

## **International Seminar on Trans-Border Cultures and Communities in Asia: Issues and Perspectives**

### **The concept note**

The notion of borders has been problematized both conceptually and linguistically; various nomenclatures like frontiers, borderlands and boundaries have been used to describe what is essentially a fracturing of cultural, geographical, political and social continuity, not necessarily confined to geo-political entities. Although borders have been used across many parameters including sexuality, the most common subject of discourse has been the geo-political borders that define nation-states whose creation, dissolution and contestation have marked the global geography in the post-Second World War period.

International borders can be of varying nature; while some are there for many centuries or millennia, others are of comparatively recent origin. The contemporary international borders are more clearly defined than the borders of the past such as the earlier marchlands or frontier areas that often acted as buffer zone between two sovereign states. Though most of the present day borders have a clear political connotation, the idea of frontier as a distinctly identifiable zone is still found to be alive in the collective consciousness of the people.

Some of the borders in the new-world were drawn as straight lines on land that was conceived as 'unlimited'. Ancient borders generally followed natural obstacles like sea, rivers, lakes, forests and mountains. Borders that run along land can be demarcated and maintained more easily than boundaries running along water. Some international borders, Indo-Myanmar border for example, may pass through a village or even a house. However important the border may be for the respective states, at least in this case the people bothered little about it while constructing their villages. Borders created many centuries back often become part of collective cultural habits; states having such boundaries rarely show much anxiety towards defining or guarding those borders jealously. As a result common citizens may negotiate these borders as a matter of routine. An international border may have different perspectives for the people living on both sides of it; certain borders may symbolize economic opportunities on the other side, some others may stand for real or perceived threat of loss of peace and tranquillity, hazardous for property and lives. The same border can appear to be differently meaningful to different interest groups.

The perceptions held by the articulate citizens of the world about a particular border or of international boundaries in general have been amply discussed in academic and political circles. The debate between the idea of a borderless globalized world and that of border as a theatre of interaction, activity and syncretic creation has not yet been concluded. However, the viewpoints of the comparatively less articulate sections of the people often get lost in the din of academic and political debates. It cannot, however, be denied that the common people possess a large body of knowledge and of perceptions about the borders through their first hand experiences. Often it is them who decide what would be the degree and nature of interaction between people on both sides of a border. Sometimes small communities are sandwiched between large nations or great civilizations; they often help to keep the flow of elements of culture and goods open without bringing the actual producers face to face. Culture specialists like local singers and musicians, the small time traders and the transhumant herders have historically played such roles.

There are many instances of existence of a common social and/or cultural group across an international boundary. In other words, political boundary is not necessarily concomitant with territory occupied by a linguistic or ethnic group. In case the people divided by an international border happen to be a numerically large language group like that of the Bengalis or Punjabis, they would articulate their views and experiences to others. The smaller social groups of the Santals or the Chakmas of the same region could rarely make their voices heard beyond the immediate local area. Little information is in circulation about the problems faced by the small artisanal livelihood groups divided by the international borders. In reality the borders often shrunk the resource base used by such people and jeopardized their livelihood practices. Some of the affected livelihood groups are the marine fishermen, animal herders, itinerant traders and nomadic groups, including the 'water gypsies'.

The smaller trans-border culture groups or communities have often been affected at another level. The intangible cultural heritage held by the trans-border communities for many generations would include their language, the body of collective knowledge and memories in forms of folklore, music, arts and crafts. For maintenance and propagation of such heritage it is necessary that different sections of such communities frequently interact with each other to ensure that the knowledge and the skills are distributed in a homogenous manner. If that does not happen, drawing parallel with the rules of biological speciation it can be said that the relative insulation would possibly transform the people into two or more dissimilar cultural groups in long run. Similarly, cessation of social interactions and absence of new marital relations may divide a hitherto social group into several subgroups. The continent of Asia, with its vastness and the wide diversity of people, culture and politics, offer us the chance of examining a wide range of variation in this subject. The Indian subcontinent is also uniquely situated in having various kinds of geographical frontiers, like the mountains, the sea, the desert and the rivers.

Keeping the above views in mind the Anthropological Survey of India and the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (Indira Gandhi National Museum of Man) propose to organize an international seminar on 'Trans-Border Cultures and Communities in Asia: Issues and Prospects' from 29<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2013. It is proposed, other than Indian participants, scholars from different countries who have worked in the Asian region will be invited to deliberate on the issues of trans-border cultures and communities from both macro and micro perspectives. It is expected that the deliberations would be community-centric rather than being object- or performance-centric.

Some of the sub-themes on which the participants may deliberate upon are listed below:

1. Specific and/or comparative commentaries on different types of borders found in the Asian region, the geographical obstacles or absence of such barriers and their varied nature and function.
2. Relations that were maintained trans-generationally across borders among cultures and communities.
3. Migration and displacement across borders: implications and suggestions.

4. Implications of international borders for livelihood groups with reference to resources and subsistence.
5. Adaptive strategies of trans-border communities with respect to resource sharing disrupted by international borders.
6. Role of communities in preserving social and cultural affinities across international borders.
7. International border as a challenge and opportunity for creative and expressive activities.
8. Memories, languages, arts and knowledge systems: convergence and divergence in transmission across borders.
9. Coping with risks and hazards of international borders, both anthropogenic and natural.
10. Biological footprints of affinities and variations of human migration across border.