



From Peripheral Settlements to Resilient Borderlands: Security, Mobility and Sustainable Development along India's Borders with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh

Dr. Shivendra Shahi

Assistant Professor, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Shri Varshney College, Aligarh

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ABSTRACT

India's frontiers with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh constitute a strategically connected but institutionally diverse border arc. Their settlements are commonly represented as distant security margins, although they function simultaneously as labour markets, commercial nodes, ecological zones and sites of intense social interaction. This article reconceptualizes these settlements as borderland systems whose resilience depends upon the combined performance of security institutions, mobility regimes, local economies, public services and transboundary environmental governance. Drawing upon critical border studies, migration scholarship, ethnographic research, civil-society reports, environmental studies and official policy documents, the article adopts a structured comparative approach. It finds that the India–Nepal frontier is organized around managed openness; the India-Bhutan frontier rests upon strategic trust and developmental interdependence; and the India-Bangladesh frontier reflects regulated mobility, territorial consolidation and extensive security infrastructure. Despite these differences, each border exhibits a recurring contradiction: national connectivity and security projects often expand faster than the institutional capacity of local settlements to capture benefits, manage vulnerability or participate in decision-making. The article therefore

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proposes differentiated borderland resilience-a model that preserves frontier-specific legal arrangements while integrating risk-based security, lawful mobility, livelihood formalization, ecological adaptation and accountable local governance. It concludes with a Borderland Resilience Compact for Viksit Bharat@2047, centred on corridor-level planning, integrated service hubs, portable social protection, community-based intelligence, transboundary environmental cooperation and outcome-based evaluation. Resilient borderlands, the article argues, arise not from territorial closure alone but from the state's capacity to distinguish legitimate circulation from harmful activity while converting border proximity into sustainable opportunity.

1. Introduction: Reconsidering the Strategic Margin

India shares 1,751 kilometres of boundary with Nepal, 699 kilometres with Bhutan and 4,096.7 kilometres with Bangladesh. Together these frontiers extend across the Terai, the eastern Himalaya, the Brahmaputra valley and the Bengal delta. Their geography is matched by institutional diversity. Movement across Nepal is historically open; interaction with Bhutan is shaped by close strategic partnership and regulated ease; and the Bangladesh boundary is managed through a denser apparatus of fencing, land ports, patrols and immigration control.¹

A line-centred approach treats these areas primarily as surfaces of territorial defence. It consequently measures achievement through kilometres of fencing, roads, outposts or surveillance coverage. Such indicators matter, but they reveal little about whether a border settlement has reliable health care, lawful trading opportunities, disaster resilience, documentary access or confidence in public institutions. The security of the boundary and the security of the people living beside it are analytically distinguishable, yet operationally interconnected.

This article advances three propositions. First, there is no single eastern-border problem; governance must be differentiated according to treaty regime, terrain, mobility and local political economy. Second, border communities are not merely populations to be monitored. They are sources of economic value, ecological knowledge and situational awareness. Third, sustainable development strengthens sovereignty when it reduces dependence upon informal intermediaries, increases the visibility of lawful activity and creates incentives for cooperation with the state.



The central concept is differentiated borderland resilience. Resilience refers to the capacity of settlements and institutions to withstand security, economic and environmental shocks while preserving lawful mobility and social legitimacy. Differentiation requires common national objectives to be pursued through frontier-specific instruments. The approach therefore rejects both unregulated movement and indiscriminate closure.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Perspective

Critical scholarship has shown why the border cannot be reduced to a cartographic fact. Willem van Schendel's history of the Bengal borderland demonstrates that Partition territorialized a social and economic region whose networks did not disappear when the international line was drawn. Borderlanders continued to negotiate markets, kinship and identity across changing legal categories. This historical insight challenges the assumption that cross-border interaction is necessarily evidence of weak sovereignty.²

Jason Cons's ethnography of the India–Bangladesh enclave system develops the idea of 'sensitive space': a territory in which national anxiety, exceptional administration and development promise become concentrated. His work makes clear that infrastructure is socially distributive. A corridor may increase state access while leaving nearby residents outside its economic benefits; a fence may enhance surveillance while interrupting access to land and social networks.³

Reece Jones directs attention to the violence and political narratives associated with hardened borders. His analysis of Indian border fencing argues that security discourse can merge territorial threats with older communal distinctions. This does not invalidate border enforcement. It requires evaluation of proportionality, error, displacement and the everyday burdens placed upon groups treated as presumptively suspicious.⁴

