

The Indo-Bangladesh Border

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Introduction

The Indo-Bangladesh border is 4095 km long and traverses five states of India – West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. The International Border (IB) in West Bengal is in the plains. It is 2217 km long with a riverine portion covering 600 km. The land border is low lying. Assam shares an IB with Bangladesh in two sectors. In Dhubri the IB is 134 km. Of this the riverine stretch across the Brahmaputra is more than 20 km, as this massive river curves into Bangladesh near Dhubri. The second stretch of the IB in Assam is 147 km long in low lying lush green Karimganj district. Beyond Dhubri, the IB is in the hill state of Meghalaya. This stretch is 443 km running roughly East to West. At the eastern end it runs into Karimganj district of Assam merging into the Tripura state. Here the border traverses five low hill ranges, all wooded and thinly inhabited. The Tripura section is 856 km long. The last stretch of the Indo-Bangladesh border is in Mizoram. It is 318 km long.

Border Management

The problems of each of the Indian States' border areas with Bangladesh are directly dependent on the physical nature of the terrain. In West Bengal, out of a length of 2200 km, 600 km are riverine. The land border of 1600 km is generally low lying cultivated area where there is flat ground right upto the border on both sides. It is thickly vegetated in other areas. About 600 km of the IB is low lying and gets inundated during the rainy season (July-October). Both, the Indian and Bangladesh sides are thickly populated right upto the IB. There are more than a hundred villages in India that are located right upto the border line. In many cases the IB runs right through the back gardens of houses on the Indian side. There are also several towns that straddle the border, like Hili, where the houses have the front door in India, while the rear door opens into Bangladesh. The population on the Indian side of the border, in many stretches, consists of migrants who have come from Bangladesh and settled down. They do not have land and their principle means of earning a living is smuggling.

Sizeable population on both sides of the border is involved in smuggling as an occupation. On the Indian side, the financiers of the smuggling are located in all the towns on Calcutta- Siliguri National Highway and Siliguri - Cooch Bihar Highway. Items smuggled from India to Bangladesh are cattle, rice, mustard oil, sugar, Phensydl cough syrup – specially manufactured with high alcohol content for consumption in Bangladesh. In West Bengal, since there is no prohibition, there is no demand for such high alcohol content Phensydl! Normal Phensydl is only used as a cough syrup.

The main problem on this IB is that habitation extends right upto the zero line. On the Western border with Pakistan, there is a clear width of 100 m between the habited area and the zero line. The fencing is constructed about 100 m from the zero line and all habitation is behind the fencing, leaving a clear belt of 100 m for the Border Security Force (BSF) to patrol. There are gates on the fencing for each village behind the fencing. This opens at first light for the farmers to cultivate their land and closes at last light. During the day the BSF patrols along the zero line. There is thus zero smuggling across this IB. The only cases reported are of throwing heroin packets over the fencing or attempts to dig tunnels under the fencing to send heroin packets across from Pakistan. There is of course the odd case of BSF personnel being subverted. Such cases are rare and a few BSF officers have been prosecuted under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act.

The situation on the Bangladesh side is, however, miserable. Since the villages are located right upto the border and the plea of the BSF to resite the villages 100 m behind the zero line has not been accepted, the border is porous. Wherever there is a village right upto the border, there is a break in the fence as wide as the number of houses straddling the border. This is an open invitation for the smugglers to operate and there is a regular stampede across these gaps both ways every night. The situation in the riverine areas is even more scandalous. For about almost 100 km, the riverine streams in the Sunderbans, thickly populated on either bank, has the IB in the midstream of the waterways. A flotilla of boats will be required to police this kind of IB.

Cattle smuggling is the worst chapter in this story. Old cattle collected from Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal and Orissa, is brought to cattle haats in Bengal and then smuggled across to Bangladesh by organised syndicates. These haats are located just behind the 3 km line from the IB. The BSF has jurisdiction only within 3 km of the IB! From here, the cattle are driven across by the smuggler gangs through gaps in the fencing where the villages are located close to the IB. Every night there is a running fight between the BSF personnel and the smuggler gangs. The smuggled cattle are rounded up and taken to the cattle pounds at the Customs post. Here they are auctioned. The smuggler gangs buy this cattle and the circus is repeated. The solution is simple and easy. The cattle can be exported to Bangladesh. However, the Government of India will not do this as it would affect the Hindutva adherents. This is absurd as the cattle are in any case being smuggled, to be slaughtered for beef. The real reason is different. A share of the illegal money generated goes all the way beyond the BSF! The decision for exporting cattle has to be taken in Delhi. I do not know when they will see reason and do this.

