

Border, Sense of Belonging and Conflict: Revisiting the Politics of Indo-Myanmar Border Fencing in Manipur

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Abstract: *This paper examines the contemporary politics surrounding the Government of India's decision to revoke the Free Movement Regime (FMR) and fence the Indo-Myanmar border, with particular focus on Manipur. While the state frames border fencing as a necessary security measure to regulate migration, curb insurgency, and strengthen territorial sovereignty, the policy has generated sharply divergent responses across Northeast India. Drawing on border studies, securitisation theory, and ethnicity studies, this paper argues that border fencing in Manipur cannot be understood solely through the lens of state security. Rather, it must be situated within the broader socio-political context of competing ethnic territorialities, homeland imaginaries, and transborder kinship networks. The paper highlights how borderland communities, particularly the Naga and Kuki groups, experience the border as a lived social space that predates the modern nation-state, making state-led bordering practices deeply contentious. It further demonstrates how the politics of border fencing intersects with existing ethnic conflicts, demographic anxieties, and indigeneity discourses, particularly within the ongoing Meitei-Kuki conflict. The study concludes that border fencing has become increasingly ethnicised, transforming the Indo-Myanmar border into a contested arena where struggles over identity, territory, and political belonging are negotiated and intensified.*

Keywords: Indo-Myanmar Border, Securitisation, Imagined Homeland, Manipur.

INTRODUCTION

The Government of India (GoI) recently announced a decision to revoke the Free Movement Regime (FMR) and fence the Indo-Myanmar border (Singh, 2024). It has generated intense political debate across bordering states of Northeast India. To regulate cross-border movement following the withdrawal of the FMR, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) introduced a revised border pass system, effective from January 2025, allowing residents living along the border to cross up to 10 kilometres into the neighbouring country for a maximum of seven days (Ranjan, 2024). Simultaneously, the government initiated the construction of border fencing, with reports that work has already commenced in parts of Manipur. While the GoI has justified these measures on grounds of national security and demographic concerns (Chakraborty & Sinha, 2025), the policy has produced sharply divergent responses across the region. GoI's move received support from the Government of Manipur (GoM), valley-based civil society organisations in Manipur, and political actors who view border fencing as necessary for strengthening security and regulating illegal immigration. In contrast, the governments of Nagaland and Mizoram formally opposed the move, while several Naga and Kuki organisations criticised the policy, for it would disrupt long-standing social, cultural and kinship ties across the Indo-Myanmar border.

Yet the debate in academia is between "the securitisation of borders" and "borderland communities being saved to their natural borderless social space," but is unable to fully explicate the intricate conflict dynamics between ethnicity, territoriality, and border fencing. The contrasting responses in the decision to fence the border highlight that border fencing is not merely a technical or security issue but a deeply contested political question shaped by competing understandings of territory, identity, mobility, and belonging. The debate is particularly more significant in Manipur, where ethnic relations are already marked by competing territorial aspirations, demographic anxieties, and prolonged conflict.

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to answer two interrelated questions using qualitative, interpretive based on textual analysis of government documents, scholarly literatures and observation of political development in Manipur. The questions are - Why has border fencing generated contrasting responses among states and ethnic communities in Northeast India? How do different actors interpret and negotiate the implications

of border regime changes and the proposal of border fencing in Manipur? By addressing these questions, the paper seeks to contribute to emerging debates on border politics, securitisation, and ethnic conflict by examining how a state-led border management initiative becomes embedded within existing structures of ethnic contestation.

CONCEPTUALISING BORDERS, SECURITY, AND ETHNIC BOUNDARIES

Borders are historically contingent and politically produced regimes that are continuously negotiated and transformed. It can change through natural processes or through socio-political changes (Nail, 2016). Despite this fluidity, modern states often portray borders as permanent, inviolable, and sacred manifestations of sovereignty linked to that particular territoriality (van Schendel, 2004, pp. 3-4). Through legal frameworks, bureaucratic expansion, surveillance mechanisms, checkpoints, and physical infrastructures such as border fences, states attempt to territorialise authority and regulate mobility. Border fencing, therefore, is not merely a technical exercise in territorial management but a performative act of state-making through which the state seeks to distinguish citizens from non-citizens, legitimate from illegitimate movement, and order from perceived disorder (p. 4). It is also a securitising exercise of the territory and the population. The politics of border fencing becomes even more contentious when viewed through the lens of securitisation and ethnicity. Security, according to Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde (1998), is not an objective condition but a discursive process through which political actors construct particular matters as threats requiring extraordinary measures. Yet, securitisation rarely operates in a political vacuum. However, borders are not experienced uniformly by all actors. It is deeply embedded in the everyday lives of those who inhabit them and cannot be reduced to the territorial imagination of the state. Borderland communities constitute vibrant social spaces characterised by kinship networks, economic exchanges, cultural interactions, and shared historical memories that often predate the emergence of modern state boundaries. This socio-spatial reality remains only partially incorporated into state structures (van Schendel, 2004). In ethnically divided societies, such narratives are often interpreted through existing structures of ethnic competition, territorial claims, and identity politics. Ethnic identities persist not because of cultural differences alone but because group boundaries are continually reproduced and defended. And these symbolic ethnic boundaries frequently overlap with territorial boundaries (Barth, 1969).

