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Borders, Lines and Cases
From Sīma to Sīmānta in South Orissa and Beyond
K.C. Panigrahi Lecture, Ravenshaw College, February 2002

by

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On September 29th, 1889 the Agent to the Govr. of Vizagapatam District in the Madras Presidency received a letter from the Agent to the Govr. in Ganjam “requesting to let him know the extent of the land which has been under Jeypore and has come to the Gumma Bissoyi by the recent demarcation of the boundary and about the sist paid by the Sowrahs to Jeypore for the land”.¹ This letter is only the first in a series of documents which show how the decision to demarcate the boundary line at that particular spot was the cause for a series of conflicts involving the Gumma Bissoyi as a subordinate of the Parlakimedi Zamindar, various groups of villagers, such as the Kondh and Savara people of several muṭhās, the administrations of Jeypur and Parlakimedi, and various British Agents and Border Commissioners. All this was the consequence of the decision of a British boundary commission to define a border line according to seemingly rational and scientific criteria, namely a line which “follows certain strongly marked natural features”.² But in doing so, they disregarded the traditional land rights and status claims of the people living in that border area or from the land in question.

The custom in the hilly areas of Orissa used to be that those who settled a previously unpopulated or abandoned tract of land had to pay taxes to the head of the political body from which the settlers came. Thus, when Kondhs who were under the authority of Baudh abandoned certain tracts in the border region adjacent to the Chinna Kimedi Maliāhs of Ganjam, Kondhs from Chinna Kimedi moved in, cleared the forest and settled. They even relocated some of the villages after a short period of time because there were outbreaks of smallpox in the original villages. These new Kondh settlers were clearly of the opinion that due to their allegiance to Chinna Kimedi, the land revenue now belonged to Chinna Kimedi. Older claims were forfeited with the abandonment of the land by the previous Baudh Kondhs. This idea, however, was strongly opposed by the Baudh Diwan who sent troops in who “planted flags in villages” in order to mark them as theirs.³

This incident, only one among many similar boundary conflicts found in the archival

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- 1 Orissa State Archives, Ganjam District Records, 2471G/451, 26 Sept. 1889.
 - 2 Orissa State Archives, Ganjam District Records, 1682G, 8 May 1880.
 - 3 Orissa State Archives, Ganjam District Records, 1429G, 24 Nov. 1870.

records of Ganjam District and other sources, shows the fluidity of borders in the traditional states of the area. Chinna Kimedi claims in this case rights over the land because their Kondhs had cleared the forest and settled there. In the Mackenzie Collection of the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library in Chennai, there is a text about the Zamindars of Tekkali in which again the clearing of the forest and the building of temples makes a piece of land the property of the settlers and their overlords, but this text also describes the killing of the original inhabitants to clear the land for the newcomers.⁴ Here we can see that even before the time of the British, border conflicts were fairly often violent affairs.

But the archives reveal another story as well. In the late 19th century, the people of the hills of Orissa were subjected to a border regime which was new to them. The border was suddenly a line, and hill peasants, who had been left virtually alone with themselves and their Bissoyis and Muṭhādārs for centuries, suddenly came under close scrutiny of a political authority they did not understand. What was merely an administrative act in the eyes of the revenue authorities, namely the making of such a harmless thing as a border line, very often cut in half areas whose inhabitants had a strong emotional tie to each other and to their political leader in the area, such as a Patro, Bissoyi, Muṭhādār or Zamindar. With the new border line, they suddenly found themselves the subjects of a king or revenue officer who was not the one they perceived to be their legitimate ruler. Naturally, the people who were subject to this change did resist. The archival records show that dozens of small rebellions and scores of court cases resulted from these abstract decisions. So, while the new British border lines undoubtedly did some good and helped to reduce the burden of taxes and forced labour the villagers had to shoulder, they created problems in the world view of the people and left them insecure in a new world which was incomprehensible for them.

