



Border, Tribe, and National Identity: An Anthropological, Legal, and Political Analysis of the Nah Community, Arunachal Pradesh, and the India-China Border Dispute

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Introduction

National borders are not merely lines drawn on political maps; they are living expressions of history, geography, culture, human communities, and state sovereignty. The true strength of any border is derived not only from military deployment but also from the presence of its inhabitants, particularly the indigenous communities whose continuous occupation, cultural traditions, and national commitment reinforce the territorial integrity of the nation. From this perspective, India's North-Eastern region represents far more than a geographical extension of the country. It embodies a unique confluence of civilizational diversity, strategic importance, and cultural richness.

In recent months, an organization representing the Nah community residing in the Taksing region of Upper Subansiri district in Arunachal Pradesh has alleged that Chinese activities have gradually expanded into areas traditionally used by the community near the Line of Actual Control (LAC). It is important to emphasize that these allegations have not yet been officially confirmed by the Government of India or the relevant security agencies. Consequently, any definitive conclusion regarding these claims would be premature until they are examined through appropriate governmental and institutional verification.

Nevertheless, this development raises a significant question: Are border tribes merely demographic constituents of a frontier state, or do they constitute the foremost social guardians of a nation's cultural, strategic, and political security? Addressing this question requires an interdisciplinary perspective that extends beyond military or



political analysis and incorporates anthropology, cultural geography, constitutional studies, and borderland research.

The Anthropological Foundations of Frontier Societies

From an anthropological perspective, the identity of an indigenous community is not defined solely by its ethnicity or language. Rather, it emerges through the interaction of its ecological environment, customary territorial rights, collective memory, religious beliefs, economic practices, and social institutions. Within tribal societies, land is rarely viewed as a mere economic resource. Instead, it represents ancestral heritage, cultural identity, and the foundation of collective existence.

Anthropological studies conducted in frontier regions across the world demonstrate that communities inhabiting borderlands often possess a cultural history that predates the establishment of modern political boundaries. In many instances, nation-state borders were delineated long after indigenous societies had established enduring relationships with the same landscapes. Consequently, traditional grazing grounds, mountain passes, rivers, forests, and settlements are not merely geographical resources but integral components of cultural heritage.

Anthropological scholarship increasingly conceptualizes borders not only as administrative demarcations but also as "human frontiers." This concept emphasizes that the effective boundary of a nation is reinforced through the continuous presence, cultural continuity, and civic participation of the people who inhabit it. In this sense, frontier tribes become silent yet indispensable partners in safeguarding national sovereignty.

Arunachal Pradesh: Geography and Strategic Importance

Situated in the north-eastern extremity of India, Arunachal Pradesh covers approximately 83,743 square kilometres. It shares international borders with China's Tibet Autonomous Region to the north and northeast, Myanmar to the east, and Bhutan to the west, while Assam and Nagaland lie to its south.



Geographically, the state is characterized by the eastern Himalayan mountain ranges, dense forests, deep valleys, fast-flowing rivers, and extraordinary biodiversity. Several major tributaries of the Brahmaputra River originate within this region, making it ecologically one of India's richest landscapes.

From a strategic standpoint, Arunachal Pradesh occupies a position of exceptional national importance because it borders the Line of Actual Control between India and China. Its rugged terrain, limited connectivity, and challenging climatic conditions make it one of India's most sensitive frontier regions. Consequently, infrastructure development, transportation networks, communication facilities, and the active participation of local communities constitute essential elements of India's long-term border management strategy.

Anthropologically, Arunachal Pradesh is equally significant as a repository of India's cultural diversity. The state is home to more than thirty major tribal groups and numerous sub-groups, each possessing distinct languages, belief systems, social institutions, and cultural traditions. Despite their diversity, these communities collectively enrich India's pluralistic civilizational heritage.

The Nah Community: An Ethnographic Perspective

The Nah community inhabiting the Taksing region of Upper Subansiri district remains one of the comparatively lesser-documented frontier communities of Arunachal Pradesh. Although scholarly literature concerning the community is limited, available ethnographic accounts indicate several significant characteristics.

