

# **Fences and Forgotten Ties: Reimagining Border Policy After the Free Movement Regime's End in Arunachal Pradesh**

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## **Abstract**

*The termination of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) in February 2024 along the India-Myanmar border, including Arunachal Pradesh's 520-km stretch, has sparked debate over its implications for security, tribal heritage, and regional stability. While proponents of border fencing and regulated passes argue they will curb insurgency and smuggling in the Tirap-Changlang-Longding belt, this securitization oversimplifies a complex region shaped by colonial legacies, Myanmar's post-2021 coup crisis, and China's strategic presence. This opinion piece critiques the militarized approach, highlighting its risks of cultural erosion, economic disruption for women traders, ecological harm to Arunachal's biodiversity hotspot, and geopolitical missteps. Drawing on historical, social, gender, ecological, and geopolitical perspectives, it advocates for a holistic border policy that balances security with tribal agency, environmental integrity, and Arunachal's role in India's Act East Policy. By reimagining the border as a lived space of coexistence, India can foster sustainable peace in its Northeast frontier.*

**Keywords:** Free Movement Regime, India-Myanmar border, Act East Policy, regional cooperation, ecological stewardship, gender equity.

## **Introduction**

In February 2024, the Indian government terminated the Free Movement Regime (FMR), a policy allowing visa-free travel within 16 kilometers of the 1,643-km India-Myanmar border, including 520 km in Arunachal Pradesh. Hailed by security officials as a decisive step to curb insurgency and smuggling in Arunachal's Tirap-Changlang-Longding (TCL) belt, the decision has sparked intense debate. Proponents argue that border fencing and regulated passes will dismantle militant networks like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang-Yung Aung (NSCN-KYA) and restore civilian confidence. Yet, this securitization narrative oversimplifies a complex issue, risking cultural erosion, economic disruption, ecological harm, and geopolitical missteps in a region shaped by colonial legacies and contemporary crises.

Arunachal Pradesh, home to 26 major tribes and a biodiversity hotspot, is uniquely positioned at the intersection of India's Act East Policy and Myanmar's post-2021 coup turmoil. The FMR's abolition threatens to sever kinship networks among tribes like the Nagas, Lisus (Yobin), Noctes, and Tangsas, disrupt women-led border trade, and exacerbate tensions fueled by Myanmar's instability and China's looming presence. Drawing on historical, social, geopolitical, ecological, and gender perspectives, this opinion piece critiques the militarized approach to border management and advocates for a holistic policy that balances security with Arunachal's tribal heritage, environmental integrity, and strategic role. By reimagining the border as a lived space rather than a fortified line, India can foster sustainable peace in its Northeast frontier.

### **Historical Context: Colonial Borders and Tribal Fragmentation**

The India-Myanmar border, formalized by the 1826 Treaty of Yandabo following the First Anglo-Burmese War, is a colonial artifact that fractured the cultural and economic systems of Arunachal's border tribes (Lintner, 2015). Imposed by British imperial interests, the treaty bifurcated communities like the Nagas, Lisus, Noctes, Wanchos, and Tangsas, whose kinship networks and trade routes spanned the Eastern Himalayas and Myanmar's Kachin and Sagaing regions (Baruah, 2005). In Arunachal's TCL belt, tribes maintained fluid exchanges with their Myanmar counterparts, using mountain passes for festivals, marriages, and barter trade. The border's arbitrariness ignored these indigenous geographies, creating a legacy of division that persists in modern geopolitics (Scott, 2009).

The FMR, introduced in 1968 and expanded in 2016, was a pragmatic response to this colonial wound. By permitting visa-free travel within 16 kilometers of the border, it enabled Arunachal's tribes to sustain familial, spiritual, and economic ties with Myanmar's border communities (Baruah, 2007). For instance, the Nocte and Wancho in Longding district relied on cross-border mobility for the Oriah festival, a clan-based ritual reinforcing social cohesion. Similarly, the Lisu (Yobin) in Changlang's Vijaynagar circle maintained Christian religious networks with Kachin communities in Myanmar (Kikon & Karlsson, 2019). The FMR was not a mere convenience but a lifeline for tribal identities disrupted by colonial cartography.

To frame the FMR as a security loophole, as some narratives do, is to erase this history. The regime acknowledged the border's artificiality, allowing Arunachal's tribes to navigate a state-imposed division with agency and resilience. Scrapping it without addressing this context risks reinforcing a colonial mindset that prioritizes state control over indigenous realities (Guyot-Réchart, 2017). In Arunachal, where tribal customary laws govern social life, such policies threaten to alienate communities already wary of centralized governance, perpetuating a cycle of mistrust rooted in colonial and postcolonial interventions (Baruah, 2005).