Boundaries are a part of our daily lives. They are part of our society, they are crucial for defining our identities, but they are also the source of many of our conflicts. We encounter boundaries wherever we go, obvious ones, and more subtle ones. When we enter a house, we might first have to open a gate in a garden fence and then cross a threshold. We encounter signs and symbols demarcating property, city limits and sacred places, and we react to them by changing our behaviour accordingly, since it is ingrained into us to do so. Even an intruder will change his behaviour once he is going to violate such a boundary, because he will become self-conscious about the act he is about to commit. Boundaries both limit and define our social identity. They can be symbols of social inequality, as used to be the case in South Africa and in formerly racially segregated states in the south of the USA,

4 The *Tṛkkali-tālūkā Jamīmḍārla-vaṃśāvali*, a Telugu text of the Mackenzie Collection, Chennai, states that the rulers of Tekkali were subordinate to the King of Parlakimedi and that old border conflicts of the 18th century between Tarla and Tekkali were brought before the king (Berkemer 1997).

where black people were not allowed to become members of certain clubs, ride on certain buses, go to certain schools or rest rooms. In a less degrading way such separating boundaries are to be found everywhere: if you do not wear the right clothes, you are not allowed to enter a fancy hotel or night club, if you have the wrong skin colour or the wrong kind of beard, you cannot enter the Jagannath temple in Puri, if you wear prison clothes, you cannot just walk out of a penitentiary. I am quoting these random examples to show how closely related boundaries and social identities are. The body social, a term used by the anthropologist Emile Durkheim, is in many ways defined by boundaries that designate social space.

Many of us may have had a very strange and somewhat unsettling experience with that kind of boundary, which is in modern times the single most important one for all of us: the border line of a sovereign state. When we come near to a state border, especially one of the highly marked and guarded kind, something very peculiar happens: we start feeling differently. Something “is in the air”. Surroundings change subtly, the tension rises, insecurity mounts. Imagine a border such as the one between North and South Korea and the one that formerly existed between East and West Germany, or those between India and Pakistan and the USA and Mexico. Imagine the fences, the border patrols with their dogs, the watch towers, the armed vehicles and helicopters, and in the cases of the most severely guarded border lines, the no-man’s-land, the mine fields, the tanks, the heavy guns and missile batteries.

The body social, that is, the extension of our physical body into the social world, shrinks in the face of such a formidable threat even before anything actually happens to us at the border. We begin to feel small and self-conscious. Our very identity as autonomous beings, secure in our social surroundings, is challenged. And when we go to the border check point, the body social recedes to the limits of our physical body. Suddenly we feel our skin being exposed to the outer world. There is no shell left to protect us from a threatening environment that is bound to overwhelm us. We become reduced to our physical body and even though we intellectually know that we are in no real danger, feelings of insecurity and oppressiveness tell us otherwise. We are subjected to scrutiny by people who speak a foreign language and have strange ways of behaviour. They poke into our private lives, open our suitcases and go through our papers. They virtually pry open our innermost selves, and we can never be sure what they actually know about us from their files and computers. We are deprived of the agency over our own lives. Crossing such a border means to give away a part of our identity and to be attributed a partly new one. We are no longer secure in the feeling of being at home in our own country, we have been made foreigners.

The emotional side of the relation between borders and identities has to my knowledge been outlined best by the German philosopher, Hermann Schmitz, who in his multi-volume *System der Philosophie* (System of Philosophy) has put forth a world view which starts not

with the intellect, but with the feelings and senses of the body. This deeper-lying level of perception is in my opinion the key to understanding emotions connected with the “atmosphere” of the border area. The insecurity I described is felt collectively, even though the border puts its mark on each individual separately. This oppressive atmosphere of the border is more than a trivial emotion. It is a shared sentiment.

Now you will probably ask yourselves what all this has to do with Orissa? To answer this question, please allow me one more extempore, this time into methodology. I am a strong advocate of the comparative method in social sciences. I believe that paradigmatic examples are useful to illustrate a point and to make clear that social phenomena can be understood by using a three-step cognitive process. First, we collect a set of data from one case, then construct a model which describes the case in question in a more general way, and finally test this model with the data from other cases. This has been done successfully in the field of history – to use only examples close to our present topic – by Burton Stein and his segmentary state model and by Bernard Cohn and Nicholas Dirks with the model of the little kingdom. Both are describing certain aspects of traditional state society in South Asia.

With the same method in mind, borders can be studied from various angles. They are phenomena which are of a political as well as a symbolic nature. Political science, administrative science, geography, anthropology, history, psychology and philosophy are concerned with boundaries, physical as well as mental.

