



Governance and Trans-Border Issues in Manipur Borderlands: Re-conceptualising India's Myanmar Policy

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Abstract

In the contemporary global order, border areas have gone beyond the notion of being regarded simply as frontiers or boundaries and have become an indispensable part of a country's foreign policy. Same applies to the border areas of India's Northeast adjoining Myanmar covering a total distance of 1643 kilometres, without the exception of Manipur borderlands. India's Myanmar policy within the renewed Act East policy emphasising on connectivity agenda, economic cooperation, infrastructure development, security issues and energy diplomacy, changed Manipur's borderland into an inseparable variable because of the reciprocity inherent. However, the area, despite its geostrategic advantages, failed to develop. Rather, it is marked by juxtapositions. While it acts as transit to India - ASEAN connectivity, it has also got many porous cross border villages where sign of the state governance are dysfunctional. The proper governance mechanism is missing. Traditional practice of state-centric security still forms the basis of any policy related to the region. Ultimately, the big question is can India's foreign policy moves synchronise with the dynamics of these border areas without compromising the externalities and reciprocities with Myanmar. The aim of the paper is to understand the prospects and missing links associated with the Manipur borderlands specifically in India's Myanmar policy, and its implications for the policy makers and the stakeholders.

Keywords: India/ Myanmar/ Manipur borderlands/ Governance

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Introduction

From the time Manipur became a part of India, life in its border areas adjoining Myanmar has always witnessed a pattern of its own¹. The state shares 398 km long geographical boundary with Myanmar but its political boundary has got little impact on the natives of these border areas. In fact, many of the villages on the border of the state have norms and modalities of their own relationship with the neighbouring villages across, apart from the intricate rules of international relations. Governments of India and Myanmar established the Free Movement Regime (FMR) allowing tribes living along the border to travel 16 km (9.9 miles) across either side of the border without visa restrictions. There is a reason behind this unique arrangement. Indeed, these borderlands have a simple lifestyle of their own, distinct from the highly sophisticated geopolitics associated with India's foreign policy. Being on the margin of more than one state means they exist in different development modes and terms of governance (Chan and Womack, 2016). These are important variables associated with the present geopolitics of Manipur, which need utmost attention to go in tandem with India's Myanmar policy (within the Act East policy) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy doctrine of neighbourhood first. Even though the scenario is different now with the recent coup in Myanmar, yet the previous border dynamics still prevail at the same pace². The political changes in Myanmar have little to dampen the atmosphere in these border areas except for the new human-security situation that has come up.

As is clear from the above, there is always a tussle between the borderless borderlands (not bound by any official demarcations or norms) guided by the norms of universal brotherhood and the day to day mundane livelihood shared, with those areas or points of the border which are strictly pinpointed, fenced by barbed wire and guarded uninterrupted by security personnel. Establishing a synergistic relationship between the two for the interest of the nation and the stakeholders is not always a simple task for the policy makers. That is the need presently missing in the borderlands of Manipur adjacent to Myanmar. In fact, Manipur, a small state in the Northeast region of India, always took pride in this mixed juxtaposition associated with its borders. On the one hand, it has got the most workable land route for India to Myanmar and the rest of Southeast Asia, but on the other it has many porous cross border villages where the sign of governance is almost absent and international boundary has got no meaning³. Still, both form part of the general borderlands of the state and its indispensability for the interest of the nation remains.



Subsequently, the case above brought Manipur borderlands to the fore, particularly the inseparability of its borderlands from the national interest of the two neighbouring countries and its implications for the regional geopolitics. The understanding is that with the rapid pace of liberalisation and the consequent market forces, the border has gone beyond the notion of simply considering as frontiers or boundaries or to some extent as periphery, and has become a necessary factor of a country's foreign policy - a space with enough room for shared prosperity. Border, though physical, has become a dynamic element of the state in recent times and more porous by nature. Hence, the characteristic of porosity as an unavoidable variable of any borderland must be taken into consideration. This is because the existence of critical factors such as market forces, flows of trade, and the movements of people, as shaped by the local culture and the local political clout of borderland communities, make the borders always porous (Brunet-Jailly, 2007, p. 351).

