



THE LAND THAT DRAWS THE LINE

The Microphysics of Borders: How Terrain, Weather, and Ecology Dictate Sovereignty

By Sanjay Aditya Singh

The old Naga elder sat quietly beneath a weathered bamboo shelter overlooking the hills that stretched endlessly toward Myanmar. The afternoon mist had begun its slow descent, swallowing ridgelines one after another. Somewhere beyond those folds of green lay an international boundary. Yet as he pointed toward the horizon, there was no certainty in his gesture.

"Our people were here before the border," he said softly. "The mountains know no line."

His words stayed with me long after I left the frontier. Across India's vast borders, from the fog-covered plains of Punjab to the shifting islands of Assam and the dense forests of the Indo-Myanmar frontier, one discovers a profound truth: sovereignty is rarely defined by maps alone. While states draw boundaries with ink and diplomacy, nature often decides how those boundaries are experienced, defended, and lived.

This reality is perhaps best understood in the borderlands where Seemanta Chetna Mancha Purvottar has long worked to bring attention to the human dimension of frontier life. Here, the border is not merely a geopolitical construct. It is an everyday encounter between people and the physical world.

In the villages of Punjab, winter arrives not just with cold winds but with an ocean of fog. Entire landscapes disappear beneath a grey blanket that can linger for days. Roads vanish. Trees become shadows. Distances lose meaning.

A retired border guard once described those nights to me.

"When the fog comes," he said, "you stop trusting your eyes. You trust your ears, your memory, and the ground beneath your feet."

For the men guarding the frontier, visibility often shrinks to a few metres. The border fence, usually a visible marker of sovereignty, fades into the whiteness. Farmers cultivating fields near the boundary move cautiously, guided by habit rather than sight. Children walking to school learn from an early age that nature can make familiar places unfamiliar.

In such moments, sovereignty is not enforced by declarations issued hundreds of kilometres away. It is sustained by vigilance, discipline, and local knowledge. The fog becomes an invisible actor in the story of national security, shaping decisions as surely as any policy.

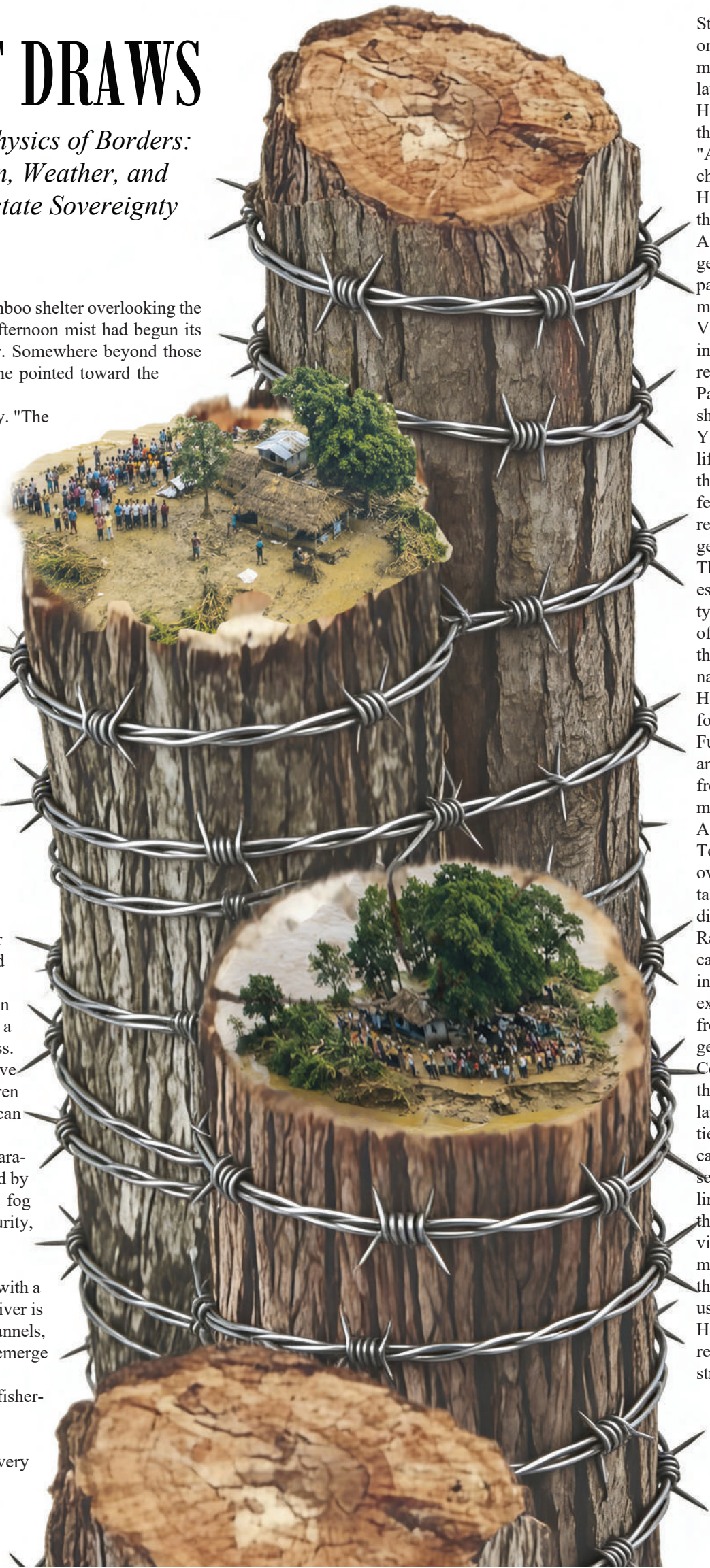
Travel eastward and the frontier tells a different story.

