

India-Myanmar Border Realities: Observations from the border village of Longwa on Security Issues

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Abstract:

The Indo-Myanmar border, an international border with rugged hills and valleys stretches over 1,643 kilometres, reflecting the rich diversity of India's Northeast and Myanmar. There are people who have spoken different languages and practiced distinct cultures and religions. Under the colonial administration this region was kept outside, but when the border was hastily demarcated in 1947, it divided traditional homelands of ethnic groups. However, both India and Myanmar agreed to uphold a 'free border regime' allowing the unhindered movement of people across the boundary. For decades, much of the border region remained inaccessible due to limited connectivity and persistent unrest, which also hindered research and detailed documentation. Nonetheless, significant changes are now evident across different spheres of life in the Longwa village due to its uniqueness. There has been improvement in communication infrastructure, however compared to many other villages in the rest of the country, this village needs particular attention, not only being a border village, but also how poverty, illiteracy and unemployment has encouraged the youth to join insurgent groups. This village also acts as a transit route for many insurgents hiding in Myanmar, often trafficking drugs and armaments. The security concerns in this village needs urgent attention from the central government. This paper aims to examine the border realities of this village Longwa situated in the Indo-Myanmar border.

Keywords: Indo-Myanmar border, Nagaland, Longwa, Security concerns

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a significant surge in violent activities by non-state actors. These groups are labelled by the governments as 'rebels', 'terrorist', or 'insurgents' and efforts are made to suppress them through various means. In the case of Nagaland, there has been a ceasefire agreement done with the NSCN-IM group in 2015. However, recently they threatened the government of India to resume armed resistance alleging violations of the agreement. There are more than 27 active insurgents currently active in Nagaland. Leveraging their geographical closeness, insurgent groups from India's Northeast often use Myanmar as a safe haven and a transit route to reach China. Longwa village in Nagaland's Mon District sits on an international border, which follows free border movement between the residents of India and Myanmar. The village of Longwa, is famous for the Head-Hunters of the Konyak Tribe, the largest tribe in Nagaland. The researcher has done frequent visits to Longwa, for her research work. The observations are made based on field survey in Longwa. Hence this paper gives a detailed analysis of the border ground

realities, security threats related to insurgency and drug trafficking in the Indo-Myanmar border using the theoretical framework of critical security studies.

Critical Security Studies: A Theoretical Framework

Critical Security Studies within the broader field of security studies challenges traditional state-centric approaches to security. Instead of focusing solely on military threats and state sovereignty, CSS emphasizes the importance of understanding security through a broader lens that includes societal, economic, and environmental dimensions. It critiques the exclusionary and hierarchical nature of traditional security paradigms, advocating for the inclusion of marginalized voices, particularly those of individuals and communities directly affected by security issues. CSS expands this view by considering how these threats affect local communities on both sides of the Indo-Myanmar border. For example, drug trafficking not only undermines state sovereignty but also devastates local populations through addiction, violence, and economic instability. In the case of Longwa village, it was observed that the proximity to the borders, free movement regime has led to accessibility to various kinds of drugs which found its way from the Sagaing region of Myanmar all the way to Longwa village and goes further to other parts of India. According to the Myanmar Opium Survey 2024, Myanmar is the highest producer of opium (UNODC,2024).

There has been a very serious impact of drugs on the tribal society especially the Konyak tribe. Once considered to be the bravest of all the tribes in Nagaland, now, the youth is addicted to drugs. The local leaders, mostly the student bodies, like Longwa Student Union, do not receive any monetary assistance from the government to organise large scale awareness programs. However since 2018, with the help of financial assistance from the Chief Angh(King), they organised a one month rehabilitation camp for the drug users in Longwa Village and awareness campaign(Interview with Chief Angh, 2024).

