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VOICES FROM THE BORDERS, VIGILANCE FOR THE NATION

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FREE MOVEMENT REGIME SCRAPPED

What It Means for Bharat–Myanmar Border Communities

By Frontier Insights Editorial Desk

For more than half a century, the Bharat–Myanmar border has existed not as a rigid geopolitical divide but as a living cultural corridor. Across the hills of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, communities have long navigated this frontier through shared ancestry, customary laws, and deeply embedded socio-economic ties. The Government of Bharat's decision in February 2024 to scrap the Free Movement Regime (FMR) therefore represents far more than an administrative adjustment—it signals a historic transformation in how Bharat governs its eastern frontier and how border communities will experience their everyday lives.

For scholars of borderlands, the Bharat–Myanmar frontier has always been a unique case. Stretching across 1,643 kilometres of mountainous terrain, dense forests, and remote habitations, the boundary cuts across communities whose identities predate modern nation-states. The scrapping of FMR marks a shift from a culturally sensitive border management framework to a security-centric approach—one that may redefine not only mobility but also trust, livelihoods, and regional stability.

CONTENTS

The Bharat–Myanmar border is a legacy of colonial cartography. When the British delineated the frontier in the 19th century, they divided ethnic communities such as the Nagas, Kukis, Mizos, Chins, and Zomis between two administrative territories. After Bharat's independence and Myanmar's political transitions, these divisions hardened into international borders, yet social and cultural continuity persisted.

The Free Movement Regime, introduced in 1968, was Bharat's recognition of this reality. It allowed residents living along the border to travel up to 40 kilometres into the other country without visas, later reduced to 16 kilometres in 2004. Border residents could cross for trade, family visits, religious ceremonies, and agricultural activities. In many ways, the FMR institutionalized what had always existed—fluid mobility based on kinship and shared heritage.

Over time, the regime evolved. In 2018, Bharat introduced border passes and identity requirements to regulate movement more effectively. Despite these restrictions, the FMR remained a lifeline for thousands of families who depended on cross-border interactions for their economic and social survival.

The scrapping of FMR must be understood within a broader security and geopolitical context. The Bharat–Myanmar border has historically been porous, and Bharat's security agencies have long raised concerns about insurgent groups using the terrain for shelter and movement. Several insurgent outfits operating in Northeast Bharat have reportedly maintained camps across the border, exploiting limited enforcement capacity in remote regions.

Drug trafficking has also emerged as a major concern. The proximity to the Golden Triangle—one of the world's most significant narcotics-producing regions—has made the Bharat–Myanmar borders vulnerable to illicit The scrapping of FMR must be understood within a broader security and geopolitical context. The Bharat–Myanmar border has historically been porous, and Bharat's security agencies have long raised concerns about insurgent groups using the terrain for shelter and movement. Several insurgent outfits operating in Northeast Bharat have reportedly maintained camps across the border, exploiting limited enforcement capacity in remote regions.

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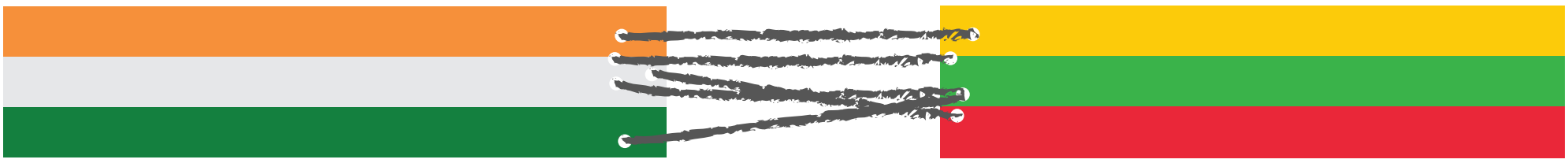

The ethnic violence that erupted in Manipur in May 2023 further accelerated policy reconsideration. The clashes, which displaced tens of thousands, exposed vulnerabilities in law enforcement and border monitoring. Government officials argued that unrestricted movement complicated efforts to track armed groups and control the inflow of illegal weapons.

Additionally, Myanmar's political instability following the 2021 military coup has transformed the border's strategic significance. With armed conflict spreading across Myanmar's Chin and Sagaing regions, Bharat's northeastern frontier has become both a humanitarian gateway and a security challenge. The decision to scrap FMR, accompanied by plans to fence parts of the border, reflects Bharat's attempt to recalibrate its frontier policy in an increasingly volatile regional environment.

While security considerations dominate policy discussions, the human consequences of scrapping the FMR are profound. For border communities, the frontier is not a line on a map but an extension of daily life.

Kinship networks also face disruption. Families divided by the border regularly crossed for weddings, funerals, festivals, and community gatherings. These interactions reinforced shared identities and maintained social cohesion. With stricter border controls, these connections risk weakening over time, potentially eroding cultural continuity.

Myanmar's ongoing conflict has led to waves of refugees entering Bharat, particularly into Mizoram and Manipur. Communities in Mizoram, sharing ethnic ties with Chin refugees, have historically welcomed displaced persons despite limited resources. The scrapping of FMR complicates this humanitarian dynamic.

Borderlands across the world demonstrate that security measures alone rarely ensure stability. Sustainable frontier governance requires balancing national security with local participation, cultural sensitivity, and economic inclusion. The Bharat–Myanmar border is no exception.

