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## Ethnic Boundaries and the Margins of the Margin

### Abstract

The theme of this paper is on one of the most elementary questions in the study of ethnicity and nationalism, namely how to approach and assess ethnic boundaries'. Should we perceive them as an advantageous or a pernicious tool in politics? To answer that question, we need a reference point; advantageous or pernicious in relation to whom? I will here use those people(-s) who are so marginalized that their voices are practically silenced, and the way in which the political reconstruction, conversion, or deconstruction of ethnic boundaries is favorable or not to them; the margins of the margin. Do ethnic boundaries, and particularly their political usage, illuminate and create preconditions for uplifting, visualization or in any other way favor the margins of the margin? And if yes, how does one handle the element of violence which is involved in the politicization and defense of such boundaries? On the contrary, if we suggest that ethnic boundaries should be deconstructed, how do we deal with the causes of ethnic boundary construction? In order to illuminate these problems, two approaches will be critically discussed and applied: *Post-Colonialism and Conflict Resolution*.

**Keywords:** *conflict resolution, ethnic margins, nationalism, politics, postcolonialism, violence*

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# ETHNIC BOUNDARIES AND THE MARGINS OF THE MARGIN:

*in a Postcolonial and Conflict Resolution Perspective*

**Bent D. Jørgenson**

*The clouds on the map would move, reform, disappear, break-up into pieces; the pieces would reassemble and new distinct areas would form; and the channels between them would expand, contract, and shift (Kopytoff, 1985, p.12).*

The theme of this paper is on one of the most elementary questions in the study of ethnicity and nationalism, namely how to approach and assess *ethnic boundaries*'. Should we perceive them as an advantageous or a pernicious tool in politics? To answer that question, we need a reference point; advantageous or pernicious in relation to whom? I will here use those people(-s) who are so marginalized that their voices are practically silenced, and the way in which the political reconstruction, conversion, or deconstruction of ethnic boundaries is favorable or not to them; the *margins of the margin*. Do ethnic boundaries, and particularly their political usage, illuminate and create preconditions for uplifting, visualization or in any other way favor the margins of the margin? And if yes, how does one handle the element of violence which is involved in the politicization and defense of such boundaries? On the contrary, if we suggest that ethnic boundaries should be deconstructed, how do we deal with the causes of ethnic boundary construction? In order to illuminate these problems, two approaches will be critically discussed and applied: *Post-Colonialism* and *Conflict Resolution*.

In recent year these two approaches have gained some influence in International Relations theory. Postcolonialism addresses the problem of epistemic violence and marginality. One of the fundamental questions is: In what ways have the dominant discourses (particularly emanating in the West) marginalized, and still marginalized, subjectivities based on skin-color, gender, ethnicity etc. And normatively: How to combat this marginalization? "The empire strikes (or writes) back," is a slogan both in the local and global political arena and, I believe, in ever growing pockets of the academia. This perspective or school of thought is present almost everywhere in the world, but especially in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa and the Caribbean.

Parallel with the rising voice of marginality, the salience of ethnic and internal conflicts all over the world has fueled interest in conflict research in general and the *conflict resolution* in particular. Conflict Resolution has been an attempt to find general methods and schemes of solution, develop guidelines for mediation, and/or identify universal processes of conflict resolution in particular societies. Bosnia and Israel, among others, have been the targets for the attention of such practitioners of conflict resolution.

Why are these two perspectives brought together into the same discussion? First, because they share a normative concern for the same fundamental problem, namely the reconstruction and deconstruction of ethnic boundaries. Concerning Postcolonialism, there is a clear emphasis on

the transformation or *conversion* of ethnic boundaries from boundaries of marginalization to boundaries for 'strategic essentialization' (Krishna, Sankaran, 1993, p.405). Conflict resolution approaches ethnic boundaries as crucial 'complications' in processes of conflict resolution and of course of prime importance in processes of conflict escalation. Despite the strong normativity in both approaches, it is crucial to bear in mind that the margins of the margin play a role in the conflict dynamic itself, and therefore, the connection; margins-conflicts-ethnic boundaries have to be dealt with, not only normatively but also positively.

Secondly, the two perspectives are brought into the same discussion as an attempt to open a dialogue between two approaches to violence, which have so far largely ignored each other's existence<sup>(1)</sup> In particular, how does one succeed in envisaging and perhaps even uplifting or 'unmarginalizing' marginal subjects. By 'breaking the ice' between the two approaches to international studies, we might end up having two perspectives illuminating each other's blind spot, and eradicating some of the worst pre-perceptions and prejudice in both.

