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Why India is Shying Away from Its Frontiers?

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Abstract

As the contemporary world is heading towards a global-village, free-market system and international cooperation, border regions are seen not as constraints but as new opportunities. However, as things stand today, it is difficult to foresee India's enhanced economic ties with eastern neighbor China. Consequently, border areas of Arunachal Pradesh have suffered considerably. There enveloped a thick cloud of poverty, illiteracy, lack of basic amenities of life in the border areas. This is further aggravated when by a simultaneous all-round development across the borders by the Chinese government. The paper provides valuable new insights into the present nature and extent of the problems of border areas in the Arunachal borderlands.

Keywords : India-China Borders, Borderlanders, Borderlands, Border Trades, Underdevelopment.

Introduction

As the contemporary world is heading towards a global-village, free-market system and international cooperation, border regions are seen not as constraints but as new opportunities. There is also a debate going on, on the idea of a borderless world and that of the border as a space of interaction, activity and opportunities. Unfortunately, in these whole debates, the viewpoints of the borderlanders are very often gets lost. It cannot, however, be denied that it is the borderlanders who possess a large body of knowledge through their first-hand experiences. Hence, little information is in circulation about the problems faced by the borderlanders divided by the borders. In reality, the borders

often shrunk the resource base used by borderlanders and jeopardized their livelihood practices.

Arunachal has the largest share in the international border in North East India; it has 1100 km border with China, 440 km border with Myanmar and 160 km long border with Bhutan. This is a huge geographical advantage of Arunachal Pradesh in becoming a gateway to South-East Asia. Though, the state government on a number of occasions pursued centre to open the state to other countries. Yet, no forward move has been undertaken in this direction by the central government. Sanjib Baruah (2004) has rightly noted: “we are the prisoner of geography” and what Jairam Ramesh once said, “Prisoners of an old mindset” (cited in Baruah, 2014). Ramesh (Ibid) even goes to argue that “the future of the Northeast lies in economic integration with Southeast Asia...it is a gateway to South East Asia...it is a geography of opportunities”. Contextualize in Arunachal, Narendra Modi’s new Act East Policy has generated a lot of hope among the borderlanders for a relook at the policy with a cross-border dialogue.

Arunachal as a Gateway to South East Asia

History speaks a volume that almost all the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh had trade and cultural relation with people of neighbouring areas within and across the border. Jabin (2010, p. 126) noted that “this region was once a bridge connecting people, cultures and civilizations, and were a centre of trade and commerce have now been reduced to a periphery, backward and is dependent on subsidies from the central government”. Monpas of Tawang till very recently had economic, religious, political ties with Tibet. There were two trade routes from Tawang to Tibet: the Bumla route and the Zemithang route which are closed today. Nah tribe of Taksing, Upper Subansiri and Bangru tribe of Sarli, Kurung Kumey had close economic relations with Tibetan till very recently. It is said that in the past, these tribes used to go even Rima, Mipi, and Migyitun, to collect rock salt from these places. Libo, Ramos, Bori and Bokar group of Adis has close cultural affinities and economic ties with Lobha of China. Idu Mishmi of Upper Dibang Valley has close economic and cultural affinities with the people of China. It is said that there are Mishmi villages across the LAC in China, who belong mostly to the

Miju Mishmi sub-group and are known as the Deng people. In the Chaglagham circle of Anjaw District, even today people very often visit relatives living on the other side (Digaru Mishmi of China). They are said to be speaking the same language and practicing the same culture. Yobin/Lisus of Vijaynagar, Changlang has close cultural affinities across the border. Meyors/Zakring in Kibito in Anjaw district has relatives across the border in China. Tangsa and Nocte also share close cultural affinities with Myanmar. Singphos and Khamtis have a similar experience across the border.

