



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Beyond state and nation in South Asia

Donnan, H.

Citation

Donnan, H. (2006). Beyond state and nation in South Asia. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12747>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12747>

Beyond state and nation in South Asia

van Schendel, Willem. 2005. *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem Press, 429 pages, maps, illustrations. ISBN 1 84331 145 3

Hastings Donnan

The last decade has seen an outpouring of work on state borders and a dramatic increase in the number of research centres, summer schools and conferences devoted to their study. Borders offer an exciting and intellectually productive meeting place for political scientists, sociologists, historians, geographers and anthropologists, among others, from which to view nations, national identities and the state. 'Borders' have increasingly entered wider social theory as a metaphor for social relations in a globalised world where boundaries of all kinds – of culture, class, gender and sexuality as well as those of state sovereignty – are being challenged and transformed, are breaking down or being reaffirmed. What is striking about this emerging body of work is how much of it is focused on the borderlands of Europe and Mexico-USA, with only a scattering of texts informed by comparative materials from borders elsewhere. South Asia, it seems, has been especially neglected.

The *Bengal Borderland* is thus to be welcomed for its fascinating and insightful account of a border region long overlooked as a site for empirical study. The Indian subcontinent's partition in 1947 ended a long period of colonial rule, but as this book makes clear, it initiated a lengthy period of boundary-making between the states that came into being at midnight on that August night, a process that nearly 60 years later leaves issues to be resolved. That so much of the Bengal border remained undetermined for so long is just one of the many surprises in van Schendel's book, which unseats a number of longstanding assumptions about the region: that the boundary separated Hindu from Muslim, that it bordered Muslim majority areas, and that it bisected Bengal. The story is both more complex and interesting than such assumptions suggest, as van Schendel elaborates in his account of Rad-

cliffe's Boundary Commission and the difficulties of fixing a boundary dominated by rivers (over 1,000 kms of the borderline runs through water) and where much of the territory was unsurveyed. The result, as he puts it, was 'a wacky zigzag' patchwork (p.54) that cross-cut historic ties of kinship, commerce and communication. People had to learn how to live with an international border where previously there had been none; at first some were not even sure on which side they were. It was as if geography and social networks conspired against state efforts to impose its territorial imprint.

The book explores the outcome of this tension between the realities of daily life along the border and state attempts to bound space as a mark of sovereignty, and the chapters variously consider issues of security, resistance, migration, trade and violence. Like many borders, the Bengal borderland is a zone characterised by varying degrees of state accommodation and subversion, and it too has its cast of smugglers, bandits, corrupt border guards and separatist militants with ties to rival states. Many contradictions and anomalies arose: how to curb smuggling while facilitating economic exchange, the blurring of legal and illegal trade, the overnight conversion of commuters into international migrants. In one case, a man crossed the international boundary every time he moved from one room in his home to another (p.214). Throughout the book, van Schendel reveals the inability of the state to contain its population and economy, how border fencing, checkpoints and deportations were often more effective as elaborate aesthetic displays that symbolically enacted the inviolability of the state than as effective means of protecting it. In many instances, he argues, local notions of territorial continuity conflicted with state concepts of territorial discontinuity as borderlanders doggedly flouted attempts to limit their conceptual and material horizons in an effort simply to get on with their lives.

This book thus does much more than fill a gap in our knowledge about the region, for it invites us to rethink the partition of British India from a borderland perspective and to re-examine a territorial and statist epistemology that is ill-equipped to understand global restructuring. It seems that states have been slow to think globally and transnationally, or at least slower than the many borderlanders who have 'jumped scale' and have transcended the sovereign and territorial constraints of the state in pursuit of better lives, commercial gain, political advantage, and self-determination. Social scientists too must go *beyond* the classic focus on nation and state, and must reconceptualise social space in a way that does not just advocate a post-territorial geography of networks and flows, but which grapples with how space has been reimagined and *re-scaled*. Borders, van Schendel contends, are the perfect sites for such study, for it is here that various imaginings of scale (such as the national, global, and state) meet and converge.

The combination of scrupulous archival research and sensitive ethnographically-informed interviews makes *The Bengal Borderland* a gripping human tale of what boundary formation meant (and means) for those whose daily lives were (and are) most directly affected. Drawing extensively on the borderlanders' own voices and experiences, and with many photographs, it paints a wonderfully rich and evocative portrait of more than half a century of Bengal border life. To those US and European borders so long considered paradigmatic in the field, the author has added a border study of enormous significance and one which border scholars everywhere should sit up and take note of. ◀

Hastings Donnan

School of History and Anthropology
Queen's University Belfast
h.donnan@qub.ac.uk