

Borderland Dynamics and Cross-Border Integration: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Indo-Myanmar Border and Northeast India's Geopolitical Complexities

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DOI:10.54741/SSJAR/6.2.2026.347


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This comprehensive research paper synthesizes insights from over 50 scholarly sources to examine the multifaceted dimensions of borderland studies, with particular emphasis on the Indo-Myanmar border and the geopolitical complexities of Northeast India. The paper explores theoretical frameworks for understanding border regions, analyzes the socioeconomic and political realities of the Indo-Myanmar borderland, examines cross-border integration mechanisms, and investigates the ethnic conflicts and governance challenges that characterize Northeast India. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship spanning political science, geography, sociology, and international relations, this study reveals that borders function not merely as dividing lines but as dynamic spaces of interaction, contestation, and opportunity. The analysis demonstrates how India's Act East Policy intersects with local borderland realities, creating both opportunities for regional connectivity and challenges related to security, identity, and sovereignty. Key findings indicate that effective border management requires balancing security imperatives with the lived experiences of borderland communities, recognizing the fluidity of ethnic identities across artificial boundaries, and developing governance frameworks that accommodate the unique characteristics of frontier regions. The paper concludes by identifying critical gaps in current approaches and proposing directions for future research and policy development in borderland studies and cross-border cooperation.

Keywords: border dynamics, manipur, north-east india, indo-myanmar border

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As. Zinghorrin, Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Manipur University, Imphal, Manipur, India. Email: zingahum@gmail.com	As. Zinghorrin, Dr. Ruolkhumzo, Sp. Sokatung, Borderland Dynamics and Cross-Border Integration: A Comprehensive Analysis of the Indo-Myanmar Border and Northeast India's Geopolitical Complexities. Soc Sci J Adv Res. 2026;6(2):78-93. Available From https://ssjar.singhpublication.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/347	

Manuscript Received 2026-02-13	Review Round 1 2026-03-01	Review Round 2	Review Round 3	Accepted 2026-03-18
Conflict of Interest None	Funding Nil	Ethical Approval Yes	Plagiarism X-checker 4.16	Note
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1. Introduction

Borders have become one of the more complicated and contested things in contemporary political geography. They are at once instruments of state sovereignty, places for economic exchange, spaces for cultural interaction, and realms of human experience (Newman, 2003; Van Houtum, 2005). In recent decades, the study of borderlands has undergone a transformation from a focus on the state to a broader investigation of how borders represent the intersection of global and local forces (Rumford, 2006; Kolosov, 2005). The Indo-Myanmar boundary region is no exception and stretches for about 1,643 kilometres through the hilly area of the Northeastern region of India, cutting through areas of ethnically related communities whose language, culture and economic bonds have historically traversed and challenged colonial and post-colonial boundary making (Khwairakpam, 2023; Guyot-Réchar, 2021).

Northeast India has a special place in India's geopolitical imagination and strategic planning. The evolution of India's Look East Policy essentially meant looking towards the east for trade, commerce and investment to Act East Policy reflects the recognition of the role that the region must play as a potent connectivity corridor and a bridge for ASEAN engagement in the realm of trade, commerce and investment. The Indo-Myanmar border has emerged as a critical interface for the attainment of the Act East Policy (Doley, 2017; Chiru, 2017). Nevertheless, connectivity initiatives and border management policies are creating serious tensions with local people. Border fencing threatens their traditional cross-border movement and will impact the relationship of trade and kinship (Majumdar 2020; Bhattacharyya 2021). How can states effectively safeguard territory while accommodating the needs of borderland populations? This tension raises crucial questions. What forms of cross-border integration can uphold both national sovereignty and transnational communities' ties?

This paper integrates existing academic literature regarding borderland studies, Indo-Myanmar relations, cross-border integration, and the ethnopolitics of Northeast India to respond to these queries. Using theoretical frameworks from the disciplines of political science, geography, sociology, and international relations, this analysis focuses on how borders divide and connect.

It focuses on the interaction between the state, regional integration initiatives, ethnic identity politics and local communities. The work moves through several interlinked explorations: setting up the theoretical contexts, understanding the historical and contemporary realities of the Indo-Myanmar borderland, assessing cross-border integrative measures, inquiring into ethno-political and governance issues, addressing border security and management concerns, combining key themes and tensions, and finally future research and policy recommendations.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Borderland Studies

Scholarly thinking about borders has evolved tremendously over time. These shifts have been mirrored in the ways we think about political geography. For a long time, borders were seen mainly as lines; they were understood as marks that indicate where one sovereign space ends, and where another begins. They were taken to be the delimiters of state authority, and a mechanism for controlling who can move across. (Anderson, 1996) Recent literature argues that borders operate simultaneously as legal boundaries, security barriers, economic meeting points and social spaces, rendering them complex, multilayered phenomena (Donnan & Wilson, 1999; Baud & Schendel, 1997) (Hagmann & D'Agoot, 2013). According to Tuck and colleagues (2025), borders are constantly under contestation and negotiation and are therefore always being made, shaped in the theatre of contestation by diverse actors such as states, local communities, transnational networks, and international organizations. This standpoint reveals the way actors perform border relations in a relational manner and is opposed to static views which treat borders as permanent fixtures of the political landscape.