The present geopolitical situation has made the debate on border and its significance and symbolism more prominent than any time since the end of the cold war and the spread of globalisation. The borderland is indeed a spatial variance of international relations (Chan, 2013, p. 123). The same applies to the significance of Manipur borderlands in India's effort for closer ties with Myanmar. Professor James C. Scott has included these extreme borderlands of Northeast India (NEI) in what he called Zomia or Southeast Asia Mainland Massif, and considered it as one of the most complex and less governed region (Scott, 2009, p. 14)⁴. In his own words he describes that the people of Zomia "are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state - making projects in the valleys - slavery, conscription, taxes, corvee labor, epidemics, and warfare" (Scott 2009, p. ix). That may not be the exact case with the region and the people today, yet vestige of the past remains. Since British administration put its imprint in the Northeast in 1826 (after the First Anglo - Burmese War) until the present days, it is still a question in the mind of the natives whether any policy of the state could forego the mindset of treating borders as security frontiers. The new foreign policy initiatives try to show it otherwise. Definitely, this will have a long-lasting consequence on any policy of the country touching the far - flung states of Northeast India (Singh, 2021, p. 232). However, not delving into the issue and simply putting it as background for understanding the arguments later, the concept of border in this study implies an institutional construct mostly physical and territorial in nature, and characterised by cross border functions and multiple policies.



When India re-launches its Look East policy as Act East policy (AEP) in 2014, with special emphasis on land connectivity to Southeast Asia, its Myanmar policy and the border areas of NEI became integral part of the new initiative. India shares 1643 km boundary line with Myanmar, which is the country's only bridgehead to the rest of the region. One could see the gradual emergence of Manipur borderlands as a geopolitical hub. The effort is to understand the political dynamics of the region that have direct or indirect bearing on the policy and vice versa. For all these, dissecting the border related issues and a thorough analysing of the same is indispensable.

The Context

To begin with, borderland has always been a dynamic space involving trans-border exchanges, compatible and incompatible socio-political and economic systems, value and ideological differences, power asymmetry, identity shifts, and constant mobility. So while studying Manipur borderlands from the perspective of India's relations with Myanmar, certain aspects need special consideration. First, power contestations leading to the shifting of border spaces and indeterminate border areas have always been a common phenomenon of this region from the historical past. In fact, what Malcolm Anderson (1992, p. 2) had mentioned about border as a dynamic element of state has become clear in this context. In the past, there have been instances of politico-military competitions between Manipuri kings and the rulers of Awa (Ava Kingdom in Medieval Burma) for the domination of these areas. Later on, the same areas saw the contestation for power between the colonial rulers and the advancing Japanese army during the Second World War. Finally, in the present context, the contestation has taken the form of a conflict of interest, particularly in term of trade and security issues, between India and China in the macro level and among different interest groups within the region at the micro level. It also includes the contestation for imagined homelands among different ethnic groups. On the whole, the region never ceases to be a space of contestation of power whosoever the parties may be. This brings changes in its geopolitical arrangements repeatedly.



Second significant point here is the existing racial affinity not bound by boundaries, free from the vagaries of time and space. The local belief of opening of the 'Eastern Gate' or 'Nongpok Thong Hangba' (in local dialect) for connecting with the long-lost ancestors, and the relationship between cross-border tribes were always there in spirit and action. The geography of race and culture remains an inseparable characteristic of the region. Knowing the geopolitics of border in Manipur calls for an awareness of its intricate geographical linkages with the ethno-cultural aspects of the natives, as conflicts and crises in the area always point to the geography. Thus, veteran Manipuri journalist P. Phanjoubam, in his book *The Northeast Questions: Conflicts and Frontier*, stated clearly the inseparability between conflicts and geographies, more true for borderlands of Northeast India without the exception of those in Manipur (Phanjoubam, 2018, pp. 2-3).

Last, it is the geographical feasibility of the region which acts as an important variable in the geopolitical dynamics touching the same. For physical connectivity between India and Southeast Asia, the borders of Manipur remain the most viable outlet. Specifically, the National Highway 102 (formerly NH 39), which connects Imphal to Moreh (the last border town), provides the require link as part of the Trans-Asian Highway (TAH).