Doing this kind of research in the context of border disputes in Southern Orissa brings together especially two separate fields of research – the history of the formation of borders on the one hand, and the research on construction of collective notions of identity on the other. Borders have in the past been the object of research from various angles, and we can learn a lot from such studies for our area. It can be inferred from such analyses that identities and borders have a reciprocal relationship (Bennett 1980; Gardner 1982). Collective identities can be the reason for the creation of borders, first symbolically or culturally, later also politically; conversely, borders can also create new identities and weaken or destroy older ones, thus bringing forth double or multiple sets of – often conflicting – identities. The creation of the state border between Orissa and the Madras state in 1936 and the subsequent creation of Andhra Pradesh as a Telugu speaking state is such a case of a process where cultural identities and state boundaries were in a kind of feedback relationship with each other.

Disputes in colonial times can be a source of information for such issues, because the colonial process forms political units regardless of older identities, or solidifies traditional border regions (*sīma* in Oriya) into border lines (*sīmānta*). The traditional Indian state which is – in Stanley Tambiah’s words – based on the idea of a “center-oriented space” is replaced

by the colonialist notion of the state as “bounded space” (Tambiah 1985). Such changes in the fundamental workings of the state are reflected in administrative proceedings (Dirks 1985, 1986) and inevitably involve claims to territory which one of the parties concerned “owns” in the colonial present and over which another party claims to have legitimate rights established in the precolonial past. Violations of boundaries are considered as violations of privileges given by superiors, and therefore as violations of status and identity connected with a particular tract of land. My colleague B. Schnepel, now Professor of Anthropology at Halle, Germany, has illustrated this constellation from an anthropological point of view, and in the context of one particular case, that of “Thatrāja of Bissamcuttack v. Mahārāja of Jeypore” (Schnepel 1994, 1995, 1997, 2001) , in which the Thatrāja claims sovereign rights over his Zamindari, even though it used to be a *sāmanta* kingdom of Jeypore. A similar case is the one filed by the Mahārāja of Jeypore against the relatives of his former subordinate, the Zamindar of Madugula. Here the Mahārāja wanted to revoke the patta on the grounds that the Madugula king had died without issue and the lease was lapsed. The British authorities opposed this, of course.

In the context of Orissa, considerable work has been done on the transition process from traditional identities via the image of modern all-encompassing nationhood into administrative boundaries, i. e. how a certain cultural identity took shape as a political entity. One major focus of these studies is the Oriya movement which is a good example of how the process of creating a cultural identity can be a driving force for the inclusion of various political entities into one unified state (Berkemer 2001; Mohanty 1982).

In this context the border of Parlakimedi has to be given special attention. Not only was the border between Jeypur and Parlakimedi one of the most prominent border areas, and simultaneously the district border between Koraput and Ganjam, but it was also the border between sub-units of the kingdoms of Jeypur and Parlakimedi. There are documents available for at least three levels of conflict across this border, i. e. between villages, between *muṭhās*, and between the zamindaries themselves. They reach from petty disputes over one or a few fields or acres of forest land between two villages at the border of a revenue unit to long-lasting conflicts and lawsuits across the district boundaries between the largest political units of the area.

There are maps available which give us the approximate extent of the zamindaries in early British times. Here, we find examples of how *sīma*-areas, especially in the form of formerly subordinate land-holdings such as Gunupur, Tarla and Tekkali and tribal lands of the *maliāhs*, are converted into administrative units by the colonial power. The reaction of the holders of the privileges connected with the land is foreseeable: there was a prolonged resistance against the British administration. Even in the 1920s the Raja of Parlakimedi sued the government of Madras Presidency to give him administrative rights over the Kimedi *Maliāhs*.⁵

5 E.g. Orissa State Archives, District Records, Ganjam Dist., Rec 2991G, 2998G, 3220G etc.

A further step into the direction towards the formation of the modern border lines of the present Indian federal states is also connected with Parlakimedi. About two thirds of Part II of the First Schedule, which is appended to the Constitution of Orissa of 1936, are necessary to describe this rather short piece of the border line in the south of the Ganjam and Gajapati Districts.⁶ It had to be done in this way because the Parlakimedi Zamindari was the only estate divided along village boundaries between Orissa and a neighbouring state (Berkemer 2001). As a result, parts of the ritual landscape of the old kingdom (Pathapatnam, Mukhalingam) are now in Andhra, while Parlakimedi town and the northern part of the zamindari belong to Orissa. Here we come across the most striking example of a border cutting old ties and establishing new identities besides the slowly fading older ones.