A differentiation of borders versus borderlands determines the understanding of a frontier. Borders are the lines that mark territorial divisions whereas borderlands are the areas that develop near these territorial borders which are characterized by interactions, exchanges, and mixing (Zartman, 2010). Borderlands embody unique social political space with distinct rhythms, institutions and cultural expressions that can be quite different from the border line itself and the heartlands of the neighboring states (Makkonen & Williams, 2016).

Recent studies have laid emphasis on what borders now allow rather than what they restrict or divide. Nijkamp (2021) develops the theory of "enabling space". According to him, borders can be potentially a source of economic opportunity, innovation and regional growth, this border view sees border regions as drawing benefits from their unique position between heterogeneous regulatory frameworks, markets or cultural systems.

The relationship between the "high politics" of state security and sovereignty and the daily lives of those who reside in borderlands is another issue that contemporary border studies struggle with. To create informal governance structures that bridge the gap between formal legal frameworks and local needs, Graeger (2024) studies how emerging communities of practice at borders establish their own norms, routines, and methods of cooperating that may differ from official state policies. A major theme in borderland studies, this conflict between what states want their borders to do and how communities coexist with and cross them has significant consequences for comprehending the effectiveness of border management tactics as well as the quality of life for residents of these areas.

3. Border Permeability and Socio-Spatial Interaction

Border permeability shapes daily life in borderland communities in ways that go far deeper than most people realize it determines how freely people, goods, money, and information can move from one side to the other, and by extension, how well neighboring regions can grow and connect. Varol and Soylemez (2018) dug into this in the context of Turkish and EU border regions, tracing how varying degrees of border openness ripple out into trade patterns, social ties, and regional development. What their work makes clear is that thinking of borders as simply "open" or "closed" misses the point entirely. A border functions more like an uneven filter, one that might wave capital through without a second glance while putting up serious walls for people trying to cross without authorization, this layered reality also sits at the heart of a bigger debate about what globalization has done to borders. The expectation, voiced by scholars like Bauman (2002), was that an increasingly connected world would see borders gradually lose their grip and perhaps disappear altogether.

But the evidence tells a different story. As Andreas (2000) points out, borders have grown more restrictive in some areas, particularly around unauthorized migration, even as they've softened considerably for the movement of money and information, and globalization has not weakened borders uniformly but has instead made them more selective.

Varol and Soylemez (2018) identify several factors that influence border permeability, including political relations between neighboring states, security concerns, economic policies, infrastructure development, and the presence of cross-border communities with established patterns of interaction. They demonstrate that higher levels of border permeability generally correlate with increased spatial interaction, economic integration, and regional development, though these relationships depend on other contextual factors. The relationship between border permeability and cross-border interaction proves particularly complex in regions where colonial or postcolonial boundaries have divided the traditional territories of ethnically related communities. In such contexts, communities may maintain strong cross-border ties based on kinship, culture, and economic interdependence regardless of official border policies, creating informal patterns of permeability that may diverge from formal regulations (Haokip, 2023). This gap between formal and informal border permeability can generate tensions between state authorities seeking to control borders and local communities seeking to maintain traditional patterns of interaction.

The theoretical frameworks discussed in this section offer crucial starting points for examining the geopolitical complexity of Northeast India as well as the Indo-Myanmar border region. According to these frameworks, borders and borderlands must be viewed as dynamic, multifaceted phenomena that are influenced by a variety of factors, including social networks, economic forces, institutional arrangements, state policies, and cultural identities. They emphasize how crucial it is to look at both official and informal systems, politics at the state and local levels, and the enabling and restricting aspects of borders. The following sections apply these theoretical insights to the empirical context of the Indo-Myanmar border region,

showing how theoretical frameworks can shed light on cases while also highlighting the necessity of context-sensitive analysis that acknowledges the unique features of various borderland settings.

4. The Indo-Myanmar Borderland: Historical and Contemporary Contexts

The India-Myanmar border we know today didn't emerge from any natural or organic process, it was drawn by colonial hands that paid little attention to the ethnic homelands, cultural landscapes, and trade routes that had existed in the region for centuries. Guyot-Réchar (2021) walks through just how messy the separation of Burma and India was between 1937 and 1948, a period defined less by clean administrative decisions and more by tangled negotiations, competing territorial claims, and governance headaches that borderland communities are still living with today. What came out of that process, as she describes it, were "tangled lands," places where fundamental questions about who holds authority, who belongs, and who gets to govern remained genuinely unresolved long after both countries had gained independence. Mishra (2011) picks up a related thread, looking at how colonial Northeastern India was gradually constructed as a borderland through deliberate politics of space and identity. British colonial authorities weren't just drawing lines on maps. They were building entire administrative systems, legal frameworks, and ways of producing knowledge that were designed to pin down fluid, mobile communities into neat, fixed territorial boxes. People who had long moved freely across the landscape, trading, intermarrying, and shifting with the seasons, suddenly found themselves classified, categorized, and contained. The border, in this sense, was never just a geographic fact, it was an act of power, and one whose consequences have proven far more durable than the empire that created it.

