

Review Article

Border Tourism and Political Boundaries: An Analysis of India-Myanmar Borderland

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Abstract: Many literatures in cultural and border studies confirm the importance of tourism in borderland areas. They have tried to focus on how borders themselves and border-related environments can act as significant tourist attractions. The tourist sites can be significant spaces for cross border co-operation as well as sites of contestation. Using various conceptual understandings, this paper will try to highlight the India- Myanmar borderland as a site of immense tourism potential. For tourism to prosper, one also needs to explore the cultural and social spaces of borderland communities within the limits created by political boundaries. With the theoretical foundations borrowed from various inter-disciplinary approaches, the paper will look into the state of Arunachal Pradesh and how it's co-existence with the international border of Myanmar, makes it a potential site for tourism.

Keywords: Political boundaries, Tourism, Borderland.

INTRODUCTION:

Borders or boundaries traditionally have been understood to be barriers or restrictions to various forms of human interactions. The purposes of this traditional border were to be a hindrance to the flow of goods, people and ideas between nations for ideological and economic reasons. According to Lacoste, border is a line of separation and contact between two or more states, revealing itself because of the existence of an evident discontinuity between each country spaces. Borders also have a conceptual aspect of understanding. They have been considered as demarcations of 'us' and 'them' or delineating differences of civilized from barbarians etc. Also the discontinuity as Lacoste talked about, may not only be territorial but cultural, economic, religious among other reasons as well. And these boundaries do not exactly coincide with the usual geographical borders. (Gimenez, 2007). As time passed, the understanding of borders too has evolved. With the modern state and developing of an international system, political boundaries developed which marked the limits up to which a political entity or the state exercises its sovereign authority. Borders enclose nations, governments, ethnicities and cultures which sometimes invade the social and cultural spaces of the people on both sides of the borders. In other words, border includes both the legal demarcation between states and a signifier of differentiation or frontier where cultures and politics meet, often in contestation, in a dynamic relationship. (Sofield, 2006) Borders in addition to their role as lines of separation, may also be viewed as lines of co-operation. These can be seen as spaces where similar or dissimilar cultures and economies converge. Many parts of the world are full of examples where political lines have been drawn through regions populated by culturally similar groups of people. This

cultural heritage can also be a factor which the countries can develop its friendly relations upon. Also along with possibilities of tourism, borders are evolving to be a gateway which facilitates mobility and interchanges.

The idea of Border Tourism:

In different parts of the world, the borderlands are becoming popular tourist destinations, giving away to the formation of the idea of 'border tourism'. Bringas defines border tourism as 'the temporary displacement of people outside their usual place of residence to the boundary between two counties adjacent cities, originated by leisure, entertainment, health, business, visits to relatives and/or friends, religion, social events or shopping, among other reasons, whose stay does not exceed one year and which comprises at least one night in the visited place. (Bringas,2004) the concept of border tourism appeared in 1980s in the works of E Anguiano, N Bringas, C Valdes and O Martinez, Campos Delgado and Odgers Ortiz, V Konrad, A Banducci, FJC Vazquez etc. Their works showed the insights on tourism along Mexico-Guatemalan border, American-Canadian border, Paraguayan- Brazilian border and Namibian- Angolan borders. However literatures relating to this perspective on India-Myanmar border have been very less or negligible. Given the nature of political relations between India and Myanmar, it only prominently came into sight after the 1991 effort of 'Look East Policy'.

Though historically, the people of Myanmar and North East India had relations and share the same cultural heritages. Both the countries too were under British colonial rule.

However due to different political systems, a military rule in Myanmar and democracy in India, relations didn't have a stability for a long time. However, two agreements are considered in diplomatic relations between these two countries- The Border Trade Agreement and An Memorandum of Understanding, both signed in 1994. With this friendly start, both the countries once again started to make advancements in their bilateral co-operation.