On the whole, border areas anywhere have several functions, though sometimes they conflict with one another. The most visible function of a border is to act as a barrier and an instrument to be applied for controlling illegal immigration, human trafficking, narcotics and weapons and for collecting duties on legal goods. This is the rationale for the infrastructure at a border comprising border crossing points and land border installations. Utilisation of border as a gateway - legally or illegally - means that the border is a resource for those operating across it (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2011). The aforesaid aspects are very much present with Manipur borderlands, yet the right returns are still missing for both the nation and the region.

Challenges facing Manipur Borderlands

Section of Indo-Myanmar border, making up the so-called Manipur borderlands, has many related issues. One will find difficult to ignore all these in any debate, deliberation and discussion related to the region. Pertinent to it, one can cite a collective viewpoint expressed by Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel while going through



a comparative study of the distinctive characteristics of borderlands and borders. According to them, “No matter how clearly borders are drawn on official maps, how many customs officials are appointed, or how many watchtowers are built, people will ignore borders whenever it suits them. In doing so, they challenge the political status quo of which borders are the ultimate symbol.” (Baud and Van Schendel 1997, pp. 211-242). Many issues associated with this border space neighbouring Myanmar have a lot to do with the situation and the challenges emerging thereof. Analysing the same in the light of the background given above will be helpful.

Security

The borderlands of Manipur have been a security hotspot with implications directed towards Myanmar. Security issues, both internal and external, always form the focal points of India’s Myanmar policy. This finds better expression in the increasing militarisation of these borderlands. Sometimes it raises doubts in the mind of the locals whether the policymakers at the national level are still to forego with the colonial mindset of considering the region as a frontier and policies framed always from a security perspective. Still, controlling Chinese expansionism and penetration, trying to curb the cross-border insurgency, checking the influx of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and increasing cases of narco-trafficking and gold smuggling, remain important components of AEP’s border management initiatives. Likewise, the complex environment of the region is proving tough for security policies to adjust comfortably.

In fact, various security fallouts emanating from across the immediate border has its serious effect on the governance and life in the region. Chinese threat perception has always been an issue of great concern when India focuses on its Northeast borders adjoining Myanmar. Presently, a disturbing trend is the gradual control of the entire Indo-Myanmar (Moreh-Tamu) border trade on the Indian side by Chinese goods. Besides, there are intelligence reports pointing towards the involvement of Chinese groups and companies with illegal activities in India’s Northeast.

Adding to this, controlling cross-border insurgency through the destruction of safe havens across the border has always been on the agenda of India’s increasing closeness to Myanmar. It is a well-established fact that most of the insurgent groups from the Manipur have got their camps all along the India-Myanmar border,



particularly across the border. Government of India is continuously persuading the Government of Myanmar in curbing the movement of insurgents. The handing over of 22 Northeast insurgents, including 12 from Manipur, to the Government of India by Myanmar in May 2020 is an outcome of the initiatives taken (The New Indian Express, 15 May 2020).

Influx of SALW from Myanmar side across the porous Indo-Myanmar border areas⁶, and the likely involvement of Chinese companies like NORINCO, which have its manufacturing units in China-Myanmar border, is always a serious security challenge for India in the region. In 2020 alone security personnel have recovered 423 Chinese weapons from the Northeast India (NE Now News, 20 November 2020). National Intelligence Agency (NIA) and other security agencies of the country have confirmed the same. It is further assumed that most of the insurgent groups from the Northeast have links with Chinese intelligence agencies. The sudden surge of narco-trafficking in recent times is another negative dimension associated with security issues in the Manipur borderlands. The state, being close to the infamous Golden Triangle, has recently become a favourite transit. Though heroin and synthetic drugs come from Myanmar side, a reverse trend is also visible as raw material being supplied from the Indian side. Cheap ephedrine and pseudo-ephedrine based anti-cold medicines are trafficked from North India to Myanmar through Moreh. They come back as methamphetamine variants for peddling across India and Bangladesh. Besides, many hilly border villages of Manipur have adopted large-scale poppy plantations because of the lucrative income (The Sangai Express, 14 December 2020)⁷. In 2017-18 alone, a rough estimate of total poppy plantations in these remote hill areas of Manipur comes to around roughly 6000 acres (Kipgen, 2019). It is showing an upward trend. For instance, in the Litan area of Ukhrul district alone, poppy cultivation came to around 5000 acres (The Sangai Express, 14 December 2020). The continuous effort of the law enforcing agencies could not deter these illegal plantations. Intercepting of 8000 kilograms of poppy worth INR 475 million in the border area on 7 June this year shows the potential for further expansion in this direction (The Sangai Express, 9 June 2021). Besides, another modus operandi is the setting up of illegal psychotropic drug manufacturing units in the borderlands. Consequent to these activities, the biggest haul of drug till date was made with the seizure of INR 4 billion worth WY or Yaba tablets (numbering 4 million tablets) in August 2019 coming from across the Indo-Myanmar border (The Sangai Express, 26 October 2019)⁸.



