Conclusion

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Partition’s Borders

The partition of British India illustrates how the decisions of a few people over a very short period of time can have lasting impacts on the lives of billions of others for many generations. The momentous and calamitous event was enacted within a two-month period in the summer of 1947 and relied heavily on the judgement of a single man, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, who had never even visited India prior to his appointment as the head of the Boundary Commission that would decide the permanent borders for India, Pakistan, and eventually Bangladesh (Chatterji 1999). To perform this mammoth task, the commission had only six weeks and Radcliffe started drawing the line on the map without any empirical knowledge of the people living along that borderscape (van Schendel 2005; Whyte 2002). The result of this cartographic scissoring was not only the mass migration and violence immediately following Partition, with over a million deaths and over ten million more people displaced, but also the long-term impacts on the lives of those who had no choice but to live with the new territorial limits to their idea of home. The quickly made, and often ill-informed, decisions of that fateful summer 70 years ago continue to shape the daily practices, politics, religion, economy, and culture of both those who reside in South Asia today and those who have migrated to distant homes. Those imagined lines on the map are the increasingly hardened borders over which guards nervously eye each other, on which civilians risk their lives to work their land, and about which politicians experience cartographic anxiety over how firmly they control the allegiance of the people and territory (Krishna 1994). Those lines also are the departure point for the millions of people who have set out in search of better opportunities elsewhere in South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, North America, and the South Pacific.

South Asian borders have a complex and significant history, but are at times overlooked by scholars in the field of border studies and allied disciplines.
However, the legacy of arbitrary borders left behind by colonists and the subsequent decades of conflict between the various states over the territorial extent of their sovereignty creates an ideal location for interrogations of state categories of power, place, and identity (Chester 2008, 2013; Cons 2016; Jones 2009; Samaddar 1999; Shewly 2013; Sur 2013; van Schendel 2005; Whyte, 2002; Zamindar 2007). While some of the borders in South Asia are among the most violent in the world, others are still wide open and feature cross-border flows and connections. Even the most securitized sections – along the India-Pakistan border and the West Bengal-Bangladesh border – divide people who share an ethnic, linguistic, and cultural history. Similarly, the meaning of these lines to people on the move, and to those living permanently in distant lands, are fraught and complex. The borderlines of South Asia do not represent ancient polities that have always been in conflict, but are instead examples of how new territorial states are written over, across, and through other histories, ancestral lands, and identities. In turn, these borders, histories, and identities continue to shape the complex interplay between place and mobility for the people who find their lives contained by them.

This book is an indication of the productive nature of South Asian borders as it sheds light on how people experience and negotiate borders in their daily lives, how borders restrict human mobility, how certain movements are branded as legal and others are not, and how borders influence the diasporic population of South Asia. The three sections of the book offered three distinct lenses to understand the consequences of borders in South Asia and beyond. The first section, ‘Experiencing Borders in South Asia’, delved into the lives of the people who continue to live around and along the borderlands 70 years after Partition. The second section, ‘Mobility in and beyond South Asia’, analysed the experiences of people on the move who undertook journeys for work, for better opportunities, or to escape violence in their homes. The final section, ‘Representations of Borders and Mobility in Diaspora’, suggested that people with ancestral connections to South Asia produce and reproduce the borders of the nation and the state through their actions, imagination, and language. In the process, they reimagine their sense of identity, their connection to place, and their idea of home.

Arguments and Implications

The book began with the question: In an age of global migration, economic flows, and information exchange, how do borders and restrictions on mobility affect the lives of people from South Asia and beyond? The multiple
perspectives in this book can be distilled down to three primary answers to this question. First, despite hardened and violent borders, people still find ways to move, often ignoring the rules of the state and risking their lives by taking ever more dangerous routes. The first two chapters of the book use the productive South Asian borderland spaces to develop new theoretical insights such as *spaces of refusal* and *layered borders*. Second, gender affects the migration experience both en route and in the opportunities in the destination countries. These impacts are evident at all stages of the process, from who is able to migrate, to how they are treated in transit countries, to how they are perceived by other migrants and locals in their new homes. Third, diaspora populations continue to renegotiate their connections to their place of residence and ancestral home for generations after migrating as the relationship between place and identity evolves. This conclusion considers the broader implications of these findings.