The colonial boundary divided the ancestral lands of the ethnic groups residing along the India-Myanmar border, such as the various Naga, Kuki, Chin, and other communities. According to Pau (2012), this division produced a distinct borderland area where family ties and ethnic identities transcend national boundaries.

These communities developed a variety of strategies for negotiating the realities of colonial and later postcolonial boundaries, they occasionally took advantage of their cross-border connections for political or economic gain. At other times, they were caught between the opposing demands of various state officials, furthermore, they frequently actively resisted attempts by the government to restrict or control their customary cross-border movements (Sakhong, 2010). The historical formation of the Indo-Myanmar border also involved missionary activities that created transnational religious networks and institutions, with Christianity becoming a significant force shaping borderland identities and communities (Pau, 2012).

In many ways, the effects of this colonial past still influence borderland dynamics today. First, because of the boundary's arbitrary nature, there are continuous disagreements about its exact demarcation, and India and Myanmar occasionally experience tensions because of these disagreements (Kumar & Bhatnagar, 2013; The Indian Express, 2013). Second, both states' attempts to establish distinct sovereignty and control over borderland populations have been made more difficult by the emergence of transnational ethnic communities whose political ambitions and identity claims cross international borders because of the division of ethnic territories (Zou, 2009). Third, contemporary border management policies must navigate expectations and practices rooted in historical patterns of cross-border movement, trade, and kinship. These clashes between community traditions and state security imperatives frequently lead to conflicts (The Hindu, 2013).

5. Socioeconomic Realities of the Border Region

The neighborhoods in the Indian east regions, bordering Myanmar, are perennially under the spotlight of the state as well as central governments on account of their strategic significance. Khwairakpam (2023) presents a detailed examination of life in these borderlands, which portrays a steadily worsening situation. Infrastructures, market access, essential services, and the threat of transnational crime either overwhelm or overwhelm border communities.

They also feel that the national development agenda rarely includes them, the outdated text underlines the importance of community welfare. Two set of economies run here side by side, on the formal front, specified crossing points such as Moreh-Tamu serve as official check points for cross-border trade. There, traders engage in transactions of goods ranging from agricultural produce to manufactured products, earning a livelihood for local traders and creating at least some momentum on the regional economy (Dutta, 2018). However, there is a much larger hidden economy which consists of smuggled goods, drugs, and unauthorized trade that operates alongside the formal economy and is not visible, and this informal trade does not happen by accident. The two countries have regulatory gaps which leads to a shortage of legitimate livelihood options for local people and the inability of state authorities to effectively control such a vast and difficult terrain (IDSA, n.d.) This results in borderland where survival and the state's idea of legality do not necessarily point in the same direction.

The development of infrastructure in the border area has for long lagged the rest of India, in a larger pattern reflected in Northeast India being sidelined in the planning of national development (Economic Times, n.d.). One can often see the gaps in roads making basic movements difficult, a telecommunication network that is barely reaching, a health and education facility that does not meet the community need and electricity supply that is most often unreliable at best, and one should not take such factors lightly. They create a real ceiling on economic opportunity and make everyday life harder for people living in these areas, and the security situation only makes the difficulty more complex.

The region has been home to multiple rebel groups, ethnic armed organizations, and armed squads for several decades. As a result, the area has witnessed continuous instability, hampering livelihoods, displacing families, and diverting government attention and funding from potential development investments to security responses (Das, 2016). Border communities are caught in between the government forces on one end and rebel groups or ethnic militias on the other, who pursue their own interests, be it forcing entry for drawing up territories or extracting ores or for another political end (Thakur & Venugopal, 2019).

To those who live there, navigating that landscape is not a political abstraction. It is what makes life daily.

One important aspect of borderland life that is often overlooked is the role that cross-border family ties play in holding communities together. In the study of Kuki families that were displaced, Haokip (2023) brings this into focus. Kinship networks which span the Indo-Myanmar border shape, in quiet ways, where people move, how they make a living and how they make sense of who they are. These are not only emotional. They act as informal institutions to help fill the gaps left by the failure of formal institutions by providing social safety nets, enabling trade, and maintaining cultural links between two countries that, on paper, are separate. State border management policies sometimes fail to recognize and incorporate this reality, and laws aimed at restricting cross-border movement can sever these networks, leading to families being divided and communities losing informal support systems with real social and economic consequences that impact people who had little or no say in where the border was drawn in the first place. The border area is characterized by a colorful and unique mix of ethnic diversity and cultural exchange beyond kinship. According to many anthropologist and social scientist, the complex of languages, cultures and social structures that we find in so many communities here has not happened accidentally. It shows that it belonged to the mountainous and multi-ethnic area whose inhabitants shared a common history and economic relations (Pau, 2012) and that a UN declaration condemning the fabrication of history was significant.

