

BORDERING WITHOUT OTHERING: PEACE AND SECURITY IN INDO-BHUTANESE FRONTIER

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Abstract

This article seeks to highlight a noteworthy instance of bordering along the Indo-Bhutan frontier. The essay combines aspects of nationalism and globalization. Nationalism deems open borders as wounds that need to be healed through fencing, while globalization seeks to open up borders for free trade and movement of people. The Indo-Bhutan border is distinct from the soft borders of Europe and the hard borders between unfriendly nations such as the USA and Mexico. This is due to the process of clear demarcation involving military patrols and simultaneously the citizens of the border villages extending their cooperation and mutual trust across the border and by not showing any signs of othering. Here, civilians play a crucial role as they have established mutual respect, collaboration, and confidence with the Bhutanese people while also supporting the SSB's widespread presence and patrols. The presence of SSB marks the solidification of borders due to rising nationalism, while the civilians on both sides of the hardened border show immense cooperation and mutual respect. Although security risks associated with othering by nationalist groups persist, the Indo-Bhutan borderline is an intriguing example.

Keywords: Bhutan, Border, India, Othering, Peace

Introduction



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For many reasons, the Indo-Bhutanese border is unique; it presents an interesting terrain full of differences. In sharp contrast to the rough hills and thick forests that characterize the Bhutanese side, the topography on the Indian side consists of relatively less vegetation. One need only cast a glance to tell the difference between the two sides, even without clear demarcation. Due to massive tree-cutting, the Indian border is marked by thin trees, whilst the Bhutanese side is covered with thick vegetation. The purpose of this article is to discuss the role of a few isolated villages that are located in the Udalguri district of Assam, close to the border with Bhutan in maintaining border security. The residents of these villages provide an engaging case study as they struggle with certain difficulties brought on by their proximity to the Indo-Bhutan frontier. Elephant assaults and water scarcity stand out among these issues as major worries that have an impact on day-to-day living in these border villages (Das, 2024). These villages also have to strike a careful balance between the processes of boundary delineation and "othering," which means seeing those on the other side of the border as fundamentally different or dangerous. These villages demonstrate high resilience and commitment to peace in the face of increasing border fortification; they embrace the complex bordering process without giving in to dividing notions.

The engagement of citizens in formal events like committee hearings, consultations, and participatory budgeting sessions is highly valued by participatory democrats. Less clearly "political" actions like unplanned protests, volunteer labor, or participation in workplace decision-making are also valued (Dacombe & Parvin, 2021). In a society that is frequently marked by violence and division, this offers an interesting case study. Here, citizens play a crucial role in determining frontier life and provide hope for peaceful cohabitation in the face of geopolitical conflicts. They challenge the idea that boundaries must inherently generate mistrust and enmity. The role of these settlements essentially creates the possibility of creating frontiers based on harmony and understanding among people. They create a way beyond the dichotomies of "us" and "them," creating possibilities of a more peaceful and inclusive borderland living. By doing this, they not only protect their communities but also open the door for a day when boundaries would not have to be obstacles but rather a means of collaboration. These villages bear the consequences of rigid boundaries as they balance the process of bordering and othering. As a result, this offers a rare example of border-making without othering, with citizens enhancing the security at the Indo-Bhutanese border.

Security Risks at Indo-Bhutan Border

Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities* argues that the members of even the smallest nation will never know each other, yet in the mind of each, there is the image of their communion. He argues that even if there exists exploitation and inequality in a nation, it will still be conceived as deep, horizontal comradeship. Anderson also makes an interesting argument regarding boundaries and borders. As no nation seeks a common boundary for mankind. There may be billions of people living in a nation, yet the boundary of the nation has to be finite even if it is elastic (Anderson, 1983). This concept becomes crucial in the face of rising nationalism even in the existence of cooperation between the people of two nations, the imagined community itself will exist in one's nation and not beyond the boundary. This does create the possibility of othering, especially because people have a pre-determined idea of communion. In the face of clear demarcation of boundaries, the imagined community becomes clearer. This creates the possibility of tensions in boundaries leading to security risks.

