

India's Porous Borders and Coastlines – Meeting the Threats and Challenges*

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Introduction

India shares her 15,106.7 kms long land border with Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and, technically, Afghanistan.¹ India has a coastline of 7516.6 kms, out of which, 5422 kms of the coastline is along the mainland and 2094 kms is along India's islands.² Nine states and four Union Territories lie along the coastline. The deployment of border protection forces is based on the principle of *One Border, One Force*. The Border Security Force (BSF) guards the Bangladesh and the Pakistan borders; the Indo Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) guards the China border; the Seema Suraksha Bal (SSB) guards the Nepal and the Bhutan Border and the Assam Rifles (AR) guards the Indo-Myanmar Border. The Indian Army is guarding the Line of Control (LC) on the Pakistan border and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the China border.

India-Bangladesh Border

The India-Bangladesh border is 4096.70 kms long. West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram lie along this border and it is very porous. Bangladeshis entering India illegally is a unique phenomenon which involves huge numbers crossing national boundaries over several decades. It has reduced the local population to a minority in the border districts of Assam and has out-numbered the entire indigenous population in Tripura. It is estimated that there are 1.5 crore Bangladeshis in India with about 3 lakh entering India illegally every year.³ Illegal migration from

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Bangladesh has following serious implications for India:-

(a) **Socio-Economic.** The people of Assam perceive that they will be outnumbered and their culture is being submerged by an alien culture. They fear that in the near future 'Tripurisation' of Assam is imminent.

(b) **Political.** The migration will result in political power being taken away from the locals. According to a report of a Group of Ministers, the Bangladeshi migrants could influence the result of elections in 32 constituencies in Assam.⁴ According to another study, out of the 292 Assembly Constituencies in West Bengal, Bangladeshi immigrants can 'determine' the outcome of polls in 52 Constituencies and 'influence' the poll outcome in 100 others.⁵

(c) **Law and Order.**

(i) **Assam.** The agitation against the Bangladeshi 'foreigners' led to the establishment of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). The Assamese society has become communally polarised due to the presence of Bangladeshi Muslims. The influx of the Bangladeshis into the Bodo areas led the Bodos to raise the demand for an independent Bodoland. Though the situation has quietened down after the Bodoland Territorial Council was granted to the Bodos in 2003, however, the matter has not been completely settled as yet.

(ii) **Tripura.** The tribal population has reduced to 28.44 per cent in 1981 from 50.09 per cent in 1941.⁶ Between 1947 and 1971, more than 6 lakh Bangladeshis had entered Tripura which led to tribal mobilisation during the 1960s and 1970s. Tripura witnessed violence during these decades; though the situation has since improved, as in 2015 Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was removed. A large portion of the border still remains unfenced. Hence, the danger of influx of refugees from Bangladesh continues to hang like the sword of Damocles over Tripura.

(iii) **West Bengal.** Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Siliguri areas of West Bengal are adversely affected by the Bangladeshi settlers. As a response, Kamtapur Liberation

Organisation (KLO) emerged. Activities of KLO need to be monitored closely as it operates in the 'Chicken neck' area of the Siliguri corridor.

(d) **Environmental Degradation.** Assam's population, boosted by illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, has put incremental pressure on land and forest resources. A study estimated that the annual fire wood requirement for a villager was 153 kg. An additional population of about 12 million illegal immigrants in the Northeast is bound to have a disastrous impact on the natural resources on this account alone. Illegal Bangladeshi migrants have also damaged the ecological conditions of the *chars* (riverine tracts getting inundated during monsoon), *beels* (inland freshwater bodies) and *bathans* (grazing lands) for buffaloes.

