

‘Sindhiness beyond Sindh’ Experiencing Borders in Banni, Kutch

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What effect did the Partition of India and Pakistan have on the people who lived in the areas where the modern boundaries were drawn? What do such borders and boundaries actually mean to those who reside near them? The rich studies that exist on Partition today tend to focus on the exchange of Hindu and Muslim populations between the two nations that took place at specific temporal moments in and just after 1947. These studies have also tended to focus primarily on parts of north India and Bengal, the regions that were most directly affected by the momentous subdivision.

But what of the people who had been moving across these modern nation states centuries before these hermetically sealed boundaries were created? What of those who shared cultural and linguistic commonalities with regions that are now separated by the formation of India and Pakistan? And, of those who cannot necessarily be categorised into the two dominant religions?

These questions certainly hold a great significance for the desert region of Thar, constituted by modern-day Kutch, Sindh, and parts of Rajasthan. The constituent elements of the Thar region share a long past, cultural traits and language, yet remain separated not only by the borders between India and Pakistan, but also by the boundaries that divide and define states within India itself, making it a space of complex social and cultural interactions. This history of Partition where pre-existing cultural regions were divided and the circulation of people, including pastoralists, traders and saints, and their stories was brought to an end remains an area of research that has not received sufficient attention.

Rita Kothari’s monograph, *Memories and Movements: Borders and Communities*

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Memories and Movements: Borders and Communities in Banni, Kutch, Gujarat

by Rita Kothari (*New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2013; pp 200, Rs 745.*)

in Banni, Kutch, Gujarat, attempts to address some of these questions through the study of a region located on the India-Pakistan border in the present-day Kutch district of Gujarat. This is the region of the Banni grasslands, which remained a disputed area between the two nations since Partition and was finally sealed as the border only at the end of the hostilities in 1965. The wider region of Kutch, with its salt desert, itself shares close proximity and cultural affinities with the neighbouring Sindh region. Furthermore, Kutch’s links with the Indian Ocean world and its location near mainland Gujarat has also rendered it a land of immigrants, giving it a cultural identity that is distinctive from the Indian state in which it is located.

The ‘Cultural Imaginary’

Within Kutch, where Kutchi and Gujarati are considered the official languages, Banni and its surrounding areas, however, stand out for their predominantly Sindh-speaking populations. These groups mainly include pastoralists who follow varieties of Islam, dalits who negotiate upper-caste Hinduism but also have social and cultural links with Muslim populations, and other lower-caste groups who are neither Hindu nor Muslim. Thus, the people of Banni traverse many senses of belonging, including the relationship with the international border, the relationship with the Gujarat state which governs them, as well as the relationship with their own complex social milieu. It is these different notions of belonging that

constitute what Kothari refers to as the “cultural imaginary” of the region.

Kothari’s work, a biography of the Banni area with a focus on its different communities, aims to trace the making of this “cultural imaginary” and examines the apparatus that generates and sustains it (p 4). Banni not only allows for a destabilisation of the ideas of borders but also questions the dominant idea of Gujarat as a unified homogeneous region, as Banni lies at the intersection of the culture shared by Saurashtra, Kutch, Sindh, as well as Rajasthan. Among these regions, notes Kothari, there exists a “civilizational unity that expresses itself in several ways, one of which is language” (p 3).

Understanding Banni’s relationship with Sindh, and the continued use of the Sindh language outside a geographical space officially demarcated as Sindh, then, becomes a central quest in Kothari’s project. In sum, Kothari appears to have set out three principal interconnected goals for herself: one, to understand the multiple meanings the border holds for the people of Banni; two, to explore their relationship to the Gujarat state which governs them; and three, to trace the role of Sindh in their history, memory and everyday experience.

Writing the biography of a region as culturally complex as Banni is an extremely important and valuable exercise as are all of the frameworks that Kothari delineates. In fact, Kothari has been interested in the issue of understanding what she calls “Sindhiness beyond Sindh”, even in her earlier work, where she examines the experience of Hindu Sindh migration to Gujarat in the post-Partition urban context.

Some Problems

While *Memories and Movements* is a discussion of how Banni, a rural area, holds on to a strong sense of Sindh identity through the language and memory of Sindh, her previous book, *The Burden of Refuge*, demonstrates how urban Hindu Sindhis in Gujarat sought to obliterate their Sindh identity in order to become acceptable Indian citizens.¹ *Memories and*

Movements, of the author’s own articulation, “extends as well critiques” (p 11) her previous research. This work could in fact have been a valuable complement to her scholarly oeuvre; however, it does not successfully achieve this due to two fundamental reasons.

First, *Memories and Movements* displays a surprising lack of engagement and acknowledgement of previous scholarship that is about the same region and explores nearly identical issues. One of the most glaring examples of this is Kothari’s central argument about the simultaneous presence and absence of Sindh in northern Kutch, which has been made in a substantial body of work by anthropologist Farhana Ibrahim.

