronunciation it is easy for them to converse and smooth interaction is established without any major hurdles. The kinship ties have also been amicably maintained and at times people from the village travel to Bhutan to meet their kins and vice versa.

With all the data and constant interview with the villagers of Samdrung and Warrangpam it can be conferred that the Monpas living in the edge of West Kameng-Bhutan border and Sharchops residing in the Eastern part of the land of Thunder Dragon King are actually a fractured community which has been separated by the political border between Bhutan and Arunachal. This conclusion has also been admitted by many of my informants that they were one community at a point of time but the political boundary created a separate ethnic identity for both the communities.

Although the conclusion has been drawn from the narratives of the Borderlanders of Warrangpam and Samdrung but a more profound data can be withdrawn from the study of the Bhutanese villages neighboring Samdrung. The present study is an endeavor and has its own limitations inviting researchers and anthropologists to look into the matter and carry forward what has been so established.

References

- Berdahl, D. (1999). *Where the World Ended*. University of California Press, first edition.
- Gyeltsen, T. (2006). "Post-Zhabdrung Era Migration of Kurmedkha Speaking People in Eastern Bhutan", *Journal of Bhutan studies*.
- Hammad, K.L. (2010). "Border Identity Politics: The New Mestiza in Borderlands", *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities (ISSN 0975-2935, vol. 2, No. 3*.
- Schendel, W. V. (2005). *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. PLOS Biology.

Other sources

- Ministry of development of northeastern region, Govt. of India, <http://www.mdoner.gov.in/node/202>, accessed on 11/7/2019, 11:29 pm
- Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of India, [https://mha.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mha/files/pdf/BM_MAN-IN-BHUTAN\(E\).pdf](https://mha.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mha/files/pdf/BM_MAN-IN-BHUTAN(E).pdf) accessed on 12/8/2019, 3:56 pm

Primary sources

- The villagers of Warrangpam and Samdrung in West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh, India.
- The Nyignma Lama, one out-migrated family from Warrangpam to kalaktang and few informants from kalaktang Circle under west Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, India.