

# SCHIZOPHRENIC SUBREGIONALISM? METHOD AND MADNESS IN INDIA'S BORDER FENCING PROJECT

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## ABSTRACT

*A problematic set of binaries stands at the heart of India's narrative on borders, one that has rendered its political signaling contradictory as well as virtually unintelligible. India's border fencing project is a stark metaphor of this conflicted discourse, perching uneasily as it were between the feel-good narrative of rethinking borders as bridges on the one hand and an almost pathological fear of open borders on the other. This binary is what characterises India's schizophrenic subregionalism, a discourse virtually in morbid fear of itself. The paper argues that this twisted logic runs the risk of turning against itself to subvert India's subregional project itself. Its political fate is also critically linked to the larger question of how India perceives its role in the region and the extent to which it prioritises subregional integration as a regional public good.*

## SCHIZOPHRENIC SUBREGIONALISM

A problematic set of binaries stands at the heart of India's narrative on subregionalism, one that pulls it in different directions. This has resulted in a high order of uncertainty that has rendered its political signaling contradictory as well as virtually unintelligible. For instance, while the Act East policy ostensibly built a narrative of rethinking borders as bridges, India's border fencing project has signaled a pathological fear of open borders. Again, while Prime Minister Modi's Neighbourhood First policy set the right tone with high-profile visits to South Asian capitals, the Chief Economic Advisor Arvind Subramanian has been on record stating that 'regional economic integration in South Asia is not a first priority for India' (The Hindu, 2015). This binary is what characterises India's schizophrenic subregionalism, a discourse virtually in morbid fear of itself. If not checked, its twisted logic runs the risk of turning against itself to subvert India's subregional project itself.

## BORDER AS A VERB

The fundamental problem with the idea of sealing borders is that it happens to be out of step with reality on the ground. A visit to the borderlands tells you why. Ask the Singphos, Nagas, Kukis, Mizos who live on both sides of the India-Myanmar borderlands and clearly the border is hardly the line of control that Delhi imagines it to be but a zone of contact and exchange as it historically has been. Paradoxically, for borderlanders the border is both an invisible as well as an integral aspect of their social existence. Its invisibility stems from the fact that much of the transactions not 'authorised' by the state take place anyway, despite it. Border rites of passage are done often enough 'illegally' eased in through jalan tikus (mouse paths) mediated, inter alia, by kinship networks. (Eilenberg and Wadley 2009 60).

So how exactly is the trade off between border mobility and border security being struck? The evidence is a sobering one with border fences often ending up addressing the symptom but not the ailment besides creating new problems in their wake. Take for instance, the fencing of a 10-km long stretch on the Manipur-Myanmar border at Moreh. Meant to prevent militants from using the road to procure arms from international gunrunners, the fencing project brings out the futility of attempting to 'close' a porous border as traffickers 'open' new routes to replace those closed. The fencing, however, has drastically disrupted the lives of villages situated along the border. Thanks to the building of the border fence that was erected into the Indian territory, the village of Muslim Basti today finds itself without any access to fresh water. The Lairok and Khujariok rivers now both fall within Myanmar territory after the construction of the border fence. Their traditional means of livelihood also stands imperiled with fishing on the Myanmar side no longer a possibility. Similar has been the experience with the border fencing programme along the India-Bangladesh border.

The programme begun in the mid-1980s now covers nearly 70 per cent of the border with 621 miles of riverine tracks that are open but patrolled. The fence runs through villages on both sides and despite the 150-yard 'no-man's land' on both sides, it is not uncommon for houses to have 'the front door in one country and the back door in the other'. (Banerjee 2010)

International experience also offers further evidence of the flawed logic behind equating border control with border security. While ostensibly built to prevent illegal migration, border fences could end up having completely opposite effects. For instance, by making the process of trying to enter illegally more prohibitive and risky, it could have the ironic effect of virtually stopping circular migration and keeping migrants in. The cost of building a fence also pales somewhat compared with the challenge of defending a fortress that is clearly breachable. A U.S. border patrol chief termed the U.S.-Mexico border fence as a \$2.6 billion 'speed bump' that far from stopping anyone will only 'slow down illegal crossers by minutes'. (Nicol 2011) The capacity of organised criminal networks to go transnational has clearly not been matched by that of national governments to jointly address this challenge. Even when law enforcement becomes effective in one part of the region, alternative routes are quickly sought. For instance, when the China-Myanmar transborder coordination began yielding results, drug traffickers quickly shifted to the China-Vietnam border crossing to carry out their operations.

How effective a border wall can be also depend critically on the how institutionalised illegal border crossings tend to be. (Kurian 2014) When formal channels are tightened, the border can still be opened at the right price. The role of 'lineman' or facilitators who enable illegal border crossings is a highly institutionalised one, with the willing connivance of agents of state. A case in point is the well-coordinated chain of financiers, traders, middlemen and the couriers involved in cattle smuggling across the India-Bangladesh border with an estimated annual turnover of Rs. 5,000 crore. State power

and authority need not always be pitted against illegality and illicitness in the borderlands need not always be the caricaturised realm of evasion and circumvention that it is often made out to be. It can instead be a collusive zone that both the state and other actors in society partake of.

## MENDING FENCES

Many of these issues are critically linked to the larger question of how India perceives its role in the region and the extent to which it prioritises subregional integration as a foreign policy goal. Is India likely to be a 'leader of last resort' interested only in minimalist goals or does it have the inclination to invest in the creation of regional public goods? To start with, it can redress the steep decline in Central assistance to states for developing export infrastructure which has registered a sharp drop from Rs. 737.60 crore in 2012-13 to a mere Rs. 50 crore by 2015-16. Also, while the role of the federal government in border management is important, no subregional project can succeed without subnational stakeholders with an interest and incentive to deepen processes of integration. Critical to this will be the capacity to institutionalise effective inter-agency coordination mechanisms among federal, state and local actors. The functioning of several border regimes show how a lack of coordination among multiple agencies adversely affects regulatory efficiency domestically as well as across the borders. These institutional logjams could seriously compromise moves to work out modalities of a subregional migration policy particularly to deal with the prospects of increased climate change-induced migration. For instance, sorting out definitional ambiguities of who is a climate refugee and who is an environmental migrant will not be easy as these entail significantly different legal frameworks. (Banerjee 2010) Initiating and institutionalising some of these region-wide processes could be the most effective force multiplier for border security than any border fence can hope to be. Clearly, sitting on the fence can no longer work.

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