In the last few years, another phenomenon of trafficking along the border areas is the increasing gold smuggling rackets. According to an official of the Imphal Division of Customs stationed at Moreh, gold is the biggest contraband from Myanmar at present. He further asserted that gold enters India as biscuits, each weighing 166 grams and with no mark of origin, from deposits in Kachin and Kayin states and the regions of Mandalay, Sagaing, Bago and Tanintharyi (The Economic Times, 29 June 2019).

Adding to all this, there is the human security issue concerning the Manipur borderlands in the form of illegal migrants from Myanmar, either as genuine refugees or otherwise. It has become more noticeable in the aftermath of the military coup in the country. There is a large scale entry of refugees in the border villages which disturbs the existing status quo of these borderlands. Though in a recent judgement, the High Court of Manipur provided relief to seven Myanmar citizens (officially unaccounted) who are still taking shelter in the border villages of Manipur. Providing food, shelter and health facilities to them amid the COVID-19 pandemic is creating immense pressure for the locals of the border areas. Now, the state machinery itself is finding it difficult in effectively tackling all these security issues. This is mainly because the security agencies and government departments underestimate the influence of specific borderland characteristics because they have only limited understanding of the said areas (Brunet-Jailly, 2007, p. 352).

Trade Across the Border

Another issue in the said context is the ongoing trade transaction across the Indo-Myanmar border, both legal and illegal. One of the serious efforts of the Government of India is sustaining the formal Indo-Myanmar border trade that was started on 12 April 1995. It acts as one of the strategic initiatives of India's Myanmar policy. The start of this border trade in Moreh-Tamu point brought the borderlands of Manipur directly within the purview of India's foreign policy. In the immediate aftermath, Moreh changed from being a non-descript place to a well-known location in the entire NEI. However, the tragic part of the story is that the border trade failed to pick up in the right earnest in the official term, though the nature of trade has been transformed into free and normal trade in 2015 (Das, 2016, p. 68).



Illegal and unofficial trade continues uninterrupted, creating a dilemma for the authorities. It is estimated that the annual volume of unofficial or illegal trade is about INR 10 billion (The Hindu Business Line, 12 November 2018). Because of the non-conducive situation in Moreh, business has gradually been shifted to Tamu's Namphalong market on Myanmar side, where there are about 700-800 well-stocked shops compared to less than 100 on the Indian side (Khundrakpam, 2016, p. 45). Reversing the trend, if possible, will be an important initiative. Besides, there is the gradual domination of the trade by Chinese products, with traders coming from as far as Yunan. There is every chance of these borderlands coming directly under a Chinese sphere of influence.

Connectivity and Regional Arrangements

India's better connectivity with the rest of mainland Southeast Asia under its AEP calls for a proper linkage with Myanmar, which means cutting through the borderlands of Manipur. Better overland connectivity among neighbouring countries demands for a proper border management mechanism which is universally acknowledged. Except for the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, most of the connectivity initiatives taken up by India with Southeast Asia under regional and sub-regional arrangements crisscross the said area.

Subsequently, India shows interest in earliest materialisation of projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway linking India's Moreh to Mae Sot of Northern Thailand through Bagan in Myanmar, the Trans Asian Highway project, and the Trans Asian Railway linking New Delhi to Hanoi (part of Mekong Ganga Cooperation Project) (Haacke, 2006, p.36). Starting with the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo Road, which is to be a part of the Trilateral Highway, India is taking up serious initiatives to have a proper linkage between NEI and Myanmar and further to the entire Southeast Asia.⁹ This requires an effective infrastructural backup in the borderlands of the state.

