

Indo-Bangladesh Border Management in Meghalaya: Challenges and Strategies for a Secure and Sustainable Border

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Abstract

The Indo–Bangladesh border in Meghalaya is 443 kilometers long and is seen as one of India’s toughest and most sensitive borders. The area’s rough land, thick forests, rivers, and close family and social ties between people on both sides make it hard to control. While much of the border is fenced, many sections remain open due to difficult terrain, difficulties obtaining land, local opposition, and insufficient roads or infrastructure. These open areas have led to cross-border threats and violence. This paper looks at why good border management in Meghalaya is important by reviewing major security problems and events, such as the Pyrdiwah clash of 2001, smuggling, rebel activity, drug smuggling, and recent violence in border villages. It also examines how ideas about borders and their management are changing. The paper argues that focusing only on security is not enough in this area, where people are closely connected. It suggests a balanced approach that includes better fencing and watch systems, working together to manage the border, involving local people, job programs like border markets, local government that includes everyone, and stronger teamwork with Bangladesh to help make the border in Meghalaya safe and stable.

Keywords: Border Management, Bangladesh, Illegal Immigration, Meghalaya, Porous Border, National Security

1. Introduction

Meghalaya has a 443-kilometer border with Bangladesh, made up of rivers, hills, and forests. This difficult landscape makes the area more open to smuggling, illegal immigration, cross-border terrorism, and other crimes. After Bangladesh gained independence, the border in Meghalaya changed, leading to the building of concrete fencing in some places. Now, about 364 kilometers are fenced with concrete and wire, but some parts are still open because of slow land acquisition, local resistance, planning problems, and lack of commitment. The rough terrain, bad weather, thick forests, and project plans that ignore the traditions and culture of border communities have caused frequent security breaches. The Border Security Force (BSF) is in charge of guarding the border, but limited resources often mean that large sections are left without patrols or guards. As a result, criminals use these gaps.¹India deals with several cross-border threats, such as terrorist and insurgent infiltration, smuggling of arms and ammunition, human trafficking, illegal migration, and other transnational crimes.²This paper explains why effective

border management is important and discusses the challenges of keeping borders secure. It also suggests ways to improve security along the Indo-Bangladesh border in Meghalaya.

1.1 Concept of Border

Borders are areas controlled by specific authorities where laws are applied. A border usually means a line that separates two countries. The ideas of borders, frontiers, and borderlands are complicated and do not have one clear definition. Of these, 'frontier' covers the widest area. In the past, it described military zones where opposing forces met. Today, it often means the place where two regions meet, usually watched by customs, police, or military. The words border, boundary, frontier, and borderlands can mean different things depending on the situation. Anderson and O'Dowd (1999) say a border is a clear line between political or administrative areas, while a frontier is the larger area around that line. Now, 'frontier' often means the borderlands between two countries.³

In international relations, borders mark where one state's authority stops and another's starts. Respecting borders means acknowledging each state's independence and its right to self-government. Borders are usually called hard when they are fenced and closely monitored, or soft when controls exist but are less strict. These are also known as 'thick' and 'thin' borders. Borders help protect a country's territory and allow for controlled movement of people and goods.⁴ Borders mark the areas where a government has authority, and its laws apply. They show a country's geographic limits and define where the government controls buildings, activities, and the people who live there.⁵

Over the last twenty years, especially after 9/11, hundreds of new borders have been created around the world. These borders separate physical areas and also divide people, influencing how they interact, see each other, and go about their daily lives.⁶ Effective border management stands at the crossroads of national security and the smooth, lawful flow of people and goods. Striking the right balance depends on the unique challenges each border faces. As technology connects the world more closely than ever, the pace and scale of cross-border trade and travel continue to surge.⁷