6. Border Fencing Controversies and Community Impacts

The border fencing at the Indo-Myanmar border, which is on the fault line of what the state seems to need for security, and what the borderland communities are experiencing as a huge disruption to their way of life. Majumdar (2020) examines India's fencing initiatives under the Act East Policy, the competing objectives which underpin these projects, and the interest effects they produce on the ground. The Indian government's proposal to fence parts of the border was motivated by genuine security concerns, including insurgency, illegal migration, smuggling, and transnational crime,

and proponents of the fencing argue physical barriers are simply what effective border management in a region this porous and this contested requires (Bhattacharyya 2021; Das 2023). This is an argument that runs into a very different set of realities when you look at what fencing means for the people living there. Manipur has seen some of the most vigorous opposition to fencing since the structures cut through communities with long-lived cross-border links. According to *The Hindu* (2013), the villages along the Manipur-Myanmar border have historically lived in a realm where the international border was merely a marker rather than a functional demarcation. Consequently, families, kin, and economic relations naturally extend across both sides. For these communities, a fence is not only a barrier. It cuts through the center of a life that was never organized around it.

The debate over the fence hasn't just been that of the fence but where the fence was being built. Claims arose that workers were opting to place parts of the fence on the Myanmar side of the boundary line, which would literally mean surrendering Indian territory in the process (*The Indian Express* 2013). The complaints were sensitive, forcing the matter right to the top, with then PM Manmohan Singh publicly declaring that "not an inch of India's land will go to Myanmar" (*The Times of India*, 2013). In opposing the fence, communities have also gone beyond domestic politics, framing their opposition in the language of human rights. Protesters pointed to United Nations declarations on the rights of indigenous peoples as a justification for why the fencing initiatives amounted to a violation (*The Sangai Express*, 2013) and this was a deliberate framing. By appealing to international norms and institutions, borderland communities sought leverage against state policies that they perceived as threats to their identity and livelihoods. The consequences of fencing are, as the evidence makes clear, hardly limited to the inconvenience of restricted passage. News reports which appear in the Moreh letter pages suggest there is a fencing in progress that is causing serious disruption of cross-border trade and severing of family ties across the border. The fencing is also disrupting local governance structures, social cohesion and cultural practices which have held these communities together (*The Sangai Express*, 2011). In other words, the fence does not merely disrupt the land; it also disrupts an entire way of life.

The controversies surrounding fencing do more than highlight a dispute over construction; a more profound contradiction runs through India's entire approach to the Indo-Myanmar border. At one end of that contradiction is the Act East Policy, which positions the Northeast as a gateway to Southeast Asia and places connectivity, regional integration and people-to-people exchange at the heart of its vision (Barua, 2020). On the other side sit security driven policies that push in precisely the opposite direction, hardening the border, expanding surveillance and tightening restrictions on the very cross-border movement that the Act East Policy claims to value (Das, 2016). According to Majumdar (2020), this is not a simple case of policy mismatch that can be resolved with better coordination. The issue reflects a truly unresolved tension at the heart of how India thinks about this border and moreover, security objectives and connectivity goals often pull against each other, rather than working together, while what the fencing controversies also reveal is how little say the communities of the borderlands have had in any of this. Decision making about the border dispute and fencing, has, in most cases, been done by the central authority of the government based in Delhi, with little consultation with the impacted communities (Kipgen, 2014). It's a deliberate pattern in which the broader political marginalization that has long characterized the Northeast's ties with the Indian state is reflected and in this connection, those who actually reside on the border are often the last to be consulted as to how the border should be laid out.

7. Ethnopolitics and Governance in Northeast India

Ethnic Diversity and Identity Politics

The ethnic richness of Northeast India comprising of hundreds of ethnic groups, languages and cultural traditions packed in a small geographic location is an astonishing trait and such diversity clearly did not happen overnight. Mishra (2011) exemplifies how it is the result of centuries of overlapping migration streams, cultural encounters, and shifting political formations in a region that has long functioned as a frontier zone where different worlds meet. Despite the rich diversity, the same has also created a situation of continued political tensions with competing claims of identity and territory, demands for autonomy and self-determination and,

a few conflicting incidents which have rendered managing the region genuinely difficult. Jilangamba (2015) examines one of the most entrenched of these tensions in Manipur: the divide between hill and valley peoples pushing back against the territorial binary that now dominates political discourse and institutional arrangements in Manipur. The problem with subscribing to the suggestion that populations are effortlessly sorted into "hill tribes" and "valley people" is obvious. It simplifies a more complex and messy reality of overlapping identities, shared territories, and fluid political formations into more manageable categories. Moreover, these categories are cleaner on paper than they ever were in practice. The problem is that they were not just analytical but were built into colonial administrative structures and have since hardened into the very architecture of political life in Manipur, shaping how resources get distributed, how representation gets allocated, and who gets to claim what territory, and it is within these frameworks that conflicts arise and continue to exist.