The socio-cultural life of the Nah people has evolved in close adaptation to the Himalayan ecological environment. Their economic practices have traditionally depended upon mountain agriculture, animal husbandry, forest resources, and limited systems of customary exchange. The difficult terrain has profoundly shaped their social organization, cultural practices, and patterns of livelihood.

Their social structure is founded upon kinship, family relationships, and collective cooperation. Community participation occupies an important place in decision-making



processes, while customary norms regulate the use of land and natural resources to ensure ecological sustainability.

The cultural identity of the Nah community is deeply intertwined with nature. Mountains, forests, rivers, water sources, and grazing lands are regarded not merely as economic assets but also as places of cultural memory and spiritual significance. Many landscapes are associated with ancestral traditions and collective identity, illustrating the inseparable relationship between territory and culture.

From an anthropological perspective, any disruption in a tribal community's access to its customary lands affects far more than its economic activities. It can influence social organization, cultural continuity, collective identity, and psychological well-being. This explains why indigenous communities inhabiting frontier regions often exhibit a profound attachment to their ancestral territories.

Historical Background, Constitutional Perspectives, and the Role of Frontier Communities in National Security

If national borders are understood solely in terms of military deployment and administrative control, the concept of a border remains incomplete. From an anthropological perspective, a border is not merely a political boundary; it is also a space where human societies, cultural traditions, economic activities, historical memories, and state authority intersect. Consequently, the study of any border dispute requires much more than diplomatic documents and strategic analyses. It also demands a careful understanding of the history, culture, and lived experiences of the communities inhabiting frontier regions.

Historical Background of the India-China Border Dispute

The historical roots of the India-China border dispute lie in the boundary-making processes initiated during the colonial period. In 1914, representatives of British India, Tibet, and China participated in the Simla Convention, an effort to define the Himalayan frontier. During these negotiations, the McMahon Line was proposed as the boundary



between British India and Tibet. While British India and Tibet accepted the agreement, China declined to formally recognize it.

Following India's independence in 1947, the Government of India regarded the McMahon Line as its legitimate international boundary. China, however, continued to reject this interpretation. As a result, the border gradually became one of the most complex territorial disputes in modern international relations. The Sino-Indian War of 1962 marked the most serious manifestation of these competing territorial claims and profoundly shaped bilateral relations for decades.

In the aftermath of the war, the military positions held by both countries eventually gave rise to the concept of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). It is important to recognize that the LAC is not an internationally demarcated boundary established through a formal treaty. Rather, it reflects the practical positions occupied by the armed forces of both countries. Since India and China maintain differing perceptions of its alignment, disagreements regarding patrol routes and infrastructure development have periodically generated tensions.

Borders through an Anthropological Lens

Anthropological scholarship distinguishes between political boundaries and cultural boundaries. Political boundaries are established through legal and administrative authority, whereas cultural boundaries evolve through centuries of human interaction, migration, linguistic exchange, customary practices, and shared historical experiences.

Across Northeast India, numerous indigenous communities have traditionally utilized mountain passes, river valleys, forests, and grazing grounds for generations. Although modern political boundaries have introduced administrative regulation over these landscapes, they have not erased the historical memories or cultural relationships associated with them. Consequently, the lived experiences of frontier communities constitute an essential component of any meaningful understanding of border regions.

Anthropological perspectives further suggest that frontier communities represent the living boundaries of the nation. Their significance extends far beyond demographic



statistics. Their continuous presence reinforces state legitimacy, cultural continuity, and territorial identity. A border inhabited by socially secure and culturally confident communities possesses a stronger foundation than one protected solely through military infrastructure.

Constitutional Protection of Tribal Communities in India

The Constitution of India recognizes the protection of Scheduled Tribes as a fundamental responsibility of the State. Article 46 directs the State to promote the educational and economic interests of Scheduled Tribes while protecting them from social injustice and exploitation.