1.2 Border Management

Effective border management is a country's first line of defense and is key to its internal security. As Puncchi notes, internal security means protecting against threats that come from within a country's borders, whether caused by unrest or by hostile groups taking advantage of instability. According to Statewatch (2007), border security means allowing legal goods and people to move freely within a country while protecting it from transnational crime, illegal immigration, trafficking, non-legitimate asylum seekers, and terrorist threats.⁸ Border security requires cooperation among border management agencies within a country or across countries, as the case may be.⁹

Border management serves two primary purposes. The first is to ensure the smooth and lawful movement of people and goods across national boundaries. The second is to protect the country by preventing the entry of unauthorized individuals and prohibited items that may threaten security. This responsibility is shared by multiple agencies, such as border security forces, customs authorities, immigration departments, and local law enforcement.¹⁰ This process is how countries control their borders and make border operations more efficient.

Border management is something a country does together with its neighbors. It cannot be done alone, and it works best when countries in a region work together, which is called integrated border management (Okumu and Ikelegbe, 2010) and (Ireland, 2009). Jana (2017) explains that different government agencies must be involved and work together collectively and cooperatively to manage the border effectively. These groups usually work separately and do not share information. He also states

that border management reflects a country's independence. If a country cannot control its borders, it can lose respect at home and with other countries. How a country manages its borders affects its legal standing.¹¹

Every nation is responsible for managing its internal matters, which includes monitoring and controlling the movement of both legal and illegal persons and commodities across its borders.¹² In India, border management focuses on the development of frontier regions, strengthening connectivity, fostering cooperation with neighboring countries, and adopting strategies to protect national interests. Different government authorities are tasked with regulating legitimate cross-border trade and overseeing the movement of people within and beyond the country.¹³

2. Why Effective Border Management is Crucial in Meghalaya?

The primary objectives of effective border management are to secure and enhance national security, prevent cross-border infiltration, and curb illegal migration, smuggling, and other transnational crimes. The following discusses several incidents that prompted the government to reinforce existing border management in Meghalaya-Bangladesh border.

2.1 Pyrdiwah Incident, 2001

On 15 April 2001, approximately twelve members of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) stormed into Pyrdiwah village (Meghalaya), claiming it to be Bangladeshi land and ordering residents to depart. The Border Security Force (BSF) outpost was summoned by the villagers. The BSF assured protection, but they failed to intervene. Later that night, other BDR members returned, drove the villagers out, encircled the BSF post, and began constructing defensive positions. On 16 April, a BSF platoon of 30 men was besieged by about 600 of the BDR members who insisted on their departure and that Pyrdiwah (known as Paduah by the BDR) was Bangladeshi. The BSF stood their ground and said that they had been occupying the position since 1971. On 18 April, the BSF started a counterattack at Boraibari, an enclave that was under the control of Bangladesh in the Dhubri district of Assam. The inability to conduct the operation effectively led to the fact that the small BSF contingent was surrounded by the Bangladeshi villagers and backed by the BDR. The encounter resulted in the loss of sixteen BSF men, the capture of two others, and the retreat of the remaining.¹⁴

2.2 Illicit Trafficking of Arms across the India–Bangladesh Border

The illicit trafficking of arms across the Meghalaya–Bangladesh border remains a significant security concern due to the region's porous terrain, dense forests, and limited surveillance in remote areas. Informal cross-border routes traditionally used for social and economic exchanges are often exploited by traffickers to move small arms and light weapons undetected. Despite the peace of Meghalaya, the strategic position of this country makes it a key transit area in the weapons that are to be transported to other regions of Northeast India. Economic vulnerability of the border communities also makes the problem more complex since some people engage in smuggling as a way of living. Although security forces have been making frequent attempts, the dynamic strategies of traffickers and the flaws in the infrastructure still remain problematic, and thus, arms trafficking remains a complex problem in the borderland.¹⁵