Security Concerns: India's Northeastern Insurgents using Indo-Myanmar Border

Despite being the world's largest democracy, India faces a troubling rise in insurgency. Many insurgent groups actively seek international support and refuge in neighbouring countries. Leveraging the long and porous Indo-Myanmar border, which spans 1,643 kilometres (1,018 miles) and includes a 200kilometre maritime boundary, insurgent groups from Northeast India have expanded their activities into Myanmar. Intelligence reports indicate that groups like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) have not only set up training camps along the Myanmar frontier but also source a significant portion of their weapons from contacts in Myanmar. In addition to illegal arms trafficking, the thriving narcotics trade originating from Myanmar serves as a critical funding source for these northeastern insurgent groups.

Northeast India, characterized by its diverse range of tribes and ethnic communities, each at varying levels of social development, is a region of great anthropological interest but poses complex challenges and security concerns for governance. During the British era, the "Policy of Exclusion" reinforced the distinct identities of these tribes. After independence, however, the Indian government did not implement administrative measures to safeguard their cultural uniqueness. Instead, efforts to assert Indian dominance in the region were marked by the gradual insurgencies in the area (Chenoy,2002). Northeast India's insurgencies are fuelled by decade long apathetic attitude of the central government since independence. Factors such as political corruption, dominance of black markets, uneven regional development, lack of basic infrastructure, rising unemployment among the educated youth, drug addiction have intensified

grievances of the local population. Insurgency often emerges as a chosen form of resistance by marginalized political groups, oppressed communities and those subjected to unjust governance. Consequently, insurgent activities are prevalent across nearly most of the “Seven Sisters” states in the region (Bhaumik, 1996:6).

The involvement of India’s northeastern rebels in Myanmar dates back to several decades ago when in 1951, Hijam Irabot, leader of the Communist party of Manipur and the Red Guards, sought assistance from Burmese Communists to establish an “Independent Socialist Republic” in Manipur (Nag,2002:201) He successfully facilitated a tripartite conference involving the Communist party of Burma, Burma Communist Party, and People’s Comrade Party, leading to the creation of a “United Front Liberation Government of Burma”. It was the first Naga rebel group in June 1966 who used Myanmar as a transit route to China. They travelled from Myanmar’s Sagaing Division and Kachin State to reach Yunnan, China, returning after six months.

Following the rejection of the Shillong Accord, Isak Chishi Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah, and Khaplang formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) with the support from Burmese Nagas. They established headquarters in Chalam, Myanmar. In 1986, the NSCN initiated contact with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in Myanmar for training and arms procurement, fuelling activities such as extortion, kidnappings, and ransom demands that disrupted local trade and industries, affecting Indian and foreign businesses alike (Verghese, 2004:57).

In May 1990, the UNLF, NSCN(K), ULFA, Kuki National Army (KNA) came together to form the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front (IBRF), aiming to unite their efforts against their political and ideological adversaries. The primary objective of the IBRF was to launch a “joint struggle for the independence of Indo-Myanmar.”(Verghese,2004: 120)

Simultaneously, the narcotics trade across the border remains a significant concern, with Indian insurgent groups heavily relying on it for financial support. Poppy cultivation on the Myanmar side of the border is further refined into heroin and transported to India via Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram. The refined heroin is either smuggled into Thailand or returned to other northeastern states. In Northeast India, the narcotics trade and insurgency are deeply intertwined, as insurgent groups use the profits from heroin sales to fund the acquisition of arms and ammunitions. This has posed a serious security threat for India.

Observations from Longwa Village: A Security Perspective

At the trijunction of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Myanmar lies the border village of Longwa, which straddles the international boundary. This village is home to the Konyak tribe, the largest among the Nagas, historically known for their headhunting practices—an activity that involved bringing back the severed heads of adversaries from nearby villages after a tribal warfare in ancient times. At present there are 12 head-hunters in the Longwa Village, who have accepted Christianity and left the practice. Oral traditions suggest that Longwa originated in the sixteenth century, founded by immigrants whose exact origins remain uncertain and debated (Hutton, 1921:6).

