

Dystopic Borderlands, Disgruntled Geographies and Ethnic Angst: Complicating the Development drives between/among Bangladesh, India and Myanmar

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I

Spillover of multiple Partitions and the Ethnic Angst

The experience of partition in India's North-eastern borderlands showcases two distinct phases, namely the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and the partition in 1947 and the spectre of preceding boundary demarcations as outlined by the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations of 1873 and the Chin Lushai Hills Regulations of 1896. Partition, then, was a very different phenomenon in North-eastern India. The partition of the subcontinent aggravated the geopolitical isolation of the North-East. It propelled the emergence of an ethno-cultural consciousness and the resurgence of divergent claims or ethnic angst over the land and its resources. These opened the floodgates of issues like "Who came first? Who is an immigrant? Who is a native? Who is an insider?" which reverberates at the macro and micro levels: the North-East versus India (mainland/heartland) level and the North-East versus the North-East itself. This is because the category 'North-East' is not a monolithic construct and consists of multiple contestations (Chakraborty 2021, 3-25), whereas, at large, Assam is passed off as representing the rest of 'little cultures'. The ethnographic mapping of these movements is of considerable interest, and their geopolitical fallout remains a fact of daily lives in the North-East (Chaube *et al.* 1975, 40-66). The primary anxiety of the tribal people of the North-East as elsewhere has been 'how to preserve their culture and racial identity? As I show later in the chapter, the North-East required political readjustments because of setting boundaries and creating states. Boundary lines by the British were drawn, keeping the British administrative conveniences in view. Herein lies the main problem of drawing boundaries on traditional game lands, which have always been the bone of contention among the different tribes and peoples of the region.

Again, internal demarcations revealing multifold layers within such constructs lie within Northern and Eastern Partition Refugees (Chakraborty 2004; Saha 2003). The category of North-Eastern Partition Refugees ranges from Bengali Hindu to Bengali Muslim or Sylheti to Chakma to Reang refugees, and many others conveniently clubbed under the category of trans-border tribes.

Following the series of partitions of the eastern borderlands, beginning with the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations (BEFR 1873), the Chin Lushai Hills Regulations (CLHR1896) and the partitions of 1905 and 1947, the gateway to the Lushai Districts via Chittagong was sealed off. Indigenous communities like the Zo/Mizo found themselves abruptly separated from their kinsmen in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT, Bangladesh) as well as in the Chin Hills of Burma (Myanmar) (Verghese and Thanzawna 1997).

The experiences of partition in contemporary South Asia reflect the inability to arrive at healing/reconciliation and closure. Also, the indelible intergenerational connections that partition weaves into the region's peoples strongly narrate the complexities in the highly gated nationalist envisions operative at two tiers: one, how do societies remember? Furthermore, the other, how do societies forget? (Connerton 1995). The politics of memory retaining, commemoration, and re-living events in historically contested narrations form an intrinsic part of inventing the vexed time, space, and history. The three are prefixed with the highly coveted, exclusivist word 'our'. This enterprise of rewriting, revisiting, reinventing, and re-narration is supposedly closer to the concerned community and presented as 'the authentic, the emic'. The following sub-sections would unfold this aphoristic enterprise of memory-making and retention and the Ethnic rumblings and cartographic discontent that mark the neighbourly relations between India, Myanmar and Bangladesh in the North-eastern borderlands of India.

Paradoxically, ethnic communities and religious groups celebrate 'Shared heritages' of interconnected historical, ethnic, cultural, and religious ties in these borderlands. However, it is beyond denial that these time-tested connections are compelled to undergo a trial by fire' in every day of the region in recent times. The post-partition (1947) politics, such as the formation of the Lushai Hills District, offered an opportunity for contact between the region's different sub-tribes, especially the Zo/Mizo and the Chakma. The hill districts developed a special kind of identity, which remained crucial for subsequent political developments in the region and the trauma of the village regrouping during the insurgency. Mizoram, for instance, witnessed a clash between ethnocentric affiliations strengthened by primordial attachments and the broader generalised commitment to the nation (India) with its plural characteristics. The northern tribes- the Lushais (later Mizo), began to assert their localness and, therefore, their "sons of the soil" status. Hence their claim to *indigeneity* as the rightful owners of the region's hills began to subdue and subsume the southern tribes who had also been provided with similar territorial institutional autonomies. Ethnic angst thus continued to flare up in these borderlands.

