Zomia Rewired: State Evasion and the Making of Bordering Practices in Northeast India

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Abstract

This article examines the complex interplay between historical patterns of state evasion, characteristic of what James C. Scott termed "Zomia," and contemporary state-driven bordering practices in Northeast India. Integrating Scott's (2009) concept of Zomia—highland regions historically characterized by state-repelling geographies and socio-political structures—with Anssi Paasi's (1996, 2005) processual theory of bordering, this paper argues that state formation and boundary-making in Northeast India are not simply erasing Zomian legacies but actively "rewiring" them. Through an analysis drawing on secondary sources, the article explores how intensified state interventions—manifested through infrastructure development, securitization, economic integration policies (like India's Act East Policy), and citizenship regimes—intersect with, transform, and provoke new forms of local agency, resistance, and adaptation among the region's diverse communities. Rather than viewing Zomia as a static geographical or cultural entity disappearing under state pressure, or borders as mere lines on a map, this framework reveals a dynamic co-constitution. State bordering practices seek to incorporate and control peripheral spaces, yet they simultaneously engage with and are shaped by enduring Zomian logics of autonomy, mobility, and flexible identity. The analysis focuses on how infrastructure projects, security apparatuses (including AFSPA and ILP), economic corridors, and identity politics contribute to the ongoing production of multi-layered, contested borderland spaces. The article contributes to border studies and the understanding of state-society relations in highland Asia by offering a synthesized theoretical lens to analyze the complexities of contemporary statecraft and local responses in historically marginalized regions.

Keywords: Zomia, Bordering Theory, State Evasion, Northeast India, Borderlands, State Formation, Infrastructure, Security, Identity Politics

Introduction

Northeast India, a complex geopolitical space comprising eight states connected to mainland India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor, presents a compelling case study for understanding the dynamics of state formation, border-making, and local resistance in historically peripheral regions. Sandwiched between Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, and Myanmar, the region is characterized by formidable topography—primarily hills and mountains—and immense ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. For centuries, its upland areas, in particular, remained relatively insulated from the direct administrative control of lowland states and colonial powers, fostering socio-political formations focused on autonomy and mobility (Baruah, 2005; Van Schendel, 2005). This historical context resonates strongly with James C. Scott's influential concept of "Zomia," a vast highland massif stretching across Southeast Asia, including parts of Northeast India, theorized as a zone of refuge and state evasion (Scott, 2009).

However, since India's independence in 1947, and particularly in recent decades, Northeast India has become a focal point of intensified state-building efforts, driven by geopolitical anxieties, security concerns, aspirations for resource extraction, and national integration agendas (Haokip, 2015; McDuie-Ra, 2012). These efforts manifest profoundly through the lens of *bordering*—the active, multi-scalar processes through which states establish, maintain, and transform boundaries, not just as lines on a map but as complex social, political, economic, and symbolic constructs (Paasi, 1996; Newman, 2006). Infrastructure development (roads, railways, dams), heightened security presence (military and paramilitary forces, legislation like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act or AFSPA), regulated mobility regimes (Inner Line Permit or ILP), economic integration policies (such as the Act East Policy), and contested citizenship frameworks (like the National Register of Citizens or NRC) all represent facets of a comprehensive bordering strategy aimed at consolidating state sovereignty and territorial control (Bhaumik, 2009; Karlsson et al., 2012).

This conjuncture—the historical legacy of state evasion meeting intensified contemporary bordering—raises critical questions. How do modern state bordering practices interact with the enduring socio-political logics and geographical realities often associated with Zomia? Is Zomia simply being erased or assimilated by the encroaching state, or is a more complex transformation underway? This article argues that the interaction between state bordering and Zomian legacies in Northeast India is best understood not as a simple process of state incorporation but as a dynamic "rewiring." State practices do not merely overwrite previous realities; they intersect with, reconfigure, and are themselves shaped by the enduring characteristics of the region's peoples and landscapes, leading to new, hybrid forms of governance, resistance, and spatial ordering.

To explore this "rewiring," this article synthesizes Scott's (2009) Zomia framework with Paasi's (1996, 2005) processual theory of bordering. Scott provides a powerful lens for understanding the historical depth of state-aversive strategies rooted in geography, social structure, and culture in highland regions. Paasi's theory, conversely, offers analytical tools to dissect the contemporary mechanisms and multi-faceted nature of state-driven boundary-making as an ongoing social and political project. By integrating these perspectives, we can move beyond viewing Northeast India as either a fading remnant of a state-less Zomia or simply a passive recipient of state bordering. Instead, we can analyze how state power and local agency co-constitute the region's evolving borderlands, producing complex landscapes where control and evasion, integration and autonomy, visibility and invisibility continuously negotiate with each other.