The following are empirical examples from Assam and Southern Bihar in India. My own experiences with the people in these two locations have generated the questions and the problems formulated in this paper. In both locations, problems associated with the marginalization of the margins have led to severe manifest or non-manifest social problems in which ethnic boundaries play a key role. In Assam, the tribal groups have slowly emerged as political forces after independence, asserting their demands towards regional and central authorities. The modern history of Assam illustrates the problem of locating or territorializing the marginalized space when elite groups claim the status as 'sons of the soil.' In Southern Bihar, a marginalized region in itself, ethnic boundaries cut across relations of dominance, thereby complicating the relation between the two phenomena.

### **Ethnic Boundaries**

Ethnic boundaries, a concept borrowed from Fredrik Barth (Barth, 1982 (1969)), are best understood as cognitive or mental boundaries situated in the minds of people and are the result of collective efforts of construction and maintenance. Ethnic boundaries dichotomize insiders from outsiders--'us' from 'them.' Katherine Verdery's summarizes Barth on this point:

The roots of [ethnicity as an] organizational form are not in the *cultural content* associated with ethnic identities but rather in the fact of their *dichotomization* -- the presence of boundaries separating groups. This shifts the emphasis from seemingly 'objective' cultural traits to behavior (including 'cultural' behavior) that is socially effective in maintaining group boundaries (Verdery, 1994, in Vermeulen & Govers, 1994, p. 35).

There are, in other words, neither objective ethnic boundaries nor objective ethnic groups or identities.<sup>(2)</sup>

Furthermore, ethnic boundaries are open to multiple individual perceptions and interpretations. No wonder that hard social sciences like International Relations, until recently, have turned a blind eye to these phenomena. Only the political significance within the last few decades and the

subsequent demand for explanation and comprehension have pushed these phenomena into the limelight of social science.

Ethnic boundaries are means to create order. They are means of social navigation in a social space comparable with the geographical map meant for navigation in our physical environment. This knowledge of a social universe is passed on through processes of learning from one generation to another or through other channels of communication, simultaneously attaching cultural values and features to what appears as an 'inside' and an 'outside.' Seen from the perspective of a certain individual, the ethnic boundary is the result of a cognitive *reconstruction* that separates 'us' from 'them.' Ethnic boundaries are thus social constructions and reconstructions mostly made peacefully in interaction between individuals.

This rather 'apolitical' definition of ethnic boundaries is challenged, or rather complemented, by a political approach that reveals that ethnic boundaries, and the cultural stuff which they contain, are not only negotiable, but also contested. This is close to the postcolonial approach in which ethnic boundaries are determined by the dominant discourse. The knowledge about ethnic boundaries are carried on via the older generation, the school, the mass media, and the state, or in short, those who have the power to define the ethnic boundary towards the marginal, and even to define what the marginal is like, i.e. to fill the image of the marginal with cultural content. The postcolonial normative approach would, as already mentioned, by a very simplistic description advocate the *conversion* of these marginalizing ethnic boundaries into boundaries of 'strategic essentialization' and as a means of resistance against marginalization. On the contrary, in a conflict resolution approach, ethnic boundaries would be assessed as obstacles to conflict resolutions; as an element of stereotyping the enemy, and putting barriers of effective communication, and thereby to get a false comprehension of what is actually and rationally going on (e.g-79). Ethnic boundaries are therefore in need of *deconstruction*. In the following discussion, conversion and deconstruction will form the core concepts, or 'lenses' through which ethnic boundaries will be illuminated.

### **Postcolonialism and Conflict Resolution**

Both the postcolonial and the conflict resolution approaches have a strong normative element, as they attempt to target the problem of violence-although with emphasis on different aspects of violence. In a Postcolonial perspective, the prime evil appears to be the epistemic violence committed by the dominant discourse over the marginal. The dominant Western discourse has wrested the marginalized of even their ability to conceptualize themselves as people with their own history, future, dignity and self-respect. Conflict resolution is, before anything else, a method to alleviate further violence, and then open direct violence. This is not to say that structural violence is not a matter of concern in conflict resolution. (Johan & Höivik, Tord, 1971, p. 73-76) However war, as the ultimate exercise of direct violence, is without doubt also the ultimate form of conflict to resolve and avoid.

More specifically, the two perspectives have rather different approaches to ethno-national boundaries. The postcolonial normative approach would, as already mentioned, by a very simplistic description advocate the *conversion* of these marginalizing ethnic boundaries into

boundaries of 'strategic essentialization' and as a means of resistance against marginalization. In a conflict resolution approach, on the contrary, ethnic boundaries would be assessed as obstacles to conflict resolutions by stereotyping the enemy and putting up barriers of effective communication, thereby creating a false image of what is actually and rationally going on (Burton, 1990, p.78-79). Ethnic boundaries are therefore in need of *deconstruction*. In the following discussion, conversion and deconstruction will form the core concepts, or 'lenses' through which ethnic boundaries will be illuminated.