Scholar-activist research undertaken by the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group places displacement, citizenship, dignity and mixed migration at the centre of analysis. Micro-level studies of Bengal border villages reveal that mobility routines change with surveillance, local politics and livelihood cycles.⁵ These studies warn against treating demographic change or cultural identity as a substitute for evidence of legal status.⁶

The India–Nepal literature presents openness as both a social institution and a governance challenge. Rajeev Kumar characterizes the border as a lifeline sustained by reciprocal needs, while Lok Raj Baral and Uddhab Pyakurel document the opportunities and vulnerabilities embedded in everyday circulation.⁷ Their findings support regulation through cooperation, documentation and worker protection rather than through the destruction of an historically embedded mobility regime.⁸



Research on India-Bhutan trade similarly complicates aggregate accounts. Deepanshu Mohan and colleagues show that border markets possess distinctive supply chains and social relations that disappear in national trade statistics.⁹ Environmental scholars working through ICIMOD demonstrate that the Himalayan borderlands are also transboundary ecosystems in which conservation and livelihood security must be jointly negotiated.¹⁰

Taken together, these literatures disclose a missing comparative link. Historians explain territorialization, ethnographers reveal lived borders, security scholars examine control, and environmental research maps ecological interdependence. Few studies integrate these insights across all three frontiers. The framework developed here treats territorial capacity, legitimate circulation, social reproduction and ecological adaptation as components of a single borderland system.

3. Methodology and Scope

The study follows a structured comparative design. Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh are examined as three border regimes within India's eastern strategic neighbourhood. Each case is evaluated through five questions: What legal rules organize mobility? Which livelihood and social networks cross the boundary? What security risks exploit those networks? How are infrastructure and development benefits distributed? Which environmental processes require bilateral action?

The evidence base combines academic books and journal articles, field-based research, NGO and intergovernmental reports, environmental journalism, treaties and official policy records. Government documents are used principally for jurisdictional facts, programmes and bilateral commitments; independent sources are used to assess social effects, competing interpretations and implementation gaps. This division prevents official description from becoming the article's only analytical voice.

The method has limits. Border-wide statistics conceal sharp variation among districts and crossing points. Enforcement records measure detected incidents rather than the full extent of an activity. Journalistic cases illuminate mechanisms but do not establish prevalence. The article therefore avoids estimating irregular populations from apprehensions, religious composition or residual population growth. Its purpose is institutional comparison and policy design.

4. India-Nepal: Preserving Openness while Increasing Legibility

The India-Nepal frontier derives much of its political significance from the routine character of movement. The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship formalized a wider relationship of residence, employment and



economic interaction. Workers, pilgrims, students, patients, traders and families cross through a landscape in which the border is often less socially disruptive than an internal administrative boundary.¹¹

Openness produces strategic value. It sustains dense interpersonal ties and enables labour to move toward opportunity. Yet limited registration and the use of informal routes may also be exploited by traffickers, forged-document networks and smugglers. The relevant policy problem is not openness itself but inadequate differentiation among mobility categories. General restriction would transfer costs to lawful travellers while adaptable criminal networks shifted routes.

A more credible model is managed openness. Major corridors require voluntary or low-burden worker registration, secure identity verification, joint intelligence and rapid district-level communication. The International Organization for Migration's baseline research emphasizes the importance of improving knowledge about cross-border mobility rather than relying on assumption. Anti-trafficking measures must focus on recruiters, transport chains and financial beneficiaries, while ensuring that victims receive protection rather than being processed simply as immigration offenders.¹²

The border's settlement system also faces floods, river-course changes, uneven services and corridor-led urban growth. Field reporting from Banbasa illustrates how changes in cross-border passenger movement immediately affect transport revenue and small businesses. This local economic sensitivity shows why security restrictions should be targeted, time-bound and communicated clearly.¹³

Boundary controversies require sustained technical mechanisms, but they should not paralyse ordinary cooperation. Joint mapping, pillar maintenance, flood information and local administrative dialogue can contain disputes within institutional channels. Resilience here means preserving the social advantages of openness while making risk visible and labour rights enforceable.

5. India-Bhutan: Trust, Markets and Ecological Interdependence

The India-Bhutan border operates through a different political economy. Strategic trust, hydropower cooperation, duty-free trade and Bhutan's access to Indian transit infrastructure create an unusually dense relationship. Border towns such as Jaigaon and Phuentsholing function as interconnected markets, although regulatory and urban conditions differ across the line.