Near Dhubri in Assam, the mighty Brahmaputra flows with a power that commands both respect and humility. The river is never truly still. It changes its course, carves new channels, and consumes land without warning. Entire sandbars emerge and disappear with the seasons.

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Along the riverine frontier, geography itself is fluid. A patch of land that exists today may be submerged tomorrow. Villages are relocated. Border infrastructure must often be rebuilt after monsoon floods. Patrol routes evolve with shifting currents.

Yet despite these uncertainties, life continues. Fishermen cast their nets. Farmers cultivate fertile alluvial soil. Families rebuild homes after floods, generation after generation.

Their resilience reveals an essential truth about sovereignty in Assam. It is not the rigidity of a line that matters most, but the capacity to adapt when nature redraws the landscape. Here, endurance becomes a form of nation-building.

Further east, beyond the valleys and plains, the Indo-Myanmar frontier rises into some of the most complex terrain in South Asia. The forests are immense. Towering bamboo groves sway overhead. Elephant grass grows taller than a man. Narrow trails disappear into thick vegetation. Rainfall, landslides, and dense canopy transform movement into a slow and deliberate exercise. Yet what makes this frontier unique is not merely its geography. It is the people.

Communities on both sides of the border share histories, languages, customs, and family ties that predate modern political boundaries. Villages separated by an international line often remain connected through memory and kinship. A village elder in Mon once told me, "The forest hides us from the world, but it also connects us to our relatives."

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FEATURE STORY *cont...*

PAPER BORDERS

Documentation Regimes, Identity Proof, and the Architecture of Inclusion/Exclusion

By Ankur Hatibaruah

The modern state has long since moved past the era where borders were defined merely by stone markers and riverbanks. In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, the most formidable barriers are constructed from the silent, weightless matter of the archive. This is the rise of the documentation regime, a system where the "paper border" acts as a selective, often volatile membrane. It is an architecture of inclusion and exclusion that does not sit at the edge of a territory but vibrates through its very center, deciding which bodies are granted the fluid grace of belonging and which are snagged by the jagged edges of administrative non-existence.

To understand this invisible fence, one must look at the document not as a neutral tool of record-keeping, but as a site of profound power. Processes like the National Register of Citizens (NRC) or the implementation of mandatory biometric IDs transform citizenship from a birth right into a forensic performance. Under such regimes, identity is no longer an ontological fact, it is not enough to simply be present, to breathe, and to work within a community. Instead, the individual must present a "legacy chain," a chronological paper trail that often stretches back decades. For the displaced, the impoverished, or those whose histories have been swallowed by flood, fire, or war, the inability to produce a specific watermark or a digitized deed becomes a terminal flaw. In this context, time itself becomes a border; the past is repurposed as a gatekeeper that bars entry into the legal present.

This architecture is uniquely insidious because of its omnipresence. Unlike a physical wall that one might scale or circumvent, the documentation regime follows the individual into every crevice of social life.

It manifests at the hospital desk, the school gate, and the bank teller's window. By linking essential services to a centralized biometric anchor, the state creates a digital tether that can be severed at any moment. When a thumbprint fails to scan or a name is missing from a verified ledger, the person undergoes a "civic death." They become a documentary ghost, physically present in the land they call home, yet legally erased from it. They continue to pave the roads and harvest the crops of a nation that has rendered them invisible through the cold logic of a database.

Furthermore, these regimes shift the fundamental burden of proof. The state no longer has to justify the exclusion of a person; rather, the person must justify their existence to the state. This creates a profound epistemic violence where local knowledge and communal recognition are dismissed as "sub-legal." A neighbour's testimony or a lifetime of local labour carries no weight against the absence of an official stamp. The result is a fractured society where inclusion is a fragile privilege granted to those with pristine folders, while exclusion becomes a permanent condition for those whose lives are too complex, too itinerant, or too precarious to be contained within the margins of a government form.

Ultimately, the paper border reveals a deep bureaucratic hubris, the belief that the wandering, tragic, and multifaceted reality of human life can be reduced to a set of verifiable data points. As these invisible fences grow more rigid, the state loses its ability to see the people it claims to govern, replacing a living society with a sterile archive. We are left with a world where the watermark on a page carries more sovereignty than the human pulse, and where the architecture of our institutions is designed not to house the spirit of a community, but to sort, filter, and eventually discard it.



COLONIAL BORDERS

*Administrative
Convenience &
Modern Challenges*

By Bhabna Kashyap

To understand why India's borders remain contested today, we must go back to the era of British India. In 1907, George Nathaniel Curzon, the British Viceroy, described frontiers not as fixed borders, but as zones of influence, territories that expanded or contracted with imperial power. What was once flexible for colonial rulers has now hardened into sovereign boundaries, shaping conflicts, migrations, and disputes that persist into the present.

India's borders are largely colonial inheritances: the Radcliffe Line, the McMahon Line, and the Durand Line. None were designed to respect communities or terrain. The Radcliffe Line, hurriedly drawn in 1947 to divide British India into India and Pakistan, displaced over 14 million people, making it one of the largest migrations in human history. Its legacy remains unresolved, most visibly in the militarized Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir, where sporadic clashes continue to claim lives decades later.