In order to challenge the ever-proactive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects of China, there is the need for speeding up the aforesaid projects within the broader perspective of AEP. The options opened under BRI may attract the Southeast Asian countries more towards it because of the likely opportunities of immense proportion. This again calls for giving utmost attention to the progress of the border areas of Manipur. However, the trouble is that many border villages in the state have no proper connection with all - weather roads, thus cutting off from the ongoing development process.



The likely positive contribution of these areas in term of providing resource bases and skilled labour forces may be missing for the new initiatives. Besides, the recent onslaught of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent hurdles put a breaker to the ongoing connectivity projects and more disengagement to the already deprived borderlands.

Ethnic Reality

Continuing with the above, a significant but less attended aspect is the ethnic and racial links. For many years, the reality remains that in the borderlands of Manipur, the official rules and political boundaries could not deter the trans-border tribes from maintaining relations with their groups across the border. Thus, promoting the existing ethnic affinity and connected history along both sides of the border for more people-to-people contact forms another focus of India's foreign policy measures concerning NEI and Myanmar. Likewise, Manipur borderlands are always on the agenda of India's diplomatic circle while maintaining a relationship with Myanmar.

The Kukis and Nagas tribes of the state have ethnic and cultural ties with people on the other side of the boundary. Besides, many Meiteis (majority ethnic group of Manipur) are also settled in many places in Myanmar, since the 11th century (Bahadur 2018). Thus, the sense of ethnic affinity is strengthened because of the presence of people belonging to the same racial groups on both sides of the border. In fact, the Meiteis went there as part of matrimonial alliances between royal families or as captives of wars. Myanmar called Meitei as Kathe, which was derived from the Shan word "Cassay" (Hlaing, 2015, pp.65-86). At present, they are on the official list of 135 ethnic groups of the country under the name of Meithei or Kathe (Singh, 2021, p.239). On the same line, the trans-border Naga and Kuki tribes are also officially recognised there. The Manipuris on the Indian side always hoped to connect with this ethnic kith and kin in Myanmar. Aware of this positive reality, the Governments of India and Myanmar signed the Land Border Crossing Agreement in May 2018, which came into effect from August the same year. Under the agreement, people from both sides could travel overland with valid passport and visa. This was a positive initiative over and above the border trade - a room for harnessing the potentials of the borderlands.



Emerging Geopolitical Dynamics in the Region

The issues above, a combination of shortcomings and potentialities, ultimately bring out the complexities facing Manipur borderlands when it comes within the trajectory of India's Myanmar policy. The fact remains that there is no historical data or record showing border as ever been a peacefully settled place in any stage of the geopolitical dynamics. In the past as well as in the present complexities associated with borders or borderlands remain. Moreover, in recent time issues related to India-Myanmar border has become more prominent with its repercussion felt in different sections. Again, this may be what Van Schendel talked about and which clearly points to the fact that (putting it in his own words), "until the second half of the 20th century, many Asian borders were not demarcated, allowing borderlanders to cross with ease, especially in mountains, rainforests, deserts and marshlands. Even today demarcation is far from complete and the exact location of these borders remains undecided, leading to violent confrontations, ...In Asia, as elsewhere in the world, state borders are gaining in importance. Unprecedented economic growth in large parts of Asia, for example, India and China, has contributed to a strengthening of these national states and this often translates into attempts to buttress national borders. Today, Asian borders are more militarized than before..." (Van Schendel and De Maaker, 2014, pp. 3-9).

Going with the stark reality associated with the geopolitics of the Manipur borderlands, the unfolding of certain dynamics could be clearly visible. Foremost is the increasing Chinese penetration and its expanding sphere of influence both in legal and illegal way. At present one could not see any effective mechanism from the side of India to challenge it, giving enough room for the Chinese tentacle to touch various aspects of the society in the region. Second is the emerging reality of increasing contestation for Manipur borderlands as push and pull associated with the boundary dividing the border areas of India from Myanmar. For many decades, since its merger with the Indian Union in 1949, the apprehension of the locals in Manipur is that the Government of India is going to compromise the territory of the state for some other ulterior interest as was the transferring away of the Kabaw Valley to Burma in the past.¹⁰ When the boundary issue came up recently in the areas of Manipur bordering Myanmar, it once again reminds the locals of the past blunders associated with the borderlands. There is a genuine fear of displacement among the people living in the villages adjoining the borders. They don't want to repeat history's mistakes. In brief, the problem started in July 2018 when the border pillar number 81 was shifted 3 km inside Manipur, in the Kwatha Khunou area of