Ethnographic work on Dadgiri/Hatisar and other market spaces demonstrates that cross-border trade depends upon small traders, transport workers and locally negotiated practices as well as formal agreements.



New railways, roads or immigration facilities can widen opportunity, but corridor growth may concentrate value in logistics firms while imposing land, congestion and environmental costs upon nearby settlements.¹⁴

The Darranga Immigration Check Post, opened in 2024 for third-country nationals, signals the frontier's expanding role in wider regional circulation. Connectivity planning should therefore incorporate affordable commercial facilities, local skill formation, public transport and transparent land compensation. Otherwise, border settlements will host strategic infrastructure without becoming participants in the prosperity it generates.¹⁵ Forests add a second dimension. Research on conflict and conservation along the frontier shows that the same terrain can support wildlife, community livelihoods and covert movement.¹⁶ Purely sectoral governance is inadequate: security forces, forest departments and village institutions require shared protocols. ICIMOD's transboundary landscape approach provides a basis for cooperation across administrative boundaries while recognizing the interests of dependent communities.¹⁷

The Bhutan case demonstrates that trust is not the absence of governance. It is accumulated institutional capital. Regular border-district meetings, predictable trade rules and responsive problem-solving reduce uncertainty. Resilience depends upon renewing that trust at the local level, where citizens encounter markets, customs, policing and environmental regulation.

6. India-Bangladesh: Security Infrastructure and the Politics of Everyday Life

The India-Bangladesh boundary is the longest and most administratively intensive of the three frontiers. Its riverine stretches, dense settlement, Partition history and contemporary political salience have encouraged an infrastructure-led security approach. Fencing, floodlighting, roads, border outposts and technological surveillance constitute central instruments.¹⁸

Van Schendel and Cons nevertheless show that the Bengal frontier is not an empty line awaiting control. It is a historically produced social region in which the boundary passes through settlements, fields and older circuits of exchange. Enforcement therefore has distributive consequences. Farmers may face restricted access to land beyond a fence; households near the zero line experience intensified scrutiny; and informal traders may become dependent upon intermediaries.

The 2015 Land Boundary Agreement demonstrates a different form of state capacity. By resolving enclaves and adverse possessions, India and Bangladesh replaced territorial ambiguity with negotiated jurisdiction and citizenship choice. The achievement suggests that sovereignty can be consolidated through legal clarity and resident-centred implementation, not only through physical closure.¹⁹



Trafficking, smuggling, document fraud and unauthorized movement remain legitimate security concerns. They must, however, be disaggregated. A trafficked child, an undocumented labourer, a commercial smuggler and an armed actor do not represent the same threat. Risk-based screening and network investigation are more effective than demographic profiling because they focus on conduct, routes, recruiters and financial relationships.

Formal connectivity can reduce the attraction of informal systems when compliance is practically accessible. Border haats, land ports, rail links and inland waterways can turn the frontier into an economic interface. The 2024 bilateral Shared Vision placed connectivity and subregional transit at the centre of cooperation. Its developmental legitimacy will depend upon whether border districts obtain employment, market access and improved services rather than functioning only as transit surfaces.²⁰

Climate risk further unsettles a security-only narrative. World Bank modelling anticipates large-scale internal climate mobility in South Asia, while independent analysis emphasizes that environmental pressure interacts with household resources, networks and labour demand.²¹ Such projections should not be presented as automatic forecasts of migration from Bangladesh to India. Their immediate policy relevance lies in adaptation, disaster coordination and livelihood protection on both sides.²²

7. Cross-Cutting Challenges

Across the three frontiers, the first recurring problem is institutional fragmentation. Security forces, customs, immigration authorities, police, district administrations, local governments and environmental agencies operate through separate reporting chains. Residents consequently confront multiple offices, while information relevant to trafficking, disaster or trade may move slowly between institutions.

The second challenge is the ambiguous role of informality. Informal trade and mobility can sustain households where formal infrastructure is distant or costly; the same networks may be appropriated by coercive actors. A durable response must reduce the price of legality. Simplified permits, accessible banking, storage, transport and documentary assistance can draw ordinary economic activity toward regulated channels, allowing enforcement to concentrate on serious harm.

Third, infrastructure is often assessed as a physical output rather than a social intervention. A road may improve patrol mobility but accelerate land speculation. A fence may reduce particular crossings while displacing them toward hazardous terrain. A land port may expand national trade without supporting local enterprise. Evaluation must examine who gains access, who bears costs and whether risks are reduced rather than merely relocated.