2.3 Ingress and Egress

The Meghalaya and other Northeastern states of India-Bangladesh border with Bangladesh, are influenced by challenging geography, historical relations, and the daily demands of communities along the border. Dense forests, hills, rivers, and other scattered settlements make it difficult to monitor

strictly, and traditional movements in farming, small trade, and social interaction are still possible. Nonetheless, these movements are becoming more and more intertwined with illegal activities, including smuggling, trafficking, and undocumented migration, and raise serious security and administrative issues. The porosity of the border has also allowed insurgent factions of the Northeast to travel with relative ease through the use of remote tracks to avoid security forces, set up transit camps, and supply lines, which have further increased internal security issues. Although uncontrolled ingress puts pressure on the local resources and governance, uncontrolled egress promotes the illegal movement of cattle, timber, minerals, and vital goods. Though measures like fencing, patrolling, and surveillance have been implemented in order to control these movements, they have also affected the livelihoods and social networks. Consequently, border management in the area will have to strike a balance between security concerns and local realities through advocating controlled movement, civic involvement, and trade mechanisms that are legally organized. Approaches to infiltration are classified into three categories: black, implying an entry through secrecy; grey, where legal crossing points are used with fake documents; and white, where it is a legal entry.¹⁶

2.4 Cross Border Migration

A porous international border makes it easier for people to cross without authorization. Since India became independent, undocumented migration from Bangladesh has continued to be a significant issue. Many see this movement as a serious challenge to India's internal security, and it is expected to remain a concern. Public discussions often claim that India has a large number of unregistered migrants from Bangladesh, but the lack of reliable data makes it hard to know the actual scale. Estimates range from 12 million to 20 million people. In response to Starred Question No. 225 in the Lok Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge was told by Kiren Rijju that the government did not have exact numbers. Later, on 16 November 2016, the Minister of State for Home Affairs gave a different answer in Parliament, citing an estimate of about 20 million undocumented Bangladeshi migrants living in India.¹⁷

2.5 Trafficking of Drugs and Narcotics

Many types of narcotics are often seized in areas of India near the Bangladesh border. Several reasons explain why these drugs keep coming in from far away. The Indian Border Security Force (BSF) often finds yaba tablets, phensedyl, ganja (cannabis), and opium. Sometimes, border police also find heroin and brown sugar. These drugs are said to be made in Myanmar and brought into northeastern Indian states like Meghalaya before being smuggled into Bangladesh through different border routes. Drug syndicates use these same routes to move heroin and brown sugar.¹⁸

2.6 Rongdangai Village Incident (Under Ranikor Civil Subdivision)

The incident on 8 August 2025 in the South West Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya exposed serious problems with security along the open border with Bangladesh. According to reports, four Bangladeshi nationals crossed into India, attacked a local villager, and ran away before the police could reach the area. Subsequently, the police discovered some abandoned weapons, cash, even an identity card of a Bangladeshi police officer. This finding prompted the concern of the rise in cross-border crimes and the potential role of organised groups. The incident demonstrates that more effective border checking, fencing, and closer collaboration between India and Bangladesh are urgently required so that incidents like this one do not occur in the future.¹⁹

The management of the Meghalaya border has been of increased significance in the past few years due to its impact on national security and territorial safety. Such events as the Pyrdiwah confrontation, the intensification of cross-border arms and drugs trafficking, the activities of insurgent groups, and the

recurrence of violence in the neighboring villages indicate that the border remains highly vulnerable. These issues are not the only ones, but reflect the underlying flaws in surveillance and control. To address these problems, it requires increased surveillance, physical security measures, improved coordination of security agencies, increased community participation, and collaboration with Bangladeshi government. These measures will be necessary to ensure that there is permanent peace and stability in the region.

3. Challenges to Border Management in Meghalaya

3.1. Smuggling and Border Livelihoods

For many people living near the border, smuggling is a main source of income. When the Border Security Force (BSF) tries to stop smuggling, locals often feel that the authorities are getting in the way of their economic activities.

3.2 Consequences of Constructing Border Fences

In certain areas, the construction of the fence has led to a lot of strain between the Border Security Force (BSF) and the residents of the nearby areas. Farmers who have access to land that is outside the fence are forced to conform to rigid rules and restricted access. Security checks frequently disrupt their farm labor, and the gates are only opened at specific times.

