

Community Participation in Border Management: Challenges and Options

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India's territorial borders, both land and sea, suffer from diverse physical, ethnic and cultural contradictions. While the state has a major role in securing our frontier, the populations along territorial peripheries, too, can play an important role in securing our interests. The people living in these areas are the most important ingredient towards a secure and safe border area. This would entail reconceptualising the concept of border guarding to effective border management, where local people became the centre of gravity of all actions. The border guarding forces have to evolve ways and means to mainstream the local population in the management of the border areas.

India has 14,880 kilometres of land border running through 92 districts in 17 States and a coastline of 5,422 kilometres touching 12 States and Union Territories. India also has a total of 1197 islands accounting for 2094 kilometres of additional coastline. There are 51 Bangladeshi enclaves (area involved 7,110.02 acres) in India and 111 Indian enclaves (area involved 17,158.13 acres) in Bangladesh. In fact, barring Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Delhi and Haryana, all other States in the country have one or more international borders or a coastline and can be regarded as frontline States from the point of view of border management.¹ From Sir Creek to the Bay of Bengal, India's land borders present a geographical diversity of a unique kind. Much of its borders are topographically difficult. Challenges in border management are peculiar like; some stretches of border are porous and easily negotiable; some stretches of border are un-demarcated etc. Border is physically unguarded at many places due to terrain constraints and lack of approachability. Also, these border regions have their own ethnic, cultural, religious and racial configurations distinct from the mainland and in some areas depicting an unmistakable affinity with those across the borders. The remoteness of local administration, its low visibility, illegal immigration, smuggling of arms ammunition and narcotic substances require number of measures from the point of view of national security. Hence, 'the proper management of borders is vitally important for national security'.¹² Besides border guarding forces and other Central Government agencies, States' Civil Administration, the border population is the most important ingredient in border management.

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Inherent Disadvantage of the Border Population

The Group of Ministers (GoM) on 'reforming India's national security structures,' in its report in year 2001 had remarked that; the people living on India's international border particularly on land borders face myriads problems like difficult terrain, harsh living conditions and lack of access to public amenities. Frequent shelling from across the border, thinly spread out administration and inadequate social and economic infrastructure make life difficult in these areas. Concerted efforts are being made by our hostile neighbours through allurements, subversion and promotion of religious fundamentalism to generate a feeling of alienation among the border population. The border population has many other disadvantages as under:

- Vulnerability to actions of border criminals.
- Restriction/control over movement by forces.
- Fear of unknown—threat of aggression by enemy, cross border shelling, firing etc.
- Lack of industrialisation/economic progress, neglect by Government being frontier areas.
- Lack of infrastructure, means of communication, education, medical, water and remoteness.

Paradigm Shift towards Community Participative Border Management³

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One of the most important challenges of border management is integration of local community in border management.⁴ Preventing alienation of border population, winning their hearts and minds by formulating people inclusive border management policies is of paramount importance. There is need to recognise the local bordering community as a prime stakeholder in border management. Of late, worldwide, the community policing is given utmost importance.

While, most of the developed countries have adopted participative and multi-national integrated border management system, India's border

management is still emphatic to security centric border guarding system by deploying the Central Para Military Forces (CPMF) specially organised as a Border Guarding Police Force (BGF). The BGF are the most visible face of Governance in bordering areas.⁵ They have been mandated with primary tasks of maintaining territorial integrity and ensuring the sense of security to border population. The Rule-15 of the Border Security Force (BSF) Rules also envisages that; one of the important role of India's largest BGF is 'to promote a sense of security amongst the people living in border area'.⁶ The GoM in its report has re-iterated that; "in normal times, these forces are expected to ensure a sense of security to people living in border areas". However, despite of all these safeguards and arrangements, India's border population in general quite often feel dissatisfied, alienated and show hostile attitude towards BGFs. Such attitude of population is owing to the restrictive and preventing nature of tasks performed by forces, which is generally against the interest of local population like; restriction in movement, economic interest, etc. Some other causes are:

- Prevention of Smuggling Activities which is a Means of Livelihood to Border Population: Smuggling is means of livelihood for many people in bordering areas. Prevention of smuggling activities by BGF lead to a perceived feeling that, they unnecessarily interfere in the means of livelihood of local populace.
- Lack of Knowledge of Local Language: There is often a lack of communication between the local people and the BGF causing conflict/distrust.
- A Sense of Distrust between the BGF and the Local Community: In many areas, BGF personnel have little communication with the local people to prevent connivance with smugglers and other criminals. The BGF field leadership keeps minimum contact with the local villagers. Hence, a communication gap exists which is detrimental to a congenial working environment.
- Border Fencing and Connected Problems: The construction of the fencing has also generated many differences between the local villagers and the BGF. Access to the farmland across the fencing is regulated. Frequent frisking and timely gate opening are irritants to farmers. The BGF have however their own constraints.
- Agitation approach: Often, the criminals with vested interests work against BGF personnel and exploit the situation to their disadvantage. Local population because of various reasons including hidden economic benefits, local social pressure comes in support of such vested interests. Hence, BGF sometimes face gheraos, demonstrations

etc, quite often, when they make any seizure/apprehension. Sometimes force personnel have been even lynched. Criminals often ensure that such incidents result in a confrontation between the BGF and the public.

