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Original Article

Borders, Border People, Victimhood and Violence : A Note on Marginality in Contemporary Politics

Santana Khanikar

Centre for International Politics, Organization and Disarmament, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

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Abstract *- Borders are increasingly understood not merely as dividing lines at the edges of the nation-states but as sociological practices of bordering, often present in the very heart of states. In this paper, an attempt is made to examine the relevance of borders in a contemporary globalised world, especially in a world ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper throws light on the processes of construction of borders at multiple scales, going down to the level of the body. It further raises normative questions about the ethics of borders and bordering practices pointing towards inherent violence of borders, both at epistemological and ontological levels.*

Keywords *- Biopolitical bordering, Borders, Covid-19, Globalisation, Othering.*

1. Introduction

In understanding states as containers, of territories, of people or nations, and of culture and politics, borders play an unmistakable role of being the gatekeeper, keeping those who do not belong out and keeping who or what belongs safe inside. In our contemporary world, ravaged by the Covid19 pandemic, termed the first pandemic of modern times, borders become very prominent. Compulsory lockdowns of cities and countries and sealing off of borders for physical entry, such as the EU, where national borders were minimal in practice, have changed our modern world in unprecedented ways. It has not only reaffirmed the place of physical boundary lines of nation-states across the world but has also brought in bio-political boundary practices into the everyday lives of common citizens, to the very centres of state territories, where the idea of the 'self' has become the narrowest possible unit vs the omnipresent threat of the 'other', the diseased or the carrier.

In this paper, I discuss a few bordering practices of our contemporary times that are constructed on narratives of 'self' and 'other', good and evil, safety and risk/ danger, and dwell further on what are the implications of such bordering practices to people who are bordered.

2. Borders in Social Sciences

Talking about borders, I would like to clarify that while the dominant understandings of border relate to the lines on a map or the physical boundaries at the edges of a nation-state, borders and bordering practices are understood with increasingly more popularity, within various social science disciplines, as being at the core of our societies. Traditionally, a distinction was maintained between borders as national boundaries and other boundaries at various other scales. However, more contemporary interdisciplinary research does not maintain such a distinction as bordering practices are perceived at multiple scales as sociological phenomena (van Houtum 2005). There is an increasing focus on borders as a process through which identities are reinforced, and separations upheld. Moreover, in such an understanding, borders and bordering are not only territorial, but there could also be other non-territorial forms of bordering. This understanding then influences the understanding of the concept of border management, where border management does not happen only at the ports of entry. However, it is reflected in policies towards refugees and migrants, rights and facilities enjoyed by various groups, social and cultural acceptance etc. Bordering practices can happen at the very core of the nation-states, in the ways that migrants are treated, or to what extent there is an 'othering' of various groups inside the physical boundaries of a nation-state.

Recent scholarship within critical and poststructuralist strands has pointed towards the fading relevance of boundaries in the context of globalisation. John Agnew (1994) famously wrote about the 'territorial trap' that mainstream IR scholars are often narrowly bound by. Agnew argues that dominant strands of scholarship take the concept of territorially bound container nation-states for granted and begin their theorisation from the assumption of nation-states as given. Such a position not only leads to amnesia of multiple other state forms before the coming of the modern state but also does not consider the globalisation processes that have led to forming newer networks and connections

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across nation-state boundaries, making them irrelevant in many respects. Writing from a postcolonial perspective, however, Sankaran Krishna debated this argument by looking at how borders, as physical lines and as social, cultural and political practices, have actually become stronger in the postcolonial world. Such strengthening of borders is attributed to factors such as easy connectivity of the common people, through 24*7 tv, internet and mobile phones, to the dominant state ideologies, often propagated by elites and earlier limited at most to a newspaper-reading educated middle class. So, Krishna says that the withering away of borders could be the reality of certain parts of the world, but for most of the postcolonial world, borders are becoming not less but more important.

Interestingly, this argument given by Krishna seems to have found an even wider geopolitical base in more recent times since Krishna wrote two decades ago. We see the emergence of carceral border regimes in the first world states such as the post-9/11 United States or the United Kingdom, especially with a move towards more nationalist regimes under Trump and the Conservative party in the UK. Issues of transnational terrorism and technological advancements have made constructing and upholding boundaries ever more common. The move towards constructing firmer boundaries has found another height during the Covid pandemic of recent times, where boundaries, both at the edges of the nation-state territories and within the hearts of these territories, got reconstructed at multiple scales beyond the scale of the state. Modern surveillance technologies have made the bordering practices acutely biopolitical and rescaled border-making to the level of the individual body.

