



GUARDING THE GATE, TOGETHER

On 15 and 16 June, at Guwahati, the Assam Rifles and Seemanta Chetna Manch Purvottar brought soldiers, scholars and citizens into a single hall to reckon with the Myanmar frontier. What took shape over two days was more than a seminar — it was a statement about who, in the end, guards a border.

By Sanjay Aditya Singh



There is an old truth on every frontier that the mainland forgets and the borderland never can: a boundary is only as secure as the people who live along it believe it to be. On the fifteenth and sixteenth of June, at Guwahati, that truth was given a dais and two days of voice. The Assam Rifles — the force that has walked the Indo-Myanmar border since long before most of our present boundaries were drawn — joined hands with Seemanta Chetna Manch Purvottar to convene a conclave on the security of the eastern frontier. For two days the watchtower and the citizenry sat together, and a region too often spoken about found itself, for once, speaking for itself.

The hour lent the gathering its weight. Across the ranges to the east, Myanmar's long war grinds on; a China-backed order has entrenched itself in Naypyidaw; refugees, drones, narcotics and arms press against our hills; and along the 1,643 kilometres of the Indo-Myanmar boundary, the old Free Movement Regime has given way to a fence and a regulated border pass. These are not abstractions in Guwahati. They are the texture of daily life for the communities of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal — and it was fitting that the reckoning with them should happen here, on Northeastern soil, and not in some distant seminar room.

What gave the conclave its meaning was not its subject alone but its symbolism. The Assam Rifles is no ordinary force.

Raised in 1835, the oldest of the nation's paramilitary formations, it has earned across generations the name its soldiers wear with quiet pride — Friends of the Hill People, the Sentinels of the North East. To see that force sit down with scholars, security veterans, academics, students and representatives of the border communities was to witness something the frontier needs far more of: the uniform and the civilian, the watchtower and the classroom, in common cause. That, precisely, is the meaning of seemanta chetna — frontier awareness — the conviction from which the Manch takes its name: that a border is held not by soldiers alone, but by a society that understands, values and guards it.

Over two days the conclave took up the questions that braid together on the Myanmar frontier. Delegates weighed the ending of the Free Movement Regime and the working of the new border pass — how a nation secures a boundary that runs through a single people, honouring kinship while restoring control. They turned to the fence rising along the ranges, and to the insurgent sanctuaries that a collapsing Myanmar has reopened in the Sagaing hills. They confronted the narcotics pouring out of the Golden Triangle and the war they wage on the frontier's youth. They reckoned, with compassion and caution both, with the refugees the Myanmar war has driven onto our soil.

And they returned, again and again, to the theme that underlay them all: that national integration and border security are one work, and that winning the trust of the frontier's people is the surest fortification a nation can raise.

Running through the deliberations was a single, unifying idea — that the security of the frontier cannot be left to the soldier alone. The border villager who reports a stranger, the teacher who keeps a restless youth from the recruiter's reach, the scholar who documents the truth of the frontier, the citizen who refuses the smuggler's cash — each is a sentinel in his own right. The conclave was, in this sense, an exercise in jan-bhagidari, people's participation, applied to the most sensitive of national tasks. The Assam Rifles guards the line; but a line guarded only by those in uniform, and unloved by those who live behind it, is a line perpetually at risk. The answer the gathering pointed toward was partnership: force, government, civil society and community, woven into a single fabric of vigilance. If the conclave had a message for the nation beyond the hills, it was this: do not treat the North East as a periphery to be managed, but as a partner to be trusted.



The sense of the gathering was that the fence must be completed with speed, yet paired always with development; that the border pass be eased by technology and better infrastructure at the crossing points; that refugees be met with humanity and registration both; that the frontier's youth be given schools, skills and livelihoods as the truest counter to drugs and the gun; and that civil society be drawn permanently into the work of border awareness, not summoned only for a seminar. The spirit of Guwahati was neither the anxiety of the besieged nor the complacency of the secure, but the confidence of a frontier that knows its own worth.

That confidence has deep roots in this soil. The North East is not a fragile edge of the nation to be anxiously held; it is a proud and ancient crossroads whose peoples have guarded these hills across centuries.

What the conclave sought was not to instruct the frontier in its duty but to gather its voice — to let those who live the border speak to those who guard it, and to bind both to those who govern from afar. In an age when the frontier's challenges arrive faster than any ministry can answer them, that gathering of voices is not a courtesy. It is a necessity of the first order.

The conclave has ended; the monsoon has come to the hills; the rivers are rising and the frontier's season of testing has returned. But something was affirmed at Guwahati on those two June days that will outlast the event. It is the conviction this magazine was founded to serve — that the eastern gate of Bharat is guarded best when soldier and citizen guard it together, and that awareness, in the end, is the frontier's first and finest defence. The Assam Rifles has kept that watch for nearly two centuries. The task now, for all of us, is to keep it with them.