Postcolonialism and conflict resolution could be seen as very different approaches, and they are indeed, but it should not be forgotten that both have roots in a critique of the same dominant discourses. Conflict resolution emerged as a critique from inside the Western society, challenging established institutions of conflict management, e.g. juridical national and international practices and theories<sup>(3)</sup>. Postcolonialism became a challenge from outside, as the Oriental, the subaltern and the marginal began to speak or write back to the dominant West, challenging imperial and colonial discourses.

On some locations the political practices derived from these two approaches are hidden and acted out silently under the surface. However, nowhere is the dynamic between them more apparent than in the recent so-called peace process in Israel/Palestine. The conflict resolution practitioners have until recently had the advantaged position, bringing the Israeli and Palestinian elite to peace talks and institutionalizing cooperation between the two parties. Recently, however, postcolonialists have raised their voices and are about to take the lead, pushing the peace-process back. The conflicts is not, at least for the moment, between the Palestinians and the Israelis or the Muslims and the Jews. It is instead between those in favor of working out ways to make ethnic boundaries less politically explosive, and those who want to politicize the boundaries further. In the former case, the end of conflict is the prime goal, in the latter the focus is on marginalization.

Before we enter into a discussion of the two approaches to ethnic boundaries, it should be clear that none of them are as coherent and fixed as they will appear below. It is inevitable to generalize and leave out certain nuances and aspects which are important for those who have brought them forward or those who believe that they are inseparable parts of each tradition. However, the aim here is to use these two approaches as rather focused 'spot lights' on the problem under scrutiny, not to give a just treatment of two perspectives and their founding parents.

### **Postcolonialism and the Conversion of Ethnic Boundaries**

In the vast literature on Postcolonialism, it is described as a project, a discourse, an ideology, a text/narrative, a trend or a variety of these concepts in the same text (Prakash, 1995, Introduction). To me, none of these features can be carved out of the composite nature of Postcolonialism. That Postcolonialism will appear as an approach in the following text, does not mean that the other facets are left out. In fact, the postcolonial approach is the most open-ended of the two perspectives probably due to the fact that it spans almost every humanist and social science and it has as a consequence a very broad methodological base. Furthermore, and probably due to this multifaceted character, Postcolonialism has within it a strong sense of self

criticism. To fix a certain standpoint in this approach is therefore, to use the conceptual framework within the approach itself, to use 'epistemic violence.'

Post-Colonialism has its origin in Literature and the study of the ex-colonial novel. The task has been to expose the subordinate representation of the colonized by the colonizers. The focus on text indicates a strong linkage with post-modernism and the difference between the two is not always clear. However, Postcolonialism, at least in the form it is presented here, is political and normative while post-modernism, at least in its most relativist form, is not.

[In] the core of the discourse, is a focus on the relations of domination and resistance and the effect they have had on identity, in, through, and beyond, the colonial encounter: the prefix 'post' is testament to the fact that the problems that lie at the heart of the colonizer-colonized relationship are seen to persist beyond colonialism. The importance of reinterpreting the colonial experience is relevant to contemporary identity. In the process of resistance, the native voice is repositioned and empowered (Darby & Paolini, 1994, p.375).

The post-colonial approach calls for revival and politicization of the marginalized's subjectivities. One of the main questions is "how does one construct provisional and strategically essentialized subjectivities to enable a progressive politics" (Krishna, 1993, p.405). The marginalized are not only supposed to deconstructed dominant hegemonic discourse, but to subvert boundaries from the 'bottom up' and transform the cultural 'stuff' which these boundaries enclose. This is problematic in terms of localizing the marginalized space and when we consider the problem of marginalization by the marginalized. These are of course central issues for further discussion below.

In India, the postcolonial discourse has had a long history which in fact dates back to figures like Tagore, but the most prominent is of course Mahatma Gandhi. He advocated a resistance which was asserted as an Indian alternative to Western colonialism. Gandhi in fact illustrates the difficulties-and challenges-within Postcolonialism. It is both a category of political movements around the world (e.g. Gandhian movements) and an highly sophisticated academic approach (e.g. Gandhism). It is, in other words, both theory and practice, which is a strength, but also poses problems of getting ideas, views, and norms across between practitioners and theorists. More concretely, the assessment of the central issues here, namely violence, ethnic boundaries, and marginality, differs considerably between these two positions. Violent chauvinism, marginalizing the margins of the margin might be 'a price worth paying' for the practitioner, whereas this is likely to be normatively unacceptable to the theorist far from *realpolitik*.<sup>(4)</sup>

### **Conflict Resolution and the Deconstruction of Ethnic Boundaries**

The other strand of research will be called *conflict resolution*. It is basically an array of theories of conflicts combined with a variety of techniques and methods to solve or manage conflicts.<sup>(5)</sup> However, such characteristics neglect the recent development within the field, where conflict resolution has developed into an academic discipline and a rather coherent school of discussion and debate. And even though it lacks a coherent theoretical base, it has emerged as a discipline in colleges and universities around the world. A great number of scholars are now theorizing about

conflicts and conflicts resolution creating a body of literature which now forms an embryonic approach to conflict and conflict resolution (e.g. Scimecca, J.A., p.19 and 33).

