

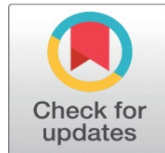
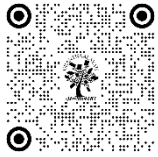
THE CHALLENGING REALITY OF MOLCHAM VILLAGE AT THE MANIPUR-MYANMAR BORDER

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ABSTRACT

The situation along the Manipur-Myanmar border is fraught with issues such as illegal crossings, insurgency, and various trafficking-related organised crimes. Although this border area is often perceived as settled and calm from the outside, it is susceptible and marked by numerous unresolved events that have persisted for decades. Both sides of the border have made claims and counterclaims regarding encroachment. Amid this complexity, Molcham village, linked to Border Pillar 66 in the Chandel district of Manipur, has suffered from encroachment and inadequate security management. Its existence remains ambiguous, as it is situated on the Indian side but is claimed by Myanmar as part of its territory. Some village areas have already been infringed upon due to the lack of clear distinction and a disputed boundary. Molcham village, positioned at the border's edge, requires significant improvement and development. A clear picture of inadequacy emerges, characterised by poor road access and a lack of governmental infrastructure typically expected in a border village despite being one of the critical entry points to the neighbouring country. This study employs Explanatory Research to highlight the disputed conditions in Molcham and to shed light on the borderland geopolitics that could protect the village from Burmese encroachment and aggressive territorial claims. Though it is a small village, understanding its geopolitical significance reveals the hidden disputes that can trigger broader concerns. In examining the situation along the Manipur-Myanmar border, prevalent themes of deprivation, underdevelopment, and minimal governmental presence emerge, pointing to a lack of sensitivity in governmental actions. These shortcomings can create negative repercussions in various contexts, exacerbated by the extraordinary permeability and vulnerability of the borderland.

Keywords: Border Pillar, Bailey, Hamilton, Manipur, Molcham

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. GENESIS

The uncertainty of the boundary issue with Myanmar is an unclear matter considering the state's political scenario. Land encroachment at the border villages is an ordinary happening, and both sides blame each other for provocative actions. In general, villages on the Manipur side of the border fall victim due to underdevelopment in terms of road and other essential infrastructure and lack of security protective cover, leading to forceful land encroachment by Myanmar taking the opportunity of lack of governmental supervision in the vulnerable areas. Chipping of land and other forest and agricultural resources cannot be counted in time with befitting action from state authorities. On the other hand, Burmese border villages are large, with proper roads, markets, and well-developed infrastructure needed

for a sustainable livelihood. Therefore, many Manipuri villagers cross the border to Burma for mercantile activities instead of travelling to the nearest town or District HQ for essential activities as the roads are in bad shape and transport facilities are least available. The feasibility of proximity and other infrastructure draw them to the Burmese border village rather than their District HQ or nearest town. The nearest Burmese town from the Molcham border crossing is hardly 1-2 km away; however, to reach Moreh town, one has to travel 100 km, approximately with bad roads and the most minor transport facilities. Naturally, Molcham villagers transverse to Burmese villages for mercantile activities, purchasing essential items, including medicine and other household items. Another factor that adds to border assimilation and common transverse is a similar ethnic trait of Chin-Kuki origin, which gives them a sense of connectivity and belongingness. Even counting all the factors of people-to-people connectivity and social assimilation, the chipping of land continues and no longer village exists in name only on the Indian map where all the land is gone as the Burmese never stop encroaching, forcing the original inhabitants to shift to another location to start a new village.

The case of Molcham is intriguing and subject to more profound analysis. The barter of the borderland phenomenon is visible with the knowledge of ordinary people at the level of governmental intercommunication. The neighbour, riding on its interest, wants the village to fulfil its strategic needs; however, in that process, Manipur's territorial land tends to lose the bartering system and, most importantly, the identity of the village and the villagers altogether. The whole scenario of losing identity is an essential factor that fuels the villagers' socio-political livelihood. The land is rich in agricultural and forest products, which are aggressively pursued by the Burmese, complementing the land-grabbing policy. Due to the lack of permanent security measures and personnel, Burmese forces frequently harassed the villagers and demanded that the area be clear. Though the area is minuscule on the map, the scenario might need to be more robust to attract policymakers' attention. However, at the disputed section of the Manipur-Myanmar border, such an issue needs to be solved with prime importance, keeping sentimental views and good neighbourhood policy in view.

2. MISPLACEMENT LEADING TO GEOGRAPHICAL DISPUTE

Molcham falls within roughly eight sq km of the Indian border but is controlled for all practical purposes by the Burmese authorities. The village is a tiny border village situated in the extreme corner of Manipur adjacent to Burma. Molcham is located in Chakpikarong Sub Division of Chandel district, one of the hill border districts of Manipur, where Schedule Tribe families reside.