(e) **Radicalisation of Bangladeshi Society.** A report in the Far Eastern Economic Review has warned that "A revolution is taking place in Bangladesh... Islamic fundamentalism, religious intolerance, militant Muslim groups with links to international terrorist groups, powerful military with ties to the militants, the mushrooming of Islamic schools ...all are combining to transform the nation."⁷ This radicalisation has had its impact on India. The cadres of Jamaat-e-Islami (Jel) of Bangladesh have been active in Manipur. The increase in the Islamic groups in Assam like United Social Reform Army (*USRA*), *Saddam Bahini* (with ISI aid) etc. is directly linked to the illegal migrants from Bangladesh. The mushroom growth of *madrasas* in West Bengal and some of the Northeastern states is also partially attributable to this.

Lieutenant General SK Sinha, the then Governor of Assam, in 1998, had stated that the "demographic invasion of Assam may result in loss of geostrategically vital districts of lower Assam. It will be only a matter of time when a demand for their merger with Bangladesh may be made... International Islamic fundamentalism may provide the driving force". Those who think this possibility as far-fetched may recall the words of a 'pro-India' leader Sheikh Mujibur Rehman who wrote in his book *Eastern Pakistan : Its Population and Economics* that "because East Pakistan must have sufficient land for its expansion... it must include Assam to be financially and economically strong".⁸

The Government of India had taken three initiatives to make the crossing of this border difficult. First, it decided to fence the border; second, it decided to light up the border with floodlights; and third, it decided to construct patrol roads to facilitate patrolling by the BSF. In 2009, there were 802 Border out Posts (BOPs). To reduce the inter-BOP distance to 3.5 kms, another 283 BOPs were sanctioned in 2009, to be completed by 2013-2014, however, 86 BOPs were constructed by 31 Dec 2015 and work is in progress at 96 other BOPs. On 101 BOPs, work is yet to start. As far as fencing of the border is concerned, against 3325 kms that were to be fenced, only 2714 kms were fenced, leaving a shortfall of 611 kms. With respect to floodlighting, against 2840.90 kms, 2042.64 kms has been floodlit, leaving a shortfall of 798.26 kms. There is also a shortfall of 818 kms of patrol roads. The delays have been due to land acquisition, obtaining statutory clearances, public protests, human habitations existing within 150 yards of the border etc.⁹ While all these issues can be resolved at the level of the State Governments concerned, vested interest of a few is not allowing to do so. There is a need to evolve a strategy to deal with the situation. Some suggestions are:-

- (a) Government must evolve a comprehensive policy to deal with the problem of illegal migration after nationwide consultations and consensus building. The cut-off date of 24th March, 1971 must not be changed. A detailed survey must be undertaken to identify the illegal migrants. After the survey, each individual case should be investigated to ascertain the citizenship status while ensuring that Indian Muslims do not face harassment. Only one appeal before the District Magistrate (DM) should be allowed. The names of all those who are found to be illegal migrants should be deleted from the electoral rolls.
- (c) India should prepare a legal regime concerning the detection and deportation of migrants. There should be no differentiation between Hindu and Muslim illegal migrants.
- (d) Work on updating the 1950 National Register of citizens in Assam should be expedited.
- (e) India must adopt compulsory registration of births and deaths. There should be disincentives for those who fail to register, such as withholding of ration card etc.

India-Pakistan Border

India shares 3323 kms of its border with Pakistan. The States bordering Pakistan are Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab and J&K. The LC is the most active portion of the border. Against 2071 kms that had to be fenced, 1986.99 kms has been fenced, leaving a shortfall of 84 kms. Against 2030.44 kms that had to be floodlit, 1973.84 kms have been floodlit, leaving a shortfall of 56.60 kms. The incomplete work is mostly in the state of Gujarat. The delay is due to the earthquake in Gujarat in 2001, floods in 2003, 2006, 2011 and 2015 and resultant price escalation and change of specifications.¹⁰

The real challenge on the India-Pakistan border is on the LC in J&K. The terrain in J&K is extremely rugged. A temporary fence, around 150 yards on our side, has been constructed along the LC over a distance of about 550 kms. It is effective when it is erect but when it snows, it collapses. It also gets washed away in floods and avalanches. Hence, some stretches remain vulnerable to infiltration. Pakistan tries to infiltrate terrorists into J&K regularly to keep the situation unstable.