Conflict resolution is a vast field with a variety of methodological approaches. The common normative approach, though, is that conflicts should be solved in an orderly (following certain methods) and peaceful way. Peaceful here could mean anything from absence of direct violence or threat of violence, to the creation of a certain desirable and non-violent regime. Conflict resolution is, first of all, advocating a non-violent ideology. It basically advocates the alleviation of violence and then pushes for the development and allocation of conflict solving methods and development of institutions geared toward conflict management. For the Postcolonials violence is not necessarily a major problem. Frans Fanon, one of the strong influences in the post-colonial discourse, has put it this way: "At the level of the individuals, violence is a cleansing force; it forces the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (Fanon, 1967, p.94).

In relation to conflict resolution, this is not just a very different view of violence, but also of its psychological function. Within conflict resolution direct physical violence is seen as the highest stage of conflict escalation and a result of 'more unconscious and subconscious forces.'<sup>(6)</sup> It is not far to interpret conflicts as a social relation which in fact describes a transformation from rationality and reason to irrationality and intuition. And a postcolonial critic would probably add: from Western to Non-western.

If we for a moment separate the field into the two influential fields of Game theory and Human needs theory, it is clear that the former has taken the ethnic boundaries as communication barriers, which have to be broken down in order to envisage the position of the opponent. Game theory is insensitive to cultural differences and the unequal distribution of power. Therefore it tells us little about the problems outlined above.<sup>(7)</sup>

It is of course disputable whether conflict resolution advocates the deconstruction of ethnic boundaries. What about Human needs theory? One of the most influential scholars in this conflict resolution approach is undoubtedly John Burton, who belong to the so called London School within the field of conflict resolution. In his monumental work, *Conflict Resolution and Provention*, he "seeks to provide a framework for consideration of theory and practice in conflict resolution and provention." (Burton, 1990, p.x). He makes a distinction between disputes which "are an integral part of a competitive society; and conflicts which are deep-rooted in human needs." (Ibid., p.1). The need of identity somehow presupposes the reconstruction of ethnic boundaries. According to Burton, we *need* to have an identity and that implies ethnic boundaries. However, the boundary is supposed to be inclusive and not exclusive and discriminatory. Burton has also explained his key concept, 'Conflict *Provention*,' in a way which prevents boundaries from becoming politicized barriers. "The term *prevention* has the connotation of containment. The term *provention* has been introduced to signify taking steps to remove a source of conflict, and more positively to promote conditions in which collaborative and valued relationships control behavior" (Ibid., p.v ).

That is to enhance communication between conflicting parties. This is to say that people are not supposed to give up their personal and collective identification, but they are not supposed to be



utilized as a political tool; ethnic boundaries are not to be subverted and strategically essentialized. The relation between the concepts of boundaries and needs of identity is objective and apolitical (Ibid., p.39f. ).

If ontological needs exist it follows that the traditional belief that politics is subjective is false. It is this discovery, this deduction, that is the core of the contemporary shift in thought. Politics can no longer be justified as arbitrary, determined by ideologies and interests. It is possible to assess 'isms, leadership and systems generally by reference to these needs. We can predict the consequences of politics. (Ibid., p.117.)

Burton's point here is that politics *in fact* is objective in its cause and development. We can assume that conflicts and even their resolution follow the same trajectory. Conflict resolution has had a tendency to slip into the grand theorizing about the universal causes and solutions to conflicts.<sup>(8)</sup> The human needs approach accentuates where conflicts derives from the frustration of basic human needs. According to Burton, politics is not a subjective realm, but a realm open for negotiation between parties with at least theoretical ability to use reason and calculation in assessment of human needs. There are two problems with this theory.

Human needs, like for instance the need for identity, is not an objective force which has a certain influence on politics. Human needs are experienced as well as expressed through cultural lenses and effected by relations of power. Burton argues that conflicts deriving from the frustration of the need of identity, are often to be found in so called multi-ethnic societies (Edward E. Azar's makes a similar point. Azar, 1990). For the postcolonials, marginalized human beings act in conflicts because they are deprived of their subjective rights which are theirs and realized by them. Furthermore, how is the need for identity satisfied and when is it frustrated? Is the need of identity frustrated when people almost never express their group belonging, because their social environment is indifferent to it, and is it satisfied when people for generations have been marginalized by the reconstruction of ethnic boundaries, *ascribing* an identity onto them? Does the frustration of human needs in the margins of the margin lead to conflicts at all, and if so, can they be handled the same way as 'other' conflicts? We will have reason to return to these last questions. The must fundamental question is of course, could the need of identity be satisfied by identifying with humanity?