The McMahon Line, drawn in 1914 to separate British India from Tibet, was never recognized by China. Its contested status underpins the modern Line of Actual Control (LAC), most tragically visible in the Galwan Valley clash of 2020, where soldiers from both sides lost their lives over an ambiguous, mountainous frontier. Similarly, the Durand Line, slicing through what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan, created a divide in Pashtun lands that continues to fuel cross-border instability.

Colonial mapping often ignored the natural world. Rivers shift, glaciers retreat, and mountains are rarely precise. The Treaty of Sugauli (1815), for example, tied India-Nepal borders to the Kali River, whose true source remains disputed, leading to the Kalapani dispute. In the west, the Sir Creek dispute with Pakistan hinges on whether the boundary follows the mid-channel or the eastern bank of the estuary, an ambiguity born from a 1914 British resolution. These disputes remind us that lines drawn without understanding the land can last centuries.

Nowhere is the distortion more human than in Northeast India, where colonial administrative logic fractured natural communities. The British separated "revenue plains" from "excluded hills" under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, dividing people who had lived, traded, and intermarried across regions for centuries. The Inner Line, a colonial administrative tool, was flexible, yet post-independence it hardened into state boundaries. Inter-state conflicts like Assam's disputes with Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh trace directly to British-era demarcations, the fatal consequences of which are seen even today, as evidenced in

evidenced in recent years. The 2021 Assam-Mizoram clash arose from competing interpretations of boundary notifications from 1875 and 1933. Lines once pliable, drawn at the whim of colonial rulers, became scars on the earth when handed to those for whom the borders are no mere scribbles, but lifeblood – territories to guard with their blood and bones.

Even across international borders, colonial logic continues to matter. The India-Myanmar border was drawn without regard for ethnically continuous landscapes. Tribes like the Nagas and Kukis live on both sides. Historically, the Free Movement Regime allowed visa-free travel within 16 km, recognizing this reality. But after Myanmar's 2021 military coup, security concerns prompted India to consider fencing sections of the border, turning a historically porous frontier into a heavily controlled one.

Some colonial anomalies have been resolved, showing that correction is possible. The India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement simplified one of the world's most complex borders, resolving 162 enclaves and allowing displaced populations to reclaim their homes. But such solutions are rare. Most colonial-era legacies remain deeply entrenched.

The deeper truth is structural: colonial borders were about control, not coexistence. They prioritized administrative clarity over social reality, strategic buffers over cultural continuity. Independent India inherited both the lines and the logic: oscillating between rigid enforcement and pragmatic flexibility. Today, this tension is visible everywhere from infrastructure along the LAC, which strengthens defense but escalates tensions with China, to fencing the Myanmar border, which curbs insurgency but risks alienating ethnic communities.

The "afterlife" of colonial lines is a clear mismatch between maps drawn 70 years ago and the lived reality of 2026. Borders are active agents continuously shaping governance, identity, and conflict. And in trying to fix them, India faces a fundamental question: why were these lines drawn so clumsily in the first place?



NIGHTFALL AT THE RIVERINE BORDER

Patrol Rhythms, Fluid Terrain, and the Politics of Visibility in the Brahmaputra Frontier

By Prachurjya Raj Gautam

Borders are commonly perceived as fixed boundaries of territorial authority, but in the river landscapes of North-east India, they function as flexible systems of visibility. This is particularly noticeable along the Indo-Bangladesh border in the Dhubri-South Salmara region, where the Brahmaputra River constantly alters the border line. As night falls, visibility doesn't just decrease—it transforms the very concept of control. The border stops being a static delineation and instead becomes a fragmented, fluctuating area where patrol patterns, environmental unpredictability, and local expertise dictate what is visible, what is hidden, and ultimately, how power is enforced.

The border between India and Bangladesh, spanning 4,096 kilometers, includes significant sections of riverine and char (sandbar) landscapes in Assam and Meghalaya where fencing is either unfinished or not feasible structurally. In the Brahmaputra valley, the ever-changing hydrology—characterized by erosion, sedimentation, and channel movement—makes fixed infrastructure inherently unreliable. Consequently, border control in this area differs from the straightforward, fence-focused approach seen along India's western boundaries. Instead, it depends on flexible and adaptive patrol methods, mainly carried out by the Border Security Force (BSF), which needs to constantly adjust its spatial perception of the border.

During the day, patrols in the Dhubri area include long boat-based monitoring over distances of 10–15 km, acting as noticeable symbols of governmental power. Yet, these strategies based on visibility have restrictions in environmentally intricate landscapes. During night-time, these limitations worsen due to poor lighting and seasonal fog, which can reduce visibility to less than 20–30 meters, making constant surveillance impractical.

As one char resident in South Salmara noted, “After dark, the river changes. You cannot tell where India ends or Bangladesh begins—the channels shift, and even the patrol lights disappear in the fog.” Similarly, a local boatman observed that “at night, movement is less about crossing a border and more about knowing the river.

Those who know the currents and sandbars can move where others cannot even see.” These stories highlight that reduced visibility influences not just technical limitations but also impacts surveillance methods and daily travel in the river border area. Consequently, there is a substantial change in patrol strategies. Rather than conducting long continuous patrols, BSF units now opt for shorter, more frequent cycles, increasing from two or three rotations during the day to five or more during night-time. These patrols encompass reduced territories at varying times, emphasizing disruption over comprehensive coverage. This signifies a transition from deterrence based on visibility to interception based on probability, where control is dependent on foresight rather than continuous surveillance.