3. Bordering at the Limits of the Deceased Body

The fear of the deceased or the infected body is not new in bordering practices. Diseases are screened at borders for a long time, but what gets considered requiring screening and how is often based on sociological biases rather than medical reasons. Rosemary CR Taylor (2013) studies how a disease comes to be identified as a serious enough threat requiring the installation of bordering physical practices like screening before and after travelling at airports, restricting movement by quarantine procedures, surveillance of personal and intimate activities etc., argues that "making of policies to contain them cannot be understood without an examination of the identities they (meaning the diseases) acquire over time," Examining the different approaches of Germany, France and Britain to screening migrants and other travellers for TB and HIV, Taylor suggests that "we need to see diseases in more sociological terms, as phenomena whose sufferers acquire certain 'identities'. These identities are typically forged at the time when the disease acquires prominence in public discourse, and, like the stereotypes associated with minority groups, they are slow to change and difficult to dispel. Thus, identities associated with a disease shaped in a specific historical context travel forward through a time where they remain influential even in new contexts." Thus, certain diseases seen as dangerous and communicable may come to be seen as associated with certain groups, not necessarily based on factual data at a certain point in time. Furthermore, they, in turn, can result in discrimination against those particular groups of people.

International immigration is managed by a biopolitical regime of fingerprinting, iris-scanning etc. Studies on the history of fingerprinting in the United States indicate the "perceived need to identify 'faceless,' racially unfamiliar hordes of people, who came in successive waves to the shores" as the reason for its popularity (Simon Cole, Ken Alder, discussed by Lokaneeta 2020, p.52). When such faceless immigrants come to be seen as potential carriers of disease, the biopolitical regime includes a mandatory screening of diseases that are seen as dangerous such as Tuberculosis. The testing in itself may look easy to be explained away by the logic of arresting the spread of a communicable disease, but studies like that of Taylor (2013) show that policy decisions about what diseases to test for are more often influenced by racist myths rather than by medical evidence (as exemplified by the lack of mandatory testing rules for HIV).

Such construction of danger sociologically and safeguarding borders based on such constructions lead to discrimination. Boundaries between the 'self' and the 'dangerous other' are curved at various scales. Likewise, discrimination happens at the scale of an international, but it also happens at various other scales, such as the inter-province, inter-district, or even at the scale neighbourhood. That is where we see the bordering practices of a pandemic situation not limited only to the lockdown and sealed borders of nation-states but the way we come to identify particular communities as carriers, harping on either their mindless 'ignorance' at a time when the requirement of staying alert is warlike, or ponder over possible conspiracies by the 'other'. Hate crimes towards Asian populations perceived as 'Chinese' and thus 'root' of covid crisis, within a discourse of the SARS-Covid19 virus framed as the 'Wuhan' or "Chinese virus', was widely reported (Human Rights Watch 2020). In India, we saw targeting of people who ostensibly look 'Chinese' in Indian cities (EP AA 2022). Similarly, Sharma and Anand (2020) have analysed how following the Nizamuddin Markaz incident in Delhi was dubbed as a 'coronavirus hotspot' in popular discourse, including popular media, and based on that, how a specific community was 'othered'.

Such border-keeping practices based on identities of an 'other' happen in more routine contexts as well, where the other and the deceased or the dirty get clubbed in a way that they become one and the same. Mary Douglas (1966) "sees the notion of dirt as essentially that of disorder: (I)n chasing dirt… we are not governed by the anxiety to escape disease

but are positively reordering our environment, making it conform to an idea. (Douglas 1966:2)" (Khanikar 2018, p.92). In the context of colonialism, as Nandini Gooptu (2001) writes, the 'insalubrious living environs' of the poor were considered not only to be a threat to public health but were also seen as the factor that lies at the root of the characteristic' inefficiency, slothfulness and other shortcoming of the poor' (Gooptu 2001). Thus, the poor become dirty, dirty becomes diseased and diseased is also criminal in a general sense, and sometimes criminal of spreading infections. Studies on policing in Delhi have noted how in the context of contemporary Delhi slums, a logic of association moving back and forth between filth and criminality is made. Within such associative logic, the slums or spaces of poor people get defined as 'dangerous others' (Khanikar 2018). Once the 'other' gets defined in such a manner, all kinds of boundary practices get legitimised. Thus, we witness practices such as the formation of gated residential societies, keeping separate lifts for domestic workers in multi-storey apartment houses etc.