### **Ethnic Boundaries and Marginality**

The theoretical connection between ethnic boundaries and marginality can be developed in two steps. First, the connection between ethnic boundaries and marginality has to do with the exercise of power and culture. Culture indicates not only what is right or wrong but also who has the right to decide in these matters. Those who are deprived of the right, at least in relation to the dominant, we can call marginal. A great deal of the post-colonial literature deals with the colonial power to define a discourse in which the subjugated people were fixed into categories of races, castes, religions or tribes, creating a tidy map to conquer and control. Timothy Mitchell argues in a citation in Philip Darby and A.J. Paolini's essay:

modern colonialism was constructed upon a vastly increased power of representation, a power that made possible an unprecedented fixing and policing of boundaries; an unprecedented power of portraying what lay 'outside.' Power is determined not so much by obvious recourse disparities, but by the ability of the colonial order to establish an absolute boundary between the West and the non-West, the modern and the past, order and disorder, self and other (Darby & Paolini, 1994, p.375).

Power is the ability to construct a social boundary in this post-colonial view. Secondly, we can imagine that a boundary has a marginal zone, a place which is neither inside, nor outside. It is a socially constructed human 'no mans land' in which 'we' have located people (real or imagined) who are neither 'we' nor 'them', they are rather a subjugated subjectivity, which is a negation of 'we'. Why? Because they are needed as a permanent instrument of locating 'we' in relation to 'them', and tell us who 'we' are (culture), what are 'our' rights (politics), and what belongs to 'us' (economics) and so forth. Often, this space 'in-between' is the margins of the margin. The tribal population in India has in many places had that function during centuries. Living either *among* the dominant caste Hindu's or at the *fringes* of their settlements, they constitute the marginal which is in many places effectively silenced.

The interesting thing to note is that there is no definite beginnings or ends to the marginal, and similarly there is no definite marginalized space which is totally without power. The margin is, in other words, a diffuse entity which can contain almost everything which is not commonly held as dominant in a specific setting and at a certain point in time. Or again in other words, the localization of the margin depends on the location of the observer. Being in the margin there is always space which is more marginalized and silenced, and, equally important, more dominant space.

The pitfalls in the conversion and reconstruction of ethnic boundaries are many and sometimes even violently disastrous in relation to the margins of the margin. The construction of ethnic boundaries could be perceived as an act of violence in the sense that they are forced on individuals for whom these divisions are incongruent with their personal perception of social boundaries and thereby marginalized these individuals; i.e. they are marginalized by the marginalized.

### **Problems of Conversion and Deconstruction**

The two realms of problems concerning conversion and deconstruction of ethnic boundaries which will be sketched out below, basically points to the problems of normativity in the postcolonial and conflict resolution approaches. But even more basically, they point to the connection between the soft sciences and political action; between theory and practice. Can we transform theoretical ideas, results and conclusion into political action and, at the same time, be observant from various political standpoints, especially toward those whom are so marginal that they are practically silenced?

### **Where is the Margins of the Margin in Assam?**

How can we possibly locate a marginal space? In the global society, the potentials for group formations and hence the conversion of ethnic boundaries are many, and these possibilities are often described as ethnic segmentation or stratification (ethnic levels), or in the post-colonial debate, as a power hierarchy. With such metaphors in mind, the postcolonial concern is to choose the right level in order to make the dominant discourse visible, subvert it, and eventually fight it. With this strategy, we might end up repressing the other marginalized groups or the marginalized of the marginalized groups. In that case, the strategy is no longer conversion of ethnic boundaries, but rather *shift of positions* from marginal to dominant. However, this distinction is not very easy to make for two reasons.

First, it is not easy to locate a marginalized space. A marginalized space always contains even more severely marginalized spaces, which might however seem too 'small' or 'weak' for political mobilization. Consequently these subgroups are not only neglected, but also forced into a political project which they might not want to be part of, or at least against their interests. Localization is, in other words, important. Secondly, this space changes location, disappears, and appears depending on a variety of factors. We can not be sure that either the ethnic boundaries or the rationale behind their construction and reconstruction will persist, although one important part in boundary making is to make them appear as eternal.

There are several examples to illustrate these problems of location and *shift of positions*. In the state of Assam in Northeast India, the Assamese elite started in the middle of the 19th century, to create an Assamese identity in contrast first of all to the dominant Bengali identity. By the advent of colonization in the 1820s, the Assamese nobility was removed from the apex of power, deprived of their former privileges, and Bengali was declared the official language of the province. The Bengali minority moving into the region was apparently successful in constructing a boundary towards the Assamese majority. Slowly a mixture of old and new Assamese leaders succeeded in subverting this ethnic boundary, and by independence, they gained political control of a territory which covered most of present day Northeast India. However, after independence five new states have been carved out of the Assam state, and this process doesn't seem to have reached a final end.