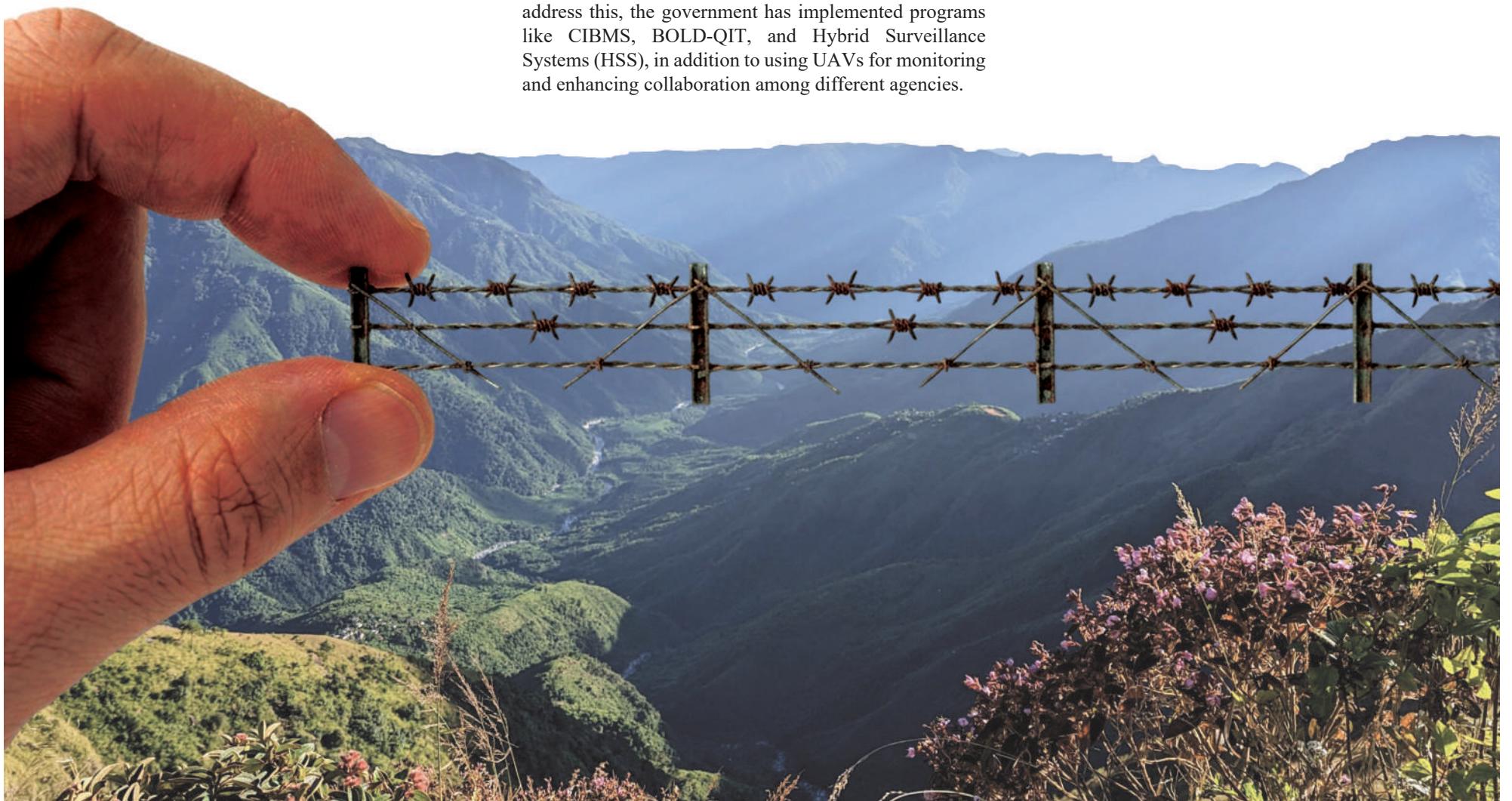
Changes in patrol schedules result in related alterations in border activities. Research indicates that illegal activities like smuggling and unofficial trade are synchronized with patrol rotations, frequently taking place during narrow time frames of 15–30 minutes between shifts. In areas with rivers, these actions are additionally influenced by elements like the velocity of the current, water levels, and the brightness of the moon. Small, discreet boats navigate through shallow and hidden pathways inaccessible to patrol ships, demonstrating a predictable movement strategy based on the familiarity with the river's changing terrain by locals.

Technology is a key element in managing India's borders. However, in river areas, it encounters limitations: floodlights provide uneven lighting, thermal cameras are affected by high moisture levels and water reflections, and drones are restricted by weather conditions such as fog, rain, and wind, leading to incomplete surveillance. To address this, the government has implemented programs like CIBMS, BOLD-QIT, and Hybrid Surveillance Systems (HSS), in addition to using UAVs for monitoring and enhancing collaboration among different agencies.

This demonstrates a shift towards unified, intelligence-driven systems. Nevertheless, these actions result in a disparity in visibility: regions close to BSF outposts are closely watched, while islands and peripheral waterways in the middle of rivers remain intermittently visible, with movement inferred rather than directly observed, determining who is observed and who goes unnoticed.