HOLDING THE EASTERN LINE

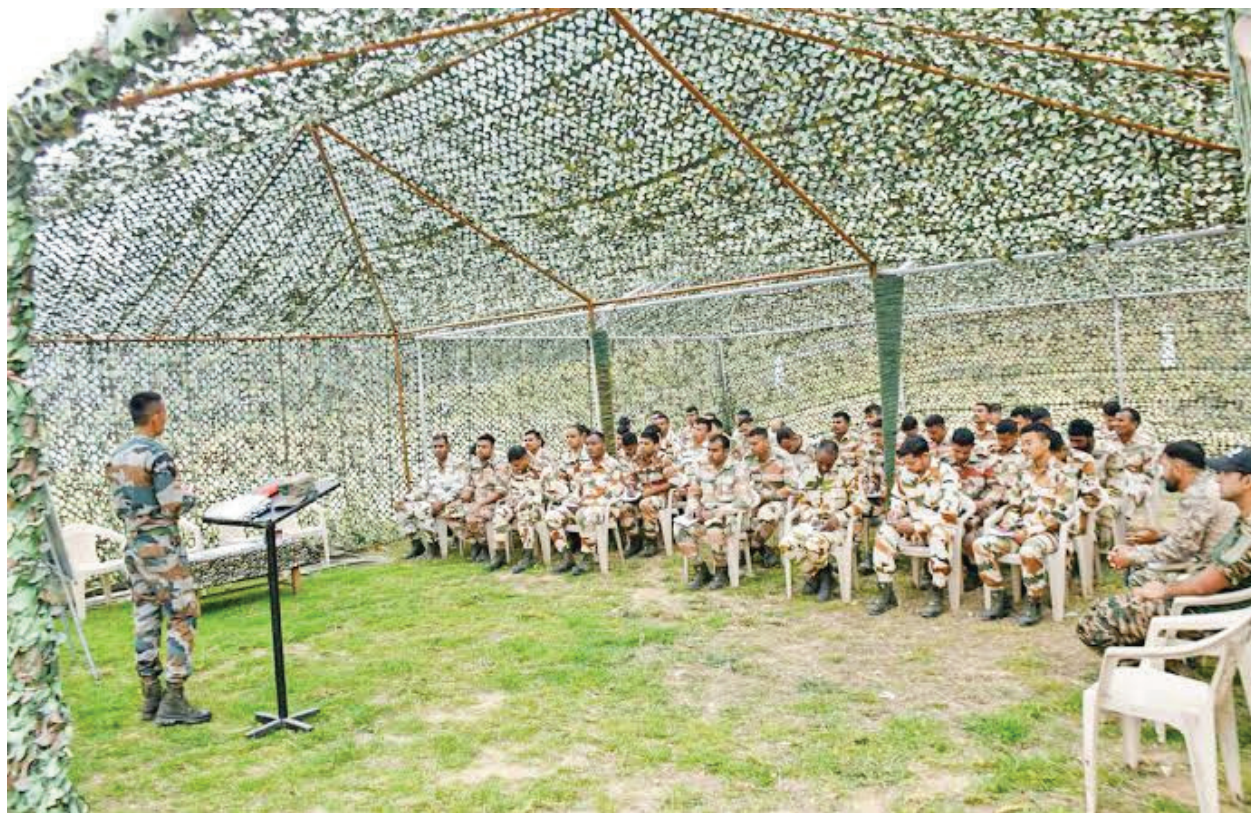
From the char lands of Sribhumi to the wire rising along the Chicken's Neck, June tested the eastern border. The nation's answer must be the oldest one there is.

By Editorial Team

On the afternoon of 27 June, the calm of Assam's Sribhumi district broke into confrontation. In the Bilabari stretch of the India-Bangladesh border, according to reports from the ground, personnel of Border Guard Bangladesh levelled weapons toward Indian soil while groups of Bangladeshi nationals — some said to be armed — pressed against the line, testing the Border Security Force. The BSF held its ground and reinforced the sector. No territory was ceded. But the message from across the wire was one this frontier has learned to read: the eastern gate is under pressure, and it will be probed wherever it is weak.

June offered a steady drumbeat of such reminders. In a single fortnight, more than thirty Bangladeshi nationals who had crossed illegally were intercepted across Assam and Meghalaya — nine detained at Guwahati railway station after alert co-passengers raised the alarm, ten more pulled from a lodge in the heart of the city, others seized in the Garo Hills as touts ferried them toward Guwahati. On 15 June, a joint Assam Police-BSF operation turned back twenty-one would-be entrants at the border itself. The Chief Minister has been plain about the stakes, calling the safeguarding of the frontier a top priority and describing the state's approach as an unrelenting, multi-pronged watch. not lack ability. Given the chance, she does not merely catch up. She excels.

These are not stray police-blotter items. They are the visible surface of a pressure that has shaped Assam's destiny for generations — the pressure that gave rise to the Assam Andolan and to the Assam Accord of 1985, a solemn national compact that unauthorised entrants would



India ups security at siliguri corridor in North-Bengal ~The Sunday Guardian Live

be detected and dealt with by law, and that the identity and demographic character of the indigenous people of this soil would be protected. That compact was not born of prejudice. It rests on a truth every nation on earth affirms: a state that cannot decide who enters and settles within its borders has surrendered the first attribute of sovereignty.

What sharpens June's pressure is the changed weather across the line. The new government in Dhaka under Prime Minister Tarique Rahman came to office promising a reset, and India extended its hand in good faith. Yet the early months have proved a slippery slope. At the Director-General-level border conference in New Delhi this month, it was the Bangladeshi side that objected — to India's own fencing on India's own soil. Dhaka's first ministerial journeys were to Kuala Lumpur and Beijing, not New Delhi. The 1996 Ganga Water Sharing Treaty nears expiry even as Beijing hovers over the Teesta close to our most sensitive corridor. And the interim regime that preceded this government left a poisoned inheritance — a Chinese drone facility rising near our border, a rekindled embrace of Pakistan.