### **Social Impacts: Cultural Erosion and Tribal Governance**

The FMR's termination threatens the cultural survival of Arunachal's border tribes, for whom cross-border kinship is a cornerstone of identity. In the TCL belt, communities like the Nagas and Tangsas straddle the border, maintaining ties through marriages, funerals, and festivals that transcend nation-states (Kikon & Karlsson, 2019). For example, the Tangsa's Wihu Kuh

festival involves cross-border clans from Myanmar's Sagaing region, reinforcing shared ancestry through song and ritual. Similarly, the Lisu's Christian networks link Vijaynagar to Kachin churches, sustaining spiritual solidarity (Aiyadurai, 2016). These practices are not incidental but constitutive of tribal cohesion in a region fragmented by borders.

Severing these ties with visa regimes and fencing risks cultural dislocation, eroding the intangible heritage that defines Arunachal's tribes. The state's failure to consult tribal councils or gaon burahs (village headmen), who wield significant authority under Arunachal's customary governance systems, exacerbates this threat (Elwin, 1959). Unlike Assam or Manipur, Arunachal's tribal governance is deeply rooted in oral traditions and clan-based decision-making, making community consent critical to policy legitimacy (Baruah, 2007). The FMR's unilateral abolition mirrors historical policies like the Arunachal Pradesh Frontier (Administration) Regulation, which marginalized tribal voices and fueled resentment (Kikon, 2019). Without dialogue, the policy risks deepening Arunachal's cultural alienation, undermining the state's pluralistic ethos.

### **Economic Impacts: Gendered Disparities and Trade Disruption**

Economically, the FMR's termination disrupts Arunachal's borderland livelihoods, particularly for women traders. Markets like Nampong-Pangasu in Changlang and Pangsau Pass in Longding rely on cross-border trade, where Nocte and Tangsa women exchange rice, textiles, and handicrafts with Myanmar's border villages (McDuie-Ra & Kikon, 2016). These traders, often operating in patriarchal tribal structures, leverage border markets to gain economic autonomy, supporting families in remote areas with limited infrastructure (Chakraborty, 2018). The FMR's abolition, coupled with fencing, chokes these networks, plunging women into precarity.

The proposed pass system, while regulatory, offers no substitute for the fluid commerce that sustains Arunachal's border economy. Unlike Moreh in Manipur, which has formalized trade zones, Arunachal's border markets remain informal, making them vulnerable to abrupt closures (McDuie-Ra, 2016). The lack of economic alternatives—such as designated trade zones or microfinance for women traders—risks exacerbating Arunachal's economic disparities, where border districts rank among India's poorest (UNDP, 2011). For instance, Longding's per capita income is half the national average, with women bearing the brunt of underdevelopment (Chaudhuri, 2013). A gender-sensitive policy would prioritize women's economic agency, ensuring security measures do not deepen existing inequalities.

### **Geopolitical Dynamics: Myanmar's Crisis and China's Shadow**

Arunachal's 520-km border with Myanmar is a frontline in a volatile geopolitical landscape, shaped by Myanmar's post-2021 coup crisis and China's growing influence. The coup has displaced over 3.2 million people, with ethnic armed groups like the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Arakan Army escalating conflicts in Myanmar's border regions (UNHCR, 2024). These dynamics spill into Arunachal, where the TCL belt's insurgency, linked to NSCN-KYA, exploits Myanmar's porous borderlands (Lintner, 2021). Kachin refugees,

though fewer than in Mizoram (40,150) or Manipur (8,250), have sought shelter in Changlang's remote villages, straining local resources (The Hindu, 2024).

Unilateral measures like fencing fail to address this transnational crisis. Insurgency and smuggling are not solely Indian problems but symptoms of Myanmar's collapse, compounded by the junta's inability to control border areas (Chaudhury & Basu, 2023). India's Act East Policy, which envisions Arunachal as a gateway to Southeast Asia via projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, demands regional cooperation—humanitarian aid for refugees, dialogue with KIA, and joint border patrols (Baruah, 2007). Yet, the FMR's termination reflects insularity, treating Arunachal's border as a domestic issue rather than a shared frontier.

China's shadow looms large, adding complexity. Beijing's claims over Arunachal as "South Tibet" and its infrastructure projects in Myanmar's Kachin State heighten strategic tensions (Guyot-Réchard, 2017). The TCL belt's proximity to China's border makes Arunachal a geopolitical flashpoint, where fencing may signal resolve but risks provoking cross-border incidents. A holistic policy would leverage Arunachal's strategic position, using diplomacy to stabilize Myanmar while countering China's influence through soft power, such as cultural exchanges with Southeast Asia (Lintner, 2015).