Many of the chapters demonstrated that the situation for migrants has become more challenging in the past 30 years as states around the world crack down on migration and make movement more difficult. The hardening of borders is evident in South Asia, where barbed wire fences, floodlights, and aggressive security forces patrol borders, as Chapter 4 by Kavitha Rajagopalan illustrated. It is also evident at the borders that migrants encounter along their journeys to the Middle East and Europe. In an age of globalization, states take full advantage of technology to ‘secure’ their borders in every way possible, including powerful cameras, motion sensors, and drones, as described by Marta Zorko in Chapter 8 (Jones 2016). In tracing the relationship between people on the move and the state, this volume contributes to a growing body of scholarship that demonstrates that bordering and borderwork do not only happen at borders, but also at many locations within and beyond the territory of the state (Johnson *et al.* 2011; Jones and Johnson 2014; Amilhat-Szary and Giraut 2015). This experience is not only restricted to mundane interactions such as showing a passport in the airport or buying a new cellular data plan in a foreign country, but is also evident in the violence perpetrated on vulnerable migrants by police and smugglers, the constant fear of being deported once a migrant arrives in their destination country, and the inability to get a good job without the proper papers.

This book shed light on these journeys by telling the stories of people who moved in search of better opportunities elsewhere and demonstrated how the hardening of regional borders can have an effect on the patterns and demographics of migration from South Asia to the Middle East and
Europe. Micronarratives, such as the stories of the Lushai people navigating the border in Chapter 3 by Azizul Rasel or Akbar’s journey detailed by James Weir and Rohullah Amin in Chapter 7, offer valuable insights into the borderwork produced by interactions with families at home, smugglers, border guards and police, and other migrants encountered on the route. These first-hand accounts demonstrate that borders are not only situated at the edge of the state, but could also materialize at many other locations, depending on whose body is on the move (Rumford 2006; Butler 2011).

Despite the hardening of borders and the anti-migrant sentiments in many countries, people around the world continue to defy arbitrary restrictions on their movement. Borderlanders experience, negotiate, transcend, and make meaning of borders based on their own subjective positionalities. In doing so, borderlanders make borders the sites of not only overt and covert defiance, but also of opportunity (van Schendel 2005). From cross-border trips to the market to longer labour migrations, people find ways to get to the place they need to go to be reunited with family or to seek better opportunities for themselves and their children. The contributors to this book peered into the cracks in the walls of the state and opened up spaces of refusal where people opted to ignore or redefine the borders imposed by the state and continued to live their lives as they desired. In some instances, this also meant that states are forced to create spaces for cross-border connections, as Edward Boyle and Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman demonstrated in Chapter 2. Although the total trade in the cross-border haats is minuscule compared to trade through the regular ports, both India and Bangladesh have taken on the burden of facilitating them. Their existence, particularly along a border that has been fenced and militarized in the past twenty years, illustrates the important role borderland residents can play in negotiating and shaping the nature of the border.

The second finding of the book is that the experience of migration is often gendered as people face different challenges based on societal norms and beliefs about who should have the right to move and work. In South Asia and the Middle East, there is a persistent stigma associated with leaving home and becoming independent that discourages many women from making the trip and harms those who do. Women face more obstacles to migration and are more vulnerable to formal and informal rules and laws. In Chapter 5, Ananya Chakraborty described the experiences of Bangladeshi women working in India and in Chapter 6 Andrea Wright demonstrated the obstacles Indian women face even before they leave home as colonial laws and contemporary attitudes about gender roles impede their ability to migrate to the Middle East for work.
For South Asian men who migrate to Europe, particularly Muslim men, the stigma of terrorism shapes interactions with host country residents who fear the straw man of how they believe Muslims act and what impact they will have on the local culture. These gendered biases affect the ability of migrants from South Asia to completely access opportunities and integrate into new host communities. In Chapter 9, Malini Sur and Masja van Meeteren detailed the challenges faced by migrants from Bangladesh for years after arriving in Belgium. Their lack of papers, the difficulty of finding good jobs, and the stigma of terrorism all made their lives difficult, but they worked together to protest the situation and raise local awareness of their plight.

