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# Borderland Realities: Decoding the Socioeconomic and Political Complexities of the Indo-Myanmar Border

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Received: 20 May 2023

Accepted: 06 August 2023

Published: 18 September 2023

**Abstract:** *This paper examines the complex dynamics of the Indo-Myanmar border regions through an array of lenses, including historical ties, economic interdependence, political relations, security concerns, and social impacts. A recent geopolitical event, the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, and the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the economic survival of the borderland populace have been integrated into the study in a novel way. This study employs a multi-disciplinary approach to examine the transformation of historical and cultural connections into intricate economic and social systems. These systems are influenced by the interplay of local communities and national policies, such as India's Look East Policy and Act East Policy initiatives. It critiques these policies for failing to deliver on their economic pledges and highlights security vulnerabilities. It contends that the region's complexity necessitates multidimensional interventions and argues that any resolution must be collaboratively orchestrated at both the local and international levels. It persuasively argues for a nuanced approach that respects the distinctive attributes of cultural coexistence while addressing the geopolitical exigencies that compromise the stability and livelihood of border communities.*

**Keywords:** *Borderland, Border Trade, Moreh, Myanmar, Northeast India.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical configuration of the border region between India and Myanmar is a complex and multifaceted composition characterised by historical linkages, economic interdependency, political aspirations, and cultural interactions. India and Myanmar share historical and cultural connections, particularly in the border region, which have developed over a span of centuries. The intricate fabric of this region has experienced some degree of disturbance due to post-colonial divisions. However, enduring cultural connections remain strong, especially among the ethnically heterogeneous communities living in proximity to the border. The economic system and livelihood of individuals residing in borderland regions are subject to fluctuations,



which can be attributed to the progressive formalisation of trading systems. Although formal frameworks offer structure and credibility, they tend to restrict the traditional freedoms and flexibilities that were historically associated with cross-border trade. The economic models frequently mirror broader geopolitical aspirations, exemplified by India's "Look East" and "Act East" programme. These programmes are motivated by the potential for enhanced regional connection. However, the discussion of these policies' efficacy persists to this day. The pursuit of national goals and the maintenance of local livelihoods frequently brings up friction. It is a region where judgements made about national policy interact and collide with regional traditions, providing an ideal setting for scholarly study. Nevertheless, despite its immense significance, the scholarly comprehension of the region remains dispersed. The security issues that afflict this border region are another focus of this study. The region not only acts as a hub for dynamic cultural and commercial interactions, but it also provides a significant concentration of various security concerns, that involve but are not restricted to illicit trade, trafficking of humans, and insurgent activities. The aforementioned issue holds grave implications for the domains of government and law enforcement, given that the local population frequently harbour a sense of distrust towards these institutions. The study's objectives are to delve deeply into the complex web of historical, cultural, economic, and political forces that have shaped the Indo-Myanmar border region. Within the scope of this paper, political strategies, particularly India's Act East Policy (AEP), are evaluated by juxtaposing their goals and outcomes against the backdrop of the present security concerns. The analysis also entails understanding the significant effects of external factors, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic's disruptions and the effects of the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, and how these influences interact with the region's complex environment. The dearth of comprehensive scholarly study becomes even more relevant in light of emerging difficulties.

### **Historical Contours of Trade and Ethnicity**

The consensus suggests that migration-related trends may help build male populations in specific regions. They brought their culture with them and enhanced it to pass it on to future generations regardless of how the terrain had changed from its initial location. Sharma (2011) emphasises that people living on the Indo-Myanmar border in Northeast India (NEI) are Indo-Mongoloid and speak Tibetan-Burman languages. The majority of these groupings are from Southeast Asia. Historical routes have both restricted and facilitated cross-border movements influenced by designated homelands for specific identities, but ethnically and culturally similar groups on either side maintain continuous interactions in a shared but politically divided landscape (Sharma, 2011). Trade has historically influenced immigration, settlement, and transformation. This phenomenon is connected, either directly or indirectly, to the peculiarities of cross-border trade between India and Myanmar. Trade between the two countries evolves due to political situations, legal frameworks, and policies that may or may not benefit the domestic population. Before stringent legislative, political, and diplomatic efforts, borderland residents traded and travelled freely. This trade underwent several impositions and alterations during colonialism and post-colonialism. The partition of India in 1947 and British India and Burma in 1937 established arbitrary borders, dividing many ethnic groups in this culturally intertwined region into independent nation-states. These borders were constructed by uninformed and ruthless colonial rulers who overlooked ethno-demography, economic