Tengnoupal district (India Today, 7 July 2018). Interestingly, this area is next to Kabaw Valley. Though there have been assurances from the government officials yet the problem of the border people are far from over. In reality, the problem is not of a single border village. There are also instances of encroachment by Myanmar in many other border villages. Villages like Ansatang, Ankakhanu, Lamlong Khunou, Waksu, Rilyam Centre, Kharou Khullen, Leibi, Choktong, Saibol, Moirengthel, Kwatha Khunou, Gobjang, A-Solphei, Bonyang etc., are also affected because of the setting up of the border fence in the controversial boundary areas.

Third, borderlands still remain a militarised zone and a space for virtual armed conflict. This could be an extension of militarisation of the state in the ground of nation-building process as well as maintaining its integrity. One could see an increasing militarisation in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands of Manipur in the name of protecting territorial sovereignty. This has been further supplemented with the recommendation of a parliamentary committee for setting up of the India-Myanmar Border Force (IMBF) with a force strength of 29 Battalions (25 Battalions of Assam Rifles and 4 Battalions of Indo-Tibetan Border Police) for guarding the Indo-Myanmar border (The Telegraph Online, 14 December 2018). Sometimes this excessive militarisation makes one rethink whether the whole foreign policy as well as the domestic policy touching parts of Northeast India within the broader perspective of AEP has actually been hijacked by the military and security establishments of the country (Baruah, 2009, p. 3). One like it or not, it still is the hard reality associated with the borderlands of Manipur too, almost a synchronisation with Professor Van Schendel's narrative of increasing militarisation in the Asian border regions (Van Schendel and De Maaker, 2014). Giving wind to all these is the simultaneous firefights and area domination operations between non-state groups and state forces along the border areas that have become a regular phenomenon. Besides, frequent clashes among the non-state factions itself are common since the camps of the armed groups are located along the unguarded borderlands on both sides of the international boundary. This creates an unhealthy condition with the spillover effecting the borderlands too. Thus, the situation has been made more complex by the ongoing ethnic identity struggles within the borderlands, or one could say because of the ethnographic bedlam and confusing ethnoscape of the region as pointed by Sanjib Baruah (2009, p. 7).



Finally, the border villages are yet to get the actual benefits of the new policy moves of the Government of India. As usual, movement of the trans-border tribes continues across the international boundary while their villages remain backward, providing enough room for various nefarious activities along the border. Caught in a static time warp, the pathetic part of the story related to the Manipur borderlands is the denial of a secured livelihood to its inhabitants. This acts as a missing link in the new geopolitical shifts, which will not be in favour of India's Myanmar policy in the long run. The area on some stretch is very remote and neglected, and lacks various social and physical amenities compared to those on the other side. State presence is often limited. As a result, the feeling of those living in the borderlands of seeing the other side of the border as more significant than the distant capitals and economic centres became acute. The basic infrastructures like all - weather roads, electricity, education, healthcare, etc., are not fully available in many of the interior border villages despite new policies and programmes being implemented by the state and under the Central sponsored Border Area Development Programme (since 1996 - 1997). Above all, the most important factor to be perused is the absence of security of life, employment and income of the people in these areas. Indeed, it is this absence of governance which gives a sense of alienation on the part of the natives in the borderlands of the state.

Where is it really moving?

Now, taking into consideration ongoing politico-economic dynamics in and around India's Northeast, the general discourse that is going on in the social and academic circles is where the core issue actually is leading. Outwardly, there were some recent developments associated with the border areas in Manipur. There was the introduction of e-visa for land entry through Moreh-Tamu point and the completion of Integrated Check Post in Moreh. This was enhanced further by new avenues for direct provincial level cooperation across the border (trade, electricity, cultural contacts, ethnic links). However, all these have come to a standstill with the recent coup in Myanmar. Only interaction that is continuing in the Manipur-Myanmar border areas is the illegal aspects, throwing the state security into a tizzy and a life full of hardship for its locals.

