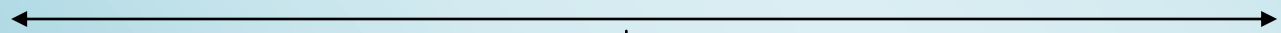


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ASSAM-ARUNACHAL BORDER: ANALYSING SHARED MEMORIES IN NARRATIVES FROM MALINI MELA

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ABSTRACT

In India, the States Reorganisation Act of 1956 was the driving force for reorganising the boundaries of Indian states. The creations of most of the separate states in India were based on linguistic lines but in the case of Northeast India it was the call for socio-cultural identities by ethnic groups.

In the process of such state making, borders were drawn to allocate distinctive space and place to the people of the states.

Border in this paper is deconstructed based on shared memories in the narratives of the people residing along the Assam-Arunachal border. The paper looks at a fair (Malini Mela) that is celebrated in Likabali that borders Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and analyses how border is perceived by the borderlanders. Narratives are collected from the fair to understand the dynamics of border.

INTRODUCTION

Borders 'include and exclude', 'unify and divide', and are at once 'symbolic' and 'material'. These dichotomies produce and reproduce identities. They erect barriers and also provide the gateway through them. This paper studies the nature of the Assam-Arunachal border from the lens of Malini Mela (Fair). Along the Assam-Arunachal border is the annually organised Malini Mela (Fair). The Mela is both a metaphor of "togetherness" and of "division". Among the various interstate borders of Northeast, the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border shares a long history from the past to the present shaped by social, cultural, economic, administrative, and political factors. To understand the dynamic of the Assam-Arunachal border, the paper focuses on the narratives from the field site i.e. Malinithan, Likabali and from the Malini Mela. The study connects people's narratives from both the states to analyse the Assam-Arunachal border. Using narrative analysis and discourse analysis the paper is an attempt to understand the relationships, acquaintances and disputes along the border area.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Reading tools like narrative analysis are applied to understand the relationships, acquaintances and identification of the Assam- Arunachal border through the lens of Malini Mela. Primary data was collected from the field through ethnographic approaches and participant observation by taking part in the fair as a local visitor as well as an outsider as a research scholar. The data collected are diverse narratives of native and non native's experiences about the Assam-Arunachal border.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is based on conceptual framework of Anssi Passi's idea of boundaries carried in the narratives and the construction of meanings through shared memories. Anderson and Dowd's work on "Borders, Border Regions and Territoriality: Contradictory Meanings, Changing Significance." This study further incorporates Henk Ven Houtum's analysis of border as simulation of model and not attributing to any original model is part of the study.

HISTORICITY OF MALINI MELA

Along the foothills of the West Siang district is the Malinithan located under the Likabali Sub-Division. Likabali is the border between the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Due to disputes over the boundary, the area is under political unrest. Malinithan is the name of the temple and hence the fair associated to it is named Malinithan mela. The story associated with the temple, signifies the cultural and religious value of the site. Malinithan temple, an important religious site of the North East India appeared in the early medieval period. It was said to be built by the Asuras for Lord Shiva in one day. However, the temple couldn't be finished in one day and it still remains unfinished. This place is revered for its importance during the Mahabharata days. It is believed Lord Krishna while eloping with Rukmini rested for a night in this sacred place. Lord Shiva and Parvati welcomed Lord Krishna and Rukmini with garlands. As such, Parvati acquired the name Malini and the place was named Malinithan.

TRACES OF CONFLICT FROM THE PAST

One of the senior most citizens of Likabali area while narrating the story of Malinithan revealed certain information that was, hitherto, not much known. He said Malinithan temple's existence was known before 1400 century, even before Ahom Kingdome entered North East.

He further revealed that the natives of Arunachal Pradesh discovered the temple during one of the hunting expedition. The NEFA government came to know about it and started the Mela to highlight the importance of the temple. He admitted that the boundary skirmish between the two neighbouring states was recent event with each side claiming encroachment in their territory.