Informal trade has historically sustained border economies. Villages along the frontier engage in exchange of agricultural produce, betel nut, textiles, livestock, and household goods. These small-scale interactions often occur outside formal trade channels but play a crucial role in supporting livelihoods in remote areas with limited economic opportunities. The end of FMR disrupts these informal economic systems. Traders now face visa requirements, travel documentation, and restricted crossing points—barriers that are often difficult for rural communities to navigate. For many households, the immediate impact is reduced income and increased uncertainty.

Local administrations now face the difficult task of balancing compassion with legal enforcement. While humanitarian considerations remain strong, stricter border policies may limit spontaneous community-based responses to refugee flows. This shift risks placing additional strain on already resource-constrained border districts. Perhaps the most significant impact of scrapping FMR lies in the psychological transformation of the border. For decades, residents viewed the frontier as permeable and culturally shared. The introduction of fences, checkpoints, and stricter controls signals a shift toward securitization. This transformation may alter how border communities perceive the state. When traditional mobility becomes restricted, residents may feel marginalized or treated with suspicion. Such perceptions, if not addressed, can weaken trust between communities and authorities.

The scrapping of the Free Movement Regime marks a decisive turning point in Bharat's northeastern frontier policy. It reflects a broader shift from cultural accommodation to strategic management. While security concerns are legitimate, the success of this policy will depend on how effectively authorities address the socio-economic and humanitarian consequences.

Alternative mechanisms—such as regulated border haats, special permits for cultural exchanges, and targeted livelihood programs—may help mitigate the impact. Strengthening infrastructure, healthcare, and education in border regions could also reduce dependence on cross-border mobility.

The Bharat–Myanmar border has long been more than a geopolitical boundary; it has been a shared cultural landscape shaped by history, kinship, and resilience. The scrapping of the Free Movement Regime transforms this landscape, introducing new uncertainties alongside potential security benefits. As Bharat redefines its frontier policy, the voices of border communities must remain central. Their lived experiences offer insights that no strategic document can fully capture.

SMART BORDERS

India's Shift to AI-Driven Surveillance and Smart Security Systems

Ankur Hatibaruah

The nature of border security is changing, though not always in ways that are immediately visible. What was once defined by physical control is now increasingly shaped by technology and algorithms.
India today manages over 15,000 kilometres of land borders and more than 11,000 kilometres of coastline, a scale that makes traditional surveillance both expensive and uneven. (VISION IAS)
What is emerging in its place is a layered, technology-driven architecture where machines watch, detect, and increasingly decide.
At the centre of this shift is the Comprehensive Integrated Border Management System (CIBMS). It is not a single technology, but a network that integrates thermal imagers, motion sensors, high-resolution cameras, radar systems, and command centres into one continuous surveillance grid. (Ministry of Home Affairs)

The aim in short, is to eliminate blind spots. This matters because India's borders are not uniform lines. In riverine stretches along Bangladesh, fences are often impossible. In deserts, they are buried. In high-altitude areas, they are cut off for months. Technology is being used to fill precisely these gaps.

Under CIBMS, systems like BOLD-QIT (Border Electronically Dominated QRT Interception Technique) have already been deployed along vulnerable stretches of the India–Bangladesh border, using laser barriers and intrusion detection systems instead of physical fencing. (VISION IAS)
Alongside this, AI is beginning to take over the most demanding part of border management: constant monitoring.
India has already deployed around 140 AI-based smart surveillance systems along its borders. These systems use video analytics to detect human movement, track patterns, and trigger alerts without human intervention. (KPMG)
The shift is subtle but significant. Instead of a soldier watching a screen for hours, the system flags anomalies automatically, reducing fatigue and response time.
Drones are now another critical layer. As of February 2026, India has over 38,500 registered drones and nearly 40,000 certified remote pilots, forming a rapidly expanding ecosystem. (Press Information Bureau)
While many are used for civilian purposes, their role in border security is growing, particularly for real-time surveillance, reconnaissance, and tracking movement in inaccessible terrain.