Border areas influence movement by utilizing extensive local familiarity with the land and seasonal variations, facilitating travel along both official and unofficial paths. In regions with rivers, this involves a close understanding of sandbars, shallow points, and concealed channels that are beyond the scope of external monitoring. During nighttime when visibility is low, this expertise becomes essential. Instead of signaling a lack of authority, darkness signifies a change in border control—increased but localized patrols, more focused yet inconsistent surveillance, and intentional movement. The border is therefore seen not as a rigid boundary, but as a flexible, negotiated zone influenced by the interaction of surroundings, technology, and human actions.

In the border area between Dhubri and South Salmara, the surveillance boundaries are influenced by a complex political landscape affected by a changing river, flexible patrol schedules, and indigenous understanding. The boundary in this region is not a static border but a diverse area with varying levels of visibility, where authority is applied intermittently instead of consistently. Even with the use of advanced technology, navigation is still dependent on the landscape and time. Particularly during night-time, the Brahmaputra river not only conceals the border but transforms it into a fluid and ever-changing area of administration.



THE LESSER KNOWN JAINTIAS

Culture beyond Borders

By Parag Phukan

International political boundaries of a country, drawn with a pen or a pencil, is an inert official document of reference. They are essentially an academic exercise and an outcome of history, tradition, geography, diplomacy, treaties etc. But, the people contained inside the borders of this side or the other are living human beings of flesh and blood, culture, emotions, dreams, aspiration and so on. Being aware of the political and geographical border lines are very important but, knowing about the people, culture, emotions, aspiration, history and heritage spread across either side of the border line is definitely more important for the brave soldiers guarding the borders in particular and all the concerned and vigilant citizens of a country in general.

The North Eastern State of Meghalaya shares an international border of 443 km with Bangladesh. The state is bound to the south by the Bangladeshi divisions of Mymensingh and Sylhet, to the west by the Bangladeshi division of Rangpur, and to the north and east by the State of Assam. Meghalaya, literally meaning the abode of clouds, is essentially a hilly state. Meghalaya State was formed on 21 January 1972 by carving out two districts from the state of larger Assam, namely, the united Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills, and the Garo Hills. The original capital of Assam State was in Shillong, (now in Meghalaya), since the days of British colonial rule and continue to be the capital city of Meghalaya today. The estimated population of the State in 2014 was over 32 lakhs comprising of three major tribal groups of Kashi, Jaintia and Garo with many other smaller ethnic and tribal groups and sub-groups.

The Jaintias are a relatively smaller tribal group mainly living in the West and East Jaintia Hill districts of Meghalaya. Unfortunately, for most of us in the Assam, leave alone the pan-Indian populace, knowledge about one of our nearest neighbors is limited to just that. When I visited Jaintia hill areas of Meghalaya extensively recently, met the vibrant people and interacted with them, learnt about their

culture a little and read about the heritage and history of our lesser known brethren, I was ashamed of my ignorance for all these years. Our collective ignorance about the Jaintias is primarily because of certain mental blocks like: nothing exists in Meghalaya beyond Shillong and Shohra (Cherrapunjee), Meghalaya is primarily the land of Khasi people, some Jaintias are also there who are almost like the Khasi people who live in remote areas etc. When we plan or make a pleasure trip to Meghalaya, our visits are limited to Shillong and Shohra, because we believe that practically nothing much exists there beyond these two locations. Unfortunately, nothing can be far from the truth.

As the name signifies, Meghalaya is indeed a beautiful abode of clouds leisurely wandering around like soft scotched-cotton, through the blue hills, green meadows and whispering Pines. But, Meghalaya is not only about the cloud, the highest rainfall location and capital city Shillong. Actually the real Meghalaya lies beyond Shillong, silently. A State with diverse ethnic tribal conglomeration of three major tribes, namely, Khasi, Garo and Jaintia, there are also many small tribal groups of different ethnic origins. All have different vibrant cultures, dialects, religious ceremonies, history and heritage. They generally do not understand each other's tongue and communicate through accented English, Hindi or Assamese.

The Jaintia Hills are a beautiful, mountainous region with a lot of green in the eastern part of Meghalaya. The Jaintia Hills exhibit a plateau-like structure with dissected hills and valleys. Average elevation ranges from 600 metres to about 1,500 metres. The topography is uneven due to intense rainfall and river erosion. The southern edge shows steep escarpments that descend sharply towards the Bangladesh plains. Because of the steep terrains, the generally rain fed rivers are short and swift-flowing. Most rivers flow southwards into Bangladesh, becoming part of the Surma – Meghna river system. The Kopili River is the largest stream in the region, known for its rocky terrain and numerous waterfalls. Other major rivers include the Myntdu River and the Lukha River which are known for its seasonal blue and acidic water.

The region is a part of the ecologically important Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot that supports tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen forests. Forests are rich in Bamboo, Orchids, Medicinal plants etc. In the higher and cooler parts, pine forests are also found in abundance. Diverse wildlife such as elephants, leopards, hoolock gibbons, horn bill etc are a part of the flora and fauna of the region. Jaintia Hills District is rich in mineral resources like coal and limestone. It has a total deposit of 37.25 million tonnes of coal and 1054 million tonnes of limestone. The region is often in news for wrong reasons due to unsafe and officially unauthorized Rat-hole mining practice. Rat-hole mining is a method of extracting coal from narrow, horizontal seams, prevalent in Meghalaya. The term “rat hole” refers to the narrow pits dug into the ground, typically just large enough for one person to descend and extract coal. Many fatal accidents have happened in recent times.