India-Myanmar Border

India shares 1643 kms long border with Myanmar which is unfenced and porous. It runs along Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. A number of factors make the India-Myanmar border vulnerable. These are:-

- (a) Even though the International Border (IB) between the two countries has been demarcated after the boundary agreement on 10 Mar 1967, the lines separating the two nations have not been marked on the ground, as the boundary cuts through the houses and villages and divides tribes such as Nagas, Kukis, Mizos etc. and forces them to live as citizens of different countries. These tribes have refused to accept this separation.
- (b) This border has an arrangement in place called the Free Movement Regime (FMR). This permits the tribes living along the border to travel 16 kms across the border on either side without visa restrictions. While the FMR has helped tribes to maintain their ancient ties, the Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs)

have been exploiting this to cross over to Myanmar to establish safe havens, get weapons and carry out attacks in India, to smuggle heroin into India and send ephedrine and pseudo-ephedrine drugs into Myanmar. The porous border also enables trafficking of women and children from the northeast of India to Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries.

(c) The Assam Rifles (AR) is responsible for this border as well as for tackling insurgency in the northeast. They have 46 battalions (bns). 31 bns are kept exclusively for counter insurgency operations. Only 15 bns are deployed for border management. AR operates on Company Operated Bases (COBs) that are located deep inside Indian territory. They are unable to dominate the border effectively as there is lack of troops and infrastructure along this border.

India should strive to resolve the outstanding border issues with the elected government that has come to power in Myanmar recently, to the mutual satisfaction of the two countries. Government of India may also revisit the FMR document and see how to plug the loopholes that are exploited by the IIGs. Also, AR needs to deploy more troops for managing the India-Myanmar border to prevent the IIGs from having a free run on the border region.

India-Nepal Border

India shares 1751 kms long border with Nepal. It lies along Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Sikkim. The Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed in 1950 governs the relations between the two countries. The Treaty “binds the two countries through socio-cultural and economic linkages....no impediment is placed on the movement of people crossing the border for availing avenues of livelihood.”¹¹

The Nepalese entering India can be put in three categories - those who come on a daily basis to buy goods for domestic needs; seasonal migrants who come during the off-season to find work; and, those who move on a long-term basis and generally settle down in India. Economic migrants from India also go to Nepal for skilled and semi-skilled work. Some also take up teaching jobs or set up small and medium enterprises. The open border works as a “safety valve” for Nepal as the landlocked country cannot absorb a four million strong manpower within the country; however, now

it is a security threat because terrorists, smugglers and traffickers also cross the border freely. Other issues are:-

(a) The border is disputed between India and Nepal at Kalapani (400 sq kms) and Susta (140 sq kms). A Boundary Working Group at the Surveyors-General level was set up in 2014 to resolve the border issues.

(b) Nepal feels threatened with more Indians entering Nepal. Some Nepalese perceive this as India's "demographic invasion of Nepal." The Nepalese also allege that Bangladeshis enter Nepal in the guise of Indians. They estimate that nearly 2.6 per cent of the population of Terai Region of Nepal is Bangladeshi.¹²

(c) Ganja, hashish, herbs, etc. are smuggled from Nepal and urea, sugar, industrial explosives, gutkha etc. are smuggled into Nepal. International terrorists have also misused Nepal's open borders for arms trafficking.

(d) Pakistan has also started conducting its covert operations against India through Nepal. Many Kashmiris who went to Pakistan illegally use this route to return to India. Prior to demonetisation of Rs 1000/- and Rs 500/- currency notes, the ISI was pumping fake currency into India through Nepal.