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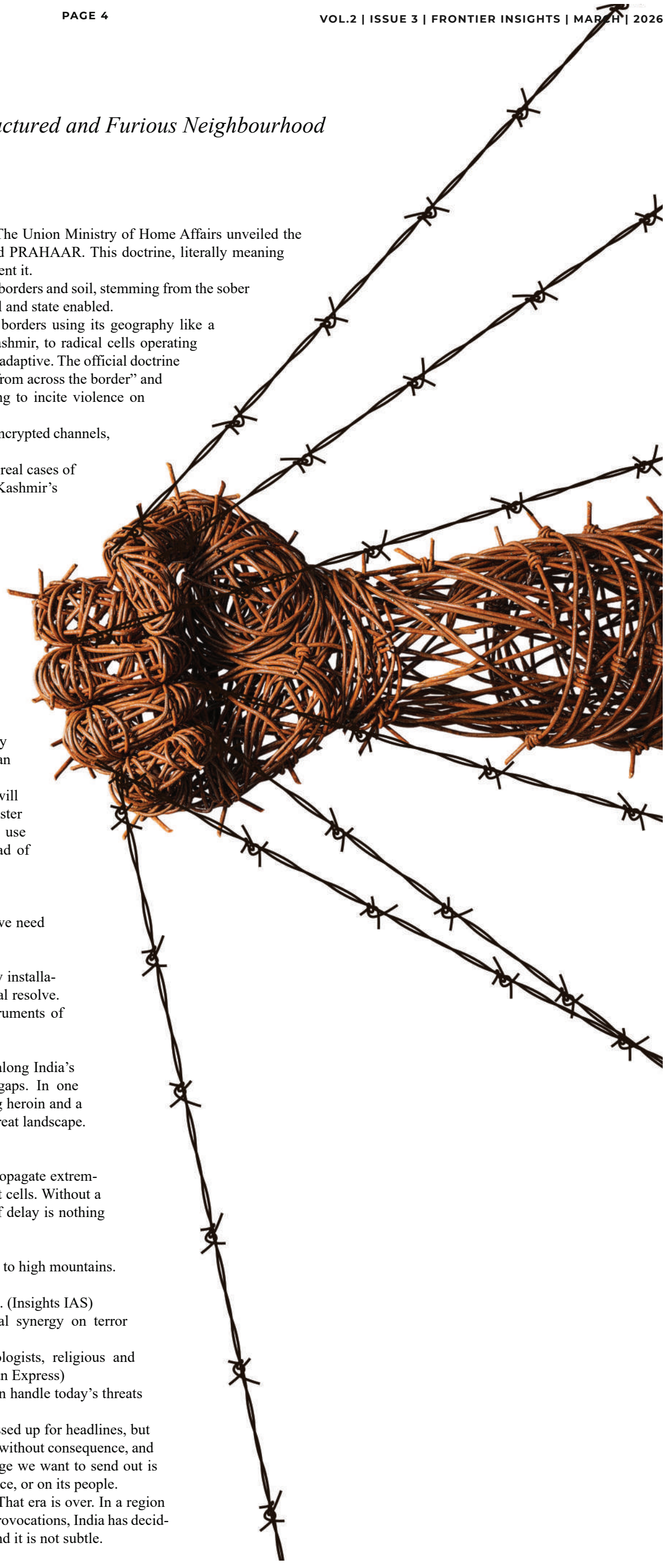
Over the past few years, cross-border drone incursions, especially along the western border, have been used to drop narcotics, weapons, and ammunition. (VISION IAS)
In response, India is investing in anti-drone systems, jammers, and detection grids. In early 2026, state-level security budgets, such as in Gujarat, have already allocated funds specifically for anti-drone defence systems and AI-enabled monitoring centres. (The Times of India)
This reflects a broader reality. Border security is no longer just about land. It is aerial, digital, and increasingly predictive.

In fact, the next phase is not just detection, but anticipation.
New AI systems being developed for the Border Security Force aim to analyse patterns of past infiltration and smuggling to predict future hotspots in real time. (Telegraph India)
This marks a shift from reactive to proactive security, where resources can be deployed before an incident occurs.
Policy is moving in the same direction. In 2025, the government announced plans to bring the entire India–Pakistan border under comprehensive electronic surveillance within four years, integrating drones, tunnel detection systems, and smart monitoring infrastructure. (Drishti IAS)
At the institutional level, this transformation is being supported by broader initiatives. The IndiaAI Mission, with an outlay of over ₹10,000 crore, aims to build national AI capacity across sectors, including defence. (PMF IAS)
The Defence AI Council and related programmes have already identified over 70 AI projects, many of them focused on surveillance, logistics, and battlefield awareness. (KPMG)
At the same time, the private sector and startups are being drawn into the ecosystem. Over 600 startups and MSMEs are now engaged in defence innovation, working on drones, sensors, and AI-based systems. (KPMG)
What is emerging is not just a security upgrade, but an entire border-tech ecosystem.
And yet, this transformation remains largely invisible. There are no dramatic visuals to accompany a sensor grid going live. No headline moment when an algorithm quietly flags an intrusion before it happens. The shift is gradual, technical, and often buried in policy documents or budget announcements.

But it is already changing how borders function.
Patrols are becoming more targeted. Surveillance is becoming continuous. Decision-making is becoming data-driven.
At the same time, this transition raises its own set of questions.
Technology can reduce human error, but it also introduces new vulnerabilities, including cyberattacks on surveillance systems, dependence on imported hardware, and the challenge of maintaining complex systems in extreme environments. (PMF IAS)
There is also the question of balance. A heavily technologised border can strengthen security, but it must still work alongside human intelligence, local knowledge, and community cooperation, especially in regions where borders cut through lived spaces.
For now, India's approach is not to replace the human element, but to augment it.
The soldier is still there. The patrol still happens.
But above and around that presence, a second layer is taking shape, one that watches continuously, learns over time, and responds faster than before.
The frontier is no longer just guarded.
It is being monitored, mapped, and increasingly, predicted.

PRAHAAR *India's Answer to a Fractured and Furious Neighbourhood*

Bhabna Kashyap



In February 2026, India took a decisive leap in securing its future. The Union Ministry of Home Affairs unveiled the country's first comprehensive national anti terror doctrine, christened PRAHAAR. This doctrine, literally meaning "strike," signals strategic resolve not just to react to terror, but to prevent it.

This doctrine is a visceral response to decades of bloodshed on India's borders and soil, stemming from the sober recognition that threats today are absolutely hybrid, networked, digital and state enabled.

For decades, India has faced organised terror groups based beyond borders using its geography like a battlefield. Be it the jihadi syndicates that have long destabilised Kashmir, to radical cells operating through sleeper networks, the threat matrix has always been lethal and adaptive. The official doctrine document notes that India has been "affected by sponsored terrorism from across the border" and names global terror groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS as forces seeking to incite violence on Indian soil.