Along with the advancement in bilateral relations, India and Myanmar also shares membership in regional organisations such as BIMSTEC, Mekong Ganga Co-operation etc., which calls for improvement in infrastructures, economic relations along with cultural relations. Tourism which is one of the major priority sectors for BIMSTEC makes it an important tool for bilateral relations.

With globalisation, regional co-operation and infrastructural development, international tourism is slowly finding its pace. India too has promoted and developed tourism circuits all over. But mostly, tourism in India is sub-national in nature. Within a country tourism has different implication than outside the country. A political boundary inside the country doesn't have much barriers or constraints, as the international crossings demands. The equation here as Matznetter highlights is that the longer the waiting period at a border or the formalities associated with crossing it, the more it tends to become an obstacle with tourists. (Matznetter,1979) Political divisions too affect tourism in at least three ways, as pointed out by Dr Dallen J Timothy, in his work 'Tourism and international borders'. First, borders act as barriers to travel either because the lines themselves are heavily fortified or because the home or host country has imposed heavy travel restrictions. Secondly, borders often function as attractions. Borderlines themselves and the way they are marked can be significant tourism objects. Thirdly, borders influence in modifying the tourist landscape.

India-Myanmar Borderland and Border Tourism prospects:

This research is a very infant idea and an attempt to look at the idea of border tourism in the India-Myanmar borderland. Along with an overview of the area and the tourism potential in that area, the research will also try to come to an understanding using the ideas of J Matzenetter and G A Erikson. Tourism potential in India-Myanmar border areas has been very underdeveloped. The academic discourses on India-Myanmar have been limited to anthropological and sociological studies, where tourism as an element in research is either very less or negligible. India and Myanmar shares 1468 kms and mostly the borderland has a very difficult terrain. The case study of the research is Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh, which borders Myanmar in its southeast direction. The justification for selecting this area was due to the historic Stillwell road, alongside which many places of tourist interests have developed and some places which

are yet to be develop, having a huge potential. The two major border crossing in Changlang to Myanmar is Pangsau Pass. It lies in the heart of Patkai Hills, which had a history of Ahoms using for trade and the Britishers for trade and administrative purposes. The route has another historical significance as it was the same road which the Japanese Forces used to enter British India during the Second World War. The district also has an abundance of unexplored bio-diversity. The legacy of Second World War, the historic Stillwell Road, beautiful Patkai hills and the diverse tribal communities with their unique handlooms as well as their cultural heritage makes this district a picturesque tourist destination.

The Stillwell road which starts from Ledo in Assam stretches upto Kunming in China. The road lies in the lands of three nations-India, Myanmar and China. 61 kms of the road is in India which crosses the states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. To reach the starting point of this road, one can access the nearest airport of Dibrugarh, and the nearest railway junction is Tinsukia, located in Assam. The whole road strip till Pangsau pass is through tea gardens and has a beautiful scenic beauty throughout. The project originally known as 'Ledo road', now 'Stillwell', was constructed under the supervision of General Stillwell from 1942 till 1943, where the construction was done, alongside India fighting against the Japanese forces. Thus alongside this road, very recently a large burial ground was being unearthed. It was there since World War II, which apart from the local villagers was not aware of its existence. It was only during the 1990s when a platoon of Assam Rifles army stumbled upon its remains and brought out to the public's notice. It has the graves of around 20,000 to 30,000 soldiers (allied soldiers of African-American, Kachins, Indians and British) who fought in the Second World War and workers who died while constructing the Stillwell road. The cemetery is spread over three acres which makes it the largest cemetery of WWII in North East India. It is also on this same route that the world longest war time pipeline from Calcutta to Myanmar, for fuel was constructed. The completion of the approximately 1800 mile pipeline to China was major military achievement of the war. The Stillwell Road was build upon the old opium route that was utilized to carry out massive civilian exodus in 1942 after the fall of Myanmar. The cemetery also has a botanical garden along with a museum which is now in the construction phase. The artefacts and other important documents from the pre and during the World War II, which are now preserved in Jairampur administrative offices will be on display once the museum will be opened.