(e) There is also the problem of trafficking of women and children due to the open border. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimated in 2003 that around 2 lakh Nepali women were in Indian brothels.¹³ A voluntary group had mapped around 1268 routes which facilitated human trafficking.¹⁴

(f) During the Maoist insurgency in Nepal, the Nepali Maoists developed links with Indian revolutionary groups. The Annual Report of the Ministry of Defence, (2003-04) stated that this was a matter of serious concern.¹⁵ According to the Asian Centre for Human Rights, most of the estimated 3.5 to 4 lakh Nepalese who were displaced due to the Maoist conflict settled in northern parts of West Bengal and Sikkim. This resulted in clamour for a "homeland" in the district of Darjeeling. Many Nepalese who have permanently settled in India are holding dual citizenship, which is against both, the Indian law and the Treaty of Peace and Friendship.

Many suggest that the movement of people on the India-Nepal border should be regulated. The matter is, however, very sensitive. Of late, China has been displaying a lot of interest in Nepal. Besides, only recently, issues connected with the New Constitution of Nepal had led to a lot of tensions within Nepal and between certain elements in Nepal and India. We should exercise caution on this issue and refrain from unnecessarily ruffling the feathers.

India-Bhutan Border

India shares 669 kms long border with Bhutan. Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh lie along this border. India and Bhutan signed a treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1949. The two countries have traditionally shared close relations. However, there are two difficulties connected with the India-Bhutan border. The first pertains to the IIGs activity in the northeast. IIGs escape to Bhutan after committing atrocities in India. At India's request, Bhutan destroyed the camps of the IIGs by launching 'Operation All Clear' in 2003-04. Since then, the IIGs are careful while sneaking into Bhutan. The second concerns the Doklam Plateau in eastern Bhutan, which China covets. In an article in the Indian Defence Review (2014) titled 'In Bhutan too, Chinese Grab Land', Claude Arpi has written that the *"PLA...has also built important infrastructure such as the road from Yatung to Phari in the Chumbi Valley which cuts across the Doklam Plateau...By grabbing the Doklam Plateau, Beijing considerably enlarged the Chumbi Valley and its access to Sikkim and Siliguri."*⁶

Coastal Security

India has a coastal border of 7516.60 kms. Nine States and four Union Territories have coastal borders. India's coasts are characterised by a diverse range of topography. The Department of Fisheries has identified 1376 landing points along the coast and most of them are unguarded. Traffic on the Indian coastal waters is very heavy. It is estimated that on a single day these witness the passage of 2115 ships, 690 coastal vessels, 850 dhows, 400 barges, 1000 dredgers and thousands of fishing vessels.¹⁷ India faces a number of threats and challenges from the sea. Some of these are:-

- (a) **Maritime Terrorism.** Major population centers, nuclear power stations, naval bases, industrial complexes, offshore

petroleum complexes like Bombay High, etc. are high value targets for terrorist attacks.

(b) **Piracy and Armed Robbery.** Piracy by definition takes place on the high seas. However, in the case of India, the shallow waters of the Sunderbans have been witnessing 'acts of violence and detention' by gangs of criminals that are akin to piracy. Pirates operating in the Sunderbans usually belong to Bangladesh.¹⁸

(c) **Smuggling and Trafficking.** As long as the smugglers smuggle petty items, they pose a challenge only for the law enforcement agencies; but once they start networking with terrorist groups, they become a threat to national security e.g. the Dawood Ibrahim group, known as a smuggling gang, perpetrated the 1993 serial bomb blasts in Mumbai by using the same routes for bringing arms and explosives as it had been using to smuggle drugs etc. earlier.

(d) **Infiltration, Illegal Migration and the Refugee Influx.** India's western coast is vulnerable to infiltration by terrorists from Pakistan. The eastern and southern coasts are vulnerable to illegal migration and the influx of refugees.

(e) **Straying of Fishermen beyond the Maritime Boundary.** The arrests of Indian fishermen as well as confiscation of their boats has raised security concerns as the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) could extract information about landing points in India from them and use a confiscated boat to sneak in terrorists into India.