In her monograph entitled *Settlers, Saints and Sovereigns: An Ethnography of State Formation in Western India*,² Ibrahim has argued that mobility, Islam, and a close relationship with Sindh are crucial elements in the imagination of the pastoralist communities that predominantly inhabit northern Kutch.³ Similarly, in an analysis of a variety of cloth typical of the region known as *ajarak*, as well as the persistence of the popularity of the poetry of the 17th century saint, Shah Abdul Latif “Bhitai”, Ibrahim has also demonstrated that while Sindh is not a geographical region or state in modern India, it remains ubiquitous in the memory and linguistic traditions of the people of northern Kutch, including the Banni area.⁴ In fact, the memory of Bhitai’s verses and other poetic traditions as markers of Banni’s Sindh identity forms an important part of Kothari’s work as well. Yet, why Kothari has chosen neither to sufficiently acknowledge nor engage with Ibrahim’s work remains inexplicable at best. In failing to do so, however, her own study stops short of advancing the scholarship on an important and hitherto under-researched region.⁵

The second problem with Kothari’s monograph is methodological. Early in the work she describes her project as the result of an “intimate interaction with the people who speak Sindh” (p 4). Subsequently, in a section on the plan of chapters, she informs us that her book “occupies an interstitial space between several disciplines, with each chapter

appropriating *myriad* approaches” (p 27).⁶ Since Banni is a region that is marginal to “mainstream Gujarat, and in fact even to Kutch” (p 27), Kothari notes that the work is an “anthropological study from the margins” (p 27).

Towards the end of the same section, she also writes that she views herself as “a translator engaged in linguistic and cultural ethnography” (p 31), yet there appears to be no discussion of the literature in this field. Written and oral history, as well as memory, also seems to play a role in the project. However, her attempts to bring the “spoken-as-written histories” into the “realm of academic inquiry” (p 31) are not sufficiently theorised. Thus, we are left with something of a methodological bricolage, rather than a well-rounded interdisciplinary work. In fact, Kothari does not clearly articulate the actual nature of the fieldwork anywhere in the book. While descriptions of the region abound, a simple fact like Banni’s physical size is left out, as is the exact manner in which she interacted with the communities from this region on the margins. The fieldwork, thus, takes the form of excerpts from casual conversations on multiple visits, rendering the overall account journalistic rather than academic.

The Language of Banni

Admittedly, Banni is not only a region that allows us to destabilise the ideas of borders, but also to problematise the

homogenising forces of the Gujarat state. Significantly, the most interesting aspect of this in *Memories and Movements* can be gleaned from Kothari’s discussions about the role of the Sindh language in relation to at least three other linguistic spheres. The first of these is the predominant and official Gujarati, which excludes the Sindh-speaking pastoralist Muslims of Banni from the state-sponsored schooling system, thus, curtailing the progress of literacy among these groups (p 83).

Second, is Sindh’s relationship with Kutchi, which is associated with the eponymous district. Kothari explains that in Banni, spoken language is referred to as Kutchi-Sindh as there exists a homology between the two. Yet, she also speaks of the fact that while Kutchi is not the official language of the region, it is also not acceptable to the Sindh speakers of Banni as it is seen as having too many Gujarati words. The Banni people’s perception of the relationship between the two languages appears to be nuanced, but is not sufficiently fleshed out.

Third, Kothari also mentions Banni’s Sindh being linked with the languages and linguistic traditions of Rajasthan. While setting up the issue of these multiple relationships in the introduction, Kothari asks as to how one can distinguish the diffused boundaries between them (p 13). Perhaps, there is no single answer to this question. However, the author leaves the empirical data to speak

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for itself rather than bringing the reader back to possible reflections on this issue, which is so central to the book. A more cohesive analysis of these negotiations and connections would certainly have added substance to *Memories and Movements*.

In Conclusion

Modern nation states, as authors like James C Scott have demonstrated, remain anxious about ordering and categorising the areas they govern. They draw borders, define boundaries and attempt to fix identities of people through census data or development schemes, among other things. However, in doing this, they are unable to incorporate those whose lives, like the people of

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Banni, negotiate many ideas of belonging. Even though *Memories and Movements* does not present an entirely new analytical perspective, it reminds us that the story of Banni is significant to further our understanding of those communities that traverse complex pasts and presents despite apparently impermeable borders.

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NOTES

- 1 See Rita Kothari, *The Burden of Refuge: The Sindh Hindus of Gujarat* (New Delhi: Orient Longman), 2007.
- 2 Farhana Ibrahim, *Settlers, Saints and Sovereigns: An Ethnography of State Formation in Western*
- 3 For a summary of the issues discussed in the monograph, see Aparna Kapadia, “Kachchh: More Sindh Than Gujarat?”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, 2011, 46(13): 33-36.
- 4 See Farhana Ibrahim, “Sindh and Kutch, Cloth and Verse”, *Himal Southasian*, 2006, 19(3): 59-61.
- 5 Ibrahim’s monograph, in fact, also addresses the question of the multiple ways in which people experience the border in northern Kutch, another aspect that Kothari fails to engage within *Memories and Movements*. Some more relevant examples of Ibrahim’s work in this area include: “No Place Like Home: History, Politics and Mobility among a Pastoral Nomadic Community in Western India”, *Nomadic Peoples*, 2004, 8(2): 168-90; “Defining a Border: Harijan Migrants and the State in Kachchh”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, 2005, 40(16): 1623-30; “The Region and Its Margins: Re-appropriations of the Border from MahaGujarat to Swarnim Gujarat”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, 2012, 47(32): 66-72.
- 6 Emphasis mine.

India (New Delhi: Routledge Taylor and Francis), 2009.