Yet it isn't only bullets and bombs anymore. Terrorists utilise drones, encrypted channels, crypto wallets, and the dark web. The policy specifically flags:

• Drone misuse for infiltration and contraband delivery, with real cases of small aerial vehicles carrying weapons or explosives near Jammu & Kashmir's Line of Control. (Reddit)

• Cyber incursions and online radicalisation, where extremist ideologies are spread seamlessly across borders. (Business Standard)

Seven Pillars to Serve One Purpose

PRAHAAR unfolds across a seven pillar strategy:

1. Prevention and deterrence
2. Swift, proportionate response
3. Internal capacity aggregation
4. Rule of law guardrails
5. Countering radicalisation
6. Global cooperation
7. Resilience and recovery

It reinforces a "zero tolerance" stance: terrorism, in any form, from any ideology or geography, will not be justified or tolerated. (The Indian Express)

Geopolitically, it matters in a way that it embeds the idea that India will not be passive while threats metastasise. The doctrine makes India faster and sharper against threats. Agencies share intelligence instantly, use modern technology to track enemies, and act together as one instead of stumbling over old, slow ways. (The Economic Times)

Why PRAHAAR is Necessary

To appreciate the emotional and strategic necessity of this doctrine, we need to look back at the following:

1. Lengthy Legacy of Sponsored Terror

Years of terror attacks, from parliament assaults to attacks on security installations, have cost thousands of lives, scarred families and tested national resolve. These have not been isolated acts of violence, but geopolitical instruments of coercion.

2. The Drone Era

Recent years have seen drones used to smuggle drugs and weapons along India's borders, a stark example of how terrorists exploit technological gaps. In one incident, the Border Security Force (BSF) intercepted drones carrying heroin and a firearm near the India-Pakistan border, demonstrating the evolving threat landscape. (Reddit)

3. Radicalisation Without Borders

Radical ideologies now travel faster than people. Online platforms propagate extremism long before traditional security apparatuses can detect and disrupt cells. Without a doctrine like PRAHAAR, responses remain reactive, and the price of delay is nothing else but human lives.

PRAHAAR does more than tighten borders. It:

• Standardises counter terror responses nationwide, from coastal areas to high mountains. (Business Standard)

• Strengthens prosecution chains, from FIR registration to convictions. (Insights IAS)

• Promotes international cooperation, intelligence sharing and legal synergy on terror suspects and financing. (The Economic Times)

• Harnesses whole of society resilience, involving NGOs, psychologists, religious and community leaders to counter root causes of radicalisation. (The Indian Express)

This approach brings together security and resilience in a way that can handle today's threats and whatever comes next.

India's unveiling of PRAHAAR is more than a polite policy note dressed up for headlines, but a warning to those across the border who believe India can be needled without consequence, and to those who think chaos can be engineered from within. The message we want to send out is direct. This country will not give way, either on land, water, on its peace, or on its people.

For years, India has been told to absorb, to restrain, to respond later. That era is over. In a region where tension is the default setting and calm is only a pause between provocations, India has decided it will not be caught on the back foot again. There is a shift here, and it is not subtle.

VIBRANT VILLAGES PROGRAMME 2.0

Reversing Outmigration Along India's Northern Borders Neighbourhood

Frontier Insights Editorial Desk

What makes people stay in a village that sits at the very edge of the country?

If this question was asked 8 years ago, the answer would have been: not much. Border villages across India's northern frontiers have long seen steady outmigration, with younger generations leaving in search of better opportunities, leaving behind ageing populations and quiet, shrinking communities. That is what makes the renewed push under the Vibrant Villages Programme feel like a meaningful change.

Launched to develop villages along India's northern borders, the programme focuses on areas that have traditionally been viewed only through a security lens. The approach now is different. Instead of treating these regions as remote outposts, the idea is to make them places people actively choose to stay in, and even return to.

The scale is ambitious. In its current phase, the programme covers over 2,900 villages across 19 districts in states and Union Territories such as Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Ladakh. The focus goes beyond basic infrastructure, extending to connectivity, tourism, and livelihood generation.

Some of these changes are already visible on the ground. In Arunachal Pradesh, villages in districts like Tawang and Anjaw have seen significant improvements in road connectivity under parallel infrastructure pushes, reducing travel time to district centres that once took an entire day. In places like Kibithu, one of India's easternmost villages, better roads and telecom access are slowly changing both mobility and economic activity.

In Uttarakhand, villages such as Mana, often referred to as the "last village" near the Indo-Tibetan border, are being repositioned as tourism hubs. Homestay initiatives and improved road access have increased footfall, especially during the Char Dham season. Local residents are now able to generate income directly from tourism, something that was far more limited earlier.

Similarly, in Himachal Pradesh's border districts like Kinnaur and Lahaul-Spiti, improved connectivity and digital access are enabling small businesses, particularly in eco-tourism and local produce, to expand beyond traditional markets.

Connectivity has been a major focus across regions. Under the programme and associated infrastructure efforts, hundreds of kilometres of roads are being upgraded or constructed, and telecom expansion has brought 4G connectivity to several previously unconnected villages. For younger residents, this has opened up access to online education, digital services, and even remote work opportunities.

Tourism is emerging as a key pillar. The government has identified border villages with cultural and natural potential and is promoting village tourism circuits, trekking routes, and homestay networks. In Ladakh, for instance, villages near the Line of Actual Control are being included in tourism circuits that were earlier limited to a few well-known destinations.