Similarly, Article 244 provides special constitutional arrangements for the administration of tribal areas. Although Arunachal Pradesh functions under constitutional arrangements that differ from the Fifth and Sixth Schedules applicable elsewhere, its indigenous customary institutions, traditional practices, and community-based governance continue to receive legal recognition through various constitutional and statutory provisions.

Local councils, customary institutions, village authorities, and indigenous leadership structures remain central to maintaining social cohesion within tribal societies. Democratic governance becomes more meaningful when local communities actively participate in decision-making processes affecting their lives and territories.

Land, Culture, and Collective Rights

Anthropological studies consistently demonstrate that tribal societies perceive land as far more than private property. It embodies collective memory, ancestral heritage, sacred traditions, ecological knowledge, and cultural identity. This understanding explains why indigenous communities exhibit profound emotional and cultural attachment to their customary territories.

Within mountain societies, forests, rivers, grazing lands, mountain peaks, and traditional pathways function not merely as economic resources but as integral components of social organization and cultural continuity. Any disruption affecting



access to these landscapes may influence economic livelihoods while simultaneously altering social relationships, cultural practices, and collective confidence.

The concerns expressed by the Nah community should therefore be understood within this broader anthropological framework. This does not imply that every local claim automatically constitutes an established fact. Rather, it suggests that such claims deserve careful, objective, and evidence-based examination through appropriate constitutional and administrative mechanisms. Democratic governance requires both respect for local voices and rigorous verification of factual claims.

The Changing Concept of National Security

In the twenty-first century, national security extends well beyond military defence. Contemporary security studies increasingly recognize that infrastructure development, communication networks, environmental sustainability, social cohesion, economic opportunities, and cultural preservation collectively contribute to long-term national resilience.

In frontier states such as Arunachal Pradesh, investments in roads, bridges, healthcare, education, digital connectivity, and employment opportunities should therefore be viewed not merely as developmental initiatives but also as strategic investments in national security. Borders become stronger when the people inhabiting them experience dignity, inclusion, and confidence in public institutions.

Frontier Communities as Partners in National Security

Across many parts of the world, indigenous frontier communities are regarded as valuable partners in border management because of their extensive knowledge of local geography, seasonal conditions, natural resources, traditional routes, and environmental changes.

India's own experience demonstrates that frontier communities have, on numerous occasions, cooperated with civil administration and security agencies under difficult circumstances. Their contribution illustrates an important principle: national security is



sustained not only through military capability but also through mutual trust between citizens and the State.

The Contemporary Context

The concerns raised by the Nah Welfare Society have once again highlighted the importance of listening carefully to the experiences of frontier communities. At the same time, matters relating to international boundaries require conclusions based upon authenticated surveys, official records, institutional verification, and constitutional procedures.

A mature democracy must therefore maintain a careful balance between respecting the voices of local communities and ensuring that conclusions concerning national security are based upon verified evidence. This balance represents one of the defining strengths of India's constitutional democracy.

National Policy, Cultural Security, Conclusion, and References

National Policy and Frontier Development

Since Independence, India has regarded the development of its frontier regions as an essential component of national integration. However, the rugged terrain of the Himalayan borderlands, limited infrastructure, difficult climatic conditions, and geographical isolation have historically constrained developmental initiatives across much of the North-Eastern region. In recent decades, significant investments have been made in roads, bridges, telecommunications, healthcare, educational institutions, and strategic infrastructure. These initiatives are intended not only to strengthen India's defensive preparedness but also to integrate frontier communities more effectively into the country's socio-economic development.

From an anthropological perspective, however, development cannot be evaluated solely through physical infrastructure. Sustainable development in frontier regions must also respect indigenous knowledge systems, customary institutions, cultural identities, and traditional relationships with the environment. Development that neglects these dimensions risks weakening the very social fabric that has sustained frontier



communities for generations. Consequently, infrastructure development and cultural preservation should be viewed as complementary rather than competing objectives.

The Nah Community and the Preservation of Cultural Heritage

Communities such as the Nah represent far more than small demographic groups inhabiting remote borderlands. They constitute invaluable repositories of India's cultural diversity. Their languages, oral traditions, ecological knowledge, customary institutions, agricultural practices, and spiritual relationships with the landscape enrich the broader heritage of the Indian nation.