Haokip (2022) takes a sobering look on how in Manipur, political life is dominated by ethnic identity. Political parties, civil society organisations, and state institutions have largely come to be structured along ethnic lines. The end result is a political arrangement wherein progress for one ethnic community is routinely interpreted as a loss for another, making compromise difficult and democratic governance genuinely more difficult to sustain. What makes matters more complicated is that the identities that drive this competition are not as fixed, nor as ancient, as they are often made to seem. Zou (2009) illustrates this through the Zou ethnic community, demonstrating that ethnic identities are living, breathing realities. Ethnic identity is not a given that is merely plotted on after birth; it is something that can be shaped and reshaped through history. Political organizing and strategic choice render ethnic identity an organized strategy for achieving particular ends, rather than a historically fixed fact. Ethnic identity is not an unchanging condition passed down through generations but is shaped and reshaped through historical and political processes. Cross-border connections make this already complex situation more complex. Several ethnic groups in Northeast India have sizeable populations on either side of international boundaries, giving rise to transnational communities whose sense of belonging and political aspirations cross the boundaries (Sakhong, 2010).

For these communities, national boundaries are generally far less important than ethnic ones, a situation which is in recurring tension with the territorial logic of the states that govern them.

Another important dimension of the ethnopolitics of Northeast India is religion. According to Longkumer (2017), there is more to Hindu nationalist discourse and Christianity in the region than meets the eye, as their relationship reveals a complexity between religion and ethnicity. At times, religious boundaries can reinforce ethnic ones, while at other instances, they intersect in a manner that distorts the overall pattern. Christianity is a widely adopted religion by many of the ethnic's group in the Northeast, and as a result, this has created landscapes in faith that are quite different from the Hindu majority mainstream of India. In fact, this difference in faith landscape contributes to an overwhelming sense of distinctiveness in the Northeast region, and moreover, this distinctiveness often brings it into a collision course with Hindu nationalist political projects. The enhanced political demands arise from multifaceted identities which include ethnic, religious, and territorial identities. According to Chakrabarty (2014), these issues vary widely from demands for autonomous district councils in their state to separate statehood and to radical calls for independence from India. The common thread that runs through all of them is the widely held view amongst many communities in the Northeast that existing arrangements are not a true reflection of what they are and do not offer real controls over their lives.

The Manipur Crisis and Civilizational Nationalism

The fighting that erupted in Manipur in 2023 was one of the worst manifestations of the state's long-running ethnic tensions, and the humanitarian fallout has been devastating, with implications that go beyond the state's borders. Baruah (2024) analyzes the nature of crisis through a civilizational nationalism lens. What was ignited was a combustible mix of ethnic sub-nationalism and majoritarian Hindu nationalist ideology operating at a site where the conditions for exactly such an explosion had existed for long. The cause for immediate ignition was the dispute over Scheduled Tribe status for the Meitei community, the dominant ethnic group, and the cause and trigger are not the same thing, as is always the case with conflicts of this scale,

as the underlying dispute reveals much deeper grievances over land, political power, demographic shifts, and fundamentally opposing visions of what Manipur's political future ought to be (USIP, 2023). The fiercest clashes occurred between the Meitei community and Kuki-Zo communities of the hill areas of Manipur, but the picture is more complicated than two sides that are in conflict as there are many actors with overlapping grievances with a long history that is more than what people think.

According to Baruah in 2024, what the Manipur crisis reveals is the effect of civilizational nationalism, the Hindu nationalist vision of an India defined by Hindu culture and civilization comes into conflict with sub-nationalisms rooted in ethnicity and territory. The Meitei demand for Scheduled Tribe status is not without merit and can be partly interpreted as a defensive measure against what this community sees as a growing threat, both demographically and politically. However, the campaign has faced stiff opposition from those communities that already enjoy Scheduled Tribe status, who believe that this is an attempt to encroach upon their lands and erode their political safeguards. The conflict essentially hinges on competing claims concerning who is truly indigenous, who belongs where, and who deserves what rights and these are precisely the kinds of questions that constitutional and institutional frameworks have struggled to answer in any way that the parties involved find acceptable while the emergence of armed militias has aggravated an already grave situation. According to Saikia (2024), armed Meitei groups, operating from outside the authority of the state, have established a Taliban-like hold over vast areas and populations, displacing the latter from the commanding heights of power. When there is a weakening of the state and the state is no longer able to perform its functions, a fill up of non-state armed actors takes place. In that case, chances of resolution become significantly lower and the cost inflicted on ordinary people in the middle continues to increase.

The human cost of the Manipur crisis has been staggering, with thousands displaced, hundreds killed, and communities left carrying wounds that will take years, if not decades, to heal (USIP, 2023).

Infrastructure has been destroyed, livelihoods disrupted, and the psychological damage runs deep. Das and Simon (2025) situate Manipur's crisis within a broader South Asian pattern, arguing that what unfolds there reflects the wider challenge of managing ethnic diversity where colonial legacies, developmental inequalities, weak institutions, and competing nationalist projects all converge and reinforce each other. The crisis also has direct implications for how we understand the relationship between ethnic politics and border dynamics as the conflict has swept into border areas and drawn in communities with cross-border ties, showing how internal ethnic violence doesn't stay neatly within a state's boundaries. It spills over, complicates border management, and pulls in dimensions that go well beyond what any single government can easily contain (Haokip, 2023).