The area in which the fair is organised is reportedly the zone of conflict for the borderlanders. Though there was bone of contention on Malinithan between the states, the issue came to surface prominently during 2012 when administration from both side tussled to organise the Mela. The incident took an ugly turn when the Assam administration demolished the multipurpose stage of the Malini Mela, being erected by the people of Arunachal Pradesh for not obtaining permission from Assam's Deputy Commissioner.

In the following year, Malini Mela became apple of discord when hundreds of Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad unit of Dhemaji district protested against the Mela by blocking the Silapathar-Likabali PWD road.

NARRATIVES FROM THE FIELD SITE LIKABALI AND MALINI MELA

A line in the sand is not always a limit, as well as border is not always a line in the sand. A line is geometry, a border is interpretation (Houtum, 2011: 50). The narratives collected from Likabali and Malini Mela organised in 2014 interprets the understanding of borders by the borderlanders. Though the borders are at times also seen in the form of lines, it is the deconstruction of these lines that reveals the nature of border in the area.

The narratives collected from the field are categorised as visitors/ pilgrims, organisers, natives (locals), administration and the business community.

On interviewing the Arunachal Pradesh administration that had a police control room in the Mela, it was made to understand that demarcating boundary according to the administration is important. Marngam Taki, Circle Officer said, "Proper demarcation should be there because the boundary starts mattering when the right for claim starts. In such situation when the case is beyond the jurisdiction we know we are not supposed to handle that part of the area. Our controls get limited and we have better idea of the dos and don'ts on part of the administration." For the administration, the Mela itself is symbolic to control as not having demarcation creates unease for the administration. In the words of Houtum, it is not the item of the border per se but the objectification process of the border, the socially constituent power practises in border which construct a spatial effect and which give a demarcation in space its meaning and influence (Houtum, 2011: 50). The demarcation

by the administration around the fair reflects the application of power to also demarcate between the “Us” and “Them”.

Taling Koje, a constable from the Police department Likabali informed that in the year 2012 Dhemaji, Assam DC sent a letter to the organising committee of the Mela that they should take permission from Dhemaji DC. He said that it was the first time such order came to the notice of the organising committee. The multipurpose building and committee stall situated in the Mela ground was demolished for not following the order. The administration from both the state power plays the celebration signifying that the celebration and the directives for not celebrating the Mela itself is a display of power and control. While the administrations were of the view that borders are important for controlling in order to maintain peace, other sections who were interviewed viewed borders as place for cultural exchanges with events like the Mela.

The organisers from Arunachal Pradesh are of the view that the Mela is a legacy attached to the state of Arunachal Pradesh. It has been organised by the youths and seniors in association with the Arunachal administration since its inception. Chimo Taipodia, secretary organising committee, said the main objective of Malini Mela is to bring about cultural exchange and maintain peace between the two states and also bring the business community under one umbrella. The Mela had more than hundred stalls ranging from consumer commodities such as cloths, kitchen appliances to food and other games and stationary stalls. Most of the stall keepers in the Mela were from Assam. As such the business community has a different standpoint on the Malini Mela issue.

Zaul Haque from Dorong, Assam who put up a jewellery stall says, “We want the Mela to be here (border). We get customers from both the side. During the Mela the range of customer we get is huge. There ain’t any problem for us, we like it. Apart from business we get to meet people and see everyone happy and smiling on their visit to the Mela.”

Bilal Ali, “At home we worry if people across the border will accept us or not. But when we are in this side of the border in the Mela, we don’t think about not being accepted. We feel part of the festival and enjoy and share similar experience of valuing each other’s culture. I came here five times. Everyone comes and be a part in it. This area should be only for Mela.”

The oldest denizen of the area, Tagi Zirdo, in his late 60s have been living in Likabali since 1981 and his parents since 1964. He opines that the Mela benefits the people of Assam even though it's organised by the Arunachal Pradesh administration. He said, "I am one of the few to have avoided taking 'Patta' for the land, rest many has taken". Patta is a kind of land possession certificate to be taken from the Assam administration if the land allegedly falls under Assam boundary. However, this patta when given to the land owner is given on a back date of the year 1978 a way to show that the land belongs to the Assam government. The administration plays a bigger role in creating the boundary issue.