### **Ecological Concerns: Fencing Arunachal's Biodiversity Hotspot**

Arunachal Pradesh, part of the Eastern Himalayan biodiversity hotspot, hosts ecosystems critical to global conservation. The TCL belt includes Namdapha National Park and Kamlang Wildlife Sanctuary, home to endangered species like the hoolock gibbon, clouded leopard, and red panda (Datta et al., 2008). Border fencing, which involves clearing forests and building access roads, threatens these habitats by fragmenting wildlife corridors that span the India-Myanmar border (Aiyadurai, 2016). In Namdapha, poaching and habitat loss have already reduced large carnivore populations, and fencing could exacerbate this decline (Datta et al., 2008).

Arunachal's tribes, such as the Lisu in Vijaynagar, practice sustainable traditions like forest co-management, which balance human needs with ecological preservation (Aiyadurai, 2016). Yet, the government's environmental assessments for fencing remain opaque, raising concerns about compliance with the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 (Menon et al., 2017). Community-led conservation models, such as the Idu Mishmi's tiger protection rituals, offer alternatives that align security with ecological integrity (Aiyadurai, 2016). Ignoring these practices risks undermining Arunachal's role as a global biodiversity steward, with ripple effects for tribal livelihoods tied to the land (Kikon, 2019).

### **Critiquing Securitization: Arunachal's Historical Lessons**

The narrative of "security as development," embodied in the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) and Arunachal's fencing project, is a recurring trope in Northeast India (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2023). Yet, Arunachal's history challenges this logic. The AFSPA,

enforced in the TCL belt since 1991, has entrenched mistrust through extrajudicial measures, while BADP's focus on infrastructure—roads, fences, checkpoints—has neglected human development (Kikon, 2019). In Longding and Changlang, schools and hospitals are underfunded, with only 30% of villages electrified, contrasting with the proliferation of security outposts (UNDP, 2011).

The India-Bangladesh border offers a cautionary parallel. Fencing, completed in the 2000s, was touted as a solution to smuggling but isolated communities, disrupted trade, and failed to eliminate crime (van Schendel, 2005). In Arunachal, similar measures risk transforming the TCL belt into a fortified enclave, where surveillance supplants the fluidity of tribal life. The claim that fencing will “restore civilian confidence” is empirically weak, given Arunachal's history of alienation under securitized governance (Guyot-Réchard, 2017). Insurgency in the TCL belt stems from structural grievances—unemployment, political exclusion, and state neglect—that militarization cannot address (Baruah, 2005).

### **A Path Forward: A Holistic Vision for Arunachal's Borderlands**

A reimagined border policy for Arunachal Pradesh must integrate five principles, grounded in the state's tribal, ecological, and strategic realities:

1. **Tribal-Centric Dialogue:** Engage Arunachal's tribes through platforms like the Arunachal Pradesh Tribal Welfare Society and gaon burah councils. Public consultations, modeled on Nagaland's village assemblies, can ensure security measures reflect tribal priorities, fostering trust and legitimacy (Elwin, 1959). For example, involving Nocte and Wancho leaders in Longding can align pass systems with festival schedules.
2. **Cultural Preservation:** Introduce flexible mechanisms, such as seasonal permits for cross-border festivals or kinship visits, to sustain tribal identities. A tailored pass system for the Tangsa's Wihu Kuh festival could balance security with cultural continuity, drawing on the FMR's original intent (Baruah, 2007).
3. **Economic Empowerment:** Establish cross-border trade zones in Nampong-Pangasu and Pangsau Pass, prioritizing women traders. These zones, inspired by Moreh's success, can regulate commerce while sustaining livelihoods, with microfinance schemes to support Nocte and Tangsa women (McDuie-Ra & Kikon, 2016).
4. **Environmental Stewardship:** Integrate tribal conservation practices into fencing projects, ensuring compliance with environmental laws. Community-led models, like the Lisu's forest co-management in Vijaynagar, can mitigate habitat loss while empowering tribes as ecological stewards (Aiyadurai, 2016).
5. **Regional Cooperation:** Leverage Arunachal's role in the Act East Policy to foster regional stability. Humanitarian aid for Kachin refugees, dialogue with Myanmar's ethnic groups, and joint border initiatives can address transnational challenges, while cultural exchanges via the Trilateral Highway can counter China's influence (Chaudhury & Basu, 2023).

These principles reframe Arunachal's border as a space of coexistence, where security complements tribal agency, ecological integrity, and regional connectivity.

## Conclusion

The termination of the Free Movement Regime marks a crossroads for Arunachal Pradesh, a state where tribal heritage, biodiversity, and strategic frontiers converge. While security in the TCL belt is critical, a militarized approach risks alienating tribes, degrading ecosystems, and misjudging Myanmar's crisis and China's ambitions. By weaving together historical sensitivity, tribal inclusion, gender equity, environmental stewardship, and regional foresight, India can craft a border policy that is both secure and humane. Arunachal's border is not just a line to be fenced but a tapestry of cultures, histories, and aspirations. Fences may guard a frontier, but only dialogue and cooperation can build a lasting peace that honors the state's unique identity.

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