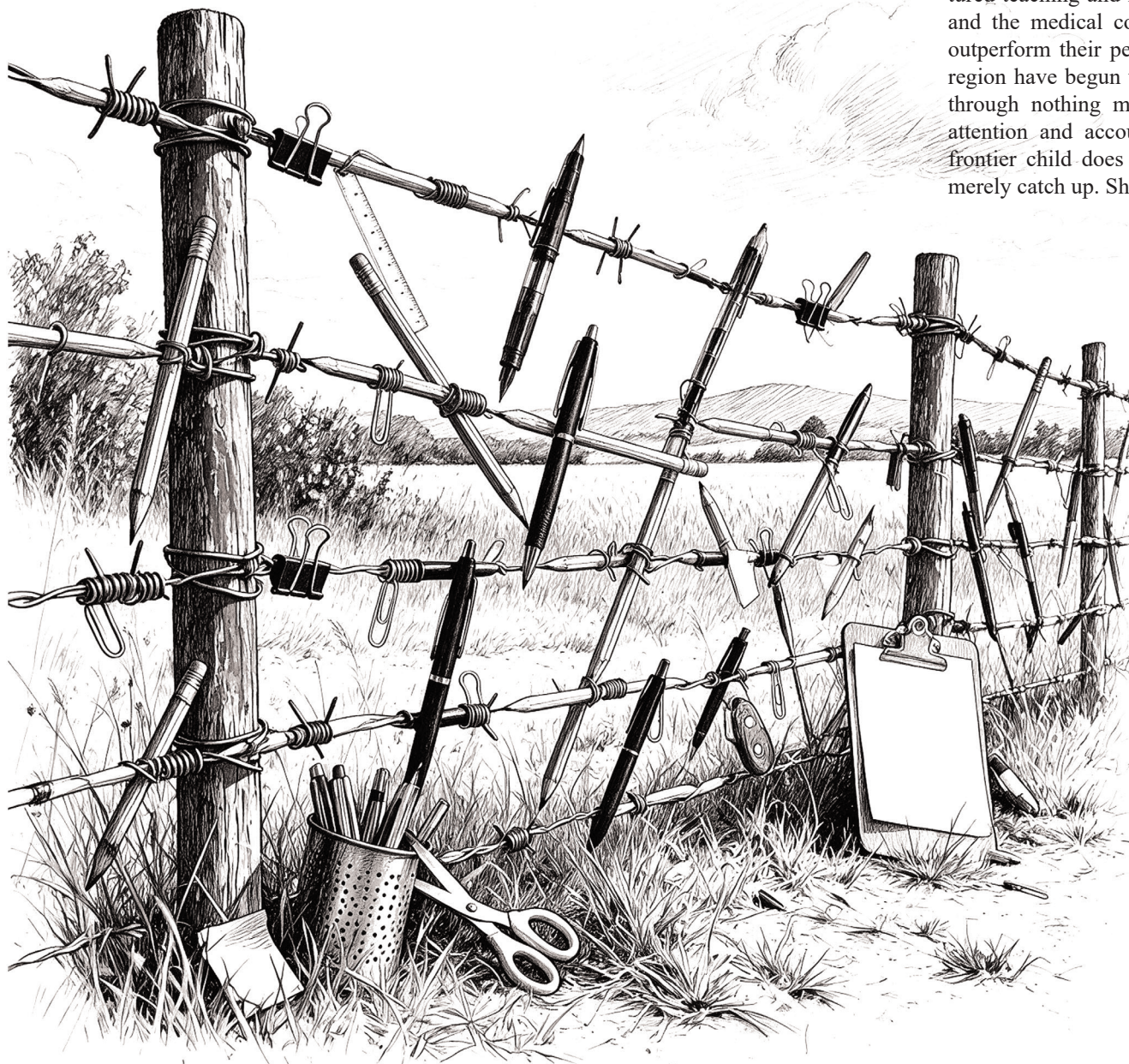
The nation's answer is being written in steel. In late May, after long-delayed land was finally handed over, the BSF began fencing sensitive stretches near the Siliguri Corridor. Along the Myanmar front, the ₹31,000-crore fence and the winding-down of the old Free Movement Regime carry the same logic: a frontier long treated as a soft line of convenience is at last being given the hard edge national security demands.

Let none mistake this resolve for hostility toward the frontier's people. To seal the border is to defend the very indigenous societies — Assamese and Bodo, Naga and Mizo, and all their neighbours — whom illegal immigration, smuggling and narcotics most endanger. The task now is speed and self-respect: complete the fence, sustain the vigil, and negotiate with Dhaka from a position of confident strength, never supplication. The eastern gate was tested in June. It held. The work now is to ensure it always will — not by a neighbour's goodwill, but by the settled resolve of a nation that knows its frontiers are the measure of its freedom.

THE FRONTIER'S EKLAVYAS

In the border districts of the North East, brilliant children have long had everything a scholar needs but the chance. The truest way to secure the frontier may be the quietest: to give those children a teacher, a ladder, and a future worth staying for

By Editorial Team



Every teacher on the frontier knows the child. She sits in the front row of a hillside school where one master teaches five subjects and six classes, her notebook margins crowded with questions the timetable has no room to answer. He is the boy in the char village who solves in his head what the syllabus has not yet reached, then walks two hours home to a house where he is the first in his line to read. They are everywhere along the border districts of the North East — bright, hungry, luminous — and they share a single, quiet grief: they have everything a scholar needs except the chance to become one.

The oldest story of the gifted frontier poor is told in the Mahabharata. Eklavya, the forest boy, was turned away by the great teacher Dronacharya because of the accident of his birth. He learned archery alone, before a clay image of the guru who had refused him, and mastered it so completely that the teacher, threatened, demanded his thumb as fee — and the boy, in his terrible innocence, gave it. For three thousand years that tale has stood as the wound of every talented child born on the wrong side of opportunity: the mastery earned, and then the price extracted; the door reached, and then shut. The border districts of our region are full of Eklavyas still — and the measure of the nation is whether, this time, it will hand them a bow instead of asking for a thumb.

The need is not in doubt. The frontier carries the heaviest burden of every gap that afflicts Indian schooling. Here are the single-teacher schools and the empty science labs, the classrooms without electricity and the villages without a road, the long walks that quietly end a girl's enrolment. Here dropout is rarely a matter of dull minds; it is a matter of hard arithmetic, a child pulled to the field or the loom because the family cannot spare the hands. Across the country the shortage of trained teachers has become a crisis, and it is the remotest, most sensitive districts that feel it worst.

Among our tribal communities, literacy still trails the national figure by a wide and unjust margin, and the enrolment of girls trails further. The talent is abundant. It is the ladder that is missing.

Nowhere does that missing ladder cost the nation more than on the border. For the frontier does not stay still when its brightest are failed. The child whose gifts find no outlet is the child most easily drawn toward the only economies that never close on the border — the tout who sells a forged document, the network that moves narcotics and arms, the recruiter who offers a gun and a grievance. Every classroom that fails is a vacancy someone else is waiting to fill. And the talent that does break through too often breaks away — draining to distant cities, never to return, leaving the border poorer in the one resource it can least afford to export: its own capable young.