At the same time, the programme is addressing everyday needs that directly impact quality of life. Electricity, drinking water supply, primary healthcare centres, and schools are being strengthened across these regions. These are not dramatic interventions, but they are often the deciding factor for families choosing whether to stay or migrate.

A notable shift is also visible in how these regions are being perceived. Border villages are increasingly being referred to as the "first villages" of the country, rather than the last. It is a small but meaningful change, reflecting a broader attempt to bring these areas into the centre of national attention.

There are early signs of impact. In some villages in Arunachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, local administrations have reported a slowdown in seasonal migration, with improved connectivity and income opportunities encouraging people to remain. In others, better road access has led to increased movement of goods and services, supporting small-scale local economies.

Of course, challenges remain. Terrain continues to be difficult, weather unpredictable, and implementation uneven across regions. Ensuring that development reaches the most remote habitations will take sustained effort.

At the same time, the programme carries a larger strategic value. A populated and economically active border is inherently more secure. Development, in this context, becomes an extension of national security, strengthening stability through people as much as through infrastructure.

What sets the Vibrant Villages Programme apart is its intent to address long-standing gaps while creating new opportunities. It recognises that border regions are not just lines on a map, but communities with potential.

For a long time, the story of these villages was about people leaving. If current efforts continue, that story may gradually begin to change, towards one where staying, and even returning, becomes a viable choice.

BAMBOO ECONOMY OF MIZORAM

Crafting Livelihoods Near the Border

Dr. Mampi Bora Das

Situated along the international borders with Myanmar and Bangla desh, Mizoram presents a unique case where natural resources, culture, and geography intersect to shape sustainable livelihoods. Among these resources, bamboo—often referred to as "green gold"—plays a vital role in the socio-economic fabric of the state, particularly in its frontier regions.

Bamboo is deeply embedded in the daily life of the Mizo people. It is used for constructing houses, making handicrafts, tools, and even as a food source in the form of bamboo shoots. In border districts such as Champhai and Zokhawthar, bamboo-based livelihoods are especially significant due to limited industrialization and geographical remoteness. Local artisans transform bamboo into baskets, mats, furniture, and decorative items, which are sold in local markets and increasingly across borders, fostering self-reliance (Swavalamban).

Recent studies highlight the economic importance of bamboo in Mizoram. Sati (2025) notes that bamboo-based industries significantly contribute to rural income, with many households depending on bamboo craftsmanship and trade as a primary or supplementary livelihood[1]. Similarly, ethnobotanical research emphasizes that bamboo is "an integral part of the culture, tradition, and daily life" of the Mizo people[2]. This integration ensures that bamboo utilization remains sustainable and culturally rooted.

An important dimension of Mizoram's bamboo economy is its link to international border connectivity. Towns like Zokhawthar serve as informal and formal trade points with Myanmar, facilitating the exchange of bamboo products and other goods. Additionally, infrastructure initiatives such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, connecting India's northeast to Myanmar's Sittwe port, are expected to enhance trade routes and market access for local bamboo industries. These developments not only boost income opportunities but also strengthen regional cooperation and economic integration—contributing to both Suraksha (security) and Ekata (unity).

Environmentally, bamboo is a highly sustainable resource. It grows rapidly, regenerates naturally, and has excellent carbon absorption capacity. Its eco-friendly nature makes it a viable alternative to timber and plastic, aligning with global sustainability goals.

Bamboo also carries symbolic meaning in mythology and philosophy.

In many Eastern traditions, bamboo represents resilience and adaptability. A popular saying describes it as "the tree that bends but does not break," symbolizing strength through flexibility. This metaphor aptly reflects the lives of border communities in Mizoram, who navigate economic and geographical challenges with resilience and innovation.

Government initiatives, including bamboo mission programs and skill development schemes, are further strengthening this sector by promoting value addition, entrepreneurship, and market linkage. These efforts ensure that bamboo continues to serve as a pillar of livelihood and sustainability.

In conclusion, the bamboo economy of Mizoram exemplifies how traditional knowledge, natural resources, and strategic border connectivity can work together to create sustainable development. It not only empowers local communities economically but also fosters ecological balance and cultural unity—perfectly reflecting the ideals of Suraksha, Swavalamban, and Ekata.

SEEN ONLY IN CRISIS

The Media Life of India's Borders

Frontier Insights Editorial Desk

In some parts of the country, the day begins with a patrol. Not a commute, not a meeting, but a patrol. This is a life those of us in the mainland, wrapped up in our offices, worries, cafés, trips and small accomplishments, can hardly fathom.
A clash.
An infiltration.
A standoff.
Then the cameras arrive.

When tensions rise along the Line of Control or the Line of Actual Control, television studios light up. A ceasefire violation in Rajouri, a face-off in eastern Ladakh, or a drone sighting along the Punjab border is enough to become headline news. Similarly, reports of infiltration attempts in Kupwara or a seizure along the Gujarat coast briefly push border issues into the spotlight. But once the situation stabilises, that attention fades just as quickly.

In 2025 alone, the India-Bangladesh border recorded over 1,100 infiltration attempts and more than 2,500 arrests. But numbers don't really show what that looks like on the ground. Much of this happens along riverbanks and shifting chars, where the border isn't a fixed line, but something that moves, breaks, and sometimes disappears altogether.