The visitors of Malinithan temple and the Mela in their narratives did not conform to the idea of Mela as a border issue.

Protima Pangeng from Dhemaji, Assam said, "I don't find this border issue to be disturbing us. This is my second visit to the temple and everything looks fine to me though we read in papers about the problems but when we come here, we experience a sense of belonging." This however reads that most of the times media present border issues as the Us-Them divide.

Kavita Narah, "I like this place. I feel good to see people together barring the difference at the very borderland, if that is what people say."

This signifies that Malini Mela is away from being a border issue rather a link for an accord.

Jamabhi Hajong says, "This Mela should continue. It is good for us the believers. Our belief in the piousness of this Mela gives us very less space to be tensed about the border difference." The cultural and religious value of the Mela and Malinithan blurs the inclusion and exclusion divide.

Vijay Kumar Shah from Jonai said he never felt like an outsider during the Mela and has been visiting the Mela since his childhood.

Narayan Chetri also from Jonai said, "Since our childhood this Mela have attracted us. It is symbolic to brotherhood. The administration should not demolish or create problems in the Mela. It is for everyone. It is like a school where students are not differentiated based on the community they come from."

Doyi Riba and the inhabitants of Likabali were of similar view that the Mela has a festival value to bring people together. People tend to value each other during the Mela.

Nar Bahadur Limbu another visitor from Narayanpur Assam says, people from far places come for offering prayers in the temple and during their visit the Mela adds to the relief of the visitors. If there is no Mela the essence of the Malinithan temple is lost.

Kamal Thapa from Pasighat said, “I come every year. People worship their gods for peace. They come here seeking peace through offering prayers in the temple. Destroying the Mela is like preventing self from getting peace.” The religious belief makes the Mela marker of peace.

ANALYSING NARRATIVES FROM THE FIELD

The narratives collected from the field site explain the nature of the Assam-Arunachal border to be a tension created rather than originating on its own. The boundary across the Malini Mela is a sharp division of Assam and Arunachal border. However, the narratives also indicate that there is a different understanding of boundary by various section of the society. The barren land where the Mela is organised gives a restructured meaning on being organised annually. The Mela and Malini temple for many is a platform for cross cultural exchange and a centre for national integration. The historical and religious value of the sacred relics of the temple makes it a connecting link with the mainstream India. The people from both the state share the memories of celebration and their visit to the Mela. The ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ though manifested as visitors and organisers during the Mela blurs the boundary dispute during the fair. This conforms to the idea of shared memories and collective identities of Anssi Passi. Passi pronounce that boundaries are carried in the narrative and become a part of shared memories and collective identities creating a discourse that continues for generation shaping the social practise and cultural practise of everyday life of the people. On the other hand the everyday lives along the border change when the Mela takes place. The visitors of the Mela expressed that in their territory (Assam) they fear alienation from the “other” (Arunachalees), but on visiting the Mela there is no feeling of being alienated as everyone enjoys the accord of the Mela. The narratives of the administration objectifies border as markers of power and control. In the context of the Mela the power practice is on part of the administration which looks at Mela as a form of enforcement that is exercised to put the area in order and assign certain aspects of living in it. Anderson and Dowd quoted Sack mentioned that territoriality enforcement, ‘uses area to classify and assign things’, making it work with the controlling access into and out of specified areas (Anderson & Dowd, 1999: 598).

The narratives pull together from the field site fortifies the coexistence of the people during the fair, a space to meet and greet people from both the states. If the land is given away to the Assam, the brotherhood that is shared during the Mela will disappear, the people participating in the Mela said. This is accepted, as the Mela sees huge

business community coming from Assam without carrying the baggage of borders and boundaries during the Mela. However, boundaries are seen in the form of material construct with various stalls put up in the Mela area by the natives and the non natives. The kinds of products sold in the stalls are markers of material boundaries. The Assam business community that sells jewellerys are different from that of the Arunachal business community. However, the nature of Assam-Arunachal border through Malini Mela in this study does not subscribe to the material construct rather the objectification process of the border.