The chapter in the next section will evaluate the questions of connectivity propelled by the gaze of Act East Policy by construing the policy imaginations and juxtaposing them with rumblings from the fields of implementations, taking the case of the movement of commodities and materials 'to, through and from the region and elsewhere. The chapter would re-look into the questions of human security amidst the webbed trend of 'ethnic terrorism' and securitisation through the militarisation of these borderlands and creating what I call the 'disgruntled geographies' of South Asia. The discussions would chart these everyday challenges that the three nations (Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar) face in their vision to translate the aspirational issues of closer connectedness into actuality.

II

Dystopic Borderlands and Disgruntled Geographies

The borderlands of India in the North East are complicated by multiple imposed lines of cartographical exercises extending from the days of the 'Raj' (the British colonial government that

ruled India in various forms over two centuries) to that of post-independence state/nation making in South Asia. India and Myanmar share extensive territorial spaces and sites through four north-eastern states, namely, Arunachal (520 km), Nagaland (215 km), Manipur (398 km) and Mizoram (510 km). I describe the dystopic borderlands on both sides of North East India and Chin state and Sagaing region in Myanmar as ‘disgruntled geographies’ precisely because of the interweaving complexities of the geography (densely forested, mountainous, riverine, resource-rich) with that of the Anthropocene (ethno-linguistically heterogeneous, fragmented on religious/denominational lines, sparsely populated, resource contested). Also, the region as ‘disgruntled geographies’ has witnessed the mushrooming of armed insurgent groups exhibiting insatiable anger on the lack of connectivity, minuscule industrial growth and lack of employment opportunities. I incorporate *Wayfinding* as a traditional navigation method in the Indo-Pacific that encompasses the techniques of orientation to spaces, negotiations in terms of route decisions, route monitoring and arriving at destinations in familiar or unfamiliar, labelled or mislabelled geographies.

The ethno-religio-linguistic complexities of the borderlands can be gleaned through the following description of the parts of the region in observation. For instance, the Sagaing region bordering Nagaland and Manipur has Bamar, Chin, Shan and Naga populations practising Buddhism and Christianity. Chin State, located in Western Myanmar, which shares boundaries with Manipur in the north and Mizoram in the west, is predominantly Christian. The Chin region of Myanmar is relatively depopulated and remains one of the minor developed areas with a high unemployment rate and fisted ethnic rumblings. The predominantly Christian Chins have cross border ethnic linkages to the communities (Zo/Mizo/Kuki) in Manipur and Mizoram. Hence, people on both sides of the border have had ethnic, religious and cultural ties. These factors were exploited by some of the ethnic militant groups in North East India, such as the PREPAK and PLA in Manipur, and the China-backed Kachin Independent Army (KIA) in Myanmar, to name a few, to seek shelter in the Chin state, Sagaing region, Arakan and Rakhine region for their anti-India activities. Due to historic ethnic linkages, people in border villages own land/property and have socio-economic interests across the borders. The complicacies of the region and its lived space are further riddled when one focuses on citizenship issues and regulating citizenship. For instance, in Champhai’s Zokhawthar region (Mizoram), the Chin/Burmese populations engage in informal entrepreneurial activities and black-marketing/smuggling. They produce the *PemLekha* issued by vigilante groups or civil society groups such as the YMA (Young Mizo Association) or even by the Village Council in Mizoram (India) whenever their day to day activities are questioned. Such permits in *PemLekha* are effectively used to circumvent the official barriers of checking illegal immigrants and citizenship. These local practices are considered in sync with the spirit of the Indo-Burma treaty of 1952 on Border Affairs, allowing free movement of the local ethnic tribals on both sides to carry on local trade and social visits (Chakraborty, 2019). The border areas of southern Mizoram (India) and Arakan, Rakhine (Myanmar), have been serving as the traditional camp spaces for anti-India pieces of training since the days of the insurgent Mizo National Front (MNF). They have doubled as a haven for ‘anti-Barmar’ (dominant ethnic group) organisations in Myanmar (Zamawia, 2007). The north-eastern Indian state of Mizoram has sought land port trade with Bangladesh. Indo-Bangladesh connectivity has been central to Mizoram’s economic prospects. Recently in March 2021, the government of Mizoram sought to establish an integrated check post at Sajek in Bangladesh and establish formal trade relations through its borders with Bangladesh. Mizoram’s Commerce and Industries Minister R Lalthangliana proposed establishing four ports for border markets while using the Chottogram port (Bangladesh) to increase the business connectivity between Bangladesh and Mizoram. Plans were made for upgrading border roads synchronising

efforts from both sides. These included improvising the road connectivity to Thegamukh. The Government of Mizoram acquired land to set up check-posts at Kawrpuichhuah near India Bangladesh border.