• Operational annoyances: Quite often, the BGF are called upon to take tough measures for combating terrorism and insurgency. These measures sometimes, cause inconvenience and annoyance to the local people. Such sense of discontent is exploited by hostile elements to create feeling of ill will against the BGF.

• Inherent limitations of BGF: The concept of community relationship, if not alien, is still not given due importance by BGF. Border guarding does not merely mean placing a sentry on a vantage point for preventing any threat to territorial sovereignty and sanctity. Some limitations of BGF are:

• *Overstretched Deployment:* The manpower on border is limited. Only 60 per cent of authorised strength in a deployed coy is available for the border duties as remaining 40 per cent are away on leave, attachments etc. Force multipliers—in terms of electronic and other surveillance measures are also inadequate. Hence, they cannot curb the trans-border crimes effectively. Sometimes, the numerically thin and capacity deficient forces on the border adopt the attitude of live and let live. Thus, the faith of the law-abiding people towards forces goes down. Also, there is no time left for the limited available strength for community participative border management in view of paucity of time and hard duties.

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• *Statistical Theory to Adjudge Performance of Units:* A serious thought is required to review the yardsticks for performance either on the 'body count' or the 'booty count'. This practice blinds the vision and breeds a competition, in which public support is sought for marking catches, whereas it should, in fact, be used for stemming the menace itself. In past, there have been cases of indirectly allowing more smuggling, to achieve the targeted seizure figure. So, unwittingly the situation is allowed to erode and the confidence and goodwill is tarnished. However, there is visible change in this approach with the coming up of border fencing where there is shift towards zero-crime approach.

- *Inherent Disadvantage of the Border Population:* Lack of favourable attitude of border guarding forces towards border population like making a villager stand at BOP gate for hours together who has come with a genuine problem and wants to meet the Company Commander and thus giving a feeling that there is no one from the Government's side who can be approached. BGF think that every villager residing next to the border is a smuggler thus doubting the integrity of each and every villager in the border belt which spoils the relations with the locals. GoM has also recommended promoting the socio-economic development of the border population.

Integrating Local Population in Border Management

The people living in the border areas are the most important ingredients towards a secure and safe border. Village Defence and Development Committees at the base level with cooperation of the local populace would go a long way in enhancing security and development of the borders besides providing a sense of belonging to these people. There would be a requirement of training the locals as well as motivating and providing incentives for engaging the locals in the task of border management. Once this is done, they will prove more than useful tool to manage localised border problems. The locals could well perform the following tasks by forming Village Defence Committees (VDC) etc:

- Reporting of any illegal activities and infiltration along the border.
- Keeping allotted areas under surveillance.
- Reporting of any abnormal activity especially in rugged terrain.
- Reporting of subversive activity being carried out by the enemy.
- Employed in construction of roads, tracks and maintenance of border fencing.
- In times of peace as well as hostilities, local population can provide invaluable information regarding enemy build-up and activities.
- Protection of villages against criminals/dacoits etc from across the border.
- Provide guides to the Armed Forces whenever required.

- In the difficult riverine areas, fishermen watch groups can be formed. This would fill in large gaps existing in the surveillance cover on a regular basis in the general area of territorial waters and the EEZ.

BGF and Community Development

The GoM had remarked, “BGF are an extension of Central Government in far flung territories. They should exploit this advantage by serving as a vector to conduit the genuine local problems and demands for onward submission, for guiding community development and participation programmes for onward submission. The relationship between BGF and border population should be viewed as a management function, which should take into consideration public attitude and perception, identifying the problems and policies and programmes of action to earn good will, understanding and acceptance of the community”. This can be achieved by:

- Providing adequate security.
- Improvement of basic amenities, infrastructure and living conditions of people in border areas.
- Assist in generating employment opportunities.

BGF must identify community-oriented programmes, which could be:

- Identification and development of projects in terms of infrastructure, health, education, employment generation, etc.
- An effective communication with the villagers leading to better understanding, win public trust and to encourage public co-operation.
- To develop public understanding of problems faced by the force.
- Projecting positive image of BGF through media.
- A strict adherence to code of conduct, ethical standards of discipline and integrity and attempts on attitudinal changes.