Let us now take a look back into the time before the modern border lines were defined. The lord of the *sīma* or border area is the paradigmatic little king. Where the great king has no authority because he cannot penetrate due to cultural or military limitations, the little king is the sovereign ruler. In an economy adapted to the hardships of the mountainous land which is based mostly on subsistence agriculture yielding only a meagre surplus, no large body of non-producing specialists can be maintained. Everything is small and, seen from the point of view of a great king, not worth to be conquered. But nonetheless, this miniature replica of a Hindu kingdom is a political reality throughout South Asia and much more common than the great empires. Such small states populate the vast border areas of the traditional Indian states.

The kingdom of the *sīma*-kings is in many ways a smaller replica of the big kingdom. An ambitious little king can become the ruler of an empire by strengthening his power base through alliances, through conquest of surplus-yielding territory, and by building up an infrastructure consisting of forts, temples and service land holdings for Brahmanas and peasant-militia. This will inevitably draw him closer to the big rice-producing plains, for they alone can sustain a large body of specialized non-agriculturists as is required for maintaining a Hindu state. Here we come across the most important difference between centre and *sīma*: their economic bases are unequal, thus either luring the little kings to the centre as conquerors or high officials, or making the central power reach out to subdue the weaker kings who make a nuisance of themselves. And there are other differences. Since the times of the Cola emperors, the great state temple is the ritual centre of the empire and a centre of pilgrimage, and acts as an integrating factor for many social groups in the empire. The rulers of the *sīma* have their tutelary deity in their mud forts, but due to their usual indigenous origin their sacred centre is very often in the hills, in the form of an uniconic Ṭhakurāṇī or a Maṇikeśvari. While this original deity does not receive daily *pūjā* and

6 The Government of India (Constitution of Orissa) Order, 1936, first schedule, part II, "The Land Boundary of Orissa," p. 8-9 (British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, Official Records, P&J (C) 6229, p. 41-48).

aṅga-raṅga-bhoga and is worshipped according to the festival calendar of the non-Hindu population of the hills, the second and ‘civilized’ *avatār* is present in or nearby the king’s palace in the form of a Kanaka Durgā or Paidatalli, and maybe also as a Kālī. Here regular daily rituals, often conducted by Brahmin priests, are the rule. The temples, however, are less elaborate and look very different from the ones found in the plains.

This pattern is repeated on an ever smaller scale on all levels of rulership and ends at the village level, as I was able to observe in Koraput District, where the *hundi* of the village goddess in the centre of the settlement stands in opposition to the Patkhaṇḍā, Bhairavī or Ṭhakūrānī outside, in the liminal zone which does not quite belong to the village. This outer area is the sphere of the spirits of the deceased, and from here Patkhaṇḍa-type goddesses guard the boundaries against sinister forces from outside. One can say that each village has its own *sīma*. This liminal area, and not the boundary line, is of ritual importance for the village people. It is the liminal area between the *kṣetra* or cultivated land and the *vana* (Claus 1978, Sontheimer 1994), the place of the evil forces that have to be kept in check. As related by Verrier Elvin in several of his books, whoever enters a village from outside inevitably carries some of the forces of this outer world into the village and is therefore a source of potential danger. Thus the boundary transforms a person. The little king or village chief becomes, as soon as he crosses the *sīma* between his area of authority and the neighbouring ones, a bandit leader who robs villagers of their cattle and who challenges the authority of another leader (Shulman 1980).