3.3. Porous Border

In the event of large gaps between border outposts (BOPs), persons, including criminals, can easily cross over the two nations. This problem is worse in the river and jungle localities, where patrolling is difficult.²⁰

3.4. Challenges Terrain

There are numerous geographical features along the Meghalaya-Bangladesh border, including thick forests, steep hills, deep valleys, and rapid rivers. Such tough terrain renders it difficult to control and patrol the border. The difficult terrain restricts the construction of fences and roads and slows the border security forces. This has led to the fact that there are no well-patrolled areas, and hence, the border is easy to cross illegally. These weak spots are usually exploited by infiltrators, smugglers, and others to cross the borders of the two nations, and this poses a security, economic, and population challenge in the region.

The socio-economic factors, hilly terrain, and safety are some of the challenges of managing the border in Meghalaya. There are numerous individuals who reside close to the border and who make a living from smuggling, thus causing frequent tensions between the local population and the security services. Although border fencing is expected to ensure that the area is safer, it has turned the farming into a more challenging task and heightened the tensions between the villagers and the BSF. The border is also not very difficult to cross, and the gaps between guard posts are very big, which allows criminals to pass through it and commit crimes, particularly in river and forest regions. It is even more difficult to construct roads and maintain watch because the landscape in the area is tough.

All these challenges render border governance weaker and demonstrate why a more balanced approach is required. This policy must consider the matter of security, consider the livelihoods of the locals, and take into consideration the unique geography of the region.

4. Role of BSF in Border Management in Meghalaya

Prior to the year 1965, the State Armed Police (SAP) Battalions guarded the borders of Meghalaya. Ho-

wever, the conflict with Pakistan in the same year demonstrated that the SAP was not capable of fighting external armed threats, nor within the country. To deal with this, and to enhance the security of the borders of the country, the Indian government established the Border Security Force (BSF) in December 1965. The BSF protects border communities during peacetime and acts as the country's first line of defense and quick response in case of any external threat.²¹

The BSF maintains a presence along Meghalaya's 443-kilometer boundary with Bangladesh, guarding one of the country's most sensitive and porous borders. This segment of the Indo-Bangladesh border features hilly and undulating terrain, dense forests, riverine tracts, deep gorges, and numerous seasonal streams, all of which present significant challenges to conventional border surveillance and fencing.

Unlike India's western borders, where it is possible to build fences all along and keep a clear view, the Meghalaya–Bangladesh border is only partly fenced. This is mainly because the land is difficult to build on, there are ongoing problems with access to the land, concerns about the environment, and resistance from local people who depend on crossing the border to make a living. Longstanding ethnic, cultural, and family ties between people on both sides also make the border more open.

In 2000, the Border Security Force (BSF) played an important role in keeping both the border and local people in Pyrdiwah, Meghalaya, safe during a tense time along the India–Bangladesh border. Pyrdiwah is a border village in the East Khasi Hills district. Its unclear border lines, rough land, and people living near the zero line made managing the border especially hard.

At this time, actions by Bangladeshi Border Guards and attempts to change the situation around Pyrdiwah caused concern among the local Khasi people. Tensions grew when members of the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), previously called Bangladesh Rifles, reportedly entered Indian territory. The result of this event was fear, people leaving their homes, and disruption of the daily way of life. In response, the Border Security Force (BSF) quickly increased its presence in the Pyrdiwah area to protect India's territory, prevent more incursions, and reassure people living near the border.²²

Managing the border in Meghalaya is hard because smuggling is connected to how people make a living; some people do not want fences, the border is easy to cross, and the land is rough. The BSF plays a key role in keeping the area safe and protecting the country, but its work is held back by problems with people, the land, and a lack of roads and buildings. In order to manage the border effectively, the security work must be accompanied by work with the local population and the improvement of the area.