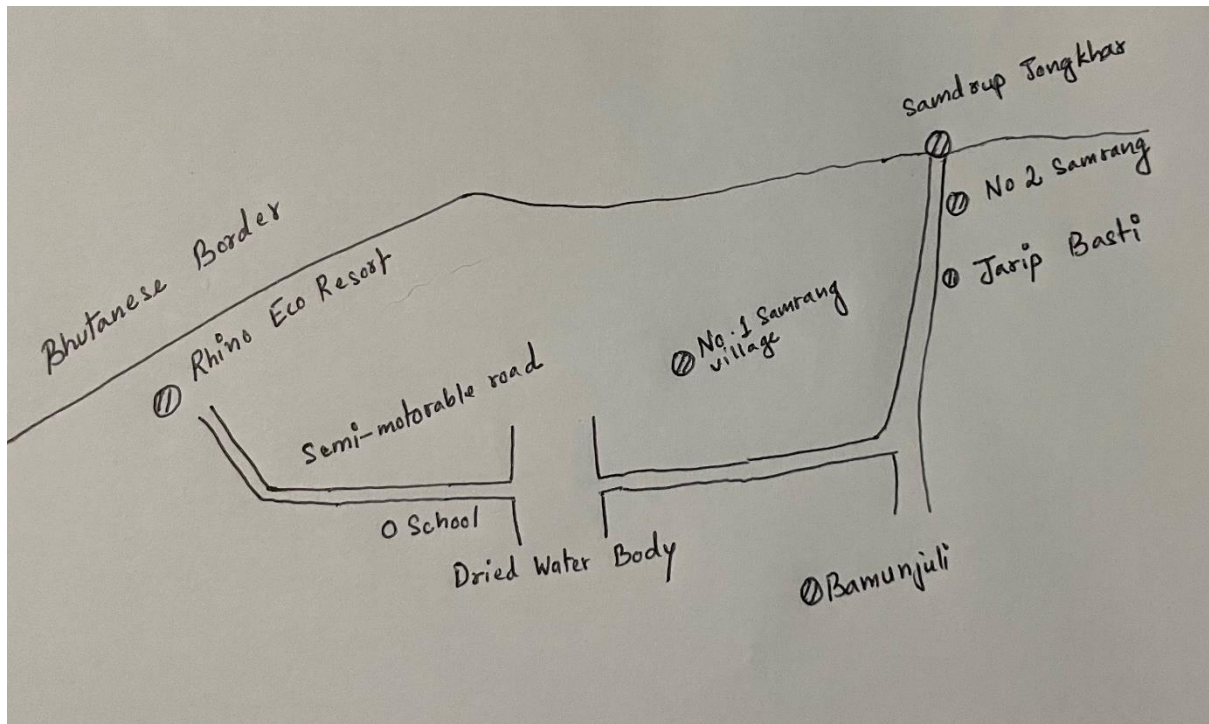
One concept that is less well-known but not any less significant centers on the idea of "non-traditional security" (NTS). NTS issues, in contrast to TS issues, are no longer of a military

nature and cover a wide range of topics, such as terrorism, energy, water and climate change, economics, and energy (Biba, 2016). Beyond traditional military threats, there are many security dangers along the Indo-Bhutan border. The possibility of "othering," in which differences in identity, culture, and socioeconomic location fuel tensions and conflict, is a serious security risk. Making the people living outside the border seem different while simultaneously forging a narrative of unity and homogeneity within the region is one of the most significant effects of "bordering," a phenomenon often referred to as "othering" (Cassar, 2022).