Yet we have seen, unmistakably, what happens when the ladder appears. Across the country, the Eklavya Model Residential Schools have taken tribal children from the remotest hinterlands and, with structured teaching and free coaching, sent hundreds of them into the IITs and the medical colleges in a single year — youngsters who now outperform their peers in the plains. Closer home, states of our own region have begun to bend the curve of dropout upward toward hope through nothing more mysterious than committed teachers, honest attention and accountability. The lesson is plain and thrilling: the frontier child does not lack ability. Given the chance, she does not merely catch up. She excels.

Encouragingly, the recognition is beginning to move from lament to action. Government schemes press outward toward the aspirational blocks; residential schools and competitive-exam coaching reach places the market never would. And civil society is stepping in alongside — among the newer efforts, Seemanta Chetna Manch Purvottar has announced its own initiative to carry quality tuition and competitive coaching into the border districts, one thread in a wider fabric that must now be woven quickly and well. What matters is not the banner over any single effort but the principle they increasingly share: where the child cannot reach the guru, the guru must go to the child — and nothing must be asked of these young Eklavyas but that they rise.

For the transformation of a single child on the border is never a private event. Educate one, and you lift a household beyond the reach of the tout and the trafficker. Educate a hundred, and you keep on the frontier the very talent that would otherwise drain away. Picture a girl from a fenced-off frontier hamlet in a doctor's white coat, a boy from a riverine char in an officer's uniform, returning not as exceptions but as the ordinary yield of a frontier that finally invested in its own. These are the true sentinels of the border — holding the line not with the rifle alone but with knowledge, confidence and a rootedness no adversary can fence out.

Here, in the end, is the deepest security. A frontier is not held by walls alone; it is held by citizens who are capable, confident and bound to the nation by the ladder it built beneath their feet. Every child taught on the border is a border made stronger, and a promise kept — the Republic's promise to every son and daughter that no talent shall be lost for want of a chance. The lamp already burns in a thousand border homes, over a thousand crowded notebooks. The task now is only to become the second flame.

SENTINELS OF THE NORTH EAST

Few in the mainland know the force that has kept the eastern watch for nearly two centuries. As the frontier hardens, the Assam Rifles carries a heavier burden than ever.

By Editorial Team

Few Indians beyond the North East truly know the force whose soldiers have kept the eastern watch for nearly two centuries. The Assam Rifles, raised in 1835 as the Cachar Levy to guard the frontier tea districts, is the oldest of the nation's paramilitary formations — older than the Republic it now serves, older than most of the borders it now holds. Across its long history it has worn many names and fought many campaigns, from the world wars to the counter-insurgencies of the hills, and it has earned an honorific its soldiers carry with quiet pride: Friends of the Hill People, the Sentinels of the North East.

Today the force guards the 1,643 kilometres of the Indo-Myanmar border and stands at the heart of internal security across the region, under a dual arrangement in which the Home Ministry holds administrative charge and the Army directs operations. It is a demanding brief. The same battalions that man remote border posts along trackless ranges also anchor counter-insurgency grids, disaster relief and the delicate task of keeping peace among communities. Few forces in the world are asked to be warrior, policeman, diplomat and social worker all at once.

It is the last of these roles that has won the Assam Rifles its name. Generations of its soldiers have built roads and schools in villages the state could barely reach, run medical camps in the monsoon, coached young athletes, and stood between feuding communities as honest brokers. In a region where trust in distant authority has often been thin, the sight of the Assam Rifles jawan — frequently a son of the North East himself — has meant security with a human face.

That legacy now faces its hardest test in a generation. Myanmar's collapse has reopened insurgent sanctuaries across the Sagaing hills, sent refugees and narcotics flooding toward the border, and turned the once-soft frontier into a live security challenge. The ending of the Free Movement Regime and the rise of the fence have placed the Assam Rifles at the centre of a historic transition — from an open border managed by trust to a regulated one managed by pass and patrol. The proposed expansion of the force and the shaping of a dedicated border-guarding construct for the Myanmar frontier will fall, in large part, on its shoulders.

The conclave at Guwahati was, in one sense, both a tribute to this force and a reckoning with the burden it carries. For the Assam Rifles cannot hold 1,643 kilometres of jungle border alone; no force could. Its strength has always been the partnership it built with the people of the hills, and its future depends on deepening that partnership — on the border villager, the student, the civil-society worker who make the soldier's watch possible.

As the nation hardens its eastern frontier, it would do well to remember what the Assam Rifles has always known: that the surest border is not the one with the most wire, but the one whose people stand with the soldier who guards it. For nearly two hundred years, the Sentinels of the North East have kept that faith through monsoon and campaign, in places the mainland cannot find on a map. The nation owes them not only its gratitude, but its partnership — and the steady means to carry a watch that only grows heavier.



A FRONTIER OF KIN, A LINE TO HOLD

The old Free Movement is gone; a regulated pass has taken its place. Can a nation secure a boundary that runs straight through a single people?

By Editorial Team

For as long as anyone in the border hills can remember, the line with Myanmar was a line in name only. Under the Free Movement Regime, members of the frontier tribes could cross up to sixteen kilometres into the other country without papers — an honest acknowledgement that the colonial boundary had cut a single people, Naga and Mizo, Kuki and Chin, into two. Kinsmen married across it, traded across it, buried their dead across it, as though it were not there.

That era formally ended in February 2024, when the Centre scrapped the FMR and committed to fencing the border, citing the security and demographic pressures that Myanmar's war and Manipur's turmoil had sharpened. But recognising that a people cannot simply be walled off from its own kin, the government put in place, from December 2024, a regulated alternative: residents living within ten kilometres of the border may still cross, but now through forty-three designated points, on a border pass issued by the Assam Rifles, for a limited stay.