THE MAKING OF INDO-MYANMAR BORDER: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although the origins of the Indo-Myanmar border can be traced to the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), several subsequent attempts at delimitation – including the Pemberton Line (1834), the Johnston Line (1881), and the Pemberton-Johnstone Maxwell Line (1896) – failed to produce a fully demarcated boundary. The present boundary emerged gradually through colonial and post-colonial negotiations and was formally demarcated following the India-Burma Boundary Agreement signed in Rangoon on 10 March 1967. Despite this, portions of the border remain disputed or undemarcated. According to the MoHA (2018),

while most of the 1,643 km Indo-Myanmar border has been demarcated, certain stretches in Arunachal Pradesh and the Kabaw Valley side of Manipur remain unresolved.

Historically, the border has remained porous, fenced only in 10 km stretched in the Moreh of Manipur. This porousness facilitates the movement of people, goods, and cultural practices across the frontier. Communities inhabiting the borderlands have maintained long-standing kinship ties, customary interactions, and economic exchanges that transcend the international boundary. Reflecting these realities, cross-border mobility was initially permitted up to 40 kilometres without passports or visas under the arrangements of the Myanmar Passport Rules, 1948, and the Government of India Notification dated 26 September 1950 (Ketoukhrie-ü, 2023). This was subsequently reduced to 16 kilometres under the FMR, which allowed residents living within the designated border zone to cross and stay not beyond 72 hours. Since, the decision pertaining to demarcation or fencing the border has hardly been consulted with the borderland communities. So, it remains contentious with their realities and the state rationalities.

STATE SECURITY AND BORDERLAND RESISTANCE

In the context of Northeast India, particularly in Manipur, border politics not only intertwines with politics of citizenship, sovereignty, security and identity but also deals with ethno-cultural nationalism inter alia, i.e., indigeneity politics. The whole issue of NRC in Assam was an illegal immigration issue from the neighbouring Bangladesh; likewise, the Meitei-Kuki conflict also has its due share of transborder issues. But above all is the epistemological contestation between statist and borderland understandings of territory, security, and belonging. From the perspective of the Indian state, border fencing represents a legitimate exercise of sovereignty aimed at regulating cross-border mobility, curbing illicit activities, and addressing perceived threats arising from undocumented migration, insurgency and transnational crime. By securing the border, according to this perspective, crime will be brought down, resources can be efficiently managed, and illegal cross-border trafficking can be checked. In Manipur's context, N. Biren Singh somehow articulate that by fencing the border and scrapping the FMR, the drug issue can be reduced, illegal cross-border trafficking of arms and other illicit trade would certainly be reduced and most importantly, insurgency issue can be reduced drastically (Bobichand, 2024). Within this discourse, the porous Indo-Myanmar border is increasingly represented as a security concern, thereby legitimising stronger surveillance, tighter border controls, and the construction of fences.

However, this statist outlook of the border is sharply questioned by anthropologist borderland theorists. Most of the time, these borderland communities were not having knowledge, let alone having consulted regarding the demarcation. Yet they are the ones subjected to separation if it is already fenced or constantly having to deal with bureaucracy and other security checkpoints if it has not yet been completely fenced (remaining porous). The region being a socio-spatial space, as suggested by van Schendel (2004), far encapsulates the social dynamics in the region.

The evidence of people loitering around the region when things are not turning favourably in terms of socio-political circumstances or livelihood exigencies is everywhere. When there was Naga-Kuki violence, families cross the border (Haokip, 2024) and vice versa. The migration of people of Indian origin, many of whom had been born and raised in colonial Burma, came to Moreh following the gradual shrinking of their socio-political space in Myanmar contributed significantly to the emergence of Moreh as a cosmopolitan border town linking India and Myanmar (Osada, 2021). During contemporary times, when there is turmoil on the Myanmar side of the border, mainly Kuki-Zo people of the Indian side host, as they proudly claim they are our kins and won't turn a blind eye to their suffering (Karmakar, 2023). Communities on both sides continue to maintain familial, cultural, and ritual relations, often perceiving themselves as members of a shared social world despite their formal location within different states. Consequently, the border fencing decision is inadvertently interpreted not as a security measure but as an externally imposed intervention that disrupts established patterns of social life and fragments transborder ethnic networks (Ketoukhrie-ü, 2023).