4. Borders and Violence

Borders are epistemology centred on the idea of violence: the border is a shield against perceived violence from the 'outside', and also, the border is backed by force or violence that has the capacity to enforce territorial limitations (Newman 2017). Beyond that, borders are also immersed in diverse forms of real ontological violence. Internal political violence results in border crossings and refugees; violence accompanies refugees while they try to escape or live in camps. Once the borders are crossed, and new territories are entered, violence is again inherent in living as refugees in foreign lands. Banerjee (2011) argues that South-Asian borders possess specific and complex characteristics due to their bitter histories of decolonisation and postcoloniality, lack of mutual confidence and resultant security risks. These elements work together, and borderlands become spaces of violence, human rights abuses, humanitarian crisis, illegal trade, communal instability, the heavy presence of the military, a region of fear, a region of everyday struggle and suspicion which make women particularly vulnerable.

Apart from those who cross borders and those who are prevented from crossing borders, there is another section of the populace that is subjected to the violence of national borders. Borders are generally understood as shields against violence, protecting the populace inside from the violence that is outside. Such attitude is reflected in ritualistic border practices, for instance, at the India-Pakistan border at Wagah, where the armed might of each state at the border gate dramatically presents the state and the entity of the border, protecting the citizenry. Border areas, thus, in general, happen to see the presence of state armies, especially in the context of postcolonial states with disputed borders. However, the people living in border areas often suffer from various forms of violence from internal sources or from their own state forces. While the nation-states claim homogeneity of reach and uniformity of rule, across the territories within their boundaries, in actual practice, this is often not the case. Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004) define margins as the spaces that the modern state has not been able to classify and organise rationally, spaces where administrative and hierarchical rationalities have not been entirely successful in making places and people legible and ordered. These margins are often at the edges of the territories claimed by nation-states, or simply put; these margins are often border regions. While these regions physically exist inside the border of the nation-state, bordering practices that place them outside the imaginations of a national 'self' abound. Many borderlands of India have been under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) for several decades, where a state discourse of 'disturbed areas' that need to be controlled and disciplined by extraordinary laws operate to consistently produce an 'other' uneasily placed within the national body (Baruah 2010, Hazarika 2013, Arora 2020). Such 'othering' is responded to by movements like that of Manipuri mothers when they challenge the Indian army to rape them (Ray 2018). The borders of the nation in such instances are drawn not on the territories but on lines of identity, culture and politics, and sometimes on bodies of people.

5. Biopolitical Violence of Bordering

The biopolitical bordering at the level of bodies happens as standard procedures when 'self' and 'otherness', citizen and alien, are documented in the form of fingerprints and iris scans. Such bio-political bordering, however, often also happens at other levels, and in physically violent forms.

During the covid pandemic, the violence of borders took another ontological dimension. Train and bus services were suspended as the logic of spreading infections was used to close down inter-state or inter-district borders. A long national lockdown was imposed, and the large community of migrant labourers living in Indian cities were forced to either choose starvation or long and hazardous walks to their villages in a blazing hot summer. As a stark contrast to this, the government facilitated the exceptional opening of international borders for those living abroad, in effect implying that some citizens are qualified to be rescued, to cross borders, even national borders, amidst a pandemic, while others did not. Such violence was not only symbolic or structural but also acutely on bodies, as migrant labourers crossing borders were doused in chemical sprays in herds, chilling reminders of the biopolitical practices of the Nazi regime in Hitler's Germany (Singh 2020).

The pandemic has changed our world like never before in recent times. Moreover, when I say this, my reference is not only to the numerous loss of lives worldwide and in the country - which is, of course, extremely tragic but also to the way states have been run at the time of a pandemic.

The pandemic had given the state opportunities to build more walls of division, and more walls of separation, pushing young, pregnant, elderly and ailing to cramped prisons amid a pandemic, as we saw in arrests in the context of protests against the Citizenship Amendment Bill. The timing of these pushes is so that it almost appears as if they are condemned to death as if they are being stripped of their basic right to life, which is the most extreme form of othering. On the other hand, coming true to the accusations of border people about resource exploitation in the peripheries, mining in biodiversity hotspots has been permitted not only against the wishes of the people inhabiting these border regions but also potentially damaging rich environmental resources. Kovras and Robins (2016), in the context of refugee crises in the European borders, conceptualise death as a border between a dead family member and a grieving family. While the present covid19 crisis presents a scenario that could be possibly conceptualised as death as the border - when grieving family and dead people are separated by boundaries made of thick layers of PPE suits and body covers, our pandemic-time politics appeared to be erecting many more boundaries by alienating its common citizens.

van Houtum (2005) has argued that there is an increasingly felt need to ask ‘why’ questions about borders as to why borders are constructed. By asking such questions, we can not only unlearn to see borders as natural but see bordering as rooted in a desire to distance oneself from the ‘other’. Such an understanding permits us to ask further questions about the morality, borders, bordering practices, and the violence inherent therein. The reflections on contemporary themes on borders in this paper reassert such a need in the field of border studies.

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