More than a year on, the border pass is the frontier's uneasy compromise between two truths that will not be easily reconciled. The first is that a sensitive international boundary, in a time of war and trafficking next door, cannot be left open. The second is that the communities along it are one people, for whom the border has never been a wall but a seam. The pass tries to honour both — to keep the kinship while restoring the control.

It has not satisfied everyone, and a frontier journal must say so plainly. The Nagaland Assembly and the Mizoram government have opposed the ending of free movement; bodies such as the United Naga Council argue that fencing and passes tear apart shared ancestry and livelihood. Their sentiment is not disloyalty; it is the cry of families who fear a queue and a document where once there was only a footpath. It deserves to be heard with respect, not dismissed.

Yet the case for the regulated regime is sound. Movement that is documented is not movement denied; it is movement made safe — for the honest villager as much as for the nation. The open border served the smuggler, the trafficker and the insurgent at least as much as it served the kinsman, and it was the frontier's own people who paid most for that openness, in narcotics and guns. A regulated crossing, properly run, protects both the kinship and the community.

The task now is to make the system work as it was meant to. That means technology — biometric passes that speed the honest and stop the false; it means infrastructure at the forty-three crossing points, so that a grandmother visiting kin does not face a day's ordeal; and it means sensitivity from those who administer it, so that the pass is felt as a courtesy of the state rather than a humiliation. Get this right, and the border pass can become what it was always meant to be: a line that is secure without being cruel, and a frontier that is guarded without being severed.

SHELTER AND THE WEIGHT OF COMPASSION

By Editorial Team

When a state collapses, its people flee — and geography decides where they land. For the tens of thousands driven from Myanmar's Chin State and Sagaing by airstrikes, village burnings and forced conscription, the nearest refuge has been the hills of the Indian North East. By the reckoning of the UN refugee agency, hundreds of thousands have fled Myanmar to its neighbours since the coup; a large share of those who crossed westward now shelter in Mizoram, with others in Manipur and a scattering in Assam.

Mizoram's response has been, in the main, a story of quiet grace. Bound by deep kinship to the Chin — the two peoples share ancestry, language and faith — the state's government and churches, its villages and student bodies, have taken in the displaced with a generosity that shames richer places. Manipur's Kuki-Zo communities have done likewise for their kin. This is the North East at its most humane, honouring a civilisational instinct older than any border: that the stranger at the door, the atithi, is not turned away.

But compassion and security must walk together, and the frontier knows it. India is not a signatory to the international refugee conventions, and treats such arrivals under its own laws. A large, unregistered, cross-border population — however sympathetic its plight — carries real risks in a sensitive border region: the mingling of genuine refugees with armed cadres,

Myanmar's war has driven its people onto our soil. The North East answers with a hand of welcome and an eye of caution — and both are right.

the strain on thin local resources, the demographic anxieties that have long troubled these states, and the danger that a temporary shelter hardens into permanent settlement. The biometric registration exercises undertaken in the border states are therefore not cruelty but prudence — the necessary knowledge of who has come, and where.

The frontier's position, then, is neither the cold one that would turn the desperate away, nor the naive one that would fling open the door and ask no questions. It is the balanced one worthy of a civilisation that has always given refuge and a nation that must guard its frontier: shelter the genuine, register all, vet for security, and hold firmly to the principle that refuge is temporary — a shelter from the storm, not a grant of settlement.

Above all, the burden cannot fall on the frontier states alone. It is the whole nation's border, and the whole nation's humanitarian duty. New Delhi must back the sheltering states with resources, coordinate a clear and consistent policy across them, and prepare — through its engagement with whoever governs Myanmar — for the day the displaced can return home in safety and dignity. For that, in the end, is the truest kindness: not an endless exile on our soil, but a Myanmar stable enough to take its people back.

Until that day, the North East will keep doing what it has done — sheltering its neighbours' children with one hand while guarding the nation's gate with the other. It is a hard balance to hold, and an easy one to get wrong in either direction. That the frontier holds it at all, amid its own trials, is a quiet testament to the character of its people.





LIGHTING THE LAST VILLAGE

By Editorial Team

When a state collapses, its people flee — and geography decides where they land. China's strategy on the Himalayan frontier is written not only in airstrips and missiles but in something quieter and, over time, more dangerous: villages. Along the disputed boundary Beijing has raised hundreds of well-appointed border defence villages, planting settled populations — and with them, a claim — on the ground it seeks to hold. India's answer to a settled frontier must be a settled frontier of its own, and that is the wager of the Vibrant Villages Programme.

The logic is as old as the frontier and as sound as any in statecraft: a populated border is a defended border. For decades, the villages of the eastern and northern frontier have emptied, as the young walked away toward the cities in search of the work, schools and connection their home hamlets lacked. Each abandoned village is a gap in the nation's living wall — a space that depopulation opens and that a rival's settlements are only too ready to fill. To reverse that drift is to close the gap. Under the programme, hundreds of border villages across Arunachal and the wider frontier are being given the very things whose absence kept their people leaving: all-weather roads, electricity and mobile signal, schools and clinics, tourism and livelihood support. The border village, long treated as the last and least of the nation's concerns, is being recast as its first line — and its residents, rightly, as sentinels in their own homes.

China settles its side of the frontier. India's surest reply is a border that thrives — for a lit village is a claim no map can erase.

This is development in the service of security, and security in the service of development — the two revealed, as this magazine has long argued, to be a single task. The farmer who can sell his oranges on a good road, the child who need not leave for a distant school, the family that finds a reason to stay — each is worth more to the frontier's defence than a length of wire. A thriving village cannot be intimidated into silence or bought into betrayal; a lit window on a dark ridge is a claim staked more firmly than any protest note.

The challenge, as ever, lies in the execution. A programme announced is not a programme delivered; roads must actually reach, jobs must actually appear, and the promise must outlast the ribbon-cutting, or the young will leave again. The frontier has heard grand announcements before and watched them fade. What the Vibrant Villages effort must prove is that this time the nation means to stay the course — that it will light the last village not for a season but for good.