Soon after independence, ethnic groups began to emerge as distinct communities with a political will different from that of the Assamese majority. The Naga elite demanded independence or autonomy immediately after 1947. After a long violent struggle in the mountains of Northeast India. Lastly, the Bodo elite of lowland Assam are demanding an autonomous state carved out of the Assam, but within the Indian Union.

This row of events could be seen as the minorities' slow awakening and proliferation of their ethnic boundary toward an ever louder Assamese identity. It is indisputable that the Assamese leadership has shifted positions, forcing Assamese language and customs on other groups. This is the major impetus for the conversion of the ethnic boundary between the Assamese and the tribals. Second, the 'tribal' awakening' has to do with the rise in education and economic power of certain segments of the tribal population all over Northeast India, especially after independence. Tribal elites have emerged and use their power to assert their subjectivity and claim the same rights to control a certain territory as other 'major groups' within the Indian Union. In that development, we of course imagine that the marginalized space is moving

downwards. Today we will find, that certain tribes, and segments of the tribals have no voice at all. They have been practically silenced in the struggle for autonomy by relatively dominant groups.

What is interesting here is that during every stage of this process, there are moments of conversion of dominating ethnic boundaries (upwards) *and* simultaneously, silencing of marginal subjectivities, i.e. to avoid any 'internal' ethnic boundaries. During the independence struggle, all ethnic boundaries were with one exception, successfully repressed. During the so called Assam Movement from 1979 to 1983, the differences between groups in Assam were again repressed in the struggle of the 'sons of the soil' against the 'foreigners,' mainly Bengali immigrants. In that movement, which was extremely violent, most of the casualties were found among the lowland tribal population,<sup>(9)</sup> which today are demanding an autonomous Bodo-land.

An important aspect to lift to the fore here is that ethnic boundaries almost never fit with the 'boundaries of marginality.' The class aspect should be brought in here. What is appearing in the Assamese context is a new Bengali marginalized group facing the anger of an Assamese majority against an historically dominant Bengali upper and middle class. These Bengalis are poor peasants fleeing the densely populated Bangladesh and are now trying their luck in Assam as in other places in India. How should this marginal Bengali group subvert the ethnic boundary which keeps them mired in marginality? Furthermore, the conversion and reconstruction of ethnic boundaries depends on the power to convert and reconstruct, and that appears to be in the hands of the elites. But sufficient power never enters the margins of the margin, where groups are marginalized by the marginalized in the process of subverting the ethnic boundaries of domination.

The fate of the Bengalis in Assam is shared with a great deal of Brahmins in Northern India. Now the numerous so-called 'backward castes' are, by democratic means, taking to power, and using it violently against their former high caste oppressors. Upper castes like Brahmins are however, a socio-economically very diversified group from rich to deeply poor. The latter are the victims of the newly born postcolonial politics now as they face the conversion of the caste boundary which has kept the lower castes in marginality for centuries.

Who is marginalizing whom and for what purpose is a question to which I will return soon. At this stage, it should be clear that ethnic boundaries are a political means, some would say a weapon, whose use of stereotyping and homogenization lead to violent effects, both direct and epistemically, on the margins of the margin.

### **Do the Margins of the Margin have a Voice in Southern Bihar?**

The major handicap for the margins of the margin is not merely economic deprivation, but the fact that they have no voice to put forward their demands. 'The subaltern cannot speak.' (Spivak, 1994, p.104). This fact is a serious challenge to the conflict resolution approach, as it presupposes that there are parties involved in a conflict. To practice conflict resolution or management presupposes the existence of parties who can negotiate, and enter processes of conflict resolution (See e.g. Wallensteen, Peter, 1994, p. 5, 59). I have not heard (!) but I could

imagine, that there are subjectivities in Bosnia and Israel Palestine which are not present or represented at the negotiation tables and are also neglected in the many NGO's which have some political influence in this conflict. Similarly in India, there are subjectivities which are generated by neither party nor in the political institutions of the conflict.

In Southern Bihar, we find a population of mixed tribes and caste-Hindus. It is a poor area, with all the severity of poverty, and with all social indicators pointing low. People have since the colonial era learned to mistrust authorities in many other places including what is commonly known as the 'tribal belt' in Central India. Although the phenomenon of the margins of the margin is as evident here as in Northeast India, there is a common perception that whatever comes 'from above' is of evil. This perception is held by many from school teachers to forest and police officials. Furthermore there is little in the present developments which have changed that image of power and its institutions.

When I visited a village in the Ranchi district in Southern Bihar in 1994 and again in 1995, I learned that the villagers had had the opportunity to elect one of their own to the village council, the Panchayat, which is an elected body presiding over 4-5 villages. This election took place in 1984 and should have been held again in 1989. But different political interests on the state level had postponed the election for years. The official reason was not known to the villagers, but their own perceptions were clear, namely that the people with power were not interested in hearing their voice. However, their elected Mukia, or headman in the Panchayat, might have been able to voice their demands and rights. Unfortunately, he and his family had long ago lost the contact with the villagers. He had settled in the town of Ranchi, and was now leading a life totally different from that of his former fellows. He had crossed over from, not the ethnic boundary, but a backward community to which he belonged into the political establishment. Politicians, despite ethnic and ideological differences, have a lot in common in terms of culture and interests.