The region being under a continuous spell of shortcomings is quite visible. A common phenomenon is the lack of physical and social infrastructures for the entire length of the border areas, and absence of skilled human resources. To take an example, when a fire broke out in the Namphalong Market (Tamu) on 7 February 2018,



fire tenders were sent from Imphal which is 100 km away as there was no adequate facility on the Indian side in Moreh. Another problem that persists is the lack of proper knowledge associated with international trade among local traders. Adding to the woe, the Indo-Myanmar border trade is not in the direction expected by the Indian policy makers. There is the case of lacking effectiveness of the state authority and failure of the Central leaders to understand the ground reality, though efforts are there no doubt. Directives are there, but the required determination seems to be absent on their part. Looking at all these aspects, the supposition that was put up by experts in the Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderland (2018) finds relevance. The same emphasised the fact that *“while infrastructure and new technologies of surveillance overall bolster state efforts to regulate movement - and thereby turn borderlands into prime targets of biopolitical interventions - implementation often remains patchy. ... Accordingly despite new roads, mobile phone connections along them, and new technologies of surveillance, states seem no less anxious about their presence and control in borderlands, and Zomia - like niches in which governance is weak or absent are not a thing of the past (Horstmann, Saxer and Rippa, 2018, p.5).”*

Eventually, lack of concrete answer to the border issues and the absence of a clear border policy with governance being minimal in many far-flung border villages in the whole make any progress related to the borderlands not only complicated but very slow. In this context, the concept of governance put up here could mean the one as suggested by International Bureau of Education (an Institute of UNESCO) that *“refer to structures and processes that are designed to ensure accountability, transparency, responsiveness, rule of law, stability, equity and inclusiveness, empowerment, and broad-based participation. Governance also represents the norms, values and rules of the game through which public affairs are managed in a manner that is transparent, participatory, inclusive and responsive”* (International Bureau of Education–UNESCO, 2021). The State and the Central government seem to be devoid of a clear-cut border policy that can tackle the mentioned issues in a multi-dimensional way. Though the people living in the border areas have dynamics of their own, yet there is a need for improving their standard of living with better amenities so that they contribute positively to the foreign policy initiatives of the country. Presently, Manipur and its borderlands failed to get maximum return from the opportunities provided by geography of the land. Rather, in the absence of a suitable policy framework, the border area remained trapped in the vagaries of the same.



Ultimately, border and borderlands continue to be a problematic and complex zone with no meaningful contribution to India's Myanmar policy and, at the same instance, no reciprocal benefit of the policy to the immediate borderland communities and tribes. Governance, in its multi-dimensional and all encompassing facets, is very much missing. As Yu Keping (2015) argues, *"governance" can be distinguished from "government" in several ways. Government authority is unitary, while governance involves different levels and venues of authority. And although governance implies instrumentality toward given goals, it requires interaction with civil society and local populations for its effectiveness*". Materialisation of this type of synergistic interrelationship in the locality is likely to take time in the Manipur borderlands, though there is some visible sign of late.

Assessment

Despite the many narratives and dialogues, what still remains unclear and ambiguous is the implication of India's Myanmar Policy for the borderlands of Manipur alongside the international boundary and its natives. The argument put forward is whether the foreign policy of the land had succeeded in delivering to them a prospective vision. It seems somewhere there is a big gap between policy and ground realities. This hampers the actual materialisation of the policy moves, though the effort is very much there on the part of the Central leadership to adjust its borderlands to the foreign policy moves.

Is the right atmosphere being created in this part to make Manipur borderlands a significant contribution to the overall national interest and productive contribution of the country's foreign policy moves concerning Myanmar is another follow up question. The paradigm shift that needs to be comprehensible to those concerned with foreign policy is the fact that in the global dynamics borders are no longer only frontiers or boundaries, but a very significant space of a country's overall geopolitical manifestation. Because of their location at the intersection of the nations, they are important for accessing regional economic markets, facilitating trade flows and shaping diplomatic relations (Plonski and Yousuf, 2018, p. 7). As such, efforts are necessary to give more emphasis on human-centric security than on state-centric security. This necessitates an earnest effort from the side of the local government too. Eventually, the fact remains that a nation who can properly utilise its borderlands to its optimum utility could be in a better position in the geopolitical dynamics. The relevance of the geopolitics of the border is always there in the foreign policy of a country without the exception of India-Myanmar border in India's Foreign policy moves towards Myanmar and beyond.