Get it right, and the reward is immense: a frontier held not by garrisons alone but by generations of rooted, confident citizens who choose to remain because home is worth remaining in. That is the deepest border security a nation can buy, and among the cheapest. The village that thrives is the village that guards itself — and in guarding itself, guards the nation. To settle and strengthen the last mile of Bharat is not welfare. It is defence, in its most enduring form.



TAWANG AND THE QUESTION OF SUCCESSION

The Dalai Lama's succession is no distant theological dispute. It runs straight through Arunachal's holiest town — and India must stand firm.

By Editorial Team

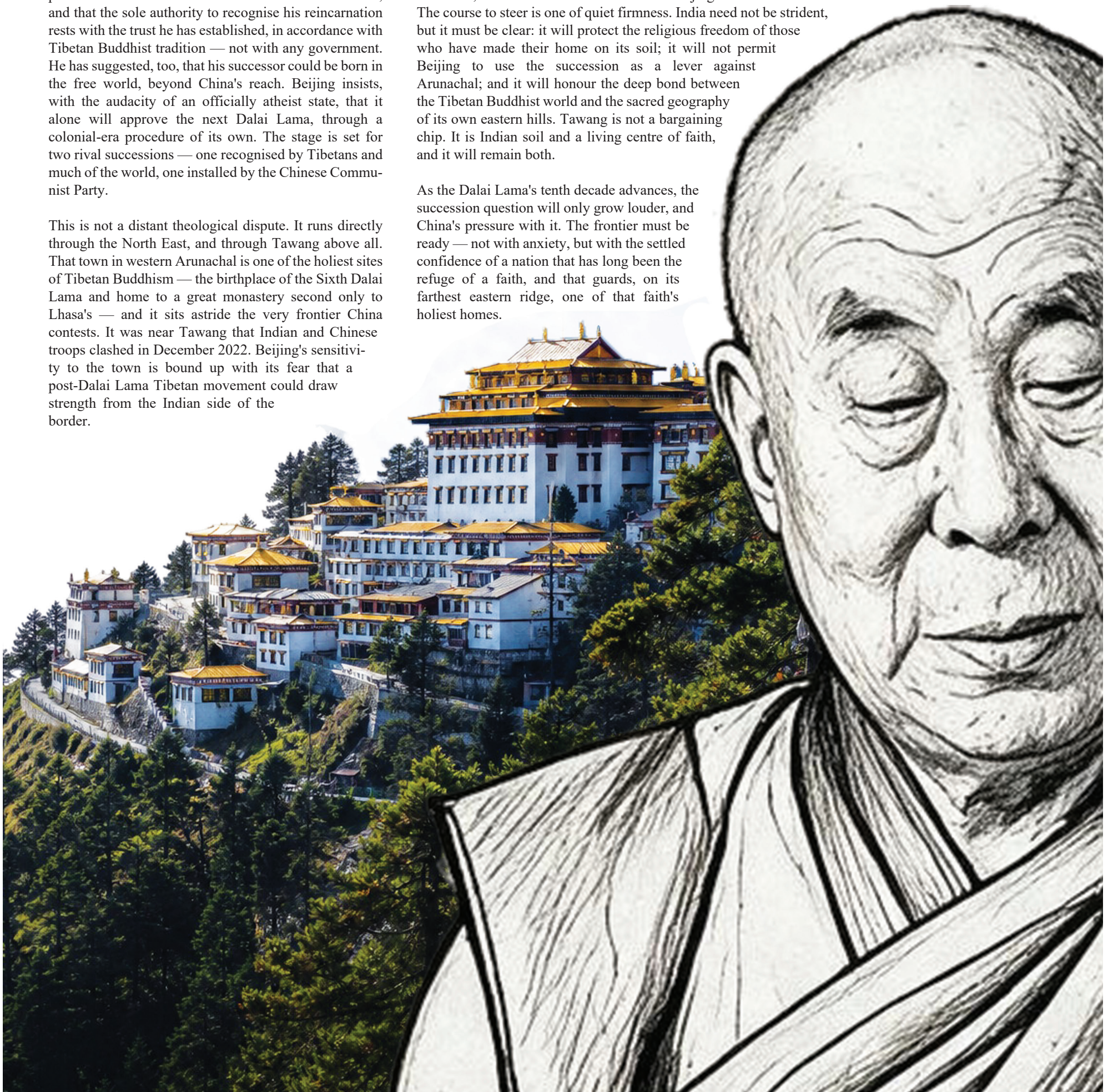
On the sixth of July each year, Tibetans across the world mark the birthday of the Dalai Lama, and each passing year sharpens a question with profound implications for India's eastern frontier: what happens when the institution passes to a successor — and who decides?

The spiritual leader, now past ninety, has made his own position clear: that the ancient institution will continue, and that the sole authority to recognise his reincarnation rests with the trust he has established, in accordance with Tibetan Buddhist tradition — not with any government. He has suggested, too, that his successor could be born in the free world, beyond China's reach. Beijing insists, with the audacity of an officially atheist state, that it alone will approve the next Dalai Lama, through a colonial-era procedure of its own. The stage is set for two rival successions — one recognised by Tibetans and much of the world, one installed by the Chinese Communist Party.

This is not a distant theological dispute. It runs directly through the North East, and through Tawang above all. That town in western Arunachal is one of the holiest sites of Tibetan Buddhism — the birthplace of the Sixth Dalai Lama and home to a great monastery second only to Lhasa's — and it sits astride the very frontier China contests. It was near Tawang that Indian and Chinese troops clashed in December 2022. Beijing's sensitivity to the town is bound up with its fear that a post-Dalai Lama Tibetan movement could draw strength from the Indian side of the border.