These cross-border movements of men and materials continued in a restricted way in the Indo-Myanmar border, however, these are completely sealed in the Indo-China border, particularly after the Chinese aggression in 1962. Misra (2013) noted “The borders did not exist on the ground for those living near them, even after lines were drawn and defended by the ‘modern’ nation-states. State witnessed continuous migration flows from both Bhutan and Myanmar. The borders, for them, were artificial constructs imposed by distant powers. So far as the Indo-China border is concerned, the 1962 Indo-China War was definitely a watershed. Movements across the borders were severely restricted”.

Trade was not the only means of interaction among the people living these borderlands. Pilgrimage, inter and intra-clan social interactions, movement of people in search of better livelihood options, and the seasonal migration of pastoralists constituted other dimensions of cross-border linkages (Dhar, 2000). Despite such historical linkage, today almost all traditional passes have completely sealed officially. Though, unofficially or illegally people continue to make contacts the people living on either side.

The threat of Chinese invasion makes opening up of border roads and border trades vulnerable. Though, Indian establishment has been fully aware of strategic developments like Railways, Highways, Airports, etc. along the Chinese side of the border for quite long. India so far, unable and not seems willing to build same road and infrastructure and military logistics on its side of border as China has been done, leaving most of the border areas backward forcing people to leave their lands.

Hence, now, there is a great deal of neglect due to pervasive underdevelopment and lack of access to basic amenities. This is further aggravated when by a simultaneous all round development across the borders by the Chinese government. In the Tawang side of the border, the Chinese side has excellent paved roads and the rail line is just 40 km away from LAC. The people living in Kivito in Anjaw district of Arunachal Pradesh can always see the pace of development in China including the growth of townships with lights and other facilities as well as all-weather roads. According to the Border Area Development Programme, Department of Planning, Government of Arunachal Pradesh Report (2012, p. 2): “There are 1555 villages with a population of about 2,71,189 situated in the border blocks in Arunachal Pradesh. Even after about 10 years of implementation of BADP, the border blocks are yet to be opened up and are in utter backwardness due to their isolation and inaccessibility. The State Government, though handicapped by its limited resources, is committed to accelerate the pace of development and is trying its best for development of the border areas. But no perceptible dent in the backwardness could yet be made. Further, the backwardness of these areas becomes more pronounced in view of the advanced stage of development and rapid progress achieved on the other side of the Indo-China border”.

Unfortunately, most of the international borders area on Indian sides are barren land-marked with rocky and snow cover high hills, deep gorges and dense forests. This rocky soil and the snowy climatic condition are not conducive for cultivation. Hence, there is limited cultivated land due to hilly terrain. No doubt, though agriculture and animal rearing remain the main source of livelihood though it is not enough for the whole year. Hence, apart from agriculture and animal rearing, the majority of the population subsists on wage labour. Thus, many borderlanders are found to be working as labourers in Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) and GREF’s road construction work. They are also engaged as labourers to carry loads of defense forces up to the Chinese border.

Owing to all hardships, large portions of border areas are un-inhabited now and it is said that the people of border areas are migrating to the state capital and the dis-

trict headquarters for opportunities living behind their land and villages. Government employees, particularly teachers, posted in these areas are the worst sufferers who are denied facilities of a normal life and who have to walk multiple days of foot-march to reach their schools.

Nevertheless, realizing that the effective use of border road infrastructure has made China strategically dominant, recently, India has also launched a major project call Trans-Arunachal Highway to improve the connectivity in this borderland. The highway extends from one end of borderland to the other, i.e from Tawang in the west to Kanubari in the east covering 1,559. Unfortunately, until today, some progress has been made in the eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh, no much progress has made in the central and western part.

Arunachal has 50000 MW potential of hydroelectricity is a fact not just known to China but Indians as well. But, in spite of that fact, India neglected long years to develop the hydro potential. Today, besides churning out hundreds of hydropower MOUs on papers with a very poor scenario on public confidence and prior consent of project affected people, the practical implementation of hydro power policy and projects in Arunachal is very unlikely.