8. Border Security and Management Challenges

Border Management Strategies

India has employed a variety of measures to govern the Indo-Myanmar border, indicative of the serious challenges that lie therein. As Das (2023) demonstrates, India's engagement with climate change has developed over time, in terms of its policies, institutional arrangements and operational practices. One of the principal components of this strategy is border fencing, based on the idea that when a porous border is fenced off, movement through the border can be forced through designated crossing points where it can be observed and controlled (Majumdar, 2020). As the discussion on the controversies regarding fencing earlier showed us that this approach has faced heavy obstacles ranging from difficult terrain and huge finances to consistent threats by locals whose lives are impacted by the fence. Even where barbed wire fencing has been put up, its effect ultimately depends on what's around it, like cameras, patrol capacity, and response when people cross where they shouldn't, indicating that the physical presence of a fence alone is not sufficient to ensure control.

The Free Movement Regime (FMR) denotes a radically different philosophy that permits residents located within 16 km of the border to cross over without using a passport or visa.

It does so on the premise that residents in these areas have been crossing over for much longer than the boundary existed (Dutta, 2018). Instead, the FMR argues that it is neither realistic nor appropriate to assume that all movement is potentially threatening when people's lives have always spanned both sides in this region, the system, however, creates its own security headaches; distinguishing between residents going about their lives and trespassers attempting to cross is far easier said than done. The bilateral cooperation with Myanmar has added another dimension to border management. Kuppuswamy (2006) argues that there cannot be effective border management if only one side acts with malice. Joint-mindedness by two-way, co-operative relationship-development is required. This involves mutual communication on everything from boundary demarcation and coordinated patrols to intelligence sharing and joint operations against insurgent groups and criminal networks, in fact, sustaining that cooperation was almost a challenge. The challenges posed by the border require bilateral cooperation that is deep and sustained yet competing national interests, differences in political systems, limited institutional capacity on both sides, and a residue of historical suspicion have all worked against this.

Infrastructure development is another strand of border management strategy that envisions that better connectivity, economic opportunity and service delivery will not just reduce the pull of illegal activities, it will also strengthen the state's presence and legitimacy in areas where the state continued to be thin (Chaturvedi, 2011). Importance of community engagement is growing in significance. According to Das (2023), merely relying on security measures will not allow for sustainable border management. It entails a genuine connection with border communities, good faith listening, understanding needs, and building a relationship of trust that turns local people into partners instead of onlookers or even adversaries. When communities believe that their voices are being heard by the authorities, and they feel served, they are less likely to show sympathy for insurgent or criminals' networks. The emergence of technology is also new surveillance that does not require endless expansion of physical infrastructure and patrol capability.

According to Das (2023), cameras and drones combined with data would significantly enhance detection of unauthorized crossing or flagging suspicious activities. However, technology works best when it complements instead of replacing human judgment and community relationships. A drone is capable of spotting movement across a hillside. It cannot indicate the reasons which trigger movement and what they are looking for; and local knowledge and community engagement remain the best choice to fill the gap.

Balancing Security with Community Needs

One of the most difficult tensions that exist regarding border management is balancing the security imperatives with the rights and interests of the human beings in the borders. Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde (1998) frame this question as a fundamental one about what borders are ultimately for and how state sovereignty relates to human security. Security-oriented approaches invariably privilege control, surveillance and restriction of movement to treat borders merely as barriers against threat. The trade, migration, and family connections that people living in border regions take part in and depend upon can, from that angle, begin to look like a management problem rather than a part of life that ought to be respected. The perspectives of the community challenge this framing. Khwairakpam (2023) suggests that border management must recognize that these people have lived in and across these areas long before modern state boundaries were drawn, and that security measures disrupting traditional ties impose huge costs without bringing real security benefits, as criminal networks and motivated individuals often find ways to overcome physical barriers, while the restrictions have impacted local movement the worst.

The framework of human security is very useful in bridging the gap between these two approaches. Instead of concentrating only on state security, it brings attention to the security of persons and communities, arguing that threats such as poverty, disease, environmental degradation and violence can be damaging in the same as traditional military threats (Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998). In terms of border management, this means that effective policy cannot simply choose between state security and community wellbeing but must pursue both by adopting approaches that enhance people's safety rather than protecting the state at the expense of

those who live within it, because when this delicate balance is not achieved significant losses occur for both the state and its communities (Haokip, 2023). This highlights how family connections across borders are key to shaping help, identity and livelihood of displaced people and policies that do not take into account or actively cut these ties are more than an inconvenience as they are damaging to people socially and psychologically, severing family ties, disrupting cultural continuity and dismantling the informal safety nets that many borderland people rely on to survive.

Border management decisions must include borderland communities in terms of their participation as its vital for the effectiveness of those decisions, because policies imposed from the Top-down without consultation create resentment and resistance, which in turn, undermines the cooperation effective border management depends on (Majumdar, 2020). Community participation builds legitimacy, develops local skills, and generates successful ownership through deliberative approaches, which invite the community to help identify the problem and develop solutions to them, the economic aspect is worthy of attention. Cross-border trade (formal and informal) is the key source of livelihood for border communities (Dutta, 2018). When measures are put in place to inhibit this economic flow, people are not only inconvenienced; they can be impoverished, as a result, this leads to growing grievances and strengthens the attraction of insurgent groups.