The village needed more Government attention and reported no electricity as well as to some other nearby and some parts of Chandel District. All the roads from Molcham to Moreh are in deplorable condition, making the village stay back in terms of transport and communication. The road leading to Molcham village on the Myanmar border, situated approximately 100 kilometres from Moreh, is deplorable. Villages are facing immense difficulties in reaching Moreh in times of medical emergencies, including childbirth. Ninety-nine kilometres of road from Moreh to New Somtal was blacktop by the Border Roads Task Force (BRTF) and the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) in 2005-6, but only 40 kilometres were covered. The road connectivity to 47 villages of Chandel District Manipur under Chakpikarong Sub-Division and Khengjoi Sub-Division could be better. BRTF, under BRO, has been constructing and blacktopping DC Road and Zero Road since 2005. However, proper investment is needed to connect DC roads in the district. Situated in such remote and inaccessible areas, villagers often struggle to get essential supplies and medical aid when needed. Along with Molcham, similar conditions exist for the surrounding villages of the district's Yangoulen, Pheisinjang, and Khenyang.

Myanmar started nibbling away at Indian territories ever since the border demarcation in 1953. Villages at the border come into Myanmar when the Burmese military causes the boundary pillars to disappear. Some land areas of Molcham village are under the de facto control of the Burmese. The strategic Tamu-Kalwa road passes through the town.ⁱ

The area around Border Pillar (BP) 66, erected at Molcham village in Chandel district, is regarded as a disputed site between the two countries. Since Border Pillar 66 was constructed at Molcham village under Khengjoi TD Block of Chandel district disappeared, over 100 acres around the spot where the two countries identified the border pillar as a disputed area and no one was allowed entry from either side. However, Myanmar has encroached upon the disputed area and has cultivated pineapples, sugar cane, and bananas for over 10 acres.ⁱⁱ

Figure 1



Figure 1 Physical Map Depicting the Original BP 33 Location (Molcham Village)

Source: Personal Collection. 2022.

Way back in January 1982, when a team from the Manipur Cultural Integration Conference (MCIC) went to examine the village and found out that Burma physically occupies the area between the Boundary Pillar 64 to 68. It was the first time the occupation was discovered, and everything followed. The team were on the ground and saw the overall situation of Molcham village and the border scenario. Some 300 feet from the Tamu Kalewa stands BP 34 since the river Tuito (Auktuang Chuang) forms the boundary here, the Hamilton Bridge over the river is half and half within India and Burma, similar to the double Bailey bridge over Lokchao at Moreh.ⁱⁱⁱ

Border Pillar 33 (New BP 66) lay east of the village to the west across the Tamu Kalewa road. Burmese wanted the two bridges over the Tuivang and Tuito (Auktuang River) and used every pressure tactic to get to the Molcham area. It was clear that BP 65 erected shows that the road is within Indian (Manipur) soil. Molcham is an important trade route with Burma through the Burmese town of Bokan, a few kilometres to the southeast.^{iv} Bokan in Burma bordered Molcham village on the Indian side. The villagers travel to the Bokan hospital for basic medical needs despite being a village on the Manipur side. Every year during June and July, Molcham encounter a malaria outbreak, and few death cases are reported.

From the prosecution of the war with Japan in the 2nd World War, Indian Army engineers made a road running north and south of Moreh. The one, Tamu-Kalewa, runs to the south parallel to the Manipur border, and in one place, it touches it. At another some 28 miles from Moreh, it serves in a south-westerly direction before the Bailey Bridge over the Tuivang River is reached and travels for about two kilometres inside Manipur, nearly parallel to the boundary until the Hamilton Bridge over the Tuito River is crossed.

BP 34 is replaced by a new BP 64. The old boundary pillar lies east of the river and east of Tuivang village. This pillar was removed and placed to the west of Tamu Kalewa road. The new BP 66 was erected near in 1969-70, and it was also removed. The BP 67 lies to the northeast of the village of Khunkot. The Survey of India Map 1942/43 shows that the BPs 33, 34, 35 and now 66 (missing), 64 and 65 run in a straight line. The new BP 65 lies east of the road about 250 feet from the edge of the Tamu Kalewa road, i.e., within Manipur. This is acknowledged by the fact that the Burmese have erected their immigration office south of the Hamilton Bridge over the Tuito River. This stretch of road, from the bridge over Tuivang to the Tuito River, is practically controlled by the Burmese.^v

The main objective behind the Burmese occupation and re-erecting the BPs at Molcham was to ensure that the Kalewa-Tamu Road fell wholly within Burmese territory. Two segments of this road (about 4 km) - 3kms in the New Bongmal-Tuivang area (BPs 65-66) and 1 km north of the Burmese village Tiddimyan (BPs 67-68) lie inside the Indian Territory of Manipur.

Figure 2**Figure 2** Pictorial Representation of the New Re-Erected BP 33 Location and Other Details (Molcham Village)

Source: Personal Collection. 2022.