That makes enforcement uneven. There are fenced stretches, and then there are gaps created by terrain, weather, or simply the way people have lived here for years. Smuggling routes and informal crossings are not new. For some, crossing over is less about crime and more about survival, which blurs the line in ways that aren't easy to judge from afar.

India has fenced most of its borders with Pakistan and large parts with Bangladesh, but even that is ongoing work. In places like Assam, floods regularly damage fencing, forcing it to be rebuilt again and again.

You don't hear much about this.

You also don't hear much about new all-weather roads quietly opening up in Arunachal Pradesh, or upgraded border outposts along the Bangladesh frontier improving response times, or pilot deployments of smart fencing and surveillance systems being tested in difficult terrain. These are developments that change conditions on the ground, but they rarely make it beyond brief mentions.

Part of the problem lies in how the Indian media ecosystem functions today. The country has hundreds of news channels and thousands of publications, yet coverage is often driven by immediacy, competition, and visibility.

Slow, complex stories like border development, troop deployment patterns, or the lives of border communities struggle to compete with breaking news.

And so, what gets left out?

The soldier posted at a remote outpost who hasn't gone home in months.

The villager living along a porous stretch where smuggling and fear are routine.

The quiet expansion of surveillance systems, roads, and fencing.

Even when development happens, it rarely becomes a story unless it can be framed as a political success or failure. Roads, tunnels, and surveillance networks are expanding steadily, not just for defence but also to support local economies and access to healthcare and education.

Yet these efforts remain invisible compared to a single dramatic incident.

There is also a deeper concern of optics. Border regions enter public attention almost exclusively through disruption – violence, tension, or breach. In doing so, they get reduced to sites of conflict, while the reality of everyday life is pushed out of view. The farmer, the shopkeeper, the soldier on a routine patrol: none of them fit the urgency of breaking news, even though they make up most of the story. The truth is that border management is a never ceasing event, but media coverage treats it like a spectacle.

This shapes public perception in a narrow way. Borders become places of danger, not places where people live, work, and adapt every day.

It also affects policy conversations. A crisis-driven narrative pushes reactive thinking – more troops, more fencing, more retaliation, while long-term issues like migration, local livelihoods, and cross-border relationships receive less attention.

So what can change?

First, there is a need for continuity in coverage. Border reporting should not begin and end with conflict. Regular, ground-level reporting can build a more accurate picture of what is actually happening.

Second, more regional voices need to be included. Journalists from border states often understand the realities better than studio panels in metros. Their perspectives can shift the narrative from dramatic to grounded.

Third, media organisations need to invest in beat specialisation. Border reporting is not just defence reporting. It sits at the intersection of geopolitics, development, culture, and human stories. Treating it as a specialised beat can improve both depth and accuracy.

Finally, there is a role for the audience. As long as viewers respond only to high-pitched crisis coverage, that is what media will continue to supply. An intentional, sustained demand for more nuanced reporting can slowly reshape priorities.

India's borders are constantly in motion.

The problem is not that nothing happens there, but that we only pay attention when something goes wrong.

INDIA – BANGLADESH: TIME TO START FRESH

Biswarup Nath

South Asia is shifting again, and this time it's Bangladesh that has thrown the first signal. With the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) back in power, the old comfort zone between India and Dhaka is gone. For years, New Delhi leaned heavily on Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League government. That worked for security, especially in the Northeast, where insurgency dropped sharply after 2009, but it also created a problem. India started to look like it was backing one side, not the country as a whole. Now that Hasina is out and has reportedly taken refuge in India, that perception has only hardened.

On the ground in Bangladesh, anti-India sentiment is no longer fringe, but entering mainstream political talk. The BNP, founded by Ziaur Rahman, runs on a different idea: "Bangladeshi nationalism." That means less emotional connect with India, more focus on sovereignty, religion, and identity. So expect a tougher Dhaka. This government cannot afford to look soft on India, not when public mood demands the opposite. But here's the reality check: geography doesn't care about politics. India and Bangladesh are tied together whether they like it or not. Bilateral trade crossed $15 billion in recent years, with India exporting nearly $13 billion worth of goods. Bangladesh relies heavily on Indian essentials like cotton, fuel, and food items. At the same time, India depends on transit routes through Bangladesh to connect its Northeast by cutting travel distance by almost 60% in some corridors. Border haats, those small cross-border markets, directly support thousands of families on both sides. Rivers are shared, borders are long (over 4,000 km), and economies are intertwined. Yet, there is a constant complaint in Bangladesh: India benefits more. This "big brother" image is the real problem.

Fixing that is now India's job and to be fair, India has already started adjusting. New Delhi is moving away from a one-party approach and keeping channels open across the political spectrum in Bangladesh. The focus is shifting to practical, people-level engagement. Medical visas for Bangladeshis remain strong, connectivity through rail and waterways is improving, and border haats continue to support local trade. These are quiet steps, but they build real goodwill.

At the same time, India is more careful about perception. The earlier "big brother" image caused friction, and there is now a visible effort to present deals as balanced partnerships. This is important with a nationalist government in Dhaka that cannot be seen as conceding ground.

There are still sensitive issues. Concerns over attacks on Hindu minorities are real, but India has largely handled them through measured diplomacy instead of public escalation. The same restraint is visible on illegal migration. Despite strong domestic politics, New Delhi has avoided letting rhetoric damage ties.

China has invested billions in Bangladesh's infrastructure, and Pakistan continues to look for openings. India is aware of the stakes and is responding with steady engagement.