Coastal security did not figure prominently in the national security matrix until the terror attacks of 26 Nov 2008. Thereafter, things changed. Now there are three organisations working to safeguard India's coastal areas. These are the Coastal Police, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) and the Indian Navy. The jurisdiction of the Coastal Police extends up to 12 nautical miles (nm) in the sea (territorial waters). The jurisdiction of the ICG extends from the shoreline to the limits of the Exclusive Economic Zone i.e. from 0 to 200 nm in the sea. The area beyond 200 nm (High Seas) falls within the jurisdiction of the Indian Navy. The Indian Navy has been designated as the authority responsible for the overall maritime security, which includes coastal security and offshore security.

The ICG has been mandated to secure India's interests in all its maritime zones under the Indian Coast Guard Act, 1978. The ICG has been additionally designated as the authority responsible for coastal security in the territorial waters also, including the areas to be patrolled by the Coastal Police. To enable the ICG to perform its duties effectively, it has been empowered under a large number of Acts. These have, in effect, made the ICG the principal organisation for the enforcement of all national legislation in the Maritime Zone of India.

The Director General Coast Guard has been designated as the Commander Coastal Command and is responsible for the overall coordination between the Central and the State Agencies in all matters relating to coastal security. The Coast Guard has been nominated as the lead Intelligence Agency for the coast. It is responsible for coordinating and sharing of intelligence among all the agencies operating on the coast.

Coastal Security Scheme

Phase I of the Coastal Security Scheme was implemented from 2005-06 for a period of five years. 73 coastal police stations, 97 check posts, 58 outposts and 30 barracks were made operational along the coast. In addition, 204 interceptor boats, 153 jeeps and 312 motorcycles were also provided to the Coastal States/UTs for coastal security. The Coastal Security Scheme, Phase II commenced wef 01 April 2011. 131 Marine Police Stations, 60 jetties, 10 Marine Operation Centers, 150 boats (12 tons), 10 boats (5 tons), 20 boats (19 meters), 35 rigid inflatable boats, 10 large vessels (for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands), 131 four wheelers and 242 motorcycles were sanctioned. Andaman and Nicobar Islands have set up four Marine Police Operational Centres.¹⁹

Indian Coast Guard

The Government of India approved the Coast Guard Development Plan 2012-17 (XII Plan) with an outlay of Rs 16,464 crores (Capital Rs 10,989 crores) to strengthen the ICG. It was envisaged that by the year 2018, the ICG would have 150 surface platforms. This may, however, not happen. Only Rs 4977 crores were spent under the head 'Capital' from 2012-13 to 2015-16. This is short of the targeted amount by Rs 6012 crores. The Ministry of Defence is not likely to allocate this much money to the ICG under the head

'Capital' in 2016-17. So, the ICG may not be able to achieve their desired level of assets.

The Standing Committee on Defence commented on this adversely. In its report tabled in Parliament recently it said, *"It is indeed worrying and dismaying to note that the funds allocated under the capital section for 2015-16 for the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) is short of the projected requirement by near about 50 per cent."*²⁰ A number of inadequacies have been detected in the coastal security architecture. Some of these are:-

- (a) **Lack of Coordination.** An estimated 22 different ministries and departments are involved in securing India's coasts. Each agency zealously guards its own turf. They also zealously guard any intelligence gathered, with the objective of scoring brownie points over other agencies.
- (b) **Differing Perceptions.** Various stakeholders such as the Indian Navy, ICG, Coastal Police and the Customs Department have differing perceptions about their roles.
- (c) **Inadequate Resources.** The Coastal Police suffers from shortage of manpower. Schemes to recruit retired naval and coast guard personnel have failed because of low salary, a low designation and a short contract period.
- (d) **Poor Training.** The coastal policemen state that the duration of the training provided by the ICG is too short and the vessels and equipment in which they are trained are more sophisticated than what is made available to them in the Coastal Police. The Customs personnel are hardly imparted any training.