interdependence, and geographical and historical reality and made hasty, irreparable decisions. Most of the inhabitants of the Indo-Myanmar region were dissatisfied with India's geopolitical, demographic, and economic changes following independence. The Indian government's security-focused approach has isolated and underdeveloped the Northeastern region, despite security being the main driver of development (Haokip, 2015). According to Verghese (2001) lack of connection and market access has set back the economy by at least 25 years. The prevailing conditions in the region are largely responsible for the emergence of ethnic tensions and feelings of alienation. This limited interpersonal connections, curtailed trade between related markets, and disrupted the Southern Silk Route. India's 1991 economic reforms liberalised its tightly regulated economy and gave economics a prominent role in its foreign policy. The Look East Policy (LEP) of India changed India's foreign policy and global stature. India-Myanmar relations have improved due to deliberate attempts to develop formal agreements and strengthen economic, political, cultural, and people-to-people ties. The Modi government, elected in 2014, has consistently supported the LEP, now the AEP (Chaudhury and Basu, 2015). India's initial venture into economic diplomacy focused on fostering extensive regional economic integration through an Eastward approach with Southeast Asian countries. The LEP had many benefits and advanced India's economy. These benefits include improved strategic partnerships between India and Southeast Asian countries, increased trade with other developing Asian countries, and more people-to-people engagement. However, the NEI has seen little or no impact from India's expanding trade with its eastern neighbours (Haokip, 2009). Historic and modern realities shape Indo-Myanmar's complex economic and ethnic relations.

### **Transnational Identities and Cross-Border Trade**

Myanmar and NEI borderlands show how cultural heritage unites people. The transnational "Kuki-Chin-Mizo" groups reside in India and Myanmar. Jangkhongam DOUNGEL (2019) claims that "the term 'Kuki' is claimed to have included all the conglomerate tribes of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo or Zo ethnic group of people who trace their common origin from a mythological cave." Because all Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes can be traced back to a fabled cave called Khul or Chhinlung, the phrase "Khul or Chhinlung origin people" can also be used literarily. Many tribes' claims of common ancestry with Chhinlung or Khul confirm the Chin-Kuki ethnic group's profound affinity and active blood ties spanning India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. As stated in Sukanya Sharma's (2011) scholarly paper, people have access to an extraterritorial road on the reverse side of the political boundary, in addition to the territorial road. The aforementioned phenomenon underpins their sense of self. The Indian government is implementing action to build a physical barrier along the border with Myanmar. The Moreh residents are discontented with it. They are concerned that Myanmarese rice, their staple food, will eventually get too expensive despite being legitimately imported by the Indian government. This social foundation fosters emotional integration and socio-political consensus, which are crucial to nation-building (Kharat, 2007). The appropriate identities were attributed to all communities residing on both sides of the boundary. Despite political differences, identity and culture are interwoven. Residents near both countries' borders have historically traded goods. Sharing joys and sorrows strengthen their ethnic bonds. This perspective encourages informal cross-border trade (Th. Priyokumar Singh, 2016). Healthy cross-border partnerships



require policy frameworks that recognise and harness these deep-rooted ties. Trade and cultural heritage require a reevaluation of state-centric policies that ignore these complexities.