Could the margins of the margin raise their voice and appear as a subject or a party in the public media, and thereby start that conflict through which they should express their frustrated needs? That would require basic reading and writing skills which the villagers in Southern Bihar do not possess. The following short story, told to me on a train ride from Calcutta to McCluskieganj in Southern Bihar in 1995, illustrates this point. I was told by a school teacher that he had not been teaching in his one-man school in a remote tribal area for six months. He had not even been there. His own explanation was that it was too far away from his home. The school master was turning his blind eye to this apparent case of fraud, as long as he received ten percent of the teacher's salary. Now I asked about the fate of the children as they apparently were deprived of their education. With a slight surprise in his face, the teacher answered: "The children? They are tribals! They cannot learn much anyway."

There are of course other political forces which offer themselves as representatives to the margins of the margin in Southern Bihar. During my visit in 1995, the Naxalite guerrillas had settled in the area. They are a Maoist group who are fighting a war against the Indian government and larger landholders located primarily in Central and Eastern India. As a guerrilla group they are totally dependent on the support of the villagers wherever they settle. When I arrived in 1995, the situation was tense and people were scared. The newspaper told about the violent conflict between the Naxalites and the government/police. Descriptions of the detailed

battles between the two parties were followed by the government and police officials view on the matter. None of the newspapers contained a single word expressed by the villagers from any part of the area. That the villagers were a party, and the losing party, was not mentioned anywhere, not even between the lines.

The fact was that in the village I described above, most of the young men had fled, to avoid recruitment by the guerrilla forces or, in the alternative, to be accused by the police for being guerrilla soldiers. A nearby village was totally deserted.

Means of conflict resolution in the present conflict in Southern Bihar would perhaps include the government, the locally elected politicians, the guerrillas, the trade Unions and so on, but the margins of the margin would certainly be left out. And even if they were invited vors due to a deep and perfectly rational mistrust of authority. To put it a bit harshly; there is no conflict at all in Southern Bihar, simply because there are no representatives of the marginalized, among whom we might expect to find those with frustrated human needs.

The question arises of course: Could they subvert the boundaries which keep them in their marginal position? Unfortunately, their identity as Yadav (a so called backward caste), Munda, and Orao, is already subverted by 'their own' elites in their struggle against the high castes. These elites are now controlling political bodies. The present Chief Minister of Bihar is a Yadav and his political power rests on his caste identity. He and the new 'backward caste elite' have succeeded in subverting the ethnic boundary which once held them in backwardness, and now use this very boundary both as a means to mobilize sufficient political support *and* to marginalized 'his own caste' (sic.). Again we have a case of shifting positions.

### Conclusion

It is impossible to assess ethnic boundaries *per se*, in terms of advantages for the margins of the margin. The postcolonial attempt to subvert them into political means of resistance does not eradicate the phenomenon of marginality. Politicized ethnic boundaries have the tendency of dichotomization and hence the use of violence--epistemic or direct--towards whatever is different 'inside' or 'outside'. Sankaran Krishna has put it this way:

I would like to begin by pointing out the irony that it is precisely the greatest victims of the West's essentialist conceits (the ex-colonials and neocolonials, Blacks, women, and so forth) that are articulating a need for new strategic essentialisms (Krishna, S., 1993, p.405).

The line between conversion and shifting positions of domination is not easy to draw in concrete situations.<sup>(10)</sup> There is a risk that the postcolonial strategic essentialism is just a replication of dominance on a different level and in a different context, and that marginality is, as already indicated, an inescapable part of the construction of ethnic boundaries. Ethnic boundaries may be, to put it perhaps too harshly, a mere means of dominance and violence. As Foucault warns:

one can perfectly well conceive of revolution which leave essentially untouched the power relations which form the basis for the functioning of the state As soon as one endeavors to *detach*

*power with its techniques and procedures* from the form of law within which it has been theoretically confined up until now, one is driven to ask this basic question: *isn't power simply a form of warlike domination?* (Foucault, 1980, p.123, my emphasis).

Resistance in the form of strategic essentialization, and hence the conversion of ethnic boundaries could be seen as a replication of the *techniques and procedures* of power. Ethnic boundaries are then an inseparable part of the essence of the dominant, which in the contemporary inter-state system, rests on the idea of the nation-state as it is outlined in the introduction. Power, according to the imperative of the modern inter-state system derives from the ability to produce congruity between ethnic/national boundaries and political border. To make these two entities, i.e. the territory and the nation, coincide, is not only a violent, but also an impossible task which underscores the irony of the modern state.<sup>(11)</sup> The case of Assam has given some indications of this irony, which also question the conversion of ethnic boundaries as a long term political strategy. In a longer perspective we might prefer to develop more sustainable social forms of interaction. This is actually one of the main concerns in the conflict resolution perspective.