The third finding of the book is that even for South Asian migrant populations that have lived for long periods in new homes, there is a constant process of rethinking and reconsidering their place in the world. Many migrant and diaspora communities retain connections with distant relatives for decades through remittances and the performance of identity in their new society in relation to other groups (Rahman and Yong 2015). These contested visions of place, homeland, and identity are often evident in poetry and prose, as well as in how past events are memorialized and remembered by diasporic communities. Partition has been the subject of many books, films, and plays, but there is also a growing literature that investigates the lingering impact of cross-border movements and divided identities in the decades since the imposition of borders in South Asia.

Borders have moved from the edge of the state to locations throughout the interior and exterior of the territory (Jones and Johnson 2014). The spread of borderwork to many new locations results in a transformation of how people on the move imagine place and their position within it. The process of placemaking involves their daily activities, their interactions with local people, their struggle to make a livelihood, their efforts to work around the system, and their attempt to learn new languages. The longing for the place left behind is always there and is often expressed in the forms of collective memories, literature, celebrating different events, memoirs, and building monuments. In Chapter 10 Riddhi Shah considered the forgotten history of Indian Ocean slave trading, and in Chapter 11 Tana Trivedi illustrated this ambiguity through the poetry of Sudesh Mishra, who details the unique sense of home for the Indo-Fijian community. In sum, the third section of the volume demonstrated through memories and literature how a sense of place and belonging is negotiated and redefined in the South Asian diaspora around the world.
Final Thoughts

The overarching theme that links these chapters together is an awareness and concern with how the arbitrary lines on the map of partition – and their increasingly militarized and violent borders on the ground today – shape the movement, identity, connections to place, and sense of belonging for people of South Asian descent, both within the region and around the world. The borders of states are a jumping-off point for many of these discussions, but a state-centric approach is not enough to draw out the dynamic picture of mobility in the contemporary world. It might provide a partial picture of formal actions, for instance, the making of categories such as citizens, residents, aliens, legal, and illegal, or of policies for cross-border trade and investment. However, a focus only on the story of the state would miss the perspective and narratives of the people who move across borders on a daily basis. This book told many of these stories, from farmers who cross the border informally to participate in a border market to people of South Asian descent who have lived for generations in diaspora, deposited halfway around the world by the colonial machine. Every borderland community has their own narratives, lifestyles, and actions that are connected to the notion of the line, but that are distinct and based on the sense of place where they reside. A clear understanding of state and local discourse and practices, as well as an analysis of how those discourses and practices align, conflict, or even combine on a daily basis, is necessary to grasp the subtleties of any given border on the ground.

The objective of this book was to engage with the dynamics of life along the borders of South Asia, on the migrant routes to distant lands, and in the diaspora communities of temporary workers and permanent residents. The chapters focused on notions of citizenship, identity, and belonging, often drawing on the lives and stories of minority populations living both in South Asia and in the diaspora. Together, they develop a broader fabric of experience that deepens our understanding of how borders and mobility are shaping and reshaping the lives of people in South Asia and beyond. Despite the stories of cross-border movement and connection that fill this volume, borders also divide people by granting legitimacy and rights to some while excluding many others from equal access and protection to the law. At the most basic level, borders are a system of controlling resources and opportunities and excluding others from the same. These border effects are produced by the political actions of different state and non-state actors who perform the sovereignty of the state and enact the rules that give power to lines on the map. It is this relationship between the map, the border,
the land, and the people who move across it that shape the chapters of this book, and that will continue to be a focus for scholars of borders and mobility for years to come.

References


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