Mizoram has a significant export market for Bangladesh products, including readymade garments for southeast Asia (Chakraborty, 2020). The state is eager to independently import garments, toiletries, sanitary ware, plastic and juice from Bangladesh (*The Business Standard Report 2021*). The Commerce and Industries Minister of Mizoram R. Lalthangliana mentioned, "Though Mizoram is a state, it has a separate constitution. According to central bank rules, it can decide independently on international trade. We are doing business with Myanmar without the approval of the central government. There is an opportunity to import and export in the same way as Bangladesh" (*The Business Standard Report 2021*)

Lalthangliana informed the Bangladesh minister that a trade centre at Kawrpuichhuah was already in existence and promoted by the government between 1998 to 2008. Mizoram's export items include bamboo, ginger, chilli spices, turmeric, Orange, and stone handicrafts. In March 2022, New Delhi made efforts to facilitate border trade between Myanmar, Bangladesh and Mizoram. Mizoram shares 510 km of International border with Myanmar and 318 km with Bangladesh. Mizoram government has taken proactive measures to strengthen the strength and Indo Myanmar border trade at Zokhawthar in the Champhai district. The Act East policy has gathered much attention in the borderlands and facilitated border trade and commerce. However, global attention on the Indo-Myanmar side has outshined the volume of trade and commerce on the Indo Bangladesh side. The Indo-Bangladesh border trade through/in Mizoram has not gathered much attention.

Recent government initiatives include the fencing of the integrated check post at Kawrpuichhuah in south Mizoram's Lunglei district on the Indo Bangladesh border. The setting up of border haats at strategic locations aims to smoothen the logistic grids. Four border haats would be set up along the Indo Bangladesh border, 3 in Mamit district and one in Lunglei district. Border Haat at Silsuri village in Mamit district has been taken up as a pilot project, and the centre is taken steps to obtain formal approval from the Bangladesh government. The Tlabung Kawrpuichhuah river connectivity is essential for completing an integrated check post. A survey report for Kawrpuichhuah ICP was done by MS rites Limited to the union home ministry in 2005, and 74.37 acres of land was acquired for the project. On 17 January 2022, the Mizoram state PWD submitted a detailed project report DPR amounting to 230 crores to the Union ministry of external affairs to construct a double Lane Bridge over Kawrpui river to link Kawrpuichhuah with Bangladesh.

Therefore, the three countries have to invest in the 'Development of Border Region' towards capacity building, development of infrastructure and securitisation/sanitisation in the region. India's contribution to building capacity and infrastructure in Myanmar includes its investment in border region projects such as the *Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP)*. The KMMTTP aims to connect the Bay of Bengal to Mizoram through Myanmar hinterland using sea, river and road transport modes and promote growth and development in Myanmar and its connected neighbourhood. This involves developing the port at Sittwee, dredging the waterway along the Kaladan river from Sittwee to Paletwa (158 km), developing IWT at Paletwa and developing a development road from Paletwa to the Mizoram border (129 km). The work on the project started in 2008, and deadlines have been deferred since then. The technical hurdles and glitches in the planning and oversights of geographic challenges and the armed insurgents and inter-ethnic animosities have delayed the project. The frequent surgical strikes carried out by the

Indian Army in collaboration with the Myanmar Army in the Arakan and Rakhine area of Myanmar (the most recent being 'Operation Sunrise' from mid-February to early March 2019) is a combing exercise toward securitisation and sanitisation of the project area and its fringe spaces.