For India, the matter touches both principle and strategy. The principle is religious freedom: India has sheltered the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people since 1959, an act of civilisational generosity that stands to its lasting credit, and it must uphold the right of Tibetan Buddhists to determine their own spiritual succession free of coercion. The strategy is the frontier: Tawang and the Monpa communities of Arunachal are Indian, their faith is their own, and no reincarnation decreed in Beijing can alter that. The course to steer is one of quiet firmness. India need not be strident, but it must be clear: it will protect the religious freedom of those who have made their home on its soil; it will not permit Beijing to use the succession as a lever against Arunachal; and it will honour the deep bond between the Tibetan Buddhist world and the sacred geography of its own eastern hills. Tawang is not a bargaining chip. It is Indian soil and a living centre of faith, and it will remain both.

As the Dalai Lama's tenth decade advances, the succession question will only grow louder, and China's pressure with it. The frontier must be ready — not with anxiety, but with the settled confidence of a nation that has long been the refuge of a faith, and that guards, on its farthest eastern ridge, one of that faith's holiest homes.



THE LONG ROAD HOME

By Editorial Team

Sixty thousand of Manipur's own still live in camps in their own land. No citizen of Bharat should be a refugee within Bharat.



~image source: National Herald

Behind the headlines of ambush and blockade lies a quieter, longer tragedy in Manipur: some sixty thousand of its own people, uprooted from their homes, still living in relief camps in their own land nearly three years after the violence began. Meitei families who fled the hills, Kuki-Zo families who fled the valley, Naga and others caught between — a whole population of the internally displaced, waiting for a return that mistrust and buffer lines keep deferring.

The camps tell their own story. Children who should be in school lose year upon year of learning. Farmers who should be in their fields depend on relief. Skilled families are reduced to idleness and dependence. Every month in a camp is a month in which lives are hollowed out and grievances hardened — and in which the armed groups that feed on despair find their recruits. Displacement is not only a humanitarian wound; it is a security one, for a people without homes or hope is a people among whom the gun finds ready ground.

The return home is snarled in the same knot that caused the flight: a state divided into ethnic enclaves, its communities separated by buffer zones, its trust shattered. A Kuki-Zo family cannot safely return to the valley, nor a Meitei family to the hills, so long as the fear that drove them out remains. Return, in Manipur, cannot be ordered; it must be built, brick by brick, on a foundation of restored security and rebuilt trust.

That is the task now before the state and the nation, and it admits no shortcuts. It requires, first, security that is real and even-handed — the disarming of the militias of every community, so that no family fears the return of the mob. It requires justice, visible and impartial, so that the crimes of these years are answered whoever committed them. It requires the patient reconstruction of homes, schools and livelihoods. And it requires, underlying all, the sealing of the border against the arms and fighters that keep the fire fed.

The frontier's conviction here is simple and humane: no citizen of Bharat should be a refugee within Bharat. The displaced of Manipur are not statistics; they are Indians owed the first duty a state owes anyone — the safety to sleep in their own homes. To leave them in camps indefinitely is to accept a permanent partition of the state by fear, and that no nation should accept.

The road home in Manipur will be long, and it cannot be walked by one community alone. But it must be walked. For the truest measure of the Republic's writ in that suffering state will not be the reopening of a highway or the swearing-in of a government. It will be the day the last relief camp empties, and the last displaced family — Meitei, Kuki-Zo, Naga alike — sleeps once more beneath its own roof, unafraid. Toward that day the whole nation must bend its will.

BRINGING THEM HOME

By Editorial Team

*Across the North East, the gun is going silent.
Firmness and generosity together are emptying
the jungle camps — and that is how a frontier is won.*

Amid the frontier's litany of hard news, it is easy to miss the quiet good news of the age: across much of the North East, the gun is going silent. The long era of insurgency that scarred the region for decades is, in most of its theatres, drawing toward a close — not through force alone, but through the patient combination of firmness and generosity that is the nation's surest weapon against rebellion.