The process of viewing and treating people or groups as essentially distinct from oneself is known as "othering." It frequently involves the establishment of hierarchies, biases, and stereotypes intended to exclude the "other." It has been suggested that othering is a necessary component of imperialist and colonialist endeavors (Bhugra, Smith, Liebrez, & Ventriglio, 2023). Othering may take many different forms in the context of the Indo-Bhutan border, such as ethnic differences, environmental concerns, and cultural differences. India wants to collect money for its hydroelectric projects in Bhutan, thus it has suggested a new "Joint-Venture" (JV) model. Under the JV model, public sector enterprises from Bhutan and India collaborate, with 70% of the funding coming from corporate debt and 30% coming from Indian equity. Some of these projects hurt India itself (Roychodhury & Srinivasan, 2016). The border between India and Bhutan near Samdrup Jongkhar is facing the impact of India-funded dam projects.

The water crisis that villages on the Indian side are experiencing is one major security danger along the border. As per the villagers, the mining operations in Bhutan's highlands have contaminated water supplies, making them unsuitable for residential or consumer use. Because of Bhutan's perceived involvement as the root of the issue, the impacted Indian communities frequently hold Bhutanese people accountable for their situation. This creates conditions for border tensions, leading to security risks in the Indo-Bhutan border. Tensions are further heightened by Bhutan's control over the water supply. Bhutan controls the flow of water, which makes Indian citizens feel even more dependent and vulnerable. The problem of "us versus them" and current divides could be strengthened by unequal access to vital resources. The regular elephant intrusions from the dense jungle on the Bhutanese side present another security danger. In addition to causing property damage, these invasions endanger the safety and means of subsistence for Indian people.

Although the existence of elephants is a natural occurrence, the impacted people's dissatisfaction could be fuelled by the Bhutanese government's incapacity to adequately manage the problem. Security dangers at the border are further increased by cultural and religious asymmetry. Conflicts could arise between the Bhutanese and the majority Hindu population in the border villages of Samrang, Neoli, etc., especially about cow smuggling. News of Bhutanese people smuggling cows, purportedly with the help of members of some groups inside India, incites anger and indignation among the villagers. Communities of these villages view the act of cow smuggling as disrespectful, which increases the possibility of religious tensions and could create a sense of cultural separation. Negative preconceptions and biases could be reinforced when Bhutanese people are linked to acts that are considered objectionable and against the values of the villagers, which could theoretically lead to a cycle of distrust and othering. Beyond traditional military concerns, the security challenges at the Indo-Bhutan border are linked to the processes of othering. Cultural tensions, environmental deterioration, animal intrusions, water scarcity, previous violence history, and biases all could contribute to the fuelling of tensions and result in preconceptions that split societies and threaten peace and security.



Source: Map drawn by the researcher

Hardening of the Border

The term "border militarization" describes the methodical escalation of the border's security measures, turning the region from a transnational barrier into a place of ongoing conflict, enforcement, and alertness. The battle on drugs, crime, and immigration is being fought along the border, which has turned into an imaginary combat zone (NNiRR, 2020). Under the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) is a paramilitary police unit tasked with guarding India's borders with Nepal and Bhutan (Chakraborty, 2016). Even though the border between India and Bhutan is often quiet, there is still a military heavy presence there. The Indian side is well-represented, with a large number of people assigned to monitor the deep forests near the border, especially with the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB). Because of previous insurgent movements in border areas up to 2003, this was considered a necessary step. Bhutan faced a significant foreign policy dilemma when armed groups infiltrated its territory between 1992 and 2003 and established camps with between 3,000 and 4,000 fighters. This resulted in a brief but fierce military battle (Operation All Clear) in 2003 between the armed forces of Bhutan and the main militant Indian factions (ULFA, NDFB, and KLO) that had their base in Bhutan (Sinha & Liang, 2021).