The bottom line is simple. India is no longer treating Bangladesh policy as a one-leader equation. The shift toward broader outreach and consistent diplomacy is already visible. Influence will come from public trust, and India appears to be moving in that direction.

ASSAM RIFLES

Sentinels of India's Northeast Frontier

Jyotirmoy Kalita

Long before it became one of India's most respected paramilitary forces, the Assam Rifles began as something much smaller and far less formal, a local militia raised in 1835 by the British, called the Cachar Levy. Its job was simple: protect tea estates and nearby settlements in Assam from raids and unrest. It was less a grand military unit and more a practical response to a difficult landscape and uncertain times.

But the Northeast has a way of reshaping anything that tries to hold ground there. Dense forests, shifting borders, and complex communities meant the force had to evolve quickly. Over the decades, it was renamed and reorganised several times, Frontier Police, Assam Military Police, East Bengal and Assam Military Police, each name reflecting a slightly expanded role. By 1917, it had grown into something more permanent and purposeful, finally taking on the name Assam Rifles.

That name stuck, but its responsibilities didn't. They kept growing.

Today, the Assam Rifles stands as India's oldest paramilitary force, operating along the 1,643-kilometre Indo–Myanmar border, one of the most sensitive and challenging frontiers in the country. It functions under the Ministry of Home Affairs, but works closely with the Indian Army, which handles its operational control. That dual structure reflects its dual role: guarding borders while also managing internal security in a region that has seen decades of insurgency, negotiation, and uneasy peace.

Its presence is spread across the Northeast, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, and Assam. Structurally, it is not a small force either, a Director General headquarters in Shillong, multiple inspectorate and sector headquarters, and 46 battalions, adding up to over 65,000 personnel. On paper, it looks like a conventional force. On the ground, it is anything but.

Because the Assam Rifles does not just patrol borders, it lives among the people.

In many remote areas, especially near the Indo–Myanmar border, state presence is minimal. Roads are poor, healthcare is scarce, and government services often do not reach. In those places, the Assam Rifles becomes something more than a security force. Through its Civic Action Programmes, it runs medical camps where villagers receive basic treatment and medicines, sometimes the only healthcare they will see all year. It distributes school supplies, helps repair infrastructure, and runs small training programmes in things like bamboo crafts, tailoring, or carpentry.

Some of these efforts are modest, almost routine. Others stand out. In 2025, a sports programme in Manipur's Tengnoupal district brought together over 2,000 people from 13 villages, less about competition, more about giving young people something to gather around. In 2026, solar-powered street lights were installed in a remote village in Chandel district, quietly changing what evenings looked like there, safer, longer, more active.

And then there are moments when the role shifts suddenly. Landslides, floods, or blockades can cut off entire villages. In 2025, Assam Rifles personnel delivered over six tonnes of supplies to 18 such cut-off villages in Manipur. No ceremony, no headlines, just logistics, effort, and the understanding that if they did not do it, no one else would get there in time.

This mix of soldier and support system is part of what defines the force. It also explains why it carries the nickname "Friends of the Hill People." Not as a slogan, but as something that has had to be earned, repeatedly, in places where trust is slow and memory is long.

At the same time, the Assam Rifles has never been far from conflict. Its personnel have served in both World Wars, first in Europe and the Middle East, later in Burma during World War II. After India's independence, the
force briefly came under the Ministry of External Affairs, before shifting to its current structure. The 1962 war with China marked another turning point, placing it firmly under the operational control of the Indian Army.

Over the years, its personnel have earned some of the country's highest gallantry and service honours. These include Ashoka Chakras, Kirti Chakras, Shaurya Chakras, and President's Police Medals for Gallantry, along with numerous distinguished service awards. These are not abstract recognitions, they come from real encounters in difficult terrain, often far from public view.

And that is the thing about the Assam Rifles, it operates mostly out of sight. There are no dramatic visuals most of the time, no constant national attention. Just long patrols, quiet engagements, and a steady presence in a region that demands both caution and patience.

From a small colonial militia to a force that now anchors security and stability in the Northeast, its journey has not been dramatic in a cinematic way. It has been gradual, layered, and shaped by the terrain and people it works among.

Even today, its role remains complicated, part soldier, part administrator, part emergency responder. But in a frontier where lines are not always clear, that flexibility is exactly what keeps it relevant.

And that is why, even after nearly two centuries, the Assam Rifles is not just still around, it is still needed.

KALADAN TO CONNECTIVITY

Bridging Mizoram to the Bay of Bengal

Frontier Insights Editorial Desk

India's North-East has long been seen as a remote and landlocked region. But today, that perception is slowly changing. Through new connectivity projects—especially the Kaladan initiative—states like Mizoram are being linked not just to the rest of India, but also to international trade routes through the Bay of Bengal. This transformation is opening new doors for development, trade, and self-reliance.

The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project is a major step in this direction. It connects India's eastern coast to Myanmar's Sittwe Port on the Bay of Bengal, and from there, links inland waterways and roads to Mizoram. In simple terms, goods can now travel by sea to Myanmar, move through rivers, and finally reach Mizoram by road. This combination of sea, river, and land transport makes the project unique and highly efficient.

For a border state like Mizoram, this connectivity is a game changer. Earlier, most goods had to travel through the narrow Siliguri Corridor, often called the "Chicken's Neck," which made transportation costly and time-consuming. Now, with the Kaladan route, Mizoram gets a shorter and more direct path to the sea. This not only reduces transport costs but also improves access to international markets.