5. SUGGESTED ACTIONS

The suggested measures are expected to strike the right balance between the promotion of cross-border movement and the protection of national security. Additional information about every intervention area is provided below.

5.1. Integrating Border Residents in Border Management

Residents living close to the border contribute significantly towards ensuring that the area is secure. In order to control the Meghalaya–Bangladesh border, it is necessary to engage the local communities since they are more familiar with the land, customs, and cross-border matters more than foreign security agencies. The locals are able to determine the most vulnerable areas of the border, the typical routes of cattle smuggling, drug trafficking, or illegal migration, and how the criminal groups utilize the challenging conditions, such as forests, hills, and rivers. Since they are familiar with the local languages, traditions, and social contacts, they are able to collect credible information and gain confidence of the villagers on both ends that is usually difficult to achieve by formal security forces.²³

5.2. Open More Border Haats

Smuggling is perceived not only as a crime in most of the border regions but also as a primary source of livelihood for most populations, largely due to a lack of alternative economic activities. Establishment of regulated border haats provides the local communities with an opportunity to participate in legal, open, as well as income-generating trade. This method addresses the economic factors that lead to smuggling and also assists in enhancing border control by reducing the informal and illegal trade. Border haats, in turn, are useful in livelihoods of those living along borders and as a tool in the development of trust and better governance of the border between neighboring nations.

5.3. Integrated Border Management

According to Moran (2005), Integrated Border Management (IBM) is the best form of collaboration between border agencies within a country and with other countries. IBM is a new method that involves coordination of the border crossing process between various agencies within a country or between countries (UNICEF, 2017). When such coordination occurs within a country, it is referred to as domestic integration. When it occurs among neighboring countries, it is referred to as International Border Integration (ESCAP, 2011). In such cases, the common practice of border management is employed by countries, and agencies such as customs and immigration pursue the same standards, rules, and working hours. This enables individuals and commodities to move across borders without any hassle (UN, 2005). The primary objective of IBM is to facilitate the transfer of legal goods and individuals across borders and ensure security of borders and national laws.

5.4. Inclusive Governance and Representation

In Northeast India, particularly in such states as Meghalaya, District Councils and local government entities assist communities in accepting policies and mitigating conflict. The Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) enable the tribal groups to self-govern in land, customary law, forest management, and local institutions. These councils ensure that state and national policies are adjusted to the cultural and social demands of tribal people by relying on local practices and local decision-making. Nongkynrih (2014) notes that such policies formulated without consulting the locals or understanding their culture tend to be met with opposition and doubt on their legitimacy. Empowering local government institutions through officialization and provision of adequate resources is significant towards enhancing democracy and alleviating conflict in diverse regions.²⁴

5.5. Border Fencing

Border fencing is one of the major strategies that India uses to control its border with Bangladesh in Meghalaya, and the aim is to control cross-border crimes, illegal migration, and smuggling. However, there are still parts that are porous because of incomplete fencing that are later used by smugglers. To improve border management, it is vital to see that the whole stretch of the border is fully fenced.

Conclusion

India requires to have peaceful relations with its neighbors to be actively involved in international affairs, particularly when the world is going through significant transformation. We should consider people and state when we discuss borders and their management. The management of this border is not only a matter of security, but it is also a way of taking care of the economic interests of people who have always been dependent on trade and other kinds of collaborations. These are the border regions which are distant from the center of the nation and hence remained underdeveloped and usually neglected by

the government. This negligence has made the inhabitants of the place rely on traditional means of survival, and this has led to cross-border movement.

The safety and security of communities living near the border is one of the primary concerns of the BSF. This is based on establishing mutual trust between the BSF and the local residents. The BSF requires the community to assist in identifying and preventing cross-border criminals and illegal migrants. The recruitment of locals into the BSF in the border regions is an advantage since they offer an insight into the area and assist in efficient intelligence and teamwork. Keeping such recruits in the same location throughout unit rotations enables them to retain close working relationships with new members.

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