The Indian army and rebels engaged in some fierce fighting that left the locals in fear and trauma. As a result, most of the residents bought firearms for their protection. The SSB intervened after the Indian army left to stop such situations from happening again. Following the battle with China, the Special Service Bureau, which is currently known as the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), was also established to attain "total security preparedness" in the distant border areas and fulfill a "stay-behind" duty if the opponent moved into Indian territory (Chopra, 2022). The SSB generally maintains good connections with the people, who also have a favorable opinion of them. The border is further hardened and becomes less permeable

by the SSB's regular patrols. Their existence, as a paramilitary group, adds to the border's militarization. Although patrolling is not as important on the Bhutanese side, the border crossing at Samdrup Jongkhar is less porous, now that guards have been stationed there. This increases the border's overall rigidity. The SSB's strong presence is a direct result of earlier confrontations with militant groups. Their patrols are intended to protect border villages from rebel activity. The villagers support the SSB's efforts since they have firsthand experience with the unrest brought on by insurgencies. Along the entire border, this cooperative connection aids in preserving peace and stability. The SSB has prepared patrolling routes through thick forests. The SSB's presence gives the residents a sense of security in addition to discouraging rebel activity. Their proactive involvement in the community develops collaboration and trust, two essential components of efficient border management. To make sure that villages feel safe and supported, the SSB conducts outreach initiatives and routine encounters. The militarization of the border, mostly because of the presence of the SSB, emphasizes how important security is to the area. Although preserving peace is the ultimate objective, militarization of the border.

Demarcating borders without othering

T. H. Marshall saw that for Germany to become a democracy after World War II, a combination of the state and community would need to emerge (Moses, 2017). The concept of "cosmopolitan democracy," which holds that the principles of democratic governance are essential for transnational organizations as well as national borders, was first advanced by David Held (Giddens, 2019). The demarcation process between India and Bhutan is intriguing due to its integration of two significant elements: nationalism and globalization. It is apparent that a nation needs borders of some kind, yet the trend of globalization is undermining these boundaries. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the prevalent opinion in the profession is that nationalism and globalization are inherently incompatible (Ariele, 2020). The Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) regularly patrols even in densely forested areas, clearly designating boundaries and demonstrating India's commitment to border security. This pledge shows how seriously India takes border security and how eager it is to have a strong presence along its borders, even with neighboring friendly countries like Bhutan.

The border patrolling not only points out India's commitment but also helps to solidify the border with Bhutan. Border solidification might typically lead to ethnocentrism or 'othering'. Cross-border ethnic identities tend to internationalize conflicts, and the repercussions of ethnic wars can destabilize entire regions when they spread to neighboring areas (Arena, 2022). However, in the Indo-Bhutan border area near Samdrup Jongkhar, the civilians play a crucial role in maintaining peace. They have absorbed the impact of bordering in a way that minimizes the possibility of ethnocentrism. This also proves that nationalism and globalization can be integrated. In this sense, the border village residents are especially interesting. Despite past conflicts, they actively work to sustain harmonious cohabitation. Their aversion to carrying weapons is indicative of their dedication to nonviolence and denial of violence. Furthermore, they recognize and value the peaceful spirit of the Bhutanese people, and they hold them in great regard. This particular situation is noteworthy as an excellent example of border management without 'othering'. The Indo-Bhutan border is a symbol of the strength of respect for one another and peaceful coexistence rather than one that promotes animosity or separation. Both countries have successfully maintained good ties while securing their borders using collaboration and understanding.

Conclusion

Along the Indo-Bhutan border, there are other security risks other than conventional military ones. A major security issue is the potential for "othering," which is the process by which disparities in identity, culture, and socioeconomic status exacerbate tensions and conflict. The border between India and Bhutan is generally peaceful. With a considerable number of personnel assigned to monitor the deep forests along the border, particularly with the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), the Indian side is well-represented. This was deemed necessary due to prior rebel activity in border areas until 2003. The process of drawing boundaries between India and Bhutan is fascinating because it combines nationalism and globalization, two important factors in the bordering process. Even in heavily wooded regions, the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) frequently patrols, establishing boundaries and displaying India's dedication to border security. In addition to demonstrating India's commitment, border patrols reinforce the boundary with Bhutan. Bhutan is an exception to the rule that border solidification usually results in ethnocentrism or "othering," or the unfavorable perception of people living on the other side of the border. Here, the involvement of the people is vital. They have minimized the potential for ethnocentrism by absorbing the effects of border-making. While this has not hampered the process of border solidification on the lines of rising nationalism.

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