There are also pitfalls in the conflict resolution approach--pitfalls which the Bihari example, in part, demonstrated. One such pitfall is the common task of deconstructing the boundaries by identifying parties to represent sides of the conflict and bring them into processes of negotiation and conflict resolution. In Bihar, the problem would be to identify the parties and especially the margins of the margin. Not even the democratic institutions are, in their present form, sufficient as means through which conflicts can be handled and solved. Presently, such institutions rest on the relations of power, and the ability of one party to silence another.

To realize that parties in a conflict do not necessarily earn the voluntary support of the group they claim to represent is a major challenge to the conflict resolution approach. The Northeastern problem of 'state'- building would probably have developed differently if the Indian government had been aware of the impossible principle of one tribe-one-state. A more fruitful strategy, might have been to transcend the ethnic boundaries and demands put forward by different parties. Such an endeavor could have envisaged the margins of the margin before they got suppressed and silenced effectively by 'strategic essentialism.' In Bihar, the social tensions are to a large extent swept under the carpet for the moment because the margins of the margin are not heard. For Conflict resolution practitioners, one of the main challenges ahead is to comprehend the meaning and effect of marginality in conflicts as well as in processes of conflict resolution.

However, at least some of the intentions in the conflict resolution approach should be considered in relation to the margins of the margin. First of all, the primary goal is to avoid direct violence. This does not prevent political struggles, but it marks a clear standpoint -- that human life should not be sacrificed for the sake of a better society for the living. Secondly, the conflict resolution approach implies the will to find channels of communication; building bridges. This is important especially if methods are developed to raise the voice of the margins of the margin. The challenge is probably not to *give* a voice to a silenced party, but to create conditions and institutions through which the margins of the margin can speak. The obstacle so far has been universalism and insensitivity to culture, particularity, and power. Power has not only a direct impact on conflicts between the state and minorities, but on the very ability to speak and thereby

to become visible in conflict resolution processes and political institutions. The two perspectives under scrutiny here, have in other words, a lot to contribute with to a more coherent perspective on political ethnic boundaries, violence, and marginality.

### Notes

1. For an an exception see Avruch, et al (eds.),1991.
2. As Thomas Hylland Eriksen has pointed out, the most serious, and perhaps common, pitfall in the study of ethnicity and nationalism is that of reification. (Eriksen, 1993). The fluidity of ethnic boundaries is described by Igor Kopytoff in the initial quote above.
3. As Joseph A Scimecca writes: " conflict resolution was born in a time of questioning whether traditional legal authority served the needs of people or supported a status quo that reinforced social and political inequality. [It was] a challenge to traditional authority, questioning of top-down, centralized decision making. the "power paradigm" was challenged via the notion that human beings seek to fulfil their basic human needs rather than always seeking power and material interests", (Scimecca, 1991, p.20).
4. Gandhi's and the Congress' handling of the so-called indigo-riots in 1917 and other similar social conflicts in Bihar clearly indicates that the lower castes were submerged under the principal conflict between the Congress and the British Empire. This is not to say that lower castes were not a crucial political weapon, but this weapon was firmly laid in the hands of the dominant castes. See (Frankel, 1989).
5. The conflict resolution literature range from texts on the human nature and the undiscovered conflict resolution potentials in human beings to concrete guidelines for intervention. (See e.g. Parry, 1991). At the other end of the spectra (Azar, 1990). There are also examples of invention of a new rational 'grammar' with the aim to render communication transparent in conflict situations and in everyday life (see e.g. Rosenberg, 1983).
6. Glasl has, among other, developed a stage model of conflict escalation and resolution (Glasl, 1982).
7. Ashis Nandy rightly observes "that the oppressed, when faced with problems of survival, had no obligation to follow any model or rules of the game." (Nandy, 1987, p.121).
8. For a broader discussion of the rationale perspective in conflict resolution see also Wallensteen, 1994, p.14. Also Azar, 1990, p. 42-48.
9. 5-7000 people were killed in two weeks time. (Gupta, 1984, p.2).
10. Even though G. Spivak has emphasized the heterogeneity and syncretic nature of the colonized and the colonizers, she does not disclaim the basic standpoint, that *colonizer-colonized* is the basic cleavage (wherever it emerges) and that this dynamic has to be found and the



politicization encouraged. In that sense Spivak only points to a problem in the process of essentializing, but does not disclaim it. (Spivak, G., 1994).

11. The best discussion which I have come across so far is an article by Sankaran Krishna, (Krishna, 1994, pp.507-521).

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