Border towns such as Zokhawthar are expected to benefit greatly. These areas can develop into active trade hubs where local products—like bamboo crafts, agricultural goods, and handloom items—can be exported. This creates new income opportunities for local people and promotes self-reliance (Swavalamban).

At the same time, better connectivity also strengthens security (Suraksha). Well-developed roads and transport systems help in better movement of goods and people, while also enabling quicker response by security forces in border areas. Development and security often go hand in hand, and Kaladan is a clear example of this balance.

Another important aspect is unity (Ekata). By connecting Mizoram more closely with mainland India and neighboring countries, the project helps reduce the feeling of isolation. It brings people closer, encourages cultural exchange, and builds stronger relationships across borders.

In recent times, global trade has faced uncertainty due to ongoing conflicts in regions like the Middle East, including tensions linked to the Gulf War and similar geopolitical disruptions. Such conflicts often affect major shipping routes, increase transportation costs, and create delays in international trade. For a country like India, which depends
heavily on global trade networks, these challenges highlight the need for alternative and reliable connectivity options.

In this context, projects like the Kaladan corridor gain even greater importance. By providing access to the Bay of Bengal through a different route, it reduces overdependence on traditional and potentially vulnerable trade pathways. For border states like Mizoram, this means more stable economic opportunities even during global uncertainties. Thus, strengthening regional connectivity is not just about development—it is also about economic resilience in a rapidly changing world.

The impact of this connectivity is not just economic—it is social and cultural too. Young entrepreneurs in Mizoram can now think beyond local markets. Farmers can sell their produce at better prices. Artisans can reach new customers. Slowly, the region is transforming from being "landlocked" to becoming "land-linked."

In conclusion, the Kaladan project is more than just an infrastructure initiative. It is a bridge of opportunity—connecting the hills of Mizoram to the vast waters of the Bay of Bengal. By improving trade, boosting livelihoods, and strengthening national integration, it truly reflects the spirit of Suraksha, Swavalamban, and Ekata.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

As we present the fourth issue of Frontier Insights, India stands at a crucial moment—politically, strategically, and socially. From the upcoming Assam elections to continuing concerns in Manipur and Nagaland, and even the unfolding war in Iran, the world and our region are undergoing rapid change. Yet amid these uncertainties, one truth stands firm: India remains a stable, resilient, and strong nation — and safeguarding our borders is not only the responsibility of the armed forces but also of every citizen.

The 2026 Assam Assembly elections are being held under a dramatically changed political landscape. Following the delimitation exercise of 2023, constituency boundaries and voter demographics have shifted significantly, altering traditional political strongholds and compelling all political parties to rethink their strategies. This election is therefore not just about political power; it is about the future direction of Assam — development, identity, and security.

Assam today stands at a crossroads. The state has witnessed improved infrastructure, better connectivity, and greater integration with national development goals. At the same time, border management, illegal migration, demographic concerns, and regional aspirations continue to remain critical issues. Elections must therefore rise above political rhetoric and focus on long-term stability, inclusive growth, and protection of Assam's unique identity.

Meanwhile, concerns in Manipur continue to demand national attention. The ethnic tensions and prolonged instability have not only affected governance but also disrupted daily life, education, and economic activity. Manipur, a strategically vital state sharing an international border with Myanmar, cannot afford prolonged instability. Peace, dialogue, and inclusive governance must remain the priority.

Similarly, Nagaland continues to navigate its complex political and peace process challenges. While progress has been made over the years, unresolved issues related to political settlements, development disparities, and youth aspirations remain. The people of Nagaland deserve sustainable peace, economic opportunities, and stronger connectivity with the rest of India.

While Northeast India faces its own internal challenges, the global environment is also witnessing significant turbulence. The ongoing war involving Iran has triggered one of the most serious geopolitical crises in recent years. The conflict has disrupted global oil supplies, increased energy prices, and affected international trade routes. Analysts describe the situation as one of the biggest global energy security challenges in modern times.

India, however, has maintained a balanced and neutral position, calling for peace while protecting its national interests. Despite disruptions in oil supply and global markets, India has taken proactive measures to ensure stability and avoid major domestic impact.

This demonstrates the strength of India's strategic autonomy and diplomatic maturity. While wars rage in different parts of the world, India continues to maintain stability, growth, and democratic functioning — including holding elections, managing internal challenges, and maintaining border security.

This is something every Indian must reflect upon.

Border areas of Northeast India are not peripheral — they are the frontlines of We are living in a great nation — a nation that remains stable despite global conflicts, regional instability, and economic uncertainties. But this strength is not automatic; it is sustained by vigilance, unity, and national consciousness.

national security. The people living in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Meghalaya are the guardians of India's eastern frontier. Their awareness, participation, and commitment to national unity are essential.

Seemanta Chetna Mancha Purvottar was founded with this very vision — to strengthen national consciousness in border regions and to ensure that citizens become active participants in safeguarding India's sovereignty.
As we move forward, let us remember:
A secure border means a secure nation.
A united society means a strong India.
An aware citizen means a resilient democracy.

The responsibility of protecting our borders does not lie only with soldiers — it lies with every Indian.
And as we release this fourth issue of Frontier Insights, we reaffirm our commitment to awareness, national integration, and border development.

Because India's borders are not the end of the nation
— they are where the nation begins.

Sanjay Aditya

SANJAY ADITYA SINGH
Chairman - Editorial Board

FRONTIER INSIGHTS

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