This article proceeds as follows. First, it elaborates on Scott's Zomia concept and Paasi's bordering theory, highlighting their respective strengths and limitations for analyzing Northeast India. Second, it outlines the methodological approach, which involves a theoretical synthesis illustrated with empirical examples drawn from secondary literature on the region. Third, the core analytical section examines the "rewiring" process through key thematic areas: infrastructure and security, economic integration and development discourses, identity politics and citizenship, and contemporary forms of resistance and adaptation. Fourth, a discussion synthesizes these findings, reflecting on the theoretical implications of the Zomia-bordering synthesis. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main arguments and suggests avenues for future research. The article aims to contribute a nuanced understanding of state-making and social transformation in contested borderlands, particularly relevant for highland Asia and other regions grappling with similar dynamics.

Theoretical Framework: Zomia Meets Bordering

Analyzing the complex dynamics of Northeast India requires theoretical tools capable of capturing both deep historical patterns of state-society relations and the specific mechanisms of contemporary statecraft. This section outlines James C. Scott's Zomia concept and Anssi Paasi's bordering theory, before proposing a synthesis to understand the "rewiring" of state evasion through bordering practices.

The Enduring Resonance and Critique of Zomia

James C. Scott's (2009) *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* introduced the provocative concept of "Zomia." He defined Zomia as a vast, geographically contiguous highland region spanning from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to Northeast India, encompassing parts of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and southwestern China. Scott argues that this vast upland zone, characterized by its "friction of terrain"—rugged mountains, dense forests, and dispersed populations—historically served as a space of refuge for peoples fleeing the oppressive state-making projects of lowland, valley-based civilizations centered on wet-rice agriculture.

The core tenets of Scott's Zomia thesis include:

1. **State Evasion as a Deliberate Strategy:** Scott posits that the cultures, social structures, and agricultural practices of highland peoples were not remnants of some earlier stage of development but were often consciously adopted or adapted strategies to remain outside the grasp of states seeking taxation, conscription, and forced labor.

2. **Geography as an Ally:** The challenging terrain made state penetration difficult and costly, providing a natural barrier that facilitated autonomy.

3. **Escape Agriculture:** Practices like swidden (slash-and-burn) agriculture, characterized by mobility and low population density, were less legible and controllable by states compared to fixed wet-rice paddy cultivation. Root crops were favored over easily confiscable grains.

4. **Flexible Social Structures:** Highland societies often exhibited more fluid and egalitarian social organizations, segmentary lineage systems, and oral traditions, contrasting with the hierarchical, literate, and more rigid structures typical of state centers (Scott, 2009, pp. 6-9). These structures hindered state incorporation efforts.

5. **Self-Marginalization:** Peoples in Zomia actively chose locations, livelihoods, and social forms that kept them at the periphery, valuing autonomy over the potential benefits (and burdens) of state incorporation.

Scott's framework has been highly influential, offering a compelling counter-narrative to state-centric histories and highlighting the agency of marginalized upland populations. It resonates powerfully with the historical experiences of many communities in Northeast India, particularly Naga, Mizo, Kuki-Chin, and various Arunachal groups, whose histories are marked by relative autonomy, distinct cultural practices, and often fractious relationships with lowland powers and the post-colonial Indian state (see Stirn & Van Ham, 2000; Zou, 2009). The region's geography and history of resistance against external domination align well with the core ideas of Zomia.

However, the Zomia thesis has also faced criticism. Some scholars argue that Scott oversimplifies the diversity of highland societies and their interactions with states, which ranged from outright resistance to tributary relationships, alliances, and strategic engagement (Michaud, 2010; Tagliacozzo, 2014). Critics also point out that "state evasion" might not always have been the primary driver of social and cultural forms, and that Scott potentially romanticizes non-state spaces while downplaying internal hierarchies and

violence within Zomian societies (Lieberman, 2009; réactions critiques in *Critique Internationale*, 2010). Furthermore, the geographical boundaries of Zomia remain somewhat ambiguous, and the framework's applicability in the face of contemporary globalization, technology, and intensified state penetration needs careful consideration (O'Dwyer, 2011). Despite these critiques, Zomia remains a valuable heuristic for understanding the deep historical context of state-society relations and the enduring valuation of autonomy in regions like Northeast India.