### **Trading Across Land Boundaries**

India and Myanmar signed the Indo-Myanmar Border Trade Agreement on January 21, 1994. The main goal of this agreement was to institutionalise border trade and promote economic cooperation. The agreement initially allowed cross-border trading of 22 items, mostly agricultural goods from participant countries. The Border trade is carried out through a three-tier system, which consists of (i) Traditional Exchange under the Barter Mechanism and (ii) Border trade of agreed-upon exchangeable items. (iii) Normal/Regular Trade (with or without the utilization of letters of credit) under the Export-Import (EXIM) policy. A common definition for traditional trading is small-scale traders' free exchange of goods. The aforementioned diminished protocols eliminate the requirement for Director General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) Importer Exporter Certificates (IEC) and Guarantee Receipts (GR) formalities. These procedures permit persons within 40 km of the border on both sides to swap domestically manufactured items worth up to US\$1000 using head or non-motorized transport means. In the second-tier system, the Land Customs Station (LCS) in Moreh conducts much of its Border Trade through barter. According to the Director General of Foreign Trade, 22 products have been exchanged for up to US\$20,000 through GR processes. This system requires traders to have DGFT-issued Importer-Exporter Codes (IECs). Indian traders can export goods not listed in Annexure I to Myanmar via Land Customs Stations (LCS), Moreh, under the EXIM policy as regular/normal exports and receive the sale proceeds in any freely convertible foreign currency like the U.S. dollar (Kshetrimayum, 2010). The third-tier trade system is often disregarded due to its unease and complexity for both parties. In 2001, several new goods were added to the tradeable list. The arrangement primarily formalises long-standing informal exchanges between Indo-Myanmar border inhabitants. Symbolically, it promotes bilateral trade cooperation (Indian Chamber of Commerce, n.d.). With the inclusion of 22 items in November 2012, the number of items that can be traded through the barter trade mechanism of across-border trade has increased to a total of 62. The second tradable item adjustment was adding 18 items to the inventory in 2008. Cotton yarn, bicycle, and motorbike parts, fertiliser, steel products, sewing machines, electrical appliances, and medicinal plants are among 62 export-potential goods (Ksh. Jhaljit Singh 2016). Trade at Moreh primarily occurs through Gate 2. On the other side of the border, Tamu's Namphalong market is near Gate No. 2. The Indian side has no such market. A significant quantity of Indian goods is smuggled into Myanmar at night through the porous border, while the majority of goods entering India originate from China, Thailand, and other East Asian countries (Chaudhury and Basu, 2015). The border trade activities occurring between Mizoram and Myanmar have several implications for Mizoram, encompassing the indigenous Mizo population, the migrant Burmese population, and the local economy. These economic, social, and political implications are predominantly attributable to informal border trade, which is significantly larger than official border trade. Informally imported goods should be divided into two groups: consumer goods on the one hand, and weapons, narcotics, and chemicals used for the manufacture of alcohol on the other (Levesque & Rehman, 2008). Myanmar's Nagas and Kachins rely upon the markets at Nampong, a small town on the Arunachal Pradesh border. This reliance is

primarily due to the approximately 100-kilometer roadless distance between Pangsau hamlet on the Myanmar side and the nearest city. Every Friday, Myanmar residents can cross the border and trade in Nampong on Burma Day. On India Days, the 15th and 30th of each month, an Assam Rifles contingent in Nampong escorts Indians into Myanmar for a few hours (Chaudhury and Basu, 2015). The 1994 Indo-Myanmar Border Trade Agreement formalises trade practices but serves as merely a symbol of economic integration. The current multi-tiered structure fails to reduce informal trading, which thrives outside government control and observation. Significantly, socio-cultural interaction between communities on both sides of the border offers a fundamental narrative and helps build these trading networks' concrete elements.

### **Pandemic Disruptions**

It is pertinent to underscore that the cross-border trade between India and Myanmar has culminated in a major proliferation of employment opportunities for those actively participating in the economy. These opportunities span a wide range of occupations, encompassing individuals engaged in manual labour such as rickshaw pullers, as well as those employed by larger firms. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound and detrimental impact on various sectors inside border zones, leading to the suspension of commercial activities upon the closure of the border gate. The national newspaper, The Indian Express, reported that S. Saikhom, a businessman in Moreh close to the integrated checkpoint has been operating an electronics business for 15 years and would frequently travel back and forth between India and Myanmar buying and selling items before the gates closed. He said, "Everything has gotten too costly. Costs have risen, and commodities transportation has been prohibited and the customers aren't arriving." (The Indian Express, 2021)