With a population of around four lakh plus, Jaintias constitute only about 13 percent of the State's population. They are also subdivided into two major sub-tribes, Pnars and Wars. Albeit, both the groups basically belong to the same stock who believed to have migrated from the Mekong valley in different waves and times along with the Khasi tribe, in search of greener pasture. The dialects of Pnar and War Jaintias are different, but they can understand each other. It is believed that their dialects originated from Mon- Khmer languages which is related to the Khasi. As per records, the Jaintia kingdom (earlier known as Sutnga kingdom) was one of the oldest and powerful in the North East India that finds mention in the Puranic and Tantrik literatures too. The earlier rulers of the medieval kingdom belonged to the Synteng community.

Like all other tribal communities, Jaintias too lacked written record of their past history and was preserved and passed on from one generation to the other orally, mostly through folklores and ritual songs. Although some discovered dilapidated ruins also speak of some history, but it can be safely presumed that many ruins that could reveal much more of their history and heritage are lying underneath or lost inside the thick vegetations of the hills. In the nearer past, records about the Jaintias can be found in the ‘Buranji’ chronicles of Ahom kingdom of Assam and subsequently in British official records. But it seems that not enough historical research has gone into the exploration of the past of the Jaintias in an organized manner.

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The term Jaintia is possibly derived from the shrine of Jayanti Devi or Jainteswari, an incarnation of Hindu goddess of ‘shakti’, Durga of Jaintiapur, now in Sylhet, Bangladesh. Jaintiapur, the capital city of the sprawling kingdom lies in ruins today. Jaintia people of Pnar and War origin are still found in the area. The rulers of newer Jaintia kingdom were non-tribal Brahmin Hindus. After the invasion of Kachari king Satrudaman, Jaintia kingdom was exposed to increasing Kachari and Ahom political influence. As per one theory, the locals of the old Sutnga kingdom found it difficult to find a suitable king and decided on a Brahmin non-tribal ruler and that's how the now recorded dynasty came into being. There were 21 kings starting from Prabhat Ray (1500-1516) and ending with Rajendra Singh (1832-1835), when the British annexed the kingdom on March 15, 1835. At that period Jaintia kingdom extended from the east of Shillong Plateau to Barak valley, a portion of Bangladesh and some areas of Assam.

The royals and nobles of the kingdom adopted Hinduism, but the original tribal religion of the common Jaintias was ‘Niamtre’. Christianity spread after the British influence. Nartiang, a sleepy village few kilometers short of Jowai town is believed to be the summer capital of the Jaintia kingdom. The amazing monolithic stone park and an old Durga temple nearby bear the testimony. The stone park has the largest concentration of monoliths at one place in the State. Each stone erection has a significance; the taller ones for men and flatter ones for women with the tallest one being about 8 meters. In front of each vertical stone erection there is huge almost table-top flat stone plate resting on supports. Erected approximately during 1500 AD to commemorate the glorious events of the Jaintia kingdom, it is amazing that how these huge stone blocks were cut, smoothened, transported and erected without modern machineries. Nartiang is believed to be the summer capital of the Jaintia kings.

The other heritage structure of Nartiang is the more than five century old Durga temple. Renovated recently and painted in striking red, regular puja and other rituals like animal sacrifice continue there. The original wooden log pillars still support the frontal porch adorned with very old huge brass bells. Close by there is also a Shiva temple with a black stone idol and a ten-armed brass Durga. The villagers inhabiting near the temple are followers of Hindu faith. The traditional Jaintia attire for male is dhoti, jacket and turban. Females wear unstitched wrapper around the waist, full-sleeve blouse and a piece of colorful cloth wrapped around the shoulder and beaded ornaments. Rice and meat are the staple food with varieties of wild plants, fruits and pollution-free pure oxygen. The people are simple and perhaps vulnerable to manipulation by vested interest agents. Being a bordering region everybody, especially the security apparatus must remain vigilant all the time. Jaintia hills is full of beautiful lush-green slopes, springs, rivulets, rivers, lakes and magnificent waterfalls which are feast to the eyes. Krang Suri falls, Bophill falls, Tyrshi falls, Dawki river, Thad-laskein lake, Stone bridge and many more are worth an explore. Although organised tourism is developing slowly but, its still in the nascent stage. A whole lot of positive actions needed to explore the full economic tourism potential of the area. Next time in Shillong, please extend your sojourn to enjoy the Jaintia panorama and ‘breath-in’ a little bit of fresh hitherto not much explored Jaintia! I can assure you from my personal experience that you would never repent.

(The author is a former top corporate executive, presently a Management consultant, Corporate Trainer, invited speaker, empaneled with AIR & DD and a freelance writer He can be reached at +91 99571 03030, paragphukan13@gmail.com).

LIVING ACROSS LINES

Culture beyond Borders

By Dr. Mampi Bora

Imagine waking up one day and finding out that your relatives now live in another country—not because they moved, but because a line was drawn on a map. For many communities in Northeast India, this is not imagination—it is reality.

Scholars studying borderlands, including research on Naga, Mizo, and Bengali communities, show that political borders are often artificial and imposed without considering local life. These borders divide people who once shared the same land, culture, and identity.