Borders as Processes: Paasi's Framework

While Scott provides a historical lens on state evasion, Anssi Paasi's work offers a framework for analyzing the active, ongoing construction of state boundaries in the contemporary era. Paasi (1996) argues against viewing borders as static lines or mere geographical features. Instead, he conceptualizes boundaries and territories as *socially constructed processes*, emphasizing the concept of "bordering." Bordering refers to the multi-faceted practices through which boundaries are produced, reproduced, and transformed.

Paasi's framework highlights several key dimensions of bordering:

1. **Institutionalization:** Borders become embedded in legal, political, and administrative structures. This involves the formal demarcation of territory, the establishment of border control agencies (customs, immigration, police, military), and the creation of specific legal regimes applicable to border zones (Paasi, 1996, pp. 25-31). In Northeast India, this includes international boundary demarcation, the presence of border guarding forces, and special administrative zones like those under the ILP.

2. **Territoriality:** Bordering is intrinsically linked to the exercise of state power over a defined territory. It involves practices aimed at securing, controlling, and homogenizing the space within the boundaries, distinguishing the 'inside' from the 'outside' (Paasi, 1996, p. 3). Infrastructure development and securitization are key tools in this process.

3. **Symbolism and Discourse:** Borders are imbued with meaning through national narratives, symbols, maps, and discourses. They function symbolically to shape collective identities (national belonging vs. 'otherness') and legitimize state control (Paasi, 2005). Debates around citizenship, migration, and national security in Northeast India are heavily laden with such symbolic and discursive bordering practices.

4. **Everyday Practices:** Bordering is not solely a top-down state project; it is also enacted and experienced in the daily lives of people living in border regions. Crossing borders, interacting with state officials, navigating different legal systems, and engaging in cross-border social and economic activities all contribute to the lived reality and ongoing negotiation of boundaries (Paasi, 1996; Van Houtum et al., 2005).

5. **Multi-scalar Nature:** Bordering operates across multiple scales, from the international boundary line to internal administrative divisions, checkpoints within the state, and even symbolic boundaries drawn between ethnic groups or communities (Paasi, 2011). The ILP system in Northeast India is a prime example of internal bordering.

6. **Boundary vs. Bordering:** Paasi distinguishes between the 'boundary' as a line or marker and 'bordering' as the broader set of practices and processes that give that line meaning and effect. He also uses 'bounding' to refer to the act of delimiting territory, while 'bordering' encompasses the wider social consequences (Paasi, 1996, p. 22).

Paasi's processual approach provides a powerful analytical toolkit for understanding *how* states attempt to

assert control and define territory in regions like Northeast India. It moves beyond static conceptions of borders to highlight their dynamic, contested, and socially produced nature, emphasizing the role of institutions, practices, discourses, and everyday life in shaping borderland realities.

Bridging the Frameworks: Towards "Zomia Rewired"

Neither Scott's Zomia nor Paasi's bordering theory alone fully captures the complexity of Northeast India. Zomia offers historical depth and an understanding of ingrained state-aversive logics but can seem less equipped to analyze the specific mechanisms of contemporary state power. Bordering theory excels at dissecting current state practices but might overlook the deep historical roots and cultural specificities that shape how bordering is implemented and received.

This article proposes integrating these frameworks to understand the contemporary situation as "Zomia Rewired." The "rewiring" metaphor suggests that the fundamental Zomian characteristics—autonomy-seeking, mobility, flexible identity, geographic influence—are not simply being erased by state bordering practices. Instead, the pathways, connections, and logics are being reconfigured, rerouted, and transformed by the intensifying grid of state control and integration.

Specifically, this synthesis allows us to ask:

- How do specific bordering practices (infrastructure, security, economic policies, citizenship regimes - Paasi's focus) directly target or intersect with historical Zomian characteristics (state evasion, mobility, escape agriculture, flexible social structures - Scott's focus)?
- How do the legacies of Zomia (historical autonomy, geographic friction, local knowledge, cultural resilience) mediate, shape, or resist the implementation and effects of state bordering projects?
- What new forms of agency, adaptation, resistance, or even co-option emerge at the intersection of bordering and Zomian legacies? Are we witnessing evasion '2.0' – strategies adapted to the contemporary context of surveillance and control?
- How does this interaction produce multi-layered borderland spaces where state logics and local logics co-exist, clash, and transform each other?