This is traditional politics of the Arthaśāstra-type on a micro-level. As André Wink has made clear, pre-modern Indian politics was characterized by its competitive and dynamic elements. There was a constant forging, breaking and realigning of political alliances, and this has to be considered as basic to the art of statecraft in India (Wink 1986: 6). We find this dynamic reflected in the archival records of the nineteenth century, but we can also safely assume that the British authorities of that time were not aware of it. In the old regime, borders are inevitably the regions of equal, i.e. usually equally weak, influence from the great centres. The actual “line of control” might change every year with the military campaigns or strengths and weaknesses of individual rulers, as it is well documented in the case of the Vijayanagar empire and its wars against the Deccan Sultans and the Gajapatis of Orissa. It is also possible that the *sīma* grows and shrinks, depending on the military power and skill of governance displayed by a ruler.

There is a famous case of such dynamic, almost pulsating border regions in the history of Southern Orissa. As documented in the *Māḍalā Pāñjī*, Kapilendra Gajapati, after having staged his coup d’état against the last Gaṅga king, Bhānudeva IV in 1434, lost almost all his territories south of Mahandragiri. These border territories were lost not due to the inroads of a foreign enemy, but due to the insubordination of traditional *sāmānta*-kings, the subordinate rulers who traditionally governed the less accessible tracts of mountainous and forested land. Some little kings had already rebelled against the weak Bhānudeva,

others tried to gain sovereignty or started to seek new alliances after the coup. The Sanskrit rendering of the *Māḍala Pañjī*, the *Kaṭakarājavaṃśāvali*, and some of Kapilendra's inscriptions describe the situation from the precarious first years as a king up to his reconquest of the suddenly very large *sīma* area between his kingdom and the Reḍḍis who ruled the Krishna-Godavari delta. An inscription from Bhubaneswar⁷ dated 1436 AD shows what was in store for the rebels when Kapilendra threatens that “if any engage in what is not beneficial to the king, he is to be banished from the kingdom and all his property confiscated”.

Exactly that happened. Kapilendra and his son Puruṣottama confiscated land from older ruling families and established new allies in the place of the rebels. Many ruling families of the 20th century came into power at that time (Berkemer 1993: 325-30), the Nandapur kingdom passed from the Śilavaṃśa line into the hands of the Jayavaṃśa, and inscriptional evidence from Siṃhācalam shows that the traditional Gaṅga allies ceased to exist (Berkemer 1993: 179-202). Identities and allegiances were destroyed and new ones created. So far, a parallel to the situation in the 19th century is discernible. There is, however, a big difference as well: while in the case of Kapilendra's and Puruṣottama's reforms and reconquests the pattern remained the same, i.e. the names of the little kings changed, but the character of the *sīma* remained, the British began a process which ultimately destroyed the *sīma* and created the *sīmānta*, the border line, and thus changed the identity of those who lived in the border areas.

The border area as *sīma* was once a cultural filter, an area not only of overlapping identities at the edges of the gravitational fields of the cultural centres, but also a repository of multiple, independent small identities. Some ideas of the coastal plains were adopted, some changed and put into new contexts, others rejected. The same was true with influences from Bastar and the Central Indian plains. The inhabitants of the Ghats and mountains of Southern Orissa had their own cultures, religions, languages and identities. They were neither Oriya nor Telugu, neither Rājput nor Reḍḍi. Their focus was their village and its neighbourhood. Their identity was defined by their local caste group or tribe, by their language and market town, by their Naik and Muṭhādār. They had their own *lingua franca*, the Desya, which is close enough to Coastal Oriya to be called a dialect, but as in the case of High German and Bavarian, a person who knows one of them will not be able to understand the other. Theirs was a small world, but they were secure within. Their conflicts had their own logic and all the hardship in their lives did not deprive them of their identity. Their body social existed in an atmosphere of, let me say, shared and well known insecurity.

Now, in modern times, all this has changed. The British administration started to mutate the *sīma* into segments of larger administrative units. *Sīma* became *sīmānta*, and soon a cultural divide. People lost their identity as groups living in the border region

⁷ Tripathi (1962), inscription no. 12.

between two centres, where they did belong to neither one nor the other. Their identity, simple as it may have been, left them autonomous as a group, and gave them the character of typical “border-people” from the point of view of the centres. An anthropologist would ascribe to them a definite identity in its own right. It is theirs, created by themselves and used autonomously, and as long as they had this identity, they were the agents of their own fate. When their area became divided by a border line, everything changed. Administrators from far away centres now collect data, build infrastructure and interact with them in an atmosphere of mutual misunderstanding. The border people are given a new identity defined by the centre, but since they do not conform to the centrist norms, they are considered a deviation. Their customs, language, religion is suppressed, most often not even deliberately and with the best intentions, due to a value system which sees their culture as defective and in need of an overhaul.