Many were of the view that as long as the Mela is celebrated in Arunachal Pradesh the real essence of the Mela is to live. But if the land goes to Assam administration which is being claimed by Assam the essence is bound to get lost. People both from Assam and Arunachal looks at Mela as a long legacy that needs to continue without any disturbances from the administration. They deemed it not to be just the legacy of the Malini temple and fair but a legacy of attending the fair and offering prayers in the temple for generations together. Few called the temple to be the heart of the Mela and Mela the blood that keeps the essence of the Malinithan temple alive, thus diminishing the existence of boundary across the Assam-Arunachal border.

David Newman says, once created borders become transformed into reality a default situation which impacts upon daily life patterns and social mores, determine the parameters of exclusion and inclusion, and creates the categories through which social and spatial compartmentalisation is perpetuated (Newman, 2011:36).

However, in the case of Malini Mela, people in their narratives said the boundary alongside the Assam and Arunachal border does not become a default situation impacting the daily life patterns during the Mela time. There is a changed 'meaning-making' of the nature of boundary and that it changes for people from both Assam and Arunachal leaving aside the administration.

In the case of Malini Mela it is the meaning making of the boundaries and borders in Likabali. People attach varied meanings to the kind of boundary that existed before the fair and during the fair where boundary does not hold significance. Borders and boundaries being dynamic in nature are read from varied perspective. The business exchange in the Mela can be looked as a common ground to ease tensions from border dispute. For Assam due to its plain topography it is easy business unlike the hilly areas where bringing staffs from the hilly area becomes difficult.

In terms of the inhabitants residing across the Assam – Arunachal border in Likabali, they are asked to take 'Patta', land possession certificate from the Assam government for their land. To avoid dispute with the Assam

officials few have adopted to the Patta system. The land possession certificate is but dated back to 1978 even if the application is made on the present day. This could be a way for the administration to reiterate that the land belongs to the Assam counterpart. Adding to this the people belonging to the state of Arunachal Pradesh believes that the Arunachal administration is not as strong as the Assam administration. The putting up of battalions in the boundary areas by the Assam government in the area once used by the Arunachalees to celebrate their festival have been allegedly encroached by the Assam counterpart. The people however in their narratives have made a common point that boundaries and disputes are created by the administration and not by people. They say that for years both people of Assam and Arunachal have co-existed along the boundary area, however the dispute is a recent creation. Malinithan temple because of its tourism value and religious affiliation is sought by the Assam administration with the sole purpose of revenue generation says, Tagi Zirido an Arunachalee.

It is noted that in most of the narratives of the visitors and business community from Assam, they agreed upon saying the Mela should continue to be in the place where it is held now i.e Likabali. According to them the Mela doesn't threaten to invade their space, rather it gives the opportunity to co-exist. They also said that there is no hatred; the hatred is created by "external forces".

The people from Arunachal Pradesh said that the locals of the Assam also do not support their Assam administration on Malini Mela issue. They said that if Assam administration gets full fledged support from the locals of Assam they would strongly act against the Arunachalee people. However, since they are not backed completely by the locals of Assam, the alleged disputed territory where Malini Mela is organised continues to take place calling for mass participation.

Thus in the words of Anssi Passi, "The construction of the meanings of communities and their boundaries occurs through narratives: 'stories' that provide people with common experiences, history and memories, and thereby bind these people together" (Paasi, 1998:75). It can be said that the stories people share in their narratives connects the people together through the Mela. A common experience is lived by the people belonging to both the states. The Malini Mela is symbolical of 'shared memories' and 'experience' and the Malinithan temple becomes a centre for national integration. It brings people from across the state and country for its religious significance.

Another common factor was that most the people when interviewed never responded as an individual. They always used, "We" while answering to the questions and participating in the discussion. This could be read as most of the people had a common feeling and expression about the significance of the Mela.

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