By applying this integrated lens, we can analyze the complex interplay of state power and local agency in Northeast India, recognizing that the region is neither a disappearing Zomia nor a fully consolidated state space, but a dynamic zone where historical patterns of evasion are being actively reconfigured—rewired—by contemporary bordering processes.

Methodology

This study employs a conceptual and theoretical methodology, integrating James C. Scott's (2009) Zomia framework and Anssi Paasi's (1996, 2005) bordering theory to analyze contemporary state-society dynamics in Northeast India. The core of the research involves a synthesis of these two influential theoretical perspectives to develop the concept of "Zomia Rewired." This concept serves as an analytical lens through which the complex interactions between historical legacies of state evasion and current state-driven bordering practices in the region are examined.

The research does not rely on primary fieldwork but instead draws extensively on a wide range of secondary sources. These include:

1. **Academic Literature:** Peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and edited volumes focusing on the history, politics, anthropology, geography, and sociology of Northeast India; border studies literature; scholarship engaging with Scott's Zomia concept; and studies on state formation,

development, and conflict in the region. Key scholars whose work informs this analysis include Sanjib Baruah, Willem van Schendel, Bengt G. Karlsson, Duncan McDuie-Ra, Thongkholal Haokip, Dolly Kikon, Walter Fernandes, and others who have extensively researched Northeast India's borderlands and state-society relations.

2. **Policy Documents and Reports:** Government reports, policy briefs related to development initiatives (e.g., Act East Policy), security frameworks (e.g., relating to AFSPA, ILP), and infrastructure projects in Northeast India. Reports from research institutions and non-governmental organizations working in the region are also consulted.

3. **Credible News Media and Analysis:** Reputable journalistic accounts and analytical pieces covering significant events, developments, and social issues in Northeast India, particularly concerning border issues, infrastructure projects, ethnic conflicts, and political movements.

The analysis proceeds thematically, identifying key domains where the intersection of Zomian legacies and bordering practices is particularly evident: infrastructure and security, economic integration and development discourses, identity politics and citizenship, and contemporary forms of resistance and adaptation. For each theme, empirical examples from Northeast India, drawn from the secondary sources, are used to illustrate and substantiate the theoretical arguments derived from the Scott-Paasi synthesis.

The selection of Northeast India as the empirical focus is justified by its unique position as a region explicitly identified by Scott (2009) as part of Zomia, combined with its status as a crucial geopolitical borderland undergoing intense state-building and bordering processes by the Indian state. Its diverse ethnic composition, history of political mobilization and conflict, challenging geography, and location at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia make it an exceptionally rich context for exploring the proposed "Zomia Rewired" framework.

The primary contribution of this methodological approach lies in its theoretical synthesis and application. By bringing Scott and Paasi into dialogue within the specific empirical context of Northeast India, the study aims to generate new insights into borderland dynamics that might be missed by applying either framework in isolation. It seeks to provide a nuanced, multi-layered understanding of how global processes of state formation and border consolidation interact with deeply rooted local histories and practices of autonomy and evasion. The limitation of this approach is the reliance on secondary data, which means the analysis interprets existing information rather than generating new empirical data through direct observation or interaction. However, the breadth and depth of existing scholarship on Northeast India provide a robust foundation for this theoretical exploration.

Analysis: Rewiring Zomia in Northeast India

The contemporary landscape of Northeast India is being profoundly reshaped by the intensified bordering practices of the Indian state. These practices, however, do not operate on a blank slate. They encounter and interact with the region's Zomian legacies—its geography, its history of relative autonomy, and the resilient socio-cultural formations of its diverse peoples. This interaction is not one of simple replacement but of complex reconfiguration—a "rewiring" of Zomian space and society. This section explores this rewiring process across four key domains.

1. The State's Reach: Infrastructure, Securitization, and Territorial Control

A primary manifestation of state bordering is the concerted effort to overcome the "friction of terrain" (Scott, 2009) that historically facilitated state evasion in the region's highlands. This involves massive

investment in infrastructure and an enhanced security presence, aiming to make the territory legible, accessible, and controllable (Paasi's institutionalization and territoriality).