Tethem Haokip, a resident of Moreh (Interviewed on 20 February 2021), stated that auto drivers make a living by transporting products and services from the Namphalong market to various transportation parking lots. The local sellers establish tiny retail establishments along the roadside, catering to both visitors and tourists. The local population also sustains its existence through the provision of labour for various services. M. Thongkhosei, a resident of Moreh (Interviewed on 21 February 2021), stated that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the border gate was closed and many business people ceased their activities. It also caused hardship for manual labourers and thousands of crores of rupees in revenue losses due to the loss of employment and trade. According to an official at the LCS, Moreh, cross-border trade is the main source of income for the residents of Moreh (Interviewed on 22 February 2021). COVID-19 had a significant negative impact on Moreh's border trade. Since residents of Moreh depend on the Namphalong market for getting the necessities of their daily sustenance. The socio-economic landscape of the Indo-Myanmar border trade has been significantly disturbed by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to notable effects on small-scale traders and labourers in towns such as Moreh. This stipulates focused policy initiatives to mitigate these consequences and render border communities resilient to future crises.

### **Political Upheaval: Myanmar's Coup and Border Trade**

The recent resurgence of the military government in Myanmar has caused significant unrest in the country and has been met with discontentment from neighbouring democratic countries.



The coup returned the country to full military rule after a short span of quasi-democracy that began in 2011, when the military, which had been in power... Demonstrations against the military takeover, some of which have turned deadly, have erupted across Myanmar. Unrest has gripped Myanmar, with demonstrators pouring into the streets for weeks on end in a challenge to the country's powerful military after it overthrew the fragile democratic government in a coup d'état on Feb. 1. (Goldman, 2021, para. 3)

The resurgence of the military junta in the country, in tandem with the persistent large-scale rallies and demonstrations, had adverse consequences on cross-border trade and the inhabitants inhabiting the border areas. The people inhabiting either side of the border express apprehension regarding the potential strain on their social connections in the event of a military regime. The nationwide protests in Myanmar against the military coup have alarmed, concerned, and saddened a refugee population in NEI. These ethnic Chins, whose genealogy is akin to that of the Mizos and Kukis of NEI, departed Myanmar between 1989 and 2004 when the Myanmar military brutally put down the Chin self-determination movement. The northeastern part of India is characterised by its extensive border, spanning 1643 kilometres, with Myanmar's Chin state and Sagaing region. These regions of Myanmar are inhabited by the ethnic Chins. According to estimates provided by the state government and community-based organisations (CBOs), 40,150 refugees currently reside in Mizoram while 8,250 refugees are in Manipur (UNHCR RBAP, 2023).

The safety and well-being of their cherished family members and relatives is a common concern among the people of Myanmar. In direct military control, ethnic minorities could be more vulnerable to repression. On February 10, 2021, the regional press reported that the Chin National Army, the armed wing of the ethnic Chin National Front, which seeks independence and autonomy in Myanmar, sought asylum for their relatives in Mizoram's Champhai areas because the Junta could crackdown at any point (Aye & Bhattacharya, 2021). Resurgent Military Junta has impeded daily life in borderlands on both sides of the international line. Mohammed Faizal, a prominent Moreh community member, expected cross-border trading to improve his finances on February 1 (Banka, 2021). However, the Myanmar military overthrew Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's democratically elected government the same day. Suu Kyi and other party leaders were arrested in early morning raids. On the designated day, Moreh's international border gates were closed (Banka, 2021). According to Moreh resident Thangminlen Touthang, the recent Military Junta takeover in Myanmar disrupted local trade (Interviewed on 21 February 2021). It was comparable to dousing a fire with petrol. The local population's livelihood has been disrupted by the closure of retailers, vendors, labourers (called "coolies"), and transporters. There was always hope before the Military Junta's takeover. It is uncertain when this political deal will end. M. Thongkhosei, a Moreh resident, said the military rule will affect border trade because Burmese people are being frantic. Trade may cease if borders are closed for an extended period. Additionally, this condition will affect the connections between border residents on both sides. This is because cross-border trade and commerce are crucial to their livelihoods. These groups may be at risk from fear-induced psychological discomfort. LCS official Moreh notes varied perspectives and hopes, saying "The military administration may affect both formal and informal trade. This depends on Myanmar's internal law enforcement and governance. Border trading existed before Myanmar's democratic government. Due to widespread protests and unrest, strict military measures have

been taken to calm the situation, disrupting border trade” (Interviewed on 22 February 2021). Despite a Military Junta or other administration, normalcy is expected. Although the Military Junta remains in place, law and order may normalise, and informal border trade may grow. Cross-border trade has been disrupted by the Myanmar military takeover, affecting livelihoods in Myanmar and India's Northeast border.