Three bridges are also seen which were constructed during the World World II. One of them is known as 'Hell Gate -Mile post 34.5'.

It was named as such by the Britishers, because it was the mirror image of hellish inferno. Hellgate was the beginning of the roads ascending into the Patkai

range that was hilly with inaccessible tropical rain forest and hazardous terrains. Thus it was a representation of the dangers lying ahead. There is also a beautiful church, St Paul Catholic Church at the heart of Nampong, the last border town before the Pangsau pass. It is also a well known popular festival- The Pangsau Pass Winter Festival, which started in 2007 and every year, the fanfare seems to be increasing. The festival goes beyond geographical boundaries and celebrates the cultures of the local tribes from Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar. This festival was an effort to bring the two nations together based on cultural heritages. It is a 3 day festival, generally celebrated in the month of January and the Pangsau Pass is opened for tourists, who can freely visit the Lake of No Return, in Myanmar on a day visit. The festival is a showcase of the extraordinary ethnic culture, cuisines and customs of various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Visitors also witness dances like Tangsa Rongrang dance, Lungchang dance, Wancho dance etc. The close proximity of Nampong with Myanmar makes it a very strategically important town. The Government of India has declared Nampong as an international trading hub, under the Border Trade Agreement between India and Myanmar signed in 1995. There is a Border Trade Centre in Nampong, which is opened on 10th, 20th and 30th of every month, where buying and selling of goods takes place between Indians and Myanmarese nationals. Nearly 20 kms ahead of the town, one can also witness the World War II observatory post at Wintong.

The Patkai hills is part of the Dehing Patkai Forest which is the largest lowland rainforest in North East India. The whole area is thus very rich in biodiversity. The forest harbours around 293 bird species, and exotic species of orchids and bromeliads. Not only flora and fauna is in abundance, but the region also has a variety of ethnic groups living in the area like Tai Phake, Khamyang, Khampti, Singpho, Nocte, Tangsa, Wancho etc.

Apart from these on the route, one can also take sub-routes from Jairampur to visit these places in Changlang district. Miao, a beautiful town situated at the bank of river Noa-Dehing surrounded by beautiful scenarios. Along with picnic spots in the river bank, the town also hosts a mini zoo, museum and a Tibetan refugee settlement area where colourful woollen carpets are produced. A beautiful monastery in the mid of this settlement area is another major tourist attraction. The Namdapha National Park and Tiger Reserve is located a few kilometres from Miao amidst hills and the Noa-Dehing River. It was declared a tiger reserve in 1983. There are more than 150 timber species and it is the only park in the world to have four feline species of big cat namely the Tiger (*Panthera tigris*), Leopard (*Panthera pardus*), Snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia*) and Clouded Leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*). Along with these, other species to be found are Assamese macaque, pig tailed macaque, stump tailed macaque etc. It also harbours many bird species such as White winged Wood Duck, the great Indian

hornbills, Jungle fowls and pheasants etc. In the village of Ranglum, one can find many crashed aircraft debris from World War II, along with a natural salt water spring. One can view the territory of Myanmar through a small trek along the Patkai Hills. Also in the villages of Jongpho and Thalom, one can find ancient stone carvings depicting the natural god and goddess. These villages doesn't have any proper infrastructural facilities, thus it is very much unexplored.

Political Boundary and its affect on Tourism:

The existence and functions of political boundaries influences the nature of tourism industry and the development of tourist destinations, especially when the tourist destinations are adjacent to or divided by or along the international borders. Matznetter has categorised the positions of international boundaries in relation to places of touristic interest into three broad types-