- **Infrastructure as Bordering:** Road networks (e.g., the Trans-Arunachal Highway, Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project connecting Mizoram to Myanmar's Sittwe port), railway extensions into hilly states like Manipur and Mizoram, development of airports, and expansion of telecommunication networks are explicitly framed as tools for development, national integration, and strategic assertion (Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region [DoNER], various reports; Haokip, 2015). However, these projects function as powerful bordering tools. They facilitate the movement of state agents (military, police, administrators), enable resource extraction, increase surveillance capabilities, and physically bind peripheral areas more tightly to the state center (Karlsson et al., 2012). By reducing physical distance and increasing accessibility, infrastructure projects directly challenge the geographical basis of Zomian refuge. They aim to transform evasive spaces into governed spaces.

- **Securitization and Surveillance:** Northeast India has long been heavily militarized due to multiple insurgencies seeking self-determination or autonomy (Baruah, 2005). The continued application of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) in several areas grants extensive powers to security forces, creating zones of exception where state power is highly visible and often coercive (Fernandes & Kikon, 2017). This securitization is a potent form of bordering, demarcating areas deemed 'disturbed' and subjecting populations to heightened surveillance and control, directly countering the anonymity and freedom of movement associated with Zomia. Furthermore, the proliferation of checkpoints, border outposts along international frontiers (often fenced, e.g., parts of the India-Bangladesh border), and increasing use of digital surveillance technologies represent the institutionalization of state control over movement and space (McDuie-Ra, 2012).

- **Internal Bordering: The Inner Line Permit (ILP):** The ILP system, a colonial-era regulation retained and expanded in states like Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, and recently Manipur, requires Indian citizens from other states to obtain a permit for entry. While often defended by local communities as a tool to protect distinct indigenous identities and resources from outside influx (a Zomian logic of maintaining boundaries), it also functions as an internal bordering mechanism wielded by the state (both central and state governments) (Agnihotri, 2020). It regulates mobility, reinforces state administrative control over access, and creates distinct legal-territorial zones within the nation-state, demonstrating the multi-scalar nature of bordering (Paasi, 2011).

These infrastructural and security interventions represent a direct assault on the conditions that historically enabled Zomian state evasion. However, the rewiring occurs as these very tools are sometimes navigated, subverted, or even co-opted by local actors. New roads may facilitate state control but also potentially enhance local mobility for trade or social networking, sometimes across formal borders through informal routes. Security presence might be intimidating but also creates zones where local actors negotiate access and resources with state agents. The ILP, while a state tool, is simultaneously claimed by local groups as a safeguard for autonomy.

2. Economic Integration and Development Discourses

Beyond physical control, state bordering increasingly operates through economic integration and development narratives (Paasi's symbolic/discursive dimension). Policies like the 'Act East Policy' (AEP), successor to the 'Look East Policy', aim to transform Northeast India from a peripheral frontier into a land bridge connecting India to Southeast Asia, promoting trade, investment, and connectivity (Das, 2019).

- **Development as Bordering:** The AEP and associated development packages are presented as beneficial initiatives to overcome the region's economic backwardness. However, they also function as bordering strategies aimed at incorporating the region more fully into the national economy and geopolitical vision (Haokip, 2015). Large-scale projects like hydropower dams (e.g., Lower Subansiri), resource extraction (mining, logging), and the promotion of market-oriented agriculture seek to harness the region's resources for the state and national economy. This often involves displacing traditional land use patterns, including swidden agriculture (Scott's 'escape agriculture'), and integrating communities into wage labor and market economies, making them more legible and dependent on state-regulated systems (Karlsson et al., 2012; McDuie-Ra, 2016).

- **Discourses of Connectivity and Backwardness:** The dominant discourse frames the region's Zomian characteristics (remoteness, traditional practices) as obstacles to progress, legitimizing state intervention as necessary modernization (Kikon, 2019). Connectivity projects are symbolically promoted as overcoming isolation and bringing the 'mainstream' to the periphery. This narrative attempts to overwrite local histories and aspirations of autonomy with a state-centric vision of development and integration (Paasi, 2005).