For example, Naga tribes live on both sides of the India–Myanmar border. Even today, families remain connected across this boundary. They attend festivals together, marry across borders, and maintain strong kinship ties. Research shows that despite “imposed geography,” these communities continue cross-border movement and relationships as part of everyday life.

This tells us something important: culture does not follow political lines. In many border regions, crossing the border is often labeled as “illegal” by the state. But for local people, it is simply part of life. A farmer visiting relatives, a family attending a wedding, or traders exchanging goods—these are normal activities that existed long before borders were created.

A study on Bengali-speaking communities in Assam highlights how the idea of “illegality” can even divide families. Some members are marked as citizens, while others are labeled migrants, even within the same household. This creates emotional and social stress, turning everyday life into a struggle with identity and belonging.

So, what the state calls “illegal,” people often experience as necessary and natural.

Memory: The Invisible Bridge

One of the strongest forces keeping these communities connected is memory. Older generations remember a time when there were no strict borders. Stories of shared land, festivals, and traditions are passed down, creating a sense of unity that no border can erase.

Researchers describe such people as “transborder communities” who share a connected history even if they now live in different countries.

This shared memory acts like an invisible bridge—stronger than fences, stronger than documents.

Culture as Resistance

Culture becomes a quiet form of resistance. Language, food, music, and customs continue across borders, refusing to be divided. Whether it is a Mizo festival, a Naga tradition, or Bengali cultural practices, these identities remain alive on both sides.

Anthropological studies show that border areas are not just zones of separation—they are spaces where people “encounter, reinforce, and even challenge political boundaries” through everyday life.

In simple terms, people do not just live under borders—they constantly reshape what borders mean.

Conclusion

The idea of a “cultural frontier” helps us understand a powerful truth: human relationships are deeper than political boundaries. While states draw lines to define nations, people continue to live, love, and remember beyond those lines.

For communities like the Naga, Mizo, and Bengali populations, identity is not limited to one country. It is built through shared history, kinship, and culture. And no matter how strong a border is, it cannot easily break these connections.



BORDER ROADS ORGANISATION

The Silent Sentinel

By Rajib Kumar Mandal

The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) is the Government of India's premier border infrastructure agency which provides support to the Indian Armed Forces. The BRO primarily constructs and maintains strategic road networks, bridges, tunnels and airfields in India's border and inaccessible areas to meet both military and civilian needs.

Through overseas infrastructures development in friendly neighbouring countries like Afghanistan, Bhutan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka it helps build regional connectivity and strategic partnerships. The BRO has played a vital role in the development of India's border infrastructure. It has constructed and maintained strategic roads, bridges, tunnels, airstrips and helipads in some of the most challenging terrains in the world which includes the Himalayas, the Karakoram Range, and the Thar Desert.

The BRO has also played an important role in the development of infrastructure in the North East region of India. It is very important for India's national security, border security & connectivity and the overall socio-economic development in the remote and hostile border areas of the North East.

The organisation functions fully under the Ministry of Defence (MoD) since 2015-16 while it was partially under the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways before that. The organisation carries a simple yet stirring creed: "Shramena Sarvam Sadhyam" which means "through hard work, all things are possible."

Legacy: The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) was formed on 7 May 1960 to secure India's northern and north eastern borders. It aims to secure India's borders and develop infrastructures in remote areas of the north and northeast states of the country.

The BRO was initially established as a temporary organization. However, it was made permanent in 1965. Since its inception BRO has built over 64,100 kms of roads, 1,179 bridges, 07 tunnels and 22 airfields across India's border areas and in friendly neighbouring countries.

The crucial India-China Border Roads (ICBRs) developed by the BRO are vital for swift mobilization of armed forces in critical areas along the China and Pakistan borders. The world's highest motorable road at Mig La Pass at 19,400 ft and projects like the Atal Tunnel, Atal Setu and Sela Tunnel are its major feats.

Current Projects: Currently BRO maintains 18 dynamic projects across 11 states and 3 Union Territories. 9 in North West India (J&K, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan), 8 in North East India (Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya) and 1 in Bhutan. BRO is also involved in socio-economic development under initiatives like Act East and Vibrant Village Programme.

In Arunachal Pradesh road projects like Vartak, Arunank, Udayak and Brahmanak tackle some of India's most challenging frontiers, connecting remote villages in the LAC through critical infrastructures including Sisseri Bridge, Siyom Bridge, Sela Tunnel and Nechiphu Tunnel. In Ladakh, road projects like Himank, Beacon, Deepak, Vijayak and Yojak maintain vital lifelines to Kargil, Leh and the Karakoram region covering strategic routes such as the Srinagar-Leh Highway, Darbuk-Shyok-DBO Road, Atal Tunnel and the ongoing Shinku La Tunnel ensuring all weather connectivity. The north east has projects like Swastik in Sikkim, Pushpak in Mizoram, Setuk in Assam and Meghalaya, Sewak in Nagaland and Manipur strengthening regional access. On the western front Sampark in Jammu and Chetak in Rajasthan enhance strategic mobility.