9. Discussion: Synthesizing Borderland Complexities

The Role of Kinship and Memory Across Borders

State-centered analyses of border management often neglect the role of kinship networks and collective memory in shaping the borderland life, even though ongoing political practices depend on them to give everyday reality of borderlands. Haokip (2023) shows how cross-border family ties among displaced Kuki communities maintain much more than sentimental values. The practical resources for economic survival, social support, and cultural continuity they offer affect the settlement and movement of people as they are not on the periphery of borderland life, in other words instead they form the basis of it.

They also highlight how arbitrary, the colonial boundary-making that created this border in the first place was. Guyot-Réchar (2021) and Mishra (2011) have shown that the colonial authorities drew boundary lines through ethnic territories without any regard for the social, cultural, and economic connections within communities. For those whose traditional territory was cut by the border drawn across Myanmar, cross-border kinship ties are not a challenge to state sovereignty. In fact, this actually reflects social patterns that existed before the border.

Cross-border kinship networks have many more functions than simply building family ties as they act as social safety nets and facilitates the sharing of resources for mobilizing mutual support in crisis situations and when properly regulated, cross-border trade enables economic exchanges that provide communities on both sides with access to goods and sustainable livelihoods. These people ensure that languages, traditions and cultural practices will still exist, allowing political mobilization to take place based on shared identities and collective grievances. It is highly important for border management to understand these overlapping functions as policies acting on the disruption of these networks for security objectives can erase social capital that has taken generations to build and cannot be easily replaced, while the memory of a group adds more complexity. Indigenous communities that have experienced border demarcation, forced displacement, and state violence do not leave this history behind when engaging with state authorities, as these past experiences continue to shape how they interpret, receive, and respond to border policies in the present (Haokip, 2023). When people have inherited memories of dis-possession and marginalization through earlier rounds of boundary-making, it is entirely rational for them to view new forms of border management with deep suspicion, reading them as a continuation of patterns they have every historical reason to distrust.

The intersection of kinship, memory, and border dynamics also sheds light on how ethnic identity politics work in Northeast India. Zou (2009) shows that ethnic identities are not fixed inheritances, but constructs shaped through history, political mobilization, and strategic choice. Cross-border kinship networks can reinforce those identities by keeping dispersed populations connected,

resourcing ethnic movements, and sustaining transnational communities whose political aspirations stretch beyond any single state's borders but these same cross-border ties can also generate tensions within ethnic communities. Populations living on different sides of the border are shaped by different national contexts, different political pressures, and different everyday realities, and over time those differences can pull communities in divergent directions, producing competing interests and identities even among people who share the same ethnic heritage.

Opportunities and Constraints in Border Regions

Border areas have their unique opportunities along with known limitations. Nijkamp develops this notion into a broader theory, arguing that regions along borders can use their position to create tangible competitive advantages. This counters the deficit view that classifies border areas as marginalized and underdeveloped due to their distance from the center of the nation. There are real opportunities: multiple market access; the possibility to exploit regulatory differentials; a natural intermediation role in cross-border exchange; and the cultural and social innovation which can happen when different worlds rub off each other (Nijkamp, 2021; Pascariu, Kourtit & Tiganasu, 2020). As the Act East Policy of the country speaks explicitly of this at the Indo-Myanmar border, it does so to re-establish the Northeast not as a remote backyard but as a crucial bridge between the economies of South Asia and Southeast Asia. Thereby it turns something which has been viewed as a liability for a long period into a potential asset (Barua, 2020; Doley, 2017).

However, facing serious challenges is required to realize these opportunities, as insufficient infrastructure increases transaction costs and restricts connectivity, hindering the ability of border regions to function as efficient trade corridors or economic centers (Nath & Saikia, 2025). Concerns over security and the conflict curtail investment and other economic activities (Das, 2016). Difficult to deliver goods, enforce regulations or sustain cross-border cooperation that development requires due to weak institutional capacity (Baruah, 2022). Researchers have little knowledge regarding border economies due to existing knowledge gaps.

Paul, Chilla and Sommer (2025) observed that while we see an extensive theoretical discourse, much empirical research grounding is missing. A lot of the existing research deals with European contexts, where border regions benefit from EU integration frameworks, massive infrastructures investments, and relative political stability. It is hard to say whether these lessons would have any relevance in a place like the Indo-Myanmar border, which is marked by ethnic conflict, weak institutions, persistent security threats and highly uneven development, and therefore there is a genuine need for research based on these circumstances rather than elsewhere.

The equilibrium between the benefits and constraints borders provide is not fixed. There is a shift as policies change, construction of infrastructures, emergence and dissolution of conflicts, and changes in the wider region. Nath and Saikia (2025) argue that, in the wake of recent developments such as China's Belt and Road Initiative, ASEAN connectivity plans and India's Act East Policy, new openings have emerged for Northeast India to connect with wider Asian economic networks. Nonetheless, they are also clear that turning possibility into reality requires sustained political commitment; adequate funding; and genuine cooperation among a wide range of actors, none of which has been any reliable presence so far. Distribution of benefits and burdens of border development also need to get paid attention, as the gains made from border opportunities become concentrated with traders, transport operators, and political elites, while the costs are borne overwhelmingly by those who are least able to absorb them- small farmers, informal workers, and minority ethnic groups (Khwairakpam, 2023). Border development initiatives lack deliberate policies that enable the fair distribution of benefits and protection of the weaker sections of the society.