### **Political Divides and Cultural Bridges**

The people inhabiting proximity to the Indo-Myanmar international boundaries are united by a strong sense of love, affection, and a willingness to share. Regardless of their political differences, they possess a strong sense of international identity. The relationships persist to exhibit resilience. In the early 1980s, a famous gospel singer-cum-composer from Burma's (Myanmar) Chin state was crossing the imaginary boundary to enroll at a theology college in his kinsmen's home in Lamka, Churachandpur district in Manipur, state police led by his ethnic group's kin detained and charged him under the 1946 Foreigner's Act (Suan, 2009). The singer was then locked up until help arrived. During his imprisonment, the artist wrote the song "Pianpih Na Laizom," (Your Own Kinsman) which is both exquisite and tragic. The song effectively portrays the singer's encounter as a casualty of a contemporary political boundary. It is a reflection of the perspective of "trans-border people" as an entity (Weiner, 1985; Campions, 2017). People residing close to the border depend on cross-border trade as a significant means of generating revenue. Despite the prevailing political divisions, inhabitants belonging to the same ethnic and cultural groups inhabiting either side of the international boundary or line have managed to sustain a level of movement over the boundary. A politically polarised landscape is something that they experience. The inhabitants residing in Moreh engage in cross-border activities, traversing the international boundary to engage in the trade of commodities such as kerosene, lungis, garments, and salt across the villages of Myanmar every day. Myanmar traders also supply Moreh with rice, seafood, cereals, flowering plants, charcoal, and others. Myanmar serves as the primary supplier of rice within the Moreh subdivisions (Sharma, 2011). Moreover, it is noteworthy that inside the city of Aizawl, there is a noticeable presence of Burmese from Myanmar who actively engage in trade and commercial activities. These individuals are often identified by the imprint of brilliant sandalwood (referred to as Safed Chandan in Hindi) on their faces, as well as their adherence to traditional dress (Puan in Mizo). The transborder society inhabiting the border regions exhibits a propensity for embracing and engaging in cross-border mobility as a usual practice, which endures over a long time frame. Nevertheless, the prohibition of such transactions by governmental authorities results in an annihilation of the cultural milieu. Regular border crossings are routine for the inhabitants of Champhai in Mizoram and Rih in Myanmar, as they frequently visit their relatives and neighbours in their respective areas and often stay there for extended periods. Indeed, the task of segregation becomes challenging and it implies that there could be a lack of a strict requirement to undertake it.

### **Unrealised Potential and Policy Paralysis**

The concept of establishing territorial connections between India and Southeast Asia via NEI and Myanmar, through Asian Highways or the Tri-Lateral-Highway and Tri-Lateral-Railway, is not new. The concern is raised regarding the potential timeframe for being incomplete,