The rewiring here involves how these economic initiatives and discourses intersect with local realities. While potentially offering new economic opportunities, they often trigger anxieties about land alienation, resource exploitation by outsiders, and environmental degradation, leading to resistance or demands for greater local control over development processes (Fernandes & Pereira, 2005). Furthermore, the vision of Northeast India as a 'gateway' often prioritizes transit infrastructure over local needs, potentially reinforcing peripheralization in new ways (Das, 2019). Communities may engage strategically with development projects to capture benefits while simultaneously asserting claims based on customary rights or ethnic identity, demonstrating an adaptation of autonomy-seeking within the new economic landscape. The informal cross-border trade networks, often a feature of Zomian economies, persist alongside formal initiatives, sometimes utilizing the new infrastructure in unintended ways (Van Schendel, 2005).

3. Negotiating Identity, Citizenship, and Belonging

Bordering practices are deeply intertwined with the politics of identity and belonging (Paasi's symbolic function). In Northeast India, with its multitude of ethnic groups and complex migration histories, state attempts to define and regulate citizenship often clash with local understandings of community and territory, frequently invoking Zomian themes of distinctiveness and self-governance.

- **Citizenship Regimes as Bordering:** The contentious National Register of Citizens (NRC) update process in Assam, aimed at identifying 'illegal immigrants' (primarily from Bangladesh), exemplifies bordering through citizenship regulation (Roy, 2019). While ostensibly an administrative exercise, the NRC became a highly politicized process, creating profound anxiety and uncertainty, particularly among minority communities, and drawing sharp lines between 'citizen' and 'foreigner' based on documentary evidence often lacking among marginalized groups (compare with Scott's emphasis on oral traditions and state illegibility). The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019, which offers a pathway to citizenship for non-Muslim minorities from neighboring countries, further intensified these debates, sparking widespread protests in Northeast India due to fears that it would legitimize migration and undermine the demographic balance and distinct identity of indigenous communities (Haokip, 2020). These state-led exercises attempt to impose a singular, state-defined notion of belonging onto a region with fluid historical cross-border connections and diverse identities.

- **Ethnic Homelands and Autonomy Demands:** Bordering practices often intersect with, and sometimes exacerbate, demands for ethnic homelands and greater political autonomy by various groups (e.g., Nagas, Bodoks, Kukis). These demands frequently draw on narratives of historical sovereignty, distinct cultural identity, and a relationship to territory that precedes the modern nation-state – echoes of Zomian self-governance (Baruah, 2005). State responses, including the creation of autonomous district councils (ADCs) under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution or specific statehood agreements, represent attempts to manage these demands within the state framework. However, these internal administrative boundaries themselves become sites of bordering, creating new layers of inclusion and exclusion and often fueling inter-ethnic competition for resources and political recognition (Haokip, 2013).

The rewiring in this domain is evident in how Zomian legacies of distinct identity and autonomy are mobilized *within* the state system. Ethnic identities, once perhaps more fluid (as suggested by Scott for some Zomian groups), become hardened and politicized in response to state classification and resource allocation mechanisms. Groups articulate their demands using the language of rights, indigeneity, and self-determination recognized (or contested) within the national and international legal frameworks. They engage in political negotiations, mobilization, and sometimes conflict, leveraging their historical narratives and distinctiveness to carve out spaces of relative autonomy *within* the bordering state, rather than wholly outside it. The state's bordering practices, aimed at classification and control, thus inadvertently provide new arenas and vocabularies for asserting difference and negotiating belonging.

4. Resistance, Adaptation, and Evasion 2.0

Despite the intensifying grid of state control, state evasion and resistance do not disappear; they adapt and transform—a form of "Evasion 2.0" operating within the rewired landscape. Scott's classic Zomian strategies (physical escape, swidden agriculture, social fluidity) may be less viable in their original forms, but the underlying logic of minimizing state appropriation and maximizing autonomy persists in new guises.

- **Navigating Multiple Systems:** Communities often operate within multiple normative orders simultaneously—customary laws and practices, state laws, and sometimes the 'laws' imposed by insurgent groups. They strategically navigate these systems to their advantage, seeking justice, resources, or protection from different authorities depending on the context (Kikon, 2019). This ability to operate 'in-between' different systems reflects a Zomian adaptability, reconfigured for a context of overlapping sovereignties.

- **Informal Economies and Cross-Border Networks:** Despite state efforts to formalize borders and economies, informal cross-border trade and social networks remain significant (Van Schendel, 2005). Communities living near international borders often maintain kinship and economic ties across the line, engaging in small-scale smuggling or trade that bypasses state controls. New infrastructure, while intended for state purposes, can sometimes be repurposed to facilitate these informal flows. This persistence of unregulated economic activity represents a contemporary form of evading state economic control.