What is most interesting is that all the military logistics, planning and development in Arunachal are effectively bullied and influenced by China. In 2009, China opposed a development loan by the Asian Development Bank to India for the development of Arunachal Pradesh. China also continues to make regular protests to India, especially when some important official visits the state. China has also continued to raise objections to the building of mega hydroelectricity projects in Arunachal Pradesh. This is where a rather strange perspective emerges in the mind of Arunachalee. Besides these tall claims of territorial sovereignty, India has morally and strategically surrendered Arunachal in principle already to China to avoid large scale military confrontation to save mainstream India. Arunachalee are being kept as hostages for the safety of mainland Indians and their industries. Arunachalee are being -feed funds by the central gov-

ernment because they are morally obliged to do so after curtailing their right to become a major trading pass between Indian, China and other east Asian countries.

People now started saying that their state has come into national focus and importance due to the repeated territorial claims by China on Arunachal Pradesh. According to Rehman (2014) “the local people perceive that development is taking place now because of strategic calculation and not out of considerations for the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh”. Similarly, Jabin (2010, p. 128) noted “Increasing and improving transports and communication lines between their peripheries and the rest of country are priorities for both Beijing and New Delhi. However, the primary difference between Beijing and New Delhi is that the former originated as an internal development programme targeted at the country’s western region while the latter began as a foreign policy strategy to enable New Delhi to reach out to East Asia”.

The Way Forwards

It is a fact that while rest of India including some northeastern state has benefitted from greater engagement with ASEAN under the Look East Policy, Arunachal Pradesh though sharing the highest international border in the northeast has been left behind. People here have a moral right and survival need for economic and strategic progress. The people here are genuinely asking for the creation and opening up of new economic opportunities through border trades with China and which India has not been able to infuse till date.

Even on a trial basis, India should open a few places in the districts of Anjaw (Kibito), Changlang (Nampong) and Tawang, where illegal trade continues to take place. Based on these trials, action plan for the entire state may be formulated. There is no doubt that the state has huge potential to export agricultural products, horticultural products, dairy products and forest products. As per the study conducted by Modi, Abo, & Gombu (2015): Tawang produce big spice for China which is highly demanded, Pansu pass sell salt to Myanmar, Tuting, Monigaon and Gelling illegally sell medicinal herbs to China which is also highly demanded in China. Not just Arunachal but the finished

goods of neighbouring states can find a way to neighbouring countries. But it seems that India is not interested to open trade with China at present, this could be explained from the fact that India recently decided not be a part of China's BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), popularly known as 21st century Silk Routes. At presently, though unofficially, border trade takes place in Nampong and Pangsung Pass on the Myanmar side on 10th, 20th and 30th day of every month. Likewise, Myanmar nationals living around 16 km of the border are permitted to visit Nampong every Friday to procure necessary items.

Conclusion

“New Delhi remain reluctant to credit its border states with adequate wisdom in foreign policy matters or in being able to draw up their own list of concerns and priorities when it comes to greater interactions across borders” (Jabin, 2010, p. 138). In this era of globalisation, no region can be left isolated for so long. The central government has to open up to give the indigenous people of the border state a share of the Act East policy. Since Arunachal Pradesh has the privilege of having the largest share of the international border with Burma and China it is highly expected that the Government of India should act decisively in developing the trans-border trade route to Myanmar and China.

Unfortunately, owing to the indecisiveness, people who live on the international border have to bear the brunt of underdevelopment with very little or no education and health care facilities available in the areas. And there is no reason why this should be prolonged any further. Honestly and genuinely, border villages along India-China border are the most backward places on the earth. No doubt, the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) has launched in the state in 1997 in order to remove the crucial disparity in physical and social infrastructure and to strengthen the economic condition of the remote border areas. Regrettably, nowhere in border areas, will you find any culverts, irrigation canals, river embankment, etc. raised or written in the name of the Border Area Development Programme.

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