Policy Suggestions to way find connectivity and direction for common grounds

1. The movement of goods to the North East through Myanmar from India or ASEAN and its extensions will likely bring down transportation costs. It will provide a much-awaited economic boost to the Indo-Pacific. The extension of the connectedness through the ports at either end of the Bay of Bengal (Kolkata/Haldia, Vishakapatnam, Dhamara to Sittwee) becomes urgent given that similar efforts by the Government of India for a transit facility for India's North East through Bangladesh had been stillborn. The project, once functional, is likely to reduce the distance between Kolkata and Sittwee by approximately 1300 km.
2. The next initiative to keep Myanmar and the trans-border ethnic sentiments favourably inclined toward India is the *Construction and Up-gradation of the Rhi-Tiddim Road*. The project involves the development of approx 80 km of road in Myanmar from the border town of Rhi up to Tiddim opposite Mizoram. The MoU for the same was signed in December 2012. The project is expected to boost the border trade in Mizoram (Zokhawthar- Rih gates), which has seen limited growth since 2004. Other projects include the *Trilateral Highway Project*. India has recently commenced work on the up-gradation of some segments of the project (about 1,360 km), connecting Moreh (Manipur) to Mae Sot (Thailand) through Myanmar. The project will be executed jointly by India, Myanmar and Thailand by 2016. However, political and financial will are vital to completing this project. The *Up-gradation of the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyoa Road* is another project in the direction of Indo-Myanmar collaborative engagement. After completing resurfacing and maintenance work, the approx 160 km stretch of road across Manipur has been handed over to the Myanmar authorities. However, in 2012, India undertook to build/upgrade the 71 old iron bridges on this road and extend the highway further to Monywa as it is a segment of the Trilateral Highway. Enhancing this road capacity can lead to a multifold increase in border trade, especially in Manipur (Moreh-Tamu points), provided both sides also address the other issues. The *Economic Aid to Chin State* that India has provided (US \$ 6 million for the development of Chin State) is the first of its kind from India. India's aid diplomacy should provide a more significant say in the region, especially with Myanmar, which is receptive to grants and loans.
3. India has also shelved past projects such as the *Border Fence 2003* due to the fisted resistance from trans-territorial ethnic communities such as Tangkhul, Kuki, and Naga in Manipur. According to them, a considerable stretch of land would become Burma's territory and foment unrest among people living on both sides of the border. The fence would divide many ethnic communities, including the Lushei, Nagas, Chins, and Kukis. Their lands straddle the regions of both the countries. It is thus a sensitive issue. Unlike other borders between countries, Indo –the Myanmar border is peaceful and devoid of hostilities due to ethnic linkages and historical factors.
4. Moreover, the 1952 Border Agreement provides free access to ethnic people to move within 16 km of the border without visa restrictions for socio-economic reasons. Hence, both countries may do away with border fencing and encourage peaceful coexistence. Erecting a border fence is a costly exercise logistically as well as environmentally. Logistically, it would entail earmarking troops for manning and surveillance, creating

infrastructure, including road networks, towers, etc. Environmentally it would be hazardous as it would check the natural paths of wildlife such as the Asian elephants, the one-horned rhinoceros and many more species classified as endangered or protected.

5. Good neighbourly relations with Myanmar and prosperity amongst people living in border areas on both sides augur well for the security of India and are in its national interests. Hence, if timely executed and made functional, various infrastructure development projects being undertaken in Myanmar will boost the initiative to tackle the immediate security and politico-bureaucratic concerns and check China's engagement in Myanmar. The Government of India should also provide economic aid for specific projects to the Myanmar governments of the bordering Sagaing region and Chin state to foster close links and cooperation on various border issues.
6. Simultaneously, within the North East region, the logistics and modalities of connectivity (road, rail, air, inland waterways) should be boosted, keeping in vision the environmental sustainability issues of the region and converting the 'disgruntled geographies' into a 'lived economic hub.'¹ Thereby, wayfinding connectivities to make India's Act East Policy objectives real and positively affect the neighbourhood and 'Neighbourhood first policy (NFP)' in South Asia. Wayfinding connectivities in the region would also engage and tilt the landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) of Nepal and Bhutan favourably towards India's Act East vision. It would steer the Himalayan neighbours to look and act through the multimodal connected oceanic 'duars' (gateways/doors/corridors) laid by India into the Indo-Pacific neighbourhood.

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¹ By 'Lived economic hub', I mean the space/site as a lived space/site, one booming with multiversal engagements and conversations like in a 'bazaar' and not a territorial space/site as an isolated periphery minus the presence of the Anthropocene (ASC).

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