In the plains area of Assam, in Dhubri, the main smuggling mode is by boat at night, across the Brahmaputra. As the great river curves into Bangladesh, it is almost 10 km wide here. The border population here comprises entirely of Bangladesh Muslims, which makes the job of the BSF even more difficult. The Bangladesh Muslims are expert boatmen. They even smuggle cattle by swimming them across the river into Bangladesh – even though it is very wide here.

In Meghalaya, the nature of the border terrain is very different. The border here consists of a series of spurs and re-entrants. The hills are densely wooded. The border fencing winds along the spurs and re-entrants. Wherever there are border haats ; one can see thatched sheds, which are used to store tins of mustard oil, rice, sugar and the ubiquitous Phensydl cough syrup with added alcohol content, and other such items meant for smuggling across. The smuggling is done generally at night through gaps in the ambushes laid by the BSF. Across the border in Sylhet and Mymensingh districts, there is a shortage of trees. Groups of smugglers from Bangladesh come into Meghalaya in boats

up the many rivers that flow from Meghalaya into Bangladesh. They park the boats and climb the hills, cut trees and roll them down into the river. The logs are carried into Bangladesh by the current. In most cases, there is a pay-off made by the smugglers from Bangladesh to the headmen of the villages controlling the forest areas concerned. This is a straightforward problem and the BSF handles it well.

The Karimganj section of Assam is where the biggest smuggling net exists. The Kushiara river is the boundary between Karimganj town and Bangladesh. All the Marwari traders have godowns that jut towards the river bank of the Kushiara river, tins of mustard oil, sugar and, of course, crates of Phensydyl syrup are stocked in the godowns. It is generally at night that boats loaded with these goods try to slip across, avoiding the patrols of the BSF. It is very easy to control this smuggling by establishing border trade for all these items with the exception of Phensydyl syrup.

In Tripura the 856 km long border passes through plain areas as well as hill sections. In the plain areas many of the border villages, mainly occupied by Bengali Hindus or Muslims, smuggle the same items, mentioned above. These villages are thickly populated right upto the border and the situation is similar to the situation in Bengal, with many villages and towns straddling the border. Here again the answer lies in re-locating villages behind the border and leave a clear area for the BSF to guard. It is also necessary to establish centres for border trade in the plain areas of the Tripura-Bangladesh border. The hill sections of the border are mainly used by insurgent groups to cross into the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) where they have set up their camps. This problem is almost over as the insurgent groups have been by and large neutralised.

The 318 km of the Mizoram border is akin to the topography of the Tripura border. Here, there are some sections which are plains and have border villages close to the border. Most of the border areas are forested. Smuggling is minimal across the Mizoram-Bangladesh border.

Suggested Plan for Zero Tolerance Smuggling

On the Bangladesh border, the areas to concentrate for sealing the borders are the plains and riverine sections in Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Whether one likes it or not; there is illegal movement of people from Bangladesh to India; there is smuggling of different commodities from India to Bangladesh and from Bangladesh to India; there is movement of terrorists from Pakistan via Bangladesh to India and in the reverse direction, after the terrorists have committed a crime. As far as people are concerned, the most painful crime is smuggling of women for prostitution from Bangladesh to India.

During my tenure as Inspector General (Operations) BSF from 1995 to 1997, and Director General BSF from November 1997 to November 2000 and Superintendent of Police, Khasi Hills Shillong from 1976 to 1980, I traversed and surveyed the border areas of India on the Western and Eastern frontiers by walking on foot, moving by light vehicles and flying by medium aircraft. I am, therefore, suggesting a plan for implementation on the ground in the Eastern frontier, which I feel will reduce illegal movement across the IB between India and Bangladesh either way to zero tolerance level.