And their resistance to border fencing, therefore, cannot be looked at as merely an opposition to state authority, but there are deep competing conceptions of territory and belonging. It is an imposed colonial legacy for the borderland communities that divided historically interconnected populations without their consent. The experiences of villages such as Longwa in Nagaland, where social and political life extends across the international boundary, illustrate the extent to which local realities challenge the rigid territorial imagination of the modern state. As a former Ahng of Longwa states, "I was not informed nor consulted. My house is divided into India and Burma (Myanmar), with a kitchen in India and a bedroom in Burma. But my kingdom extends over many villages in Burma and India. There are about 50 villages in Burma that pay me tributes in terms of meat, gong, rice, and service. Being the father of many villages, I do not want any division but wish to keep them together as was in the past" (Ketoukhrie-ü, 2023, p. 50). This sums up the arbitrariness and lack of humaneness in modern boundary cartography. However, such spaces resemble what James C. Scott (2009) describes as "non-state space", where state authority has historically remained uneven and where social relations frequently transcend formal political borders. Yet, in expanding state sovereignty in the form of having rigid territorial boundaries, the borderland communities are inevitably paying their price in every social aspect of being a cultural identity and, in the Indo-Myanmar border's case, political imagination of ethnic homeland too.

COMPETING IMAGINED HOMELANDS

In Manipur, these competing understandings of border acquire particular significance because of the territorial ethno-national imagination of a "homeland". Naga imagines a "*Nagalim*" which extends to part of Manipur, the whole of Nagaland, part of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and part of the Sagaing region of Myanmar (NSCN, 2023). Likewise, Chin-Kuki-Zo also imagine a "*Zale'n-gam*" or "*Zoland*" (Roluahpuia, 2024), which extends part of Manipur, the whole of Mizoram, Chin State of

Myanmar and Chittagong Hill Tract of Bangladesh. Both these imaginations have been embodied through movements – more intense and deadly for the Nagas as compared to Chin-Kuki-Zo. And there are overlapping territorial disputes between the two claims; Manipur is the epicentre of it, which more often than not is discernible in the form of Naga-Kuki tension/conflict. This imagined homeland for the Nagas and Kukis again run counter to Meitei historic concept of "*Kangleipak*", which they now appropriate with the contemporary territorial political boundary of Manipur. Thus, one's imagined territory or homeland overlaps with another's and hence give an impossible case of resolving the issue. Consequently, border fencing becomes invested with meanings that extend beyond security concerns and is interpreted through narratives of ethnic survival, homeland protection, and political autonomy. What appears as a necessary security measure for some communities is viewed by others as a threat to their historical, cultural, and territorial existence.

ETHNICISATION OF BORDER POLITICS

Like Myron Weiner (2015) explained about Indian ethnic groups having territoriality characteristics, so they compete for who truly belongs with respect to the land. He describes it as a true "son of the soil" that implies claims not just to group status but also to resources. In that regard, Manipur is no exception. Ethnic groups are rooted in space, no doubt. None of the ethnic community are ready to transcend the ethno-space for a larger, collective and all-encompassing state. As discussed above, many communities perceive or imagine a homeland beyond the existing national boundary. While having their uncompromising stance on territoriality, pre-existing competition on resources often keeps the region in ethnic tension. Conjecturally, territorial competition ensued between communities trying to have larger territorial influence both in the hills and valley in Manipur. This has an ethnicising effect that affects other political and social aspects.

In fencing border, no doubt it's the tribal villages belonging to the Naga and Kuki communities going to be affected. But, in understanding the politics from the securitisation point of view, it is imperative to understand larger politics encompassing ethno-political relations with respect to the state. This includes power equations and resource sharing. Since the present Manipur is the result of the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826, which was signed between the British and the then Ava kingdom. Subsequently, the British colonised Manipur in 1891 and started the formation of a state through the existing Meitei kingdom. Political power has always been with the Meitei by virtue of their kingdom as well as being a majority thereafter within the Indian electoral democratic milieu (Osada, 2021). Despite Meiteis only inhabiting the valley, whenever a threat emanates of having the present territory to be broken or fractured, ethno-Meitei nationalism evokes taking the euphoric Meitei kingdom of the past, having extended territorial influence exceeding the present boundary. In other words, Meitei civil societies are not ready to compromise the existing political boundary in any way possible. On the other hand, to the relatively new ethno-nationalistic uprising within the Naga and Kuki communities, Meitei nationalism stands opposed to them.