At the same time, many smaller indigenous communities remain insufficiently documented within academic literature. Several tribal languages face the risk of decline, while valuable oral histories and traditional ecological knowledge remain inadequately recorded. This situation underscores the importance of expanding ethnographic research, linguistic documentation, and interdisciplinary scholarship concerning frontier communities.

The preservation of indigenous cultures should therefore be regarded not merely as a cultural obligation but also as an investment in India's intellectual, ecological, and civilizational heritage.

Cultural Security and National Security

Contemporary strategic studies increasingly recognize that stable borders cannot be secured exclusively through military deployment. Social trust, cultural continuity, economic opportunity, administrative responsiveness, and community participation are equally significant components of long-term security.

When frontier populations perceive themselves as respected participants in national development, they become powerful contributors to national resilience. Conversely, inadequate development, social exclusion, or weak institutional engagement may generate feelings of insecurity within border regions.



Accordingly, sustained dialogue with frontier communities, timely resolution of local concerns, improved educational and healthcare facilities, livelihood opportunities, and respect for customary institutions should be regarded as integral elements of India's long-term border management strategy.

Broader Lessons from the Present Situation

The concerns expressed by the Nah Welfare Society should not be interpreted as established facts because, at the time of writing, they have not been officially verified by the competent authorities of the Government of India. Equally, however, the concerns articulated by frontier communities should not be dismissed without careful examination.

A mature constitutional democracy requires that such concerns be investigated through scientific surveys, administrative assessment, security evaluation, and, where necessary, diplomatic mechanisms. This balanced approach simultaneously strengthens national security, democratic accountability, and public confidence in state institutions.

Policy Recommendations

From an anthropological, legal, and policy perspective, several measures deserve consideration:

- 1. Comprehensive Documentation:** Traditional territories, customary land-use systems, oral histories, and sacred cultural landscapes of frontier communities should be systematically documented through interdisciplinary research.
- 2. Interdisciplinary Border Studies:** Anthropologists, historians, geographers, environmental scientists, legal scholars, and strategic analysts should collaborate in the study of India's frontier regions.
- 3. Community Participation:** Indigenous communities should be actively involved in consultative mechanisms relating to border governance, sustainable development, and environmental conservation.



4. Inclusive Development: Education, healthcare, digital connectivity, transportation infrastructure, and employment opportunities should be recognized as long-term investments in national security rather than merely developmental expenditures.

5. Protection of Indigenous Languages and Knowledge: Smaller tribal communities should receive institutional support for preserving their languages, oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and cultural practices.

6. Evidence-Based Public Discourse: Public discussions concerning border disputes should remain balanced, evidence-based, and respectful of constitutional institutions until official investigations establish verified facts.

Conclusion

India's borders represent far more than geographical demarcations. They embody history, constitutional values, cultural diversity, ecological heritage, and national identity. Frontier tribes are not merely inhabitants of these regions; they constitute an indispensable part of the nation's cultural and civilizational continuity.

The concerns recently expressed by the Nah community remind us that border security extends beyond military preparedness. It also encompasses public trust, constitutional governance, cultural preservation, sustainable development, and meaningful participation by frontier populations.

Anthropological perspectives consistently demonstrate that national borders attain lasting stability when the communities inhabiting them experience dignity, inclusion, and recognition as equal partners in the national project. Such an approach strengthens not only territorial sovereignty but also democratic legitimacy.

The future of India's border policy should therefore extend beyond infrastructure and defence preparedness to embrace cultural preservation, indigenous rights, environmental sustainability, and participatory governance. These dimensions are not peripheral to national security; they are integral to it.



Ultimately, the strongest defence of any nation is not constructed solely through roads, military installations, or physical barriers. It is built through the confidence of its citizens, the preservation of their cultural identities, and their enduring faith in the constitutional values of the Republic. In the long run, these remain the most resilient foundations of India's unity, sovereignty, and democratic strength.

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