Fourth, border communities are vulnerable to categorical suspicion. Language, religion, occupation or birthplace cannot establish immigration status or security risk. Profiling generates false positives, diverts investigative attention and weakens cooperation. Legitimate enforcement requires evidence, reviewable decisions and mechanisms for correcting documentary errors.

Finally, ecosystems connect what political boundaries divide. Floods, erosion, wildlife movement, forest fire and landslides require information exchange and coordinated planning. Mongabay-India's reporting on the Kangchenjunga landscape illustrates how conservation boundaries and human-wildlife conflict extend across jurisdictions. Ecological cooperation is therefore an element of preventive security.²³

8. Mobility, Gender and the Unequal Experience of Borders

Mobility is experienced unevenly. Traders with capital, transport firms and frequent documented travellers can absorb delays and regulatory costs more easily than seasonal workers, small cultivators or people seeking urgent medical care. Women and children encounter additional exposure to deceptive recruitment, sexual exploitation and documentary dependence. A border regime may therefore appear open at the aggregate level while remaining coercive for those with the least bargaining power.

Human-trafficking research along the India-Nepal frontier demonstrates that mobility restriction alone does not dismantle exploitation. Recruiters use promises of employment, marriage or onward migration; forged documents may be obtained after crossing; and victims may not identify themselves as trafficked at the point of interception. Effective prevention requires origin-area awareness, regulation of recruiters, financial investigation, trained screening and long-term rehabilitation. Border forces constitute one part of this chain rather than its entire institutional solution.²⁴

Citizenship and documentation generate a different inequality. Border residents may possess inconsistent spellings, delayed birth registration or documents issued under changing administrative boundaries. When service-access databases are treated as conclusive citizenship instruments, minor errors can acquire severe consequences. Administrative legibility must therefore include correction procedures, evidentiary flexibility and reasoned review. Documentation policy should make lawful identity easier to establish rather than transform documentary poverty into presumed illegality. Labour formalization should similarly follow fair-recruitment principles so that workers can report abuse without losing access to wages or remedy.²⁵

Gender-sensitive infrastructure also matters. Safe transport, lighting, sanitation, help desks, childcare and women personnel at crossing points can alter the practical accessibility of lawful mobility. Civil-society



organizations possess experience in victim identification and referral that should be integrated through transparent protocols without outsourcing the state's protective responsibilities.²⁶

A resilient mobility regime consequently evaluates not only how many people cross but under what conditions, at what cost and with which protections. Disaggregated data on sex, age, purpose of travel and case outcome can reveal vulnerabilities while respecting privacy. The relevant security achievement is not simply interception; it is the reduction of coercive movement and the successful prosecution of those who profit from it.

9. Sustainable Borderland Development beyond Corridor Construction

The developmental transformation of a borderland cannot be inferred from the presence of a highway, railway or land port. Corridors reduce distance between national markets, but they may create enclaves of logistical efficiency surrounded by poorly serviced settlements. Land values rise, commercial activity concentrates near terminals and smaller villages may lose traffic without obtaining alternative employment. Infrastructure assessment must therefore extend beyond throughput to territorial distribution, a concern also relevant to subregional corridor planning under the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation framework.²⁷

Border haats illustrate the potential of locally embedded connectivity. When designed around small consignments and accessible procedures, they can formalize customary exchange, support women traders and create regular contact between administrations. Research by CUTS International has emphasized the livelihood and confidence-building role of border trade in eastern South Asia. Yet haats require storage, banking, transport, product standards and transparent selection of participants if their benefits are to extend beyond a narrow group.²⁸

Public services are equally strategic. Border residents should not need to cross informally because the nearest clinic, school or market lies on the other side. Telemedicine, mobile services and all-weather transport can reduce vulnerability, while interoperable emergency referral can protect life when domestic facilities remain distant. Investment criteria should incorporate travel time and seasonal accessibility rather than rely on administrative population ratios alone.

Climate adaptation must be designed at settlement scale. Raised roads, flood-resilient health centres, protected water systems, slope stabilization, crop diversification and insurance can reduce distress mobility. ICIMOD's regional work shows that transboundary landscape governance is most durable when local livelihoods and conservation are planned together. A protected landscape that excludes dependent



communities may generate resistance; unregulated extraction, by contrast, destroys the ecological base of long-term security.²⁹

Digital connectivity introduces both opportunity and risk. Online services can improve documentation, banking and market access, but cyber-enabled recruitment and misinformation can cross borders faster than physical movement. Digital literacy, secure grievance channels and multilingual public information should accompany surveillance technology. Developmental digitalization must not become an unreviewable system of population profiling.