The bounded space of the modern administrative units claims all citizens to be equal within the borders. However, in reality the former special identity of the inhabitants of the *sīma* is reduced to that of a second class citizens, deficient in their urbanity, rustics who cannot correctly speak the state language and who behave shamefully in their eating habits, drinking rituals and love life. The world is full of novels and movies based on this theme. Some of them, like Kazantzakis’ *Alexis Sorbas* or Garcia-Marquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude* describe such eccentric characters from the *sīma* and rendered them immortal literary figures. But usually, the border people are not indomitable individuals whose shrewdness allows them to triumph over the dangers from the big city. On the contrary: as has been described so vividly by Verrier Elvin, when the modern world penetrates the *sīma* areas, the indigenous people soon learn to fear the scorn of the outsiders who mock them and leave them with a feeling of emptiness. The border line divides the former *sīma* into two political units and often cultural regions. On both sides, the pressure to accept foreign norms comes from different centres. Kinship groups are divided, traditional places of pilgrimage are made inaccessible. The people become self-conscious and undergo the same mental process that we feel when crossing a border. Their world is ripped apart, their values denigrated and their selves violated.

This process happened and is still happening all over the world. The context was and is usually a colonial or national one. It happens in Africa and South America, in Tibet and on the Balkans. It happens for instance when nationalist sentiments express themselves in slogans such as “one state, one language, one people”. Minorities who not willingly succumb to such slogans become easily the victims of nationalist suppression. So the Young Turks declared the Kurds as “Mountain Turks”, in the Mexican State of Chiapas a civil war is fought between indigenous people and big landlords, and only bloody wars between the English and the Scottish finally paved the way to a United Kingdom. The formation of a united Germany – I mean the first unification in 1871 – was also a case of border violation

and formation. The state was announced in Versailles of all places, in the heartland of the arch-enemy, France. In all these cases boundaries are created, invaded or destroyed.

A new danger, however, now comes from globalization. I do – by the way – not believe in oversimplifications like Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” or in the idea that MTV and Coca Cola destroy the cultures of the world. But I see a subtle change in the way people perceive themselves. Take for instance TV commercials. The same message praising the good of Pepsi can be seen by people in remote villages in the mountains of Orissa, the Alps and the Andes. Some may not know at first who the fat guys are who play soccer against David Beckham for a cooler of Pepsi on all Indian TV channels, but there is always somebody who can explain what Sumo wrestlers are. Here, one global manufacturer of soda pop plays events and figures such as a soccer championship, sports heroes and marketable traditions of exotic Japan in a way which is believed by the market strategists to be globally understandable. It is not, of course. There is some good in this, though, because, trivial as it may, such TV commercials open a window to the world for people who otherwise have no way out of their social microcosm. Globalization may even give them back part of the agency which they have lost because they may learn to perceive themselves as part of a larger whole in which the people from the regional centre are in no better position than they are. Suddenly, whole nations become border areas in which the multinationals act as the colonial powers used to in the remote parts of their empires in the time of Imperialism.

This is the rebirth of the *sīma* on a global scale. We are all actors on an unfamiliar stage. We have to use languages in which we cannot express ourselves comfortably, such as business English and Computerese, and we have to perform strange rituals, such as perusing stock reports and operating an Automatic Teller Machine. Do we not all feel insecure and deprived of at least a part of our self-esteem in the face of such new challenges? When I think about such changes in my world, I understand how my new friends in the villages of Koraput must feel when they come to Bhubaneswar. They feel as small and insecure as I feel when standing in line in front of a border checkpoint in a foreign country or in front of a computer terminal which has access to data about myself which I cannot control. I hope for them and for all of us that the border areas of the world, the geographical and social *sīma* between the national and commercial giants can never be reduced to one-dimensional lines which give you only the choice to be one or the other of two options. Let us hope that our world will always be a multicultural one, from the level of the villages to that of the United Nations.

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