Landmark Projects :

- **Atal Tunnel (Himachal Pradesh):** Atal Tunnel is a 9.02 km tunnel connecting Manali to Leh, reducing the travel time and providing all weather access.
- **Umling La Pass Road (Ladakh):** BRO constructed the world's highest motorable road at 19,024 feet setting a Guinness World Record.
- **Sela Tunnel (Arunachal Pradesh):** This Tunnel shortens the journey from Dirang to Tawang by many kms which is essential for rapid troop movement.
- **Darbuk-Shyok-DBO Road (Ladakh):** This strategic road constructed under project Himank, allows faster deployment of troops to the LAC in the Karakoram region.
- **Shinku La Tunnel (Ladakh/Himachal):** It's an ongoing project designed to connect Ladakh to the rest of the country throughout the year.
- **Zojila Pass Tunnel** would provide year round access to Ladakh which was formerly cut off during the winter due to heavy snowfall.
- **Arunachal Frontier Highway:** It's a major project involving a 719 km road project (NH-913) meant to enhance security in the border regions.
- **The world's highest airfield** located in Daulat Beg Oldie is connected to Ladakh via the DSDBO all weather road.
- **One of the main BRO initiatives in Afghanistan** is the Zaranj-Delaram Highway.
- **Daporijo Bridge in Arunachal Pradesh** is for the fast movements of troops, supplies, medical personnel and rations.

Staff & Key Personnel : BRO is staffed by personnel from Border Roads Engineering Service (BRES) General Reserve Engineer Force (GRES) and Indian Army Corps of Engineers.

Lt General Harpal Singh is the current and 29th Director General Border Roads. He succeeded Lt General Raghu Srinivasan. Ajay Mishra, Bhanu Misra, Harendra Kumar, Rajeev Dua, Debashis Bhattacharya are the Chief Engineers headquartered in New Delhi.

Group-A officers recruited through the UPSC's Indian Engineering Service (IES) are responsible for designing, constructing and maintaining strategic road infrastructure in the border regions. The DGBR commands the BRO to develop and maintain road networks in India's border areas, particularly in the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and Bhutan.

Conclusion: The Border Roads Organisation acts as a vital pillar of India's national security, strategic autonomy and regional connectivity in the border regions evolving from a support agency into a "silent sentinel" that constructs essential infrastructure in high altitude terrains.

As a crucial entity for national defence and development, the BRO ensures border security, socio-economic integration of the remote regions with the national mainstream and utilizes advanced technology for infrastructure resilience.



PARAM VIR CHAKRA

Major Somnath Sharma

On 3 November 1947, Major Somnath Sharma's company of 4 Kumaon was ordered on a fighting patrol to Badgam in response to the advance of Pakistani forces towards Srinagar. The enemy, estimated to be about 500 strong, attacked his company position from all sides with the aim of capturing the Srinagar airfield.

Major Somnath Sharma led his company in the face of overwhelming odds and fought the enemy with great determination. Displaying exceptional courage, he moved across open ground under intense enemy fire, encouraging his men and skillfully directing their fire. During the fierce battle, a mortar shell exploded near him, causing fatal injuries.

Despite his death, his inspiring leadership and example motivated his troops to continue fighting and hold their position, thereby delaying the enemy advance towards Srinagar. Their gallant resistance played a crucial role in safeguarding the Srinagar airfield.

For his inspiring leadership, conspicuous bravery, and supreme sacrifice in the highest traditions of the Indian Army, Major Somnath Sharma was posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra, India's highest wartime gallantry award.



When we speak about borders in India, we often imagine fences, checkpoints, maps, and military deployments. Yet, after spending years travelling through the frontier regions of our country, I have come to believe that a border is far more than a line on a map. It is a living space where geography, identity, governance, and national security meet every single day. This edition of Frontier Insights attempts to look beyond conventional narratives. Our cover story examines a simple but often ignored reality—that sovereignty is not exercised in conference rooms alone. It is shaped by fog in Punjab, by shifting rivers in Assam, and by dense forests along the Indo-Myanmar frontier. Before policy reaches the border, nature has already defined the challenge. Terrain, weather, and ecology remain silent but powerful actors in national security. The frontier is also governed by documents. Identity cards, border permits, biometric systems, and citizenship records increasingly determine who belongs, who moves, and who participates in the life of the nation. Invisible systems are creating invisible borders, often more consequential than physical barriers themselves.

This edition further explores how colonial-era boundary decisions continue to influence present-day governance and conflict. Many of the challenges we face today are not new; they are inherited realities that demand contemporary solutions. At the same time, we must recognise that roads, schools, healthcare, welfare delivery, and communication networks are not merely development initiatives. They are instruments of national integration. A state that reaches its people with dignity and consistency creates stronger frontiers than one that relies solely on security infrastructure. We also examine a growing challenge of our times—the weaponisation of narratives. Rumours, misinformation, and perception management have become powerful forces in border regions. The frontier today is contested not only through movement of people and goods but also through the movement of information. Yet amid all strategic discussions, we must never forget the human dimension. The border is a farmer rebuilding after floods in Assam. It is a soldier patrolling through fog in Punjab. It is a family divided by an international boundary but united by culture and memory. It is a road worker carving connectivity through mountains. It is the ordinary citizen whose daily life gives meaning to national sovereignty.

At Seemanta Chetna Mancha Purvottar, we believe that frontier regions are not the periphery of India. They are where India meets the world, where challenges emerge first, and where the strength of the nation is tested most visibly. **If this edition encourages policymakers, scholars, security professionals, and citizens to view borders not merely as lines of separation but as spaces of engagement and opportunity, it will have served its purpose. For the frontier is not the edge of the nation. It is where the nation begins.**

Sanjay Aditya

SANJAY ADITYA SINGH
Chairman - Editorial Board



FRONTIER

INSIGHTS

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