Overlapping with the foreign policy move is the dynamics of globalisation influencing the borderlands which cannot be ignored. This is another connected dimension that touches the locals of the Manipur borderlands too, whether they like it or not. An intricate dynamics associated with the policy moves could be expected thereof. Thus, before one proceeds with any serious discourse, Minghi's assertion regarding the functional evolution of borders need proper deliberation (Minghi, 1963, pp. 407 - 428). Locals need to be realistic and be ready for the change. An all out preparation is a must. This calls for efforts to convert the available potentials of the region to actual marketable outputs and resources so that when India's Myanmar policy become fully functional in this part of the country, and that the borders of Manipur opens up to Myanmar, the *Flyover syndrome* is avoided. The issue now is of good governance and transformative leadership.

What is desirable is a well-developed human capital base with right infrastructure inputs in the borderlands of Manipur. This is to be further supplemented by alternative means of livelihood. The importance of cross-border cooperation in a multidimensional way needs to be recognised and defined as a priority both in foreign policy and domestic policy. Enhancing the potentials of the Indo - Myanmar borderlands by encompassing its ever developing functional changes could be a positive contribution. Ultimately, collective consciousness and earnest effort is called for in the level of the Central government as well as the State government, inclusive of the local population going across the ethnic and racial spectrum, for productive participation in the emerging dynamics. Opportunities associated with the surge of goods, people and ideas in the border areas need to be tapped for the progress of the region itself. Institutionalised regional initiatives and initiatives to establish regional connections need to be enhanced. Only then could borderlands of Manipur in India's Northeast adjoining Myanmar could be a positive contribution to the country's shift towards Myanmar within the broader perspective of its Act East policy.



Endnotes

- ¹ Manipur is a state of India located in its Northeast, bordering Myanmar. This former princely state became a part of the India on October 15, 1949.
- ² On 1st February this year the civilian government in Myanmar under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, which was in office since 2016, was overthrown by a military coup led by General Min Aung Hlaing.
- ³ The Government of India through its agency like the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) promotes these roads heavily.
- ⁴ The term ‘Zomia’ is actually coined by Professor Willem Van Schendel of Netherlands in 2002 (in an article published in the geography journal Environment and Planning D: Society and Space) though used in his thesis by James C. Scott. The word itself is an amalgamation of two terms ‘Zo’ meaning remote or hill and ‘Mi’ means people. Thus, literally the term denotes a highland region. At the same time, Canadian anthropologist Jean Michaud developed the concept of Southeast Asian Massif in 1997. The regions of Zomia and Southeast Asian Massif almost overlap with each other.
- ⁵ Moreh is the border town in the Indian state of Manipur adjacent to Tamu town of Sagaing State in Myanmar.
- ⁶ The fact remains that still many parts of the state borderlands remain unmanned and unguarded despite being managed by the Assam Rifles (a para-military under Government of India) and state police forces.
- ⁷ An acre of poppy plantation can yield at least 10kg opium and according to the villagers, 1kg would cost not less than Indian Rupee (INR) 50,000 in the local market.
- ⁸ The WY stands for “World is Yours” which is a psychotropic drug or tablet.
- ⁹ The Trilateral Highway will be an important part of the BIMSTEC initiative. It will cover a distance of about 1360 km.
- ¹⁰ Historical sources point out that Kabaw valley, a teak-rich area of approximately 3000 sq. miles lying in the Manipur-Myanmar border, has always been an area of contestation between the Manipuris and the Burmese rulers since the early times. However, for the larger part of history it was under the rulers of Manipur. It was only in 1834, under the Kabaw Valley Agreement, that the same was transferred to the Burmese for a compensation of 6000 circa rupees per annum to the king of Manipur. But the same was to be reverted to Manipur in case of ‘nonpayment’. Indeed, the Burmese stop paying it after state became a part of independent India. It is said that the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru again handed over the Kabaw Valley to the Burmese authorities in the year 1953 without any negotiation during Prime Minister U Nu’s visit to Northeast India. What was alleged is that this was done without the consent of the Parliament of India and people of Manipur.



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