- **Strategic Engagement and Co-option:** Resistance is not always overt defiance. Communities may strategically engage with state development projects or political processes to extract resources, secure concessions, or influence outcomes in their favor, while still maintaining a degree of local control or cultural distinctiveness (McDuie-Ra, 2016). This might involve participating in electoral politics, leveraging development funds for community projects, or negotiating benefit-sharing agreements for

resource extraction. This represents an adaptation from outright evasion to tactical engagement within the state system.

- **Digital Evasion and Counter-Narratives:** In the digital age, new forms of evasion and resistance emerge. Social media and digital communication can be used to mobilize protests, disseminate counter-narratives challenging state discourses (e.g., regarding development impacts or human rights abuses), and build solidarity networks across geographical distances, sometimes circumventing state censorship or control over information (cf. Postill, 2014, on digital activism).

This adaptive evasion demonstrates the limits of state bordering projects. While the state successfully rewires the physical and institutional landscape, making classic Zomian strategies difficult, it cannot fully extinguish the deeply ingrained logics of autonomy and adaptation. Local actors find new ways to navigate, subvert, and appropriate the tools and spaces created by the state, ensuring that Zomia, in a reconfigured form, continues to shape the realities of Northeast India's borderlands.

Discussion

The analysis presented above, drawing on a synthesis of Scott's Zomia concept and Paasi's bordering theory, suggests that the relationship between the state and historically evasive highland societies in Northeast India is undergoing a complex transformation, aptly captured by the metaphor of "rewiring." Rather than a straightforward narrative of state incorporation erasing Zomian characteristics, we observe a dynamic interplay where state bordering practices actively reconfigure, and are simultaneously influenced by, the enduring logics of autonomy, mobility, and adaptation associated with Zomia.

Integrating Scott and Paasi provides significant analytical leverage. Scott's framework (2009) offers the crucial historical depth, reminding us that state aversion in the highlands is not simply reactionary but rooted in long-standing strategies for preserving autonomy, shaped by geography and socio-political organization. It helps explain the cultural resilience and persistent skepticism towards state projects encountered in Northeast India. However, focusing solely on Zomia risks overlooking the specific mechanisms and intensity of contemporary state power and its transformative effects. It can also, as critics note (Michaud, 2010), sometimes essentialize highland cultures and downplay their engagement with state structures throughout history.

Paasi's bordering theory (1996, 2005), conversely, provides the tools to dissect the multi-faceted nature of current state interventions. It highlights how infrastructure, security apparatuses, economic policies, and citizenship regimes function collectively as bordering practices aimed at consolidating territorial sovereignty, producing governable subjects, and integrating peripheral spaces (institutional, territorial, symbolic, practical dimensions). Yet, applied in isolation, bordering theory might present the state as overly monolithic and effective, potentially underestimating the agency of local populations and the friction generated by historical legacies and geographical realities – precisely the elements Scott emphasizes.

The "Zomia Rewired" framework bridges this gap. It posits that state bordering in Northeast India actively targets Zomian conditions (e.g., infrastructure overcomes terrain friction, security counters mobility, market integration replaces escape agriculture, citizenship regimes challenge fluid identities). However, the outcomes are not predetermined. Zomian legacies—including ingrained desires for autonomy, local knowledge systems, resilient social networks, and the very geography the state seeks to tame—mediate these bordering processes. This results in:

1. **Hybrid Spaces:** The borderlands of Northeast India emerge not as fully state-controlled zones nor as

pristine Zomian refuges, but as hybrid spaces where state power and local agency are in constant negotiation. State infrastructure coexists with informal cross-border routes; formal legal systems overlap with customary practices; national identity narratives compete with deeply felt ethnic and local affiliations.

2. **Transformation of Evasion:** State evasion evolves. Outright physical escape becomes less feasible, replaced by strategies of navigating state systems, exploiting loopholes, engaging in informal economies that persist alongside formal ones, leveraging state resources for local ends, and utilizing new technologies for communication and mobilization ("Evasion 2.0"). Autonomy is pursued not necessarily *outside* the state, but often *within* or *through* negotiation with its structures.