At functional level, Civic Action Programmes (CAP) and population support measures can be evolved. Civic action must be a continuous, dynamic, should fulfil local needs and aspirations. Funds may be provided either directly to BGF or through State Government. However, these programmes may be executed through State Government or NGOs but identification and selection of projects and its monitoring should be the domain of the BGF.

Responsibility of Government

The BGF-community relationship can essentially survive on Government support. Political will is first and foremost for creating the breathing space. If the concept of 'border guarding' has to be replaced by 'border management' then, the responsibility has to be shared by the Central as well as State Governments. There is unemployment and abject poverty due to lack of economic opportunity, hence, people resort to smuggling. If repressive measures are taken by BGF, ignoring the ground realities, the only source of income is denied the people get alienated. The BGF is not therefore seen as a friend but as the enemy who is impinging upon in earning their daily bread. Unless the Government creates the resource and generates dignified employment, the situation will not improve.

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BGF should have a role in drawing projects for the welfare and empowerment of border population. They should have adequate resources and authority in getting such projects monitored and implemented. The Border Area Development Programmes (BADP) should be exclusively border centric and people inclusive. BGF must have adequate say in deciding BADP schemes in consultation with local population.

Steps for Improving the Community Relations Ability of BGF Personnel⁷

The following are some of the steps that can be initiated:

- Review Field Procedures: Many of the regulation and practices that apply to the forces distances them from the common man. It is necessary to re-look such policies and practices.
- Training for a More Ethical Force: Continuous motivation, incentive and monitoring will develop morally and ethically strong force.
- Training to Develop a Community Oriented Force: The role of the BGF in the borders areas is such that there is bound to be a difference of opinion between the citizens and the forces. The skill for adept handling of the public can only come through sustained training.

- Monitoring Grievances Against the BGF: The grievance redress mechanism against the force personnel warrants a systematic reappraisal. There are cases where the field level leadership often resorts to isolation from the public by adopting escapist attitudes with regard to the grievances of the public.
- Get Nearer to the People Programmes: The local community has a negligible and at times, a faulty awareness about the role of the forces. Periodical awareness/out-reach programmes, conducting of games, etc, for the villagers, inviting them to the BOP, organising cultural shows can draw the public closer to the BGF and increase awareness.

Recommendations to Improve the Community Participation in Border Management

Following steps may increase the level of trust between the border population and the BGF to achieve the people inclusive border management:

- Attitudinal change - develop empathy towards population.
- Identification and development of projects.
- Educating border population about the constraints of BGF and rationale of the operations carried out by BGF. Develop positive image at local levels and also through media.
- Explaining rationale of the restrictions imposed.
- Develop understanding with locals of the problems faced by BGF.
- Permanent communication leading to better understanding; border coordination meetings, etc.
- Respect for the local customs and habits.
- Above board dealings—strict adherence to code of conduct, ethical standards and integrity—win trust.
- Assistance to population in times of need/emergencies, health assistance.
- Carrying out civic action programmes, sports activities, judicious utilisation of border population grant, etc.

- No misbehaviour/maltreatment, no forced labour, no damage to crops, no favouritism.
- Pay for what you buy.
- Keep watch over bad characters, identify ex-servicemen and seek co-operation.
- Learn local language, respect women folk, elderly persons. Respect the religion and local customs.

Conclusion

Policing in India, as an institution carries British legacy and is still disliked and suspected by people. The general feeling amongst the local population and the local government is that, the Central force personnel are unaware of the sentiments of the local people. Thus, the forces are slowly distancing away from local people and a feeling of mistrust is growing.

The BGF should give up the mindset that, everyone living in the border region is a criminal. They must imbibe the idea of involving the local community in border guarding. The widening divide between BGF and population in bordering areas is cause of concern, since effective border guarding is not possible without community support. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that, BGFs evolve ways and means, whereby people develop a feeling of attachment toward them. The community should serve as force multiplier in border management. Once the local population along the bordering areas is integrated in the mainstream, a certain amount of moral responsibility would automatically come in. The realistic 'community's participation in India's border management' can be achieved only thereafter.



Notes

1. "Reforming the National Security System", Recommendations of the Group of Ministers, Government of India, Chapter 5, pp. 5.1, 2001.
2. Ibid, pp. 5.2 and 5.3.
3. S. K. Sood, "Border Management", Faculty of Studies, Border Security Force.
4. Ibid.
5. Subrata Kumar Mitra, "Emerging Major Powers and the International System: Significance of the Indian View", Working Paper No. 9, University of Heidelberg, October 2002.
6. "BSF Act and Rules".
7. Interaction with Senior BSF Officers.