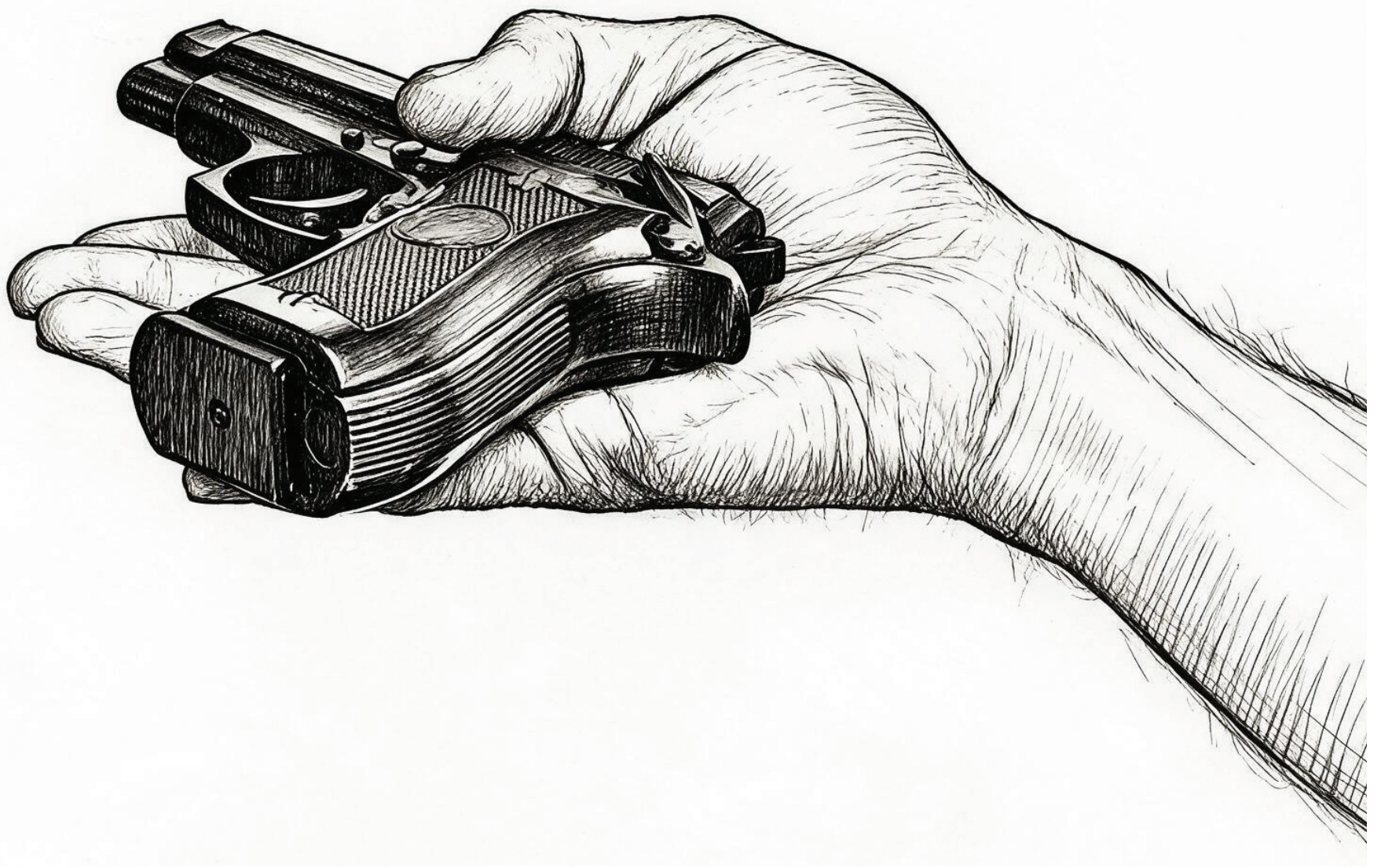
The record of recent years is remarkable, and deserves to be told. A string of accords has folded former insurgents back into the constitutional fold: the Bodo peace agreement of 2020, the settlements in Karbi Anglong and with Dimas and Adivasi groups, the accord that returned the Bru-Reang to homes and citizenship, and, in December 2023, the agreement with the pro-talks faction of the ULFA that closed one of Assam's longest chapters of violence. Thousands of cadres have laid down their arms, accepted rehabilitation, and rejoined the society they once fought. Whole districts that lived under the shadow of the gun now know a peace their children will grow up taking for granted.

The model behind this progress is one the frontier should be proud of. It offers the man with the gun a choice: continue, and face the full resolve of the state; or lay down the weapon, and find the nation's hand extended — a rehabilitation package, a path to livelihood, a place in the mainstream, and dignity restored. It is firmness that makes the offer credible and generosity that makes it attractive. Neither alone would suffice; together they have emptied the jungle camps.

Work remains, and the frontier does not pretend otherwise. The intransigent faction of the ULFA still holds out from across the Myanmar border. The Naga political settlement, the oldest and most consequential of all, remains unfinished, snagged on the questions of flag, constitution and homeland. And Myanmar's collapse threatens, as this magazine has warned, to offer old militancies new sanctuary. The task of peace is not complete.

But the direction is unmistakable, and it vindicates a conviction this issue has returned to again and again: that the frontier is won not by the gun alone but by the trust the nation builds — the accord signed, the cadre rehabilitated, the school opened, the road built, the village lit. Every former fighter brought home is a victory worth more than a battle, for it converts an enemy into a citizen and closes a wound rather than opening another.

The nation's course from here is clear: complete the settlements that remain, on the firm ground of one Constitution and one flag; deny the holdouts their foreign sanctuary; and keep the hand extended to all who will take it. The twilight of insurgency in the North East is one of independent India's quiet triumphs. To carry it through to a full dawn — to a frontier where the gun is not merely silenced but forgotten — is a task worthy of the nation, and within its reach. Bring them home: that is how a frontier is finally won.



FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK

There are moments when the idea behind a magazine takes on flesh. For The Frontier Insights — and for the Seemanta Chetna Manch Purvottar that publishes it — one such moment came on the fifteenth and sixteenth of June, when this platform joined hands with the Assam Rifles, the sentinel force of the North East, to convene a two-day conclave at Guwahati on the security of our Myanmar frontier. Our cover story this month carries that gathering to those who could not attend, for its deliberations belong not to a hall but to the whole region.

What made the conclave significant was not merely its subject but its symbolism. Here was the force that walks the Indo-Myanmar border sitting down with scholars, veterans, students and ordinary citizens — the uniform and the civilian, the watchtower and the classroom, in common cause. That is the very meaning of seemanta chetna, frontier awareness: the conviction that a border is held not by soldiers alone but by a society that understands, values and guards it. A vigilant citizenry is the deepest fortification a nation can build, and for two days at Guwahati that citizenry took shape. The July issue follows the thread the conclave drew out — that the Myanmar frontier is not one problem but many, braided together. We profile the Assam Rifles, whose long watch few in the mainland fully know. We examine the border-pass regime that has replaced the old Free Movement, and ask how a nation secures a boundary that runs through a single people. We turn, with compassion and caution both, to the refugees the Myanmar war has driven onto our soil, and to the villages we must light so that our own frontier does not empty. We look at trade and rivers, at Tawang and the question of succession, at Manipur's long road home, and at the quiet, hopeful work of bringing former fighters back into the national fold.

Readers will find, as ever, our settled convictions running through these pages: that sovereignty is not negotiable; that national integration is the patient work of a generation; that security and humanity are not opposites but partners; and that the border-dweller — soldier, student, farmer, or the child at a frontier desk — is the first citizen of the nation's defence. The conclave at Guwahati affirmed something this magazine has long believed: that the state and its people are strongest when they guard the frontier together. To the Assam Rifles, our partners in that endeavour, we offer a soldier's salute and a citizen's gratitude. To our readers along the border and beyond, our thanks for keeping this watch with us. The monsoon is upon the hills now, and the rivers are rising; the frontier's season of testing has come again. Turn the page — and let us keep the watch together.



SANJAY ADITYA SINGH
Chairman - Editorial Board