perhaps for an additional decade or two decades till completion. The LEP, which attempts to enhance trade between Northeast India and Southeast Asian countries, particularly those in the ASEAN region, by leveraging Myanmar as a conduit, has been implemented for over twenty years. There have been no discernible economic benefits for the Northeast Indian states as a result of this strategy, and Myanmar currently favours Chinese goods over Indian ones due to the lower pricing and the convenience of importing from China (Sharma, 2011). There is a consensus among scholars and experts that trade activities along the Indo-Myanmar border have not witnessed substantial progress. India and Myanmar signed a trade agreement on January 21, 1994, allowing Moreh and Tamu to trade in 1995. For 17 years, the border has been open without advancement (The Sangai Express, 2012). The most practical way to trade in Moreh was barter. Many of Moreh's import/export licence holders can't read or write, making the LCS a bigger concern. They lack concern about or understanding of import-export laws. Trade has shifted to unofficial channels due to the discrepancy, allowing exporters to profit from the unofficial exchange rate. An inflated official currency exchange rate discourages traders from conducting commercial transactions through official channels and limits banks' foreign exchange activities. Without banks and other financial institutions, the trading system is faulty (Indian Chamber of Commerce, n.d.). The informal structure controls the region's border trade, making normal trade difficult. Sociopolitical issues have impacted the border. Thus, the Indo-Myanmar border trade is impeded. The bulk of goods exchanged between India and Myanmar come from metropolitan centres like Chennai, Delhi, Jaipur, and Kolkata, the Northeastern states have not completely benefited from formal or informal trade. Myanmar also trades a lot of goods with India informally from China, Korea, Japan, and Thailand. Consequently, local productions cannot compete in the market. In addition to law and order issues, border trade faces many restrictions. Several checkpoints and random checks along the national highway also hindered border trade and disturbed the local traders. Intercepting drugs and contraband more often highlights the drawbacks of cross-border trading. Infrastructure constraints are often cited as trade development constraints. These limits include road connectivity, telecommunications, border transit facilities, and banking and financial networks. Additionally, Manipur and Moreh communities have not been effectively enabled to take advantage of Myanmar's proximity and cross-border trade, which is distressing. The Manipur government's ambivalence to Moreh's potential for major international trade worsens the situation. Without even the most basic contemporary conveniences, Moreh town is reminiscent of the 18th century. Today, Moreh has several flaws. Its strategic placement is its biggest benefit. The disaster was exacerbated by New Delhi's geopolitical decision to make Kolkata or Guwahati the main Indian trading hub for Indo-Myanmar border trade (The Sangai Express, 2021).

## **2. CONCLUSION**

In the Indo-Myanmar border region, economic, cultural, and geopolitical elements are intertwined. Undoubtedly, border settlements require a comprehensive approach to handle the many issues individuals face. Understanding historical antecedents, economic interdependence, security consequences, and social fabric transformation is crucial to contemplative policy-making and execution. Comprehending and appreciating the historical





complexity that creates this region is essential for developing a sustainable future route since the past is the foundation for the future. This study indicates that historical and cultural affiliations actively shape present-day relationships. While establishing legal mechanisms, the Indo-Myanmar Border Trade Agreement and related legislative frameworks should avoid impeding the long-standing cultural links and informal trade channels that have nourished these communities. It clarifies that economic policies like India's LEP and AEP must accord with local economic systems. The interdependence of communities situated on either side of a border has a major impact, necessitating the need for macroeconomic policies to possess adequate flexibility to accommodate the intricacies of microeconomic reality. Considering the geopolitical relevance of the Indo-Myanmar border, specifically with India's broader objectives in Southeast Asia, policy measures should converge with the needs and aspirations of local communities. Dissent may emanate from localised complaints that stem from overarching political agendas, potentially posing a threat to national objectives. The domain of border management frequently confronts distinctive challenges when it pertains to ensuring security, which constitutes a crucial component in this context. Therefore, adopting a more intricate and community-oriented strategy towards security may result in more enduring consequences, in contrast to the repressive and state-centric enforcement methods that tend to isolate people whom they intend to safeguard. The borderlands are characterised by a hazardous existence, as evidenced by the substantial societal consequences of economic activities and the exacerbation of conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Future strategies should incorporate comprehensive contingency planning and healthcare systems that possess the capacity to endure pandemics and unanticipated interruptions. The recent military takeover in Myanmar has contributed to a series of humanitarian and economic crises, hence exacerbating the intricacies of the border region. The international community and local governments should engage in diligent collaboration to achieve stability in this highly volatile environment. The matter at hand encompasses not solely the realm of state security, but also is a matter of utmost importance for human rights, thereby requiring immediate and collaborative global attention. Collaboration among international organizations, governments, local communities, and scholars is important to develop comprehensive solutions. The cooperation required for any significant change must be based on a solid understanding of history, practical economic considerations, and keen geopolitical analysis. The synthesis of accumulated expertise and the agglomeration of diverse yet related interests are the keys to progress. In these times of uncertainty, it represents the sole strategy to protect the livelihoods, dignity, and future of the many communities that call the borderlands home.

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