

Belongingness and Place: Making of “Ecologic” Border

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Key Words : Belongingness and place, Ecologic border, *Bhitamati*

This paper is an outcome of a small project I was doing in Kalinganagar in Odisha. It was on border: not about a border that prevents the flow classifies the nation and states, separates and segregates people, and territorialises life. It is about a vernacular border. Taking the case study of the Munda tribes of Kalinganagar in Odisha, I have argued *about the* Ecological border called *bhitamati* in the Odiya language. It is a counter-narrative to the border as a territorial trap, where the state controls citizen's life through territorial authority over the vast geographical stretches of land, air, and water.

The ecological project does not involve bio-politics. As Foucault highlights, bio-politics involves the technical and excessive dependence on expert knowledge production and their influence on changing notions of the self, the family, the future, and expectations about dying and death. The fascination with new life forms created through bureaucratic, commercial, and technical means constructs the personhood that undermines the natural and ecology of life formation and death.

The ecological perspective contests territoriality and evokes an alternative view of life and person. It tries to retrieve life from the clutches of bio-politics by stressing the highly contingent and historical formation of life: the site and the source of the ongoing evolution of life as a self-evident fact of nature.

The ecologic border as *Bhitamati* :

The ecologic border or *bhitamati* has a sense of place where boundary and territory, in initial observation, seem thinly connected. The connection is plain. *Bhitamati*

is a word that is familiar in the Odiya vocabulary. The older generation of my family, or any family in a traditional village setup, would evoke it for holding back individual family members who want to move away to distant urban areas in search of employment. Our grandmother would constantly stir up this emotive word whenever there was a talk in our family to shift to the nearby town, which was just 3 kilometers away from our native place. Our relatives would appeal to the father's intention of moving away from the place of birth. The sense of territory stretched from the beginning of the village, where the village deity is established, to the cremation ground situated at the end of the village.

The ecological border thus has emotive connotations attached to it with situational meanings: “Who would look after the field that sustains us and would sustain the future generation?” “You have an organic connection with the place. “You have grown up here with friends and relatives.”, “How can you abandon the beauty and pure environment?”. The shared internalised feeling creates a sense of boundary to restrict mobility: an initial connection that could be established between *bhitamati* and territory. However, to establish a deeper connection with the border, one needs to explore the notion of territoriality created through the natural and social environment, a sense of place, the place-making process, community feeling, and its socio-political contents attached to that environment.

The more profound connection with the border was evident when I conducted fieldwork in Kalinganagar in Odisha. Kalinganagar is a product of the politics of

peripherality and the globalization process. Kalinganagar was carved out of the two blocks— Danagadi and Sukinda — in Jajpur district on 1 August 1992. The tribes put up a valiant fight against the TATA company that has displaced the maximum number of tribes from their villages. Twelve tribal lives were sacrificed. In their struggle, two diametrically opposite perspectives on boundaries with distinct meanings to life emerged.

For the state, the boundary meant confinement of people within their village — controlling people and their mobility, creating a border beyond which they were restricted to venture. The police would arrest if the movement activists crossed the village's border. The surveillance system was very much in operation, where the police and industry-hired henchmen would abduct, kill, and kidnap people if they crossed the village boundary. In this sense, the statist nature of boundary confirmed what Foucault called the “national order of things”. The tribes lived in a state of exception where life was reduced to “bare life” ready to be sacrificed.

However, for the inhabitants, the boundary was not restricted to the administrative boundary of their village. It extended beyond their confined area of dwelling. In its extended form, it went beyond to include the natural landscape surrounding the village on which they have depended for livelihood since immemorial. The ecologic border is not about spatialized power relationships of controlling people or controlling mobility. It is about socially and culturally situated people who were and are engaged in place-making, creating locality and territory. They create a locality that expands beyond the occupied land. There are sites of memory scattered across the landscapes — sacred groves, water sources, a stone, a place where one gave birth to a child, ponds, and even a small pothole that circumscribe the individual's and communities' feeling of place. Here, “boundaries...are important sites where the link between collective memory and territory, community and place... is established” (Zhurzhenko, 2011: P 73 and 74)

The tribes had remained relatively isolated from the influence of the non-tribes. The relative isolation was due to a self-imposed buffer of not interfering with the other ways of life. The buffer is crossed when the two communities meet at the marketplace to exchange the

produce. The market meant not only a place where the trade, interaction, and communication of many different communities took place but also synonymous with establishing and renewing relationships: a place not for nurturing exploitative relations and exchange but for initiating a connection with the outside world.

Other tribes inhabit this area. The social boundaries are drawn based on commonality among different tribes. Similar kin can take part in death rituals and marriages. Commensality have different meaning for different occasions. The commonality of cooked food during the death ritual is that community members seek blessings from the ancestors living with them and protecting them. Commensality during childbirth and marriage is to bless the child and couples, respectively.

Tribal life is deeply connected with nature. Nature is a source of sustenance *for* people, and people sustain nature. The land, forest, and the surrounding landscape, with the help of the hard labor of the tribe, are a source of sustenance for generations. Dabur Kalundia stated.

“A portion of territory the eye can see does not correctly describe the relationship between the human being and his or her surroundings. Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the place they stand on.”

The forests, trees, flowers, fruits, and brooks are animated with life and spirits. They are worshipped and propitiated to prevent any harm occurring to the people. The most important tree that is worshipped is Sala (*Shorea Robusta*) tree. It is considered to be the god of the jungle. The sala flower stands in interpersonal relationships between human beings and birds and animals.