The central principle is local value capture. A specified share of employment, procurement, training and municipal revenue generated by major corridor projects should benefit surrounding settlements. Social-impact monitoring should continue after construction. Without such arrangements, national connectivity may modernize the movement of goods while reproducing the borderland as a labour reserve and security buffer.

10. Differentiated Borderland Resilience

A resilient border regime must perform five functions simultaneously. It must protect territorial integrity; organize lawful mobility; sustain viable settlements; adapt to ecological change; and maintain institutional legitimacy. Failure in one dimension transfers pressure to the others. Livelihood insecurity can strengthen illicit recruitment, while arbitrary enforcement can reduce the community information needed for effective policing.

Differentiation determines the appropriate instrument. On the Nepal frontier, the priority is to preserve openness while improving worker protection and intelligence coordination. On the Bhutan frontier, connectivity must be embedded in local market development and ecological safeguards. On the Bangladesh frontier, surveillance and fencing must be balanced by lawful trade, rights-conscious status procedures and support for communities affected by infrastructure.

Technology should support this model without becoming its governing logic. Sensors, cameras and interoperable records can improve response, but systems require maintenance, data-quality standards, purpose limitation and human review. A costly platform that produces unverified alerts or cannot operate during floods creates an appearance of modernization rather than operational capacity.

Community participation is equally important. Residents possess route knowledge, environmental memory and early awareness of new intermediaries. Liaison arrangements should include women, traders, farmers,

transport workers and Janjatiya institutions. Participation must not be reduced to intelligence extraction; it must also influence service planning, land access, compensation and grievance resolution.

11. A Borderland Resilience Compact for Viksit Bharat@2047

India should adopt a Borderland Resilience Compact combining national principles with corridor-specific action plans. Each plan should map settlement patterns, lawful and irregular mobility, livelihood dependence, ecological exposure, infrastructure and institutional responsibility. The planning unit should be the functional corridor and its surrounding settlements, not the international line in isolation.

A Borderland Observatory should publish comparable non-personal indicators on civil registration, service access, employment, trade, disaster displacement, trafficking cases, case resolution and community trust. It must disclose definitions and uncertainty. The observatory should never infer citizenship or threat from group identity.

Integrated service hubs near major crossings could combine documentation support, labour information, customs assistance, health referral, banking, victim protection and grievance registration. By lowering transaction costs, these hubs would make lawful conduct more accessible and reduce dependence upon brokers.

Border-area expenditure should be evaluated through outcomes. The Border Infrastructure and Management Scheme and border-development programmes provide important material resources. Success, however, should be judged through reduced victimization, faster legitimate crossings, reliable disaster response, livelihood recovery, higher formal trade and improved trust-not expenditure alone.³⁰

Bilateral cooperation must move below the national level. District-to-district communication, professional working groups, joint environmental monitoring and standardized referral procedures can preserve cooperation during political fluctuation. BBIN connectivity should be accompanied by local benefit-sharing, safety standards and labour protections so that faster corridors do not reproduce peripheral settlements.

Universities and independent organizations should participate in evaluation. Longitudinal household studies, matched border and non-border comparisons, and qualitative research can reveal effects that administrative systems overlook. Research access must protect participants and prevent academic data from being repurposed for individual enforcement.

12. Conclusion



India's borders with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh cannot be governed effectively through a single doctrine. They embody distinct combinations of openness, trust, regulation, ecology and political history. Yet their settlements face a shared danger: remaining socially peripheral even as their territory becomes increasingly strategic.

Differentiated borderland resilience offers a way beyond the false opposition between security and mobility. It directs coercive capacity toward demonstrable risks, protects legitimate circulation, formalizes economic opportunity and treats ecological adaptation as security policy. It also makes local legitimacy a measure of institutional strength.

By 2047, a successful border should be visible not only through stronger surveillance but through safer movement, resilient livelihoods, functional services, reduced trafficking, expanded formal commerce and trusted public authority. Converting peripheral settlements into resilient borderlands is therefore not a concession to frontier populations. It is an investment in India's sovereignty, neighbourhood leadership and sustainable national development.

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