



India China Borderlands: Conversations Beyond the Centre

Speaker: Dr. Nimmi Kurian

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The presentation focused on comparative analysis of India-China relations at the sub-regional level. In past, India-China relations have been studied at bilateral, national and international level but not much has been studied and written keeping in mind the sub-regional level. Speaker tries to explore this level through various evolving dynamics such as massive state-led development thrust that India's north east and China's western border regions are currently witnessing. These moves have been studied as isolated cases with little attempt at comparison. She emphasized that India-China relations need to be studied beyond solely national frames of reference.

This presentation is part of the book written by Dr. NimmiKurian "India-china borderlands: Conversations Beyond the Centre". She tries to look and define India-China relations from margins that is the border, India and China share particularly, and not from the centre.

The speaker situated her arguments on two developments/shifts in India-China relations: one, new reading of the borders by India and China whereby a new narrative is coming up about imagined borders more as bridges and less as barriers. Second, the sub-regional thrust across Asia where countries like India and China are engaged in sub-regional community building such as BCIM, South China Growth Triangle, and Greater Mekong Sub-Region in Asia.

The analysis dealt with some questions that her analysis is engaged with. First, what do we understand by this new reading of borders by India and China given the fact that borders remains the applying spot or a puzzle. Second, what really is the nature of India-China

borders/ relations at sub-regional level? There are three advantages of having this sub-regional thrust by India and China. First, borderlands being applying spots; sub-regional level approach will bring the borderlands in focus. Second, this approach will bring both sub-regional and sub-national approaches together. Speaker talks about north eastern region in India and western region of China as sub-regions, projected by India and China as peripheries. Third, the inclusion of Sub-regional level approach in studying India-China relations actually questions the assumption of linear border line as a divider in both domestic and international level. She highlighted the robustness of cross border flows, despite being prohibited by the state. She attributes these flows to social acceptance and other factors which involve the sources of livelihood and income at the border region. She also pointed out that there is a need to look at state as an embedded actor. State is also involved in these flows through agents of state such as border security forces. These border security forces have tremendous discretionary power to decide which flows to be allowed and which not to be. Despite the presence of 4056 km long border, there has been a tendency to look at border through perspective of centre-Delhi and Beijing and not through the regions and surroundings of the border. She asserts that this shift to go beyond centre will bring the borders back to policy imagination.

She raised two important questions. First, what does this shift mean for the border region? Second, what does it mean for India-China relations? This shift reflects the transforming economic geographies and also 'feel good' narrative when we look at look east policy or western region development strategy. State plays a very important role in these developments with promises of prosperity and resources. States use metaphors for borders such as bridges and gateways. She calls this geo-economic narrative of borders as bridges as a liberal vision. This vision is in fact a double vision because border region tend to be suspended into geo-economic narrative of prosperity and geo-strategic narrative of fear and anxiety.

The speaker pointed out that not only the sub-national level has been understudied while comparing India-China, also not much has been done to understand the nature of India-China interaction at this level and the implications their parallel moves can have for these two countries. Speaker throws light at the capacity of border narratives in India and China to move beyond linear modes of problem solving and urges the need to shift the focus to local sites, towards the issues that have direct impact on those living on the frontiers.

Many questions were raised during discussion session. One participant raised the question of relevance of the borders in aiding the flows on either side. The speaker answered that borders are a mere line for the State but for the periphery, it is more than a line; it is a central thing as it has a history and also it is closer with the other side than with the state in terms of connectivity. Another participant commented that two states might facilitate the movement of people and goods only if the border is well defined. The case of United States and Mexico was pointed out whereby a Mexican can travel to U.S for a stipulated time sanctioned by the state. The case of Arunachal Pradesh was also discussed whereby there is no clear cut border and also how this has affected the peripheries of both India and China.

Another participant raised the question of insurgency being put an end in India since one of the main reason for insurgency is department. The speaker replied that even though Indian state views that problem as a law and order problem, it should be looked upon from the periphery point of view which they have found it to be a governance issue.

Another interesting point was raised if a state can choose to be consciously absent from the peripheries and to which the speaker negated that by saying that the state is always power hungry and it will not let go off that anytime. The speaker explained how a state maintains its authority where there is tight security in the peripheries because the state wants to be in kept in the loop of all the proceedings.

The discussion further raised the significance of another factor i.e., the international factor in addition to the sub regional and sub national level and added how the Chinese have an added burden of taking into account of the international factor too in case of Tibet.

The Speaker concluded the presentation with a remark that flows across border happen not despite state; but because state is also interested in colluding with the factors which are active across the border. She emphasized on the ethical argument that border issues need to take into consideration the 'border citizens' who have claims to state resources.

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