In the Longwa village, with a population of 7000 people, considered one of the bigger Konyak villages in the region (Census, 2011), has been facing issues of poverty, illiteracy, lack of proper infrastructure, which has severely impacted the lives of people.

Due to its remote location, social change, economic development in the area has been relatively slow, mirroring the conditions in some Naga-inhabited regions of Myanmar. As a result, significant disparities

persist in socio-economic indicators, creating a pronounced divide between the eastern districts and other parts of Nagaland (Nagaland Vision, 2030).

In addition to its isolation, insurgency has also played a significant role in the underdevelopment of Longwa. While the separatist movement in Nagaland began in the late 1940's, the Konyak region became more deeply involved after the formation of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980. This was the first time that NSCN brought together a larger group of Naga leaders from both sides of the border, including many Konyak leaders. Notably, Khole Konyak, who played a key role as the deputy chief of the army, helped secure the support of nearly all the villages within his community and the neighbouring regions in both India and Myanmar. However, in 1988, the NSCN split into two factions: and Isak-Muivah groups. This led to intense territorial battles between the two factions, with the Khaplang faction (NSCN-K) eventually gaining greater control over the Konyak region and Naga areas of eastern Nagaland and Myanmar.

Longwa Village spans a compact area of about one and a half kilometres, with the highway running in close proximity to the international border at various points. Under the 'free border regime', residents of one country can cross into the other and travel up to 40 kilometres although journeys often extend to distinct locations for various purposes, often narco-trafficking, poppy cultivation.

Opium has been a long-standing import from Myanmar, where it is cultivated extensively in the remote hills of the Konyak, Lainong, and Pangmi regions. While cultivation has also been reported in parts of Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur, Indian government agencies regularly destroy these fields, creating a stark contrast with the situation across the border. In Myanmar, the NSCN(K) imposes a tax on opium, which serves as a key incentive for its continued cultivation and ensures its prevalence for the foreseeable future.

Opium, an essential component in heroin production, is primarily consumed within Myanmar, with the surplus smuggled into villages in Nagaland and eastern Arunachal Pradesh. Addiction to opium remains a pervasive problem in the region, with its origins tracing back to colonial times. Evenings in these villages often reveal groups of individuals gathered around fires, taking long puffs of opium from bamboo pipes. While estimates regarding the number of addicts differ, it is generally believed that more than half of the households in these areas are affected (Bhattacharya, 2016)

Longwa has historically served as a vital link to key locations on both sides of the border. It was connected to Challam Basti in Myanmar, which served as an NSCN headquarters until the mid-1980s when it was raided by the army (Litner, 2011). This camp was one of the earliest NSCN bases, hosting rebel cadres from multiple northeastern Indian states and Myanmar—a model later replicated in other areas of the northern Sagaing Division (Bhattacharya, 2014).

Even in the later years, Longwa remained an essential link to places like Taga, home to central headquarters of the NSCN-K as well as Lahe and Hkamti, where Naypidaw has established a presence. Longwa serves as a gateway to Mon, the district headquarters and connects to other towns in Nagaland and Assam. It is noteworthy that most of the narco-trafficking has been done using Longwa as a transit, to export to other states in Nagaland like Dimapur and Kohima as well as Namtula in Assam border.

The border village offers a deserted view every Sunday where there are no presence of any security personnels. Locals daily travel to the Sagaing division, even admit their children in schools on the Myanmar side in the hope of possible employment opportunities. Most of the insurgents of the NSCN-K faction often receive every form of assistance from the local people who feel they are fighting for the people of Nagaland. (Interview with Locals, 2024).

In July 1948, the Government of India issued a notification allowing tribes on both sides of the Indo-Myanmar border to cross up to 40 kilometers into either country without requiring passports. However, this provision was soon exploited by both Indian and Myanmar's rebels, posing a significant security challenge to both governments.