In order to address the shortcomings, the Government has taken a number of initiatives. Noteworthy are:-

- (a) The "National Committee for Strengthening Maritime and Coastal Security (NCSMCS)" against threats from the sea has been set up under the Cabinet Secretary to ensure timely implementation of various decisions taken by the Government in respect of coastal security. It includes the Chief of Naval Staff, Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary, Home Secretary, other Secretaries of the concerned Ministries, Chief Secretaries of the concerned States, DG Coast Guard etc.

(b) The Ministry of Defence has created four Joint Operation Centres (JOCs) at Mumbai, Vishakhapatnam, Kochi and Port Blair. These are jointly manned by the Navy and the ICG with inputs from the concerned central and state agencies. Coastal security exercises like *Sagar Kavach*, coordinated by the ICG with the coastal States/UTs, are held every six months to improve preparedness of all concerned.

(c) The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) is providing security at all the major ports. The National Marine Police Training Institute (NMPTI) is being set up at village Pindara, District Dwarka in Gujarat.²¹

To enhance India's Maritime Domain Awareness, the National Command, Control, Communication and Intelligence Network (NC3I) was set up in November 2014. It collates data about all ships, dhows, fishing boats and all other vessels operating near the Indian coast from multiple technical sources and analyses them at the Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) at Gurgaon. The compiled Common Operating Picture for Coastal Security is distributed to all 51 nodes of the Navy and Coast Guard.²²

In the end, I would like to say that although the security of the land borders has always been on the radar of the Government of India; it is also looking very seriously at the aspect of coastal security. Even though the Mumbai terror attacks of 2008 acted as catalyst to more robust coastal security measures, we are well on our way to securing both our land as well as coastal borders. Thank you.

Endnotes

¹ Annual Report 2015-16, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

² *Ibid.*

³ Prakash Singh, ex DG, BSF, '*Bangladeshi Immigrant: Are we headed for Another Partition?*' Dialogue Vol. 3 No. 3.

⁴ Dr Rajeev Sharma and Ankita Bhushan, '*Illegal Immigration of Bangladeshis into India.*'

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Available at Tripura.gov.in/Demographics, Tripura State Portal, Demographic features (Accessed on 10 April 2017)

⁷ Dr. Rajeev Sharma and Ankita Bhushan: 'Illegal Immigration from Bangladesh into India'.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Annual Report 2015-16, Ministry of Home Affairs.

¹⁰ Annual Report, 2015-16, Ministry of Home Affairs.

¹¹ Sangeeta Thapliyal 1998: Mutual Security: the case of India and Nepal, Lancers Publishers, New Delhi.

¹² Sangeeta Thapliyal, 1999, *Movement of Population between India and Nepal: Emerging Challenges*, Strategic Analysis, Vol. 23, No. 5, pages 777-89.

¹³ Rajeev Kumar, "Broader Implications of Open Border: The Case of India and Nepal.

¹⁴ Hindustan Times, *Eyes Wide Open for Flesh Trade*, February 20, 2008, New Delhi.

¹⁵ Annual Report 2003-04, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, page 12, para 1.19, sourced from scribd.com (Accessed on 9th April 2017).

¹⁶ Indian Defence Review, Net Edition, date: 14 June, 2014, 'In Bhutan too, Chinese grab land', by Claude Arpi Available at indiandefencereview.com (accessed on April 7, 2017).

¹⁷ Pushpita Das, "Coastal Security: The Indian Experience," IDSA Monograph Series, No.22, September 2013.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Annual Report 2015-16, Ministry of Home Affairs.

²⁰ Sourced from: Government in Choppy Waters as Panel Slams Coast Guard Budget... Indian Defence News, March 6, 2016, Indian Express. Available at defencenews.in/article/Government-in-Choppy-Waters-as-Panel-Slams (Accessed on 9th April 2017).

²¹ Annual Report 2015-16, Ministry of Home Affairs.

²² Available at indiannavy.nic.in/content/maharashtra-coastal-security-exercise (Accessed on 08 April 2017).