3. PRIME BURMESE INTENTION

Manipur's Molcham Valley has been involved in contention. The Burmese forces carry out alleged threats to villagers and frequent incursions. There were cases in past when the Manipur Human Rights Commission acknowledged the alleged torture of the border villagers and village Chief by the Burmese force. The Myanmar military junta had consistently eyed Molcham since 1961 to illegally snatch a piece of it for the development of a road adjacent to the borderline, which could be of prime importance for them. To stop such occurrences, the Manipur government had projected to construct a forward police post and provide security measures.^{vi} The Manipur Police Housing Corporation took the initiative and built the police outpost. The Myanmar forces had misplaced the BP 60 to encourage the encroachment. This was brought to the government's notification in 1982. There is also a specialised issue with BP 66. The Review of India maps printed after 1975 imprint the stretch between BP 65 and 67 as the 'true limit' of the Manipur Boundary.^{vii} Manipur has lost around 28 sq km of land to Myanmar over 50 years. Before this, the Myanmar military moved toward the Government of India in 1985 to trade a town called Choro as a by-product of Molcham. In any case, it was later discovered that Choro previously existed inside the Manipur under the Ukhrul area. Therefore, there was no question of exchange of the village to suit the demand, and it never took place. The Myanmar security personnel made an incursion and possessed some areas close to Molcham village in Chandel locale after the puzzling vanishing of BP No. 33 (BP 66).^{viii}

In May 2020, the Molcham police outpost was reinstalled. The police outpost had been lying non-working throughout the previous 30 years. However, in connection with the ebb and flow of the COVID-19 pandemic and to keep up lawfulness along the international border, the State government re-introduced the police outpost after much weight from the locale organisation, effectively viably sealing the entry and exit point. Reestablishing the outpost and sealing the border will be more successful, and lawfulness circumstances will be improved.

A selection from the Boundary Agreement between the Government of India and the Government of the Union of Burma marked at Rangoon on 10 March 1967, the Contracting Parties concurred on depicting the limit between the two nations. Among many, it was mentioned that generally eastwards along the bed of the stream to where Boundary Pillar No.37 is located; thence in a generally northerly direction to Boundary Pillar No. 36 and thence in the same direction to Boundary Pillar No.35 located on the right bank of the Auktaung Chaung; thence down the midstream of the Auktaung Chaung to the Boundary Pillar No. 34 on the left of the bank of the Auktaung Chaung; thence in a northerly direction to

Boundary Pillar No. 33 located on the left bank of the Tiwan Lam or Tuiwang Dung; thence in a north-northeasterly direction to Boundary Pillar No.32 located on the right bank of the Tiddim Dung or Naneka Chaung; thence in a north-northeasterly direction to Boundary Pillar No 31.

4. FEW CONSIDERATIONS

The issue involves misunderstandings regarding the border, governmental actions, and decision-making. The Government of Manipur must maintain awareness and take proactive measures regarding any missing or necessary actions related to border issues. Villagers are concerned that arrangements may be made to alter territorial boundaries without their knowledge. Creating alternative borderland arrangements will likely provoke more outrage than resolving the problem.

The people want concrete actions from their government to address the boundary issue. The controversy surrounding the Manipur-Myanmar border is not a recent development; it is rooted in a history that precedes independence, involving both British officials and the actions of so-called educated individuals. Each mistake regarding the border can be traced back to unclear demarcations and decades of neglect in managing the state border with Burma. Current challenges include a need for physical inspections of border points, an unclear border policy, insufficient protection for borderlands, and inadequate patrolling by security forces.

The Manipur-Myanmar border is vulnerable and poses a significant challenge to internal security. Therefore, the Indian government must effectively manage this porous border with Myanmar. Manipur has yet to fully benefit from its borderlands and utilise resources to collaborate with border villagers for large-scale development. To do so, investments in border villages are essential, alongside the construction of roads and other necessary infrastructure. This approach should align with the Border Area Development Programme (BADP) and consider the region's geopolitics.

ⁱ Dhar, P. (1998). *Ethnic Unrest in India & Her Neighbours*. New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications.

ⁱⁱ Shamungou, L. (2009). "Border pillar disappears, Myanmar encroaching Molcham learns to live with bunkers." *The Sangai Express*, January 27.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ranjan R.K. September 1982. "Tour Diary of the team of MCIC that Lower Molcham & Surrounding village 24th to 31st January 1982." *Regional Integration*. VII (18): 4.

^{iv} Ibid p 5.

^v Ibid p 8.

^{vi} Sunil, O. (2001). "Manipur village live in fear of Myanmar Army." *The Telegraph Online*. April 7, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/manipur-villages-live-in-fear-of-myanmar-army/cid/932242>.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Tarapot, P. (2003). *Bleeding Manipur*. New Delhi: Har Anand Publications.