10. Future Directions and Recommendations

The analysis presented in this paper reveals multiple areas requiring further research and policy development to address the complex challenges and opportunities of the Indo-Myanmar borderland and, more broadly, Northeast India.

11. Research Directions

There are many research gaps which are important. Paul, Chilla, and Sommer (2025) are right that the economic literature is still limited and has a strong European bias. There is a need to learn much more about the scale and composition of both formal and informal cross-border trade along the Indo-Myanmar border. Also, the economic impact of border management policies on local communities in Myanmar and India requires careful consideration, particularly in examining how benefits and costs from cross-border integration are distributed among different groups, while the social and psychological dimensions remain largely unexplored. Haokip (2023) provides important insights on how memory and kinship stretch across borders but much more work is needed to unpack how border fencing, restrictions on movement, and security operations impact on the community wellbeing, social cohesion, mental health, and cultural continuity of people living closest to the border.

Looking at the Indo-Myanmar border alongside other border areas of South and Southeast Asia could yield important insights. Saleh Shahriar examines the Bangladesh-India border issues which have some common as well as some difference with the India-Myanmar border issues and analyzing border areas in different contexts to identify similarities and differences may yield valuable insights into the border management and cross-border integration domain. Research is needed on the effectiveness of different border management strategies and their impacts on security; community benefits; and cross-border integration. Das (2023) provides a detailed understanding of the way India has managed its borders, but the rigorous evaluation of their effectiveness of these policies is quite limited.

12. Policy Recommendations

Border management policies should be developed through participatory processes that meaningfully involve borderland communities in identifying problems, developing solutions, and implementing initiatives. The top-down approach, which has dominated much border policymaking, has generated resentment, resistance, and reduced effectiveness (Majumdar, 2020). Participatory approaches harness local knowledge, legitimize actions, and help develop policies that benefit the

people rather than just the state, and border management should adopt a human security framework that recognizes the safety needs of people who live in borderlands as much as the states. This approach focuses on addressing the sources of insecurity such as poverty, marginalisation, ineffective governance, and longstanding grievances that have never been addressed, it is about more than just a control and containment posture at the border.

Policies should enable legitimate cross-border transaction and manage negative security risks instead of imposing blanket restrictions on all cross-border movements, which requires elaborate management systems to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate flows. For example, citizen family-visit border passes and border markets for local trade with certain restrictions can aid in this, similarly easier clearance of commercial flows can help. In terms of cross-border integration initiatives, the Act East Policy should have provisions to ensure borderland communities benefit from connectivity projects, since such initiatives are designed to facilitate flows through border regions rather than to border regions too often. As a result, actors from national core areas benefit while border communities pay the costs, these include land acquisition, environmental impacts, and social disruption (Barua, 2020). The ethnic conflict problem and governance problem in Northeast India require basic reforms and not just a security response only. As Baruah (2024) argues while analyzing the Manipur crisis, sustainable peace requires addressing underlying grievances related to political representation, allocation of resources, land rights, and recognition of identities.

13. Conclusion

This Indo-Myanmar border region and Northeast India analysis discusses borderland processes, cross-border integration and geopolitics. In this analysis, borders are thought of as dynamic spaces that are also shaped by the state, where global economic, political and security processes interface with local processes, and state policy and community practices often come into conflict while scholarly frameworks emphasize borders as sites that both divide and connect, formed not only by states but also by economies, networks, and identities (Newman, 2003; Van Houtum, 2005; Rumford, 2006).

In the case of the Indo-Myanmar border, legacy of colonialism compromise ethnic territories and traditional linkages, security-led policies create friction despite continuing networks of kinship and economic flows. (Guyot-Rechard 2021; Haokip 2023; Majumdar 2020)

India's Act East Policy is likely to turn Northeast India into a strategic gateway through connectivity and integration, yet the policy faces challenges from multiple fronts such as underdeveloped infrastructures, ethnic violence (e.g. the Manipur 2023 violence), parallel authority by non-state actors, and mismatch of security measures (Barua 2020; Baruah 2024; Thakur and Venugopal 2019). India is a multi-ethnic country where diversity often generates competing claims over identity and belonging, and security challenges such as insurgency, trafficking, and migration demand multi-pronged responses that move beyond merely hardening borders and instead emphasize bilateral modes of cooperation, while also expanding the understanding of security through human security frameworks as discussed by Saswati Das (2016) and Barry Buzan et al. (1998), since there remains a persistent tension between sovereignty and connectivity as well as between national integration and local practices that must be carefully negotiated

Looking forward, realizing the region's potential as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia requires participatory policies, human-centered security, institutional innovations like dedicated border agencies, and research on economies, policy impacts, and comparative governance. By engaging communities, accommodating autonomy within constitutional frames, and ensuring equitable benefits from connectivity, stakeholders can enhance security, prosperity, and well-being amid these inherent borderland dynamics.

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