- a) Situations where the lines runs between two touristic areas but at a significant distance from each. Here the border is merely a barrier or a point of transit on the way to a more distant destination and its influence on tourist flows depends largely on its degree of permeability.
- b) Situations where touristic areas touch a border, but only on one side. It may remain the same for many years as tourism continues to develop on one side of the border only. However, in the situation that tourists are permitted to cross the border easily and given that the other side provides places or objects of interest, tourists from the developed side may begin to visit the non-developed side, thereby promoting the growth of tourism on both sides of the border.
- c) Conditions where tourist areas abut a boundary on both sides. In this condition, the cohesion between two tourist areas on each side depends to a large extent on the degree of openness between adjacent countries. (Matznetter,1979)

The tourist places of my research area are at a significant distance from the actual international boundary. The border is simply a transit point. But tourism has not developed much because of the difficult permeability issues. From the start of Stillwell road to Pangsau Pass, via Jairampur, there are more than 4 Assam Rifles security check points, where one has to verify all documents along with a check of the vehicle. This longer and strenuous procedure of formalities of check points and taking passes becomes an obstacle for tourists.

Also, any tourist place to flourish and become attractive depends on certain factors. Eriksson suggests that the level of attractiveness of border areas for tourists depends on a number of factors including the natural, social and cultural environment near the border and the degree of freedom or difficulty in crossing it. He classifies four sections-

- a) Borderlands which represents areas where boundaries are both difficult (sometimes nearly impossible) to cross and where they divide

dissimilar cultural or social groups. For instance, Israel and its Arab neighbours. This type of regions may attract those tourists who are willing to go through the tedious process of crossing a difficult border or evading the restrictions altogether in order to experience marked differences in landscape, culture and society on the other side.

- b) Borderlands which represents borders such as ones between Greece and Turkey where crossing is very easy, but where society and culture are different on each side.
- c) Borderlands such as between India and Myanmar, Mongolia and China, where the areas on both sides are inhabited by similar cultural or social groups but extensive formalities or restrictions are associated with crossing it.
- d) Borderlands which represents easy to cross boundaries where similar cultures and societies meet. For instance, Austria-Germany, Canada-United States. (Eriksson,1979)

As already figured out, India Myanmar border falls in classification C, where similar social groups are found on both sides. Pangsau pass on either sides of the border is inhabited by the Tangsa tribe. The Konyak Naga tribe is found on Nagaland-Myanmar border, while Kuki –Nagas are found on Manipur-Myanmar borders. With the close affinities between these tribes, there has always been movements and crossborder cooperation between them since a long time. The Free Movement Regime, which allows tribes living along the India-Myanmar border to travel 16 km across either side of the border without visa restrictions, was a outcome of the Act East Policy. Such policies were steps to success, but the question of its success is to be rethought as the pandemic happened along with recent military coup in Myanmar. The tribes of both the sides of the border too are connected on religious lines. Buddhist centres of worship are equally important for the tribes along both sides of the border, which has seen immense cross border movements.

CONCLUSION:

Borders or boundaries are often viewed as barriers to interaction and mobility, both conceptually and in reality. The material facets of border like big fences, checkpoints, drones, paper works etc are always tedious and long formalities. However, there are some kinds of tourists, who thrive to undergo these procedures and be the part of the thrill of crossing international borders. It is not common though, but tourists (wherever they are allowed), would click pictures of

the welcome billboards, border markers, poles displaying the flags of both the countries, the security outposts etc. In their own right these icons may be an attraction to many people as they mark the interface of differences in language and culture, social systems etc. (Timothy, 1995) The India-Myanmar border through Arunachal has been very less explored. The beautiful diverse tribe who are welcoming and tries to showcase their cultures and traditions, if guided properly and efficiently will open the tourism to this area. Not to mention, tourism as a economic potential would also be successful, once the locales are equally made the stake holder in the process of development. Political demarcations are necessary and restrictions too. The only holistic concept of developing tourism here is how to utilise the political demarcation and making it efficient for a tourist borderscape.

The information about various tourist places are collected from the observation method during my visits to Pangsau Pass, as a researcher for my Phd dissertation. Also I have verified my data with the Government of Arunachal sites. The sites are:

1. <https://changlang.nic.in/tourism/>
2. www.cbi-theater.com

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