The model to be adopted is the Western IB between India and Pakistan in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab and Jammu. On the Western border, when Cyril Radcliffe drew the line between India and Pakistan, there was no village or town right on the 'zero line' except for a few places which could be counted on your fingers. Starting from Gujarat, there was Munabao in Barmer district, where the Munabao town extends right to the zero line. So is the case with Poonch in Jammu. Throughout the remaining frontier there was not a single village anywhere near the zero line.

This was not the case on the Eastern frontier. Several towns of India extended right upto the zero line. Hili in West Bengal; Agartala, Khowai and Kamalpur in Tripura and Karimganj in Assam. On the Eastern border the villages and towns are also thickly populated, which cause added problems. As far as commerce is concerned, it does not recognise borders. Commodities that are costly in India and cheaper in Bangladesh will flow from Bangladesh to India, while commodities that are cheaper in India and costly in Bangladesh will flow from India into Bangladesh.

In the 1980's, the need for construction of fencing along the IB Punjab was first realised when the Khalistan terrorists problem arose. The leaders of the Khalistan Commando Force, Babbar Khalsa and other such insurgent groups, started to send their cadres to Pakistan to get them trained and equipped with arms and explosives. It was decided to fence the IB in Punjab on priority. Luckily the zero line drawn by Cyril Radcliffe between India and Pakistan was clear of any villages or towns in Punjab. Since the fencing was required urgently, it was constructed roughly 100 m from the zero line in three tiers. There were two rows of fencing about 2 m apart. The front and rear 4 m high angle iron posts were fixed in concrete with barbed wire. In between, short posts with rolled concertina barbed wire laid. It was virtually impossible for anyone to cross this double fence. For 555 km across the Punjab IB, enough BSF battalions were sanctioned so that each border outpost had enough manpower to have line of sight patrols along its length. The border was then provided with standby generators to be switched on when the main line tripped. With this the Punjab border was effectively sealed. In Punjab, the land was cultivated right upto the zero line by both sides. You could see the Boundary pillars dotting the border between the wheat or paddy plants. To facilitate our farmers, gates were fitted before each village situated 100 m or more behind the zero line. The gates would open at 0500 hrs daily and farmers could go in with their tractors or combines and work till 30 minutes before last light, when the farmers had to move behind the fencing and the gates would be closed and locked. During the BSF day would patrol just before the zero line, and at night just behind the fencing.

Since there are a number of villages and some towns straddling the IB in the Eastern frontier, it will be necessary to mandatorily shift the villages 100 m behind the zero line. Each village can be shifted, by building houses of the same size as the one that is located on the border, at a new site 100 m behind the zero line. If this is cultivable land, land in equal measure can be given between the fencing and the border to the family shifted behind the fence. The system of gates as on the Western border can be adopted on the Eastern border also.

There are a number of rivers flowing from India into Bangladesh. All the rivers have embankments to prevent

floods during the rainy season. In all such cases the fencing will have to come right upto the embankment with a bunker constructed for the BSF. In some cases, as in the area of Sunderbans, the river flows in-between the IB, as for example along the Harbanga - a tributary in the Sunderbans. Here the answer to prevent smuggling, either way, is for the BSF to anchor medium craft or floating BOPs in midstream and use speed boats to patrol along the midstream between the anchored floating BOPs.

As for the towns located on the border on the Indian side, the answer is to demolish all the buildings within 100 m of the IB and reconstruct them behind the fence, so that 100 m of vacant space exists between the buildings and the border for the BSF to patrol. This shifting of houses and buildings in the villages and towns from, right on the zero line, and rebuilding them 100 m behind will cost some money. But, the investment would be worthwhile because it will prevent generation of black money from smuggling between the two countries. It will also eliminate the hassle of border policing.

The next step is to set-up border trading posts at several points along the IB for legal trading of all goods. This should include all commodities that the commerce ministries of the two countries would agree upon from time to time. As for cattle smuggling, India will have to take a decision based on common sense to legalise the export of cattle.

Conclusion

India and Bangladesh have finally signed an Agreement for handing over the Enclaves to each other and also finalised the pending issue of a few km of the IB and of the 'adverse possessions'. This issue was festering for a long period, in which the populations of the two countries have patiently borne all the tribulations of uncertainty. If the two countries could use the momentum of this long delayed Agreement, they could sit down together again and agree to set-up border trading stations for all commodities; it would remove at one stroke all the hassles of smuggling and other illegal activities across the IB.

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