Rabindra Jarika^[i], an inhabitant of Chandia village, narrates the story of a Budha raja^[ii] who went to war, leaving his beloved wife companionless. He was aware of his wife's apprehensions. He plucked the sala flowers and handed the tender flowers to his beloved. He stated that it personifies himself. So long as this flower remains fresh, he would be alive. Every morning, the wife would wake up and watch the flowers. Finally, after a long wait, her husband returned home, and they lived happily ever after.

Another story that connects humans, trees, and birds were narrated by Birendra Hembrum^[iii], a priest in Hatimunda village. In the old days, only two people were

[i] Interview at Chandia on 22.6.2008

[ii] The tribes do not have a concept of a king. They call their ruler Budha Raja, a king who is old, wise and knowledgeable about nature.

[iii] Interview at Hatimunda on 16.6.2008

inhabiting the world. They wanted to worship the ancestors and call it *baparab*. For this purpose, they required sal flowers. They did not know what it looked like. They went to sleep in desperation as no one could help them. A bird named *Gangar Salu* brought the flower. From then on, the sal flower is used to worship the ancestors. After the ritual, the flowers were distributed among all the villagers.

In the "ecologic" conception, a lived experience is about an affective feeling "of the presence of the significant others." (Wise, 2000: P, 299) Those significant others would include nature and all the small things entangled within it. Feeling home could mean carrying significant others within the self.

"We are not outside it, nor does it restrain us. It is within ourselves with which we move, think, act, react, feel, and retain. We are part of it as well. It has its existence, rhythms, and plans. We touch it every day," explained Rabindra Jarika.

Within the ecological border, people are embedded in a relationship with nature where "body and environment fold into and co-construct each other through a series of practices and relations" (Wylie 2007, P. 144). It is a primordial connection. It is a "being-in-environment," to paraphrase Morleau-Ponty. The body is both "*in and of the world.*" (Wylie 2007: P 148)

Locality, familiarity, intimacy, and deference are the building blocks of broad-based social relationships. Flexible social relations and friendship constitute the base of inter-community relations. In everyday social and economic transactions, there is the obligation to perform duty and cooperate. Respect for members, norms, and rules keeps social relationships sustained for a long.

There is a propensity to share within unequal relations. Sharing performs a vital function that helps people during scarcity or uncertainty. It performs the role of the social capital. The expected return may be "immediate" or "delayed". Chakradhar Haibru Sr explained.

"Any poor people, even without land, can never starve in the village. His children and wife can survive if the person is critically ill. If one works in the factory as a daily wagger and falls ill, he does not get a wage. After two or three days, the family would be starving. His wife and children would also face hardship. He would not have to worry if he were in a village. Women and children can live with the support of other community members. People help each other during their time of need. From the birth

to the death, the poor villagers are cared for by the community."

Fundamentals of tribal existence are based on being connected to the land and caring *for* the land. Their custodianship is reflected in their ritual practices and kinship organizations. There are different rituals associated with agricultural cycles. However, the practice of rituals varies among tribes. *Herkarsa* is a ritual to initiate the process of plowing and sowing. *Mage parab* is celebrated for reaping. All life participants are connected by a shared oral history that helps them transmit knowledge. It helps and provides information to enable the community to survive against the onslaught of the world outside. Stories and oral narrations became the medium of retention of knowledge.

Land and humans become "co-dependent." They take care of each other. There is inequality, but is not socially created; instead, it is an individual's unwillingness to labour. There is egalitarianism in practice when investing labour over a piece of land. Land of any kind becomes the object of labour and becomes the source of their individual identity. Labouring on and possessing a piece of land is the only way to achieve equality of status within and among communities. Land becomes the source of freedom and sources of individuality. Dabur Kalundia of Chandia village argued.

"A poor man, if he possesses at least a homestead land, can survive without much difficulty. He keeps chicken. He tends goats that he sells in the market and earns cash. In addition, he gets help from the villagers by procuring some pulses and rice. The poor man stitches leaves, makes plates and sells them in the weekly haat (local market). Some even work in other fields to grow and sell seasonal vegetables. They have freedom. He does not have to listen to the labour contractor's abusive language, nor is he under the threat of eviction from the factory if he does not work according to the whims and fancies of the order of the clerks, contractors, intermediaries and babus. They can clear a patch of the forest land and cultivate it. In this way, tribes are free. They enjoy being left free. We are *matiramanisha*. We are sons of soil, belong to the place."

Generational dependence and entanglement with nature and things, and the relationship of land and environment give essence to people, affective, social relationship and immersion of people in the place where place does not belong to people; instead, they belong to place characterize the Ecologic Border. It means

embedded of self in place and place in self: the border is embedded within. It embodies deep memories of being “at home” and subjective belonging to place and locality. Leaving *Bhitamati* means crossing the ecologic border, that is, being “out of place.”

Conclusion:

Ecologic Border is a “habitat *for and of* the human collective,” its relationship with nature is embedded in intergenerational security, sharing, and cooperation. The communities that inhabit the space can be labeled as “communities of places — geographically bounded community,” a community held together by the “spirit of the place” (McIntosh, 2010; P 19) . Deep memories of surrounding things and their ‘essence’ enable inhabitants to feel contented: being “at home”, a secure place and life full of embodied memories (Relph, 1976). Deep memories are about the present and a shared past where relationships and connectedness are shaped or consciously and unconsciously developed and nurtured. It is rooted.

The spatial context of life within the border relates not only to the materiality of dwelling – patches of hamlets, a small scrap of land adjoining the house, arterial village

roads, cremation ground, fields, wells and ponds, hills, brooks, even small water holes, shrubs and berry trees and animals and insects — but also to the affectivity in life. This is what Wilson calls “memorate knowledge”: “knowledge derived from individual experience and unmodified by socially shared or transmitted knowledge.” (Wilson, 30) Each object has the potential to shape and transform life.

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