3. **Co-constitution:** State practices shape local responses, but local agency and Zomian legacies also shape the implementation and outcomes of bordering. State projects face resistance, delays, and modifications due to local protests or negotiations. Internal bordering mechanisms like the ILP or ADCs are products of state attempts to manage Zomian demands for autonomy, demonstrating how state structures themselves adapt. The very definition of borders and belonging remains contested, shaped by both state directives and local assertions.

This perspective challenges simplistic dichotomies of state vs. non-state, center vs. periphery, tradition vs. modernity. It suggests that the process of state formation in these highland borderlands is inherently dynamic and contested, producing complex socio-spatial configurations where power operates unevenly and is constantly renegotiated. The "rewiring" metaphor emphasizes connectivity and reconfiguration rather than erasure, highlighting how elements of the old system (Zomian logics) become integrated into, and simultaneously alter, the new system (state bordering grid).

The implications extend beyond Northeast India. Many highland regions across Asia, Africa, and Latin America share characteristics with Zomia and are facing similar pressures of state consolidation, infrastructure development, resource extraction, and border securitization. The "Zomia Rewired" framework could offer a valuable tool for comparative analysis, prompting researchers to look for the nuanced ways historical patterns of state-society relations are being transformed, rather than simply overcome, by contemporary statecraft and globalization. It underscores the importance of understanding both the deep historical context (Scott) and the specific mechanisms of contemporary power (Paasi) to grasp the complexities of borderland transformations globally.

However, the framework also has limitations. The concept of "rewiring" needs further empirical grounding through detailed, ethnographic case studies focusing on specific communities and their interactions with particular bordering projects. Such studies could reveal the fine-grained textures of negotiation, resistance, and adaptation that are only broadly sketched here. Furthermore, attention must be paid to the internal power dynamics and inequalities within Northeast Indian societies, avoiding the Zomian tendency to sometimes present upland communities as uniformly egalitarian or resistant. Bordering processes themselves often create new winners and losers within local communities.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the interaction between historical legacies of state evasion, conceptualized through Scott's (2009) Zomia framework, and contemporary state-driven bordering practices, analyzed using Paasi's (1996, 2005) processual theory, is producing a complex "rewiring" of Northeast India's socio-political landscape. The intensifying efforts of the Indian state to consolidate sovereignty and integrate this peripheral region through infrastructure, securitization, economic policies, and citizenship regimes do

not simply erase Zomian characteristics. Instead, these bordering practices intersect with, reconfigure, and are themselves shaped by the enduring logics of autonomy, mobility, and adaptation rooted in the region's history and geography.

The synthesis of Scott and Paasi allows for a nuanced understanding that moves beyond viewing Northeast India as either a relic of a state-less past or a passive object of state-making. It reveals dynamic borderlands where state control and local agency are co-constitutive, producing hybrid spaces, transforming modes of evasion ("Evasion 2.0"), and generating ongoing contests over territory, resources, identity, and belonging. State bordering attempts to impose legibility and control, but the Zomian inheritance ensures that friction, negotiation, and adaptation remain central features of the region's reality. Infrastructure connects but also creates new pathways for informal flows; security contains but also generates resistance; economic integration incorporates but also sparks demands for local control; identity classification hardens boundaries but also provides new platforms for asserting distinctiveness.

The "Zomia Rewired" framework highlights the importance of historical context in understanding contemporary borderland dynamics. State-making in regions with long histories of relative autonomy does not follow a uniform path but is mediated by specific local conditions and legacies. This perspective contributes to border studies by emphasizing the interplay between state projects and deeply rooted social forms, and to the study of state-society relations in highland Asia by offering a way to analyze continuity and change simultaneously.

Future research should build upon this theoretical framework through empirically rich case studies. Ethnographic research focusing on specific communities along Northeast India's international or internal borders could provide invaluable insights into the lived experiences of bordering and the precise mechanisms of "rewiring" in different contexts. Comparative studies applying this framework to other Zomian or historically state-evasive regions facing similar contemporary pressures would further test and refine its utility. Investigating the role of non-state actors, including insurgent groups and civil society organizations, in shaping these dynamics also warrants further attention.

Ultimately, understanding Northeast India requires acknowledging both the transformative power of the modern state's bordering practices and the remarkable resilience and adaptability of its peoples, rooted in histories that often sought distance from state centers. The region's future trajectory will likely continue to be shaped by this ongoing tension—the constant rewiring of Zomia in the face of the relentless, yet never fully complete, project of state-making.

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