Strategies for India's Security

Insurgency continues to claim a significant number of lives in both India and Myanmar. In the border regions, the worst sufferers in any cross-border violence or conflict between the state and non-state actors have been the innocent children, women and elderly. The growing influence and violence of insurgent groups demand that the issue be addressed at its roots.

1. Enlarging Security Force:

In peripheral areas such as India's Northeast particularly the border villages which have concerns over security, and experience ongoing militarization since the 1950's (Chenoy, 2002:130) demands the deployment of several specialised security forces. Like Nagaland was designated a 'Disturbed Area' in January 1955, which prompted the deployment of Border Security Force (BSF), the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and the Assam Rifles (AR). Unfortunately, the border villages do not have the presence of BSF and CRPF till date which is a major security lapse.

1. Peace talks and friendship agreement

Given the severity of insurgency issues and persistent underdevelopment affecting Nagaland, the government with the help of Naga Mother's Association (NMA) and the NSCN-IM reached a ceasefire agreement on July 25, 1997 and again with the BJP government, a Framework Agreement on 2015. As part of this agreement, both parties committed to halting all offensive activities including killings, kidnappings, arson, destruction of property, extortion, and acts of intimidation or threats. The (MHA) Union Ministry of Home affairs signed a ceasefire agreement with the Niki-Sumi of the NSCN-K faction on 6th September, 2021, and extended it to September 2025. However, according to the annual report released by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) was responsible for 44% insurgency-related incidents in Nagaland during 2020. According to the locals, the centre needs a more involved and integrated approach in this issue rather than only signing ceasefire agreements.

2. Involvement of Local Organisations in Decision Making

There needs a more decentralised approach in decision making when it comes to securitization of an insurgency affected region. The locals in the border village of Longwa feels alienated from the other parts of India due to its geographical and economic backwardness. New Delhi must make concentrated efforts on the redevelopment of these peripheral areas rather than only focussing on the core regions. The local NGO's like the Sansam Organisation, JACOAA, Longwa Students Union needs emancipation and integration in policy making. A policy of accommodation and inclusivity for the local community by giving them best infrastructure will help address this security concern to a great extent.

3. Naga Demands on Fencing the Indo-Myanmar Border Must be Heard

The Konyaks in the Longwa Village and on the side of the Myanmar does not support the idea for proposal to construct fencing along the Indo-Myanmar border which was intended to address cross-border insurgency activities carried out by insurgent groups. However, considering the local sentiments it will be great benefit for India to listen to the Naga voices this time. Fencing may further alienate the Nagas and create a sense of anti-India feeling. The Villagers in Longwa already started movements to stop the fencing

in the Nagaland side of the Indo-Myanmar border. The locals suggested CCTV must also be installed in every corner of the villages for proper surveillance of the movements of insurgents and track them easily. The villagers also suggested the presence of BSF in the areas which are high insurgency prone rather than creating a fence leading to unrest and chaos among the nagas against the Indian government.

Conclusion

India's Northeast region has long suffered from economic neglect by the policy makers in New Delhi, resulting in minimal participation in wealth accumulation over the past decades. Despite significant financial allocations from New Delhi, the budget for 2024-25 has allocated a total of 5,900 crore for various central sector schemes and projects in the NER. However nearly 85% of these funds have been misappropriated, which needs close monitoring by the bureaucracy to curb the evil menace of corruption by the state authorities. The central question here remains that how the states of Northeast particularly the Indo-Myanmar border village of Longwa in Nagaland which is a highly insurgency prone area, susceptible to narco-trafficking, is deprived of basic development due to corruption in the state levels. Northeast India needs more of an assimilative approach from the Central government. The persistent security lapse needs urgent attention by the MHA and deployment of security personnel in the Indo-Myanmar border area is integral. The border village of Longwa is integral strategically, which should not be neglected further by the security experts. Assimilation and integration of NE India into the mainstream is long overdue.

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