Since both Nagas' and Kukis' nationalist aspirations cover beyond the boundary, inside the Manipur boundary there are territorial disputes vividly shown in various instances. Unlike the Meiteis, whose Manipur project remains to be solidifying the Manipur boundary, which runs counter to both former groups' aspirations. This has been the source of tension between the communities in Manipur for ages. To make the matter worse, regarding border fencing, the Nagaland government as well as the Mizoram government stand contrary to the decision of border fencing, which lies in a completely antagonistic stance to the then N. Biren Singh-led BJP government in Manipur. Despite the Mizo National Front (MNF) of Mizoram and the government of Nagaland being NDA allies at the centre, border fencing dictates doesn't go consistently with the GoI. Likewise, so does the newly formed Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) in Mizoram.

The contrasting positions adopted by the governments of Manipur, Nagaland, and Mizoram clearly suggest that responses to border fencing are shaped in this region not by security aspects but by ethnic affinities and regional political interests. The opposition expressed by Nagaland and Mizoram, despite differing party affiliations and relations with the central government, indicates the continuing significance of transborder ethnic solidarities in shaping political responses to border governance. Such developments reinforce existing ethnic divisions within Manipur and contribute to the further politicisation of border issues.

BORDER FENCING IN THE CONTEXT OF MEITEI-KUKI CONFLICT

In the light of the current crisis between Meitei and Kuki, the politics of border fencing also carries significant weight in the conflict. Although the origins of the conflict are complex and cannot be reduced to a single factor, debates surrounding migration, indigeneity, and demographic change have emerged as important dimensions of the Meitei-Kuki conflict. In particular, allegations of illegal immigration from Myanmar have increasingly entered public discourse owing to the turmoil and situation in Myanmar since 2021. To this, sections of the Meitei community expressed concerns that continued cross-border movement may alter the demographic composition of the state and affect existing patterns of political representation, land ownership, and resource distribution. Consequently, demands for stricter border management and the fencing of the Indo-Myanmar border have gained support among the Meitei populations in the valley.

These concerns intersect with broader indigeneity discourses that have become increasingly prominent in Manipur's political landscape. Competing claims regarding historical belonging, settlement, and entitlement to land have contributed to the construction of exclusionary narratives about indigeneity and legitimacy. This was clearly seen when the Haomee Federation, a self-claimed indigenous people's organisation constituted mainly of Meitei and Naga tribes, has excluded Kukis and Pangals, in an indigenous community list made by them recently just before the violence broke out in Manipur (HF, 2022). All when government of Manipur in its gazette notification

recognised Meitei, Pangals and 33 other tribes who belong to either Naga or Kuki ethnic fold. To this, civil societies of both the communities reacted against citing this would bring more harm than good in community relations. In this context, border fencing demanded by the Meiteis is not perceived merely as a security measure but as a mechanism to embolden the exclusionary politics playing out in indigeneity discourse. At the same time, this has invariably cast suspicion on the Kuki community that the Meitei community conflates questions of migration and security with broader claims homeland about the legitimacy of particular communities within Manipur.

In this light, border fencing has introduced a new dimension to the ongoing ethnic conflict in Manipur. This has implications in ethnic relations and conflict in Manipur, but when this narrative of indigeneity conflates with the fencing of the border along with the cultural nationalism of the respective Naga and Kuki communities, the issue has contributed to the further ethnicisation of political discourse (Osada, 2021). Thus, border becomes an essential contesting arena, through which broader struggles over identity, territory, and political authority are negotiated and contested.

CONCLUSION

The paper has argued that the contemporary politics of the Indo-Myanmar border must be understood through the intersection of state-making, borderland realities, and ethnic contestation. The Indian state's decision to fence the border, embodying its territorial sovereignty, encounters a borderland society whose everyday life has historically been organised around mobility, shared ethnic spaces, and transborder networks. In a region like Manipur, where the regional politics are characterised by competing territorial aspirations and unresolved ethnic tensions, border fencing is intertwined with broader struggles over homeland, indigeneity and community survival. The article further demonstrates that border fencing has become increasingly ethnicised within the context of Manipur's contemporary conflicts. Narratives surrounding migration, demographic change, and security are interpreted through existing ethnic boundaries and political rivalries, transforming the border into a symbolic site of contestation. Support for or opposition to border fencing therefore reflects not only differing assessments of security policy but also competing political projects and territorial imaginations. What appears as a mechanism of protection for one community may be perceived as a threat to historical belonging and collective identity by another. Thus, the debate on Indo-Myanmar border fencing cannot be looked at solely through a state security lens but also from a lens that incorporates social spaces inhabited by communities with complex historical, cultural and political ties.

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