

# India's Land borders: A Critical Study of Political and Popular Narratives



**Mukesh Kumar Verma**

Assistant Professor,  
Deptt.of Political science,  
University of Rajasthan,  
Jaipur, Rajasthan

## Abstract

India has a long international border with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal, China, and Pakistan. India's land borders are conflict prone due to various reasons. The tragic narratives of partition and India's Kashmir conflict shape political discourses on Indo-Pak border. The colonial boundary agreement and the border dispute negotiations-incursions rules Indo-China border politics. The Nepal-Bhutan border relations with India are based on the politics of friendship and trust. India follows 'open border regime' with Myanmar to facilitate normal socio-economic activities of the bordering people. Indo-Bangladesh border is projected and perceived as a route of illegal influx of humans and goods.

These political characteristics of the Indian land borders have been the fundamental guiding principles of India's national border policies. In this backdrop the paper analyses how the political discourses shape lives and livelihood of people in Indian borderlands? How the popular culture shapes the discourses on border in the national psyche and consciousness? The paper would substitute the arguments: the political and popular narratives on the Indian land borders have not been corresponding to each other. In the case of Indo-Pak and Indo-Bangladesh the popular culture reinforces the political narratives. At the same time, the political discourses on Nepal-Bhutan and Indo-Myanmar borders have marginalized representation in the popular culture. Moreover, the local narratives do not validate singularity and hegemony of political discourses.

The paper makes survey of statements of various political parties, policy documents, and official stands on borders issues to understand political discourses. It would trace out representation of borders in movies, media stories, and literature to explore popular narratives. The local narratives would be accessed through oral history and interaction with the people lives in the borderland.

**Keywords:** Land Border, Political Geography, Political Narratives, Popular Narratives, Foreign Policy, Neighbourhood, International Relations.

## Introduction

The foreign policy and foreign relationship of any nation are often determined by its domestic, regional and international factors. Amongst these factors, regional factors are essentially defined in term of immediate neighbour thriving upon geo political location and geo strategic conditions. These immediate factors are quite decisive in expanding and prevailing stability to national interest.

India is situated as a sub continent in South Asian region which stretches from Himalayas in north of Indian Ocean in south and from desert and plateaus in west to river and forest areas in east. India shares its land borders and costal line with seven nations situated in South Asia amounting to border of 15106 km. It is worthy to note that after China and Russia India has the longest international border lines.



S.No.	Neighbouring Countries	Bordering States
1	Bangladesh	West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura
2	China	Jammu Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh
3	Pakistan	Jammu Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat
4	Nepal	Bihar, West Bengal, Sikkim, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand
5	Myanmar	Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh
6	Bhutan	Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Sikkim
7	Afghanistan	Jammu Kashmir (POK- Pakistan Occupied Area)

Sr.No.	Neighbouring Countries	Length of border (In K.M.)
1	Bangladesh	4096.7
2	China	3488
3	Pakistan	3323
4	Nepa	1751
5	Myanmar	1643
6	Bhutan	699
7	Afghanistan	106
<b>Total</b>		<b>15,106</b>

In term of international relations, the role of immediate neighbor is very important as it has been said that it is possible to choose friends but not the neighbours. In this context analyzing Indian sub continent and its neighbourhood, one can find number of distinctive factors. On India's land border developed as Indian sub-continent, one can easily trace effects of British documents such as Redcliff

line, McMahon line etc. The observation of India's land border in descending order reveals that it has the longest boundary of 4096.7 km with Bangladesh which extends to Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura; followed by 3488 kms long border with China that extends up to Jammu Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh; then after 3323 km long border with Pakistan that covers Jammu Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat; 1751 kms with Nepal covering states of Bihar, West Bengal, Sikkim, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand; 1643 kms with Myanmar that covers up to Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh; 699 kms land border sharing with Bhutan which extends up to Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal and Sikkim and after that 106 kms with Afghanistan which is extended only to Jammu & Kashmir (PoK).

The perspective of India's land border is based on historical, geographical, cultural, psychological & economic factors which can further be analyzed in two forms of narratives i.e. Political Narratives and Popular Narratives. While a sound political narrative is depicted since 1947 till present through diplomatic talks, agreements and documents; popular narrative is expressed through people to people connect or track-2 diplomacy.

This research paper makes an attempt to understand popular narrative with special reference to media, cinema and literature. It is the perfect medium for India to win over the hearts and mind of millions, including Pakistan and other parts of land border countries. The Pakistan conflict has sadly spilled into the cultural realm, attenuating forces that provide the little glimmer of hope for an integrated, peaceful and prosperous South Asia; cultural, arts, music, movies and people to people relations. One should keep in mind that art and cultural have no nations, no boundaries and no religion. Works of art are priceless treasures of world regardless of their origination.

Thanks to bollywood, India has enormous soft power on the world stage, even more than neighbouring China which is much stronger both militarily and economically. Indian movies and songs are extremely popular even in Pakistan, where millions laugh and cry, reveling not only in movies like Bajrangi Bhaijaan or PK, but also bollywood movies that have nothing to do with Pakistan. Bollywood represents the perfect medium for India to win the hearts and mind of millions throughout the world, including Pakistan and other parts of South Asia. By banning a handful of Pakistan actors, and musicians and taking the hostility to a cultural level, India elicited the Pakistani response of a ban on Indian movies as well as content. As a result India actually closed frontier of influence where it had a natural advantage over Pakistan, which had none. Even for the jingoist chest thumpers, this is a strategic blunder.

The positive power of cultural exchange in easing political tensions can hardly be overemphasized. When India Bangladesh relations became tense in the 1980's over the Farakka Barrage dispute, there was a popular saying in Delhi and Dhaka that if Bangladesh was willing to trade Runa Laila, the Bangladesh singer who was very popular in India, for water, India would remove the dam. While the statement has no official value, it shows the power of cultural exchanges in building bridges, and normalizing strained diplomatic relationships.

The political narrative have made their presence visible either in major or minor form in land border relations of every country which includes both Conflict and Conflict resolutions. In the context of India such political narratives and discourse can be seen as early as 1947 when a separate nation of Pakistan was created owing to communion riots which led to the partition of country. The issue of Kashmir has emerged as one such dispute which despite popular and Political narrative has remain contested from last seven decades.

In the year 1971, under the leadership of Yahiya Khan & Julifkar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan and

Sheikh Mujib eastern Pakistan (present Bangladesh) & Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Indian prime minister, one of the major elections of Pakistan took place wherein its Bengali identity also came at the forefront. Consequently it led to the creation of Bangladesh; political & popular narratives played a vital role in establishing strong relations between India & Bangladesh, which can be reinstated with trade and land border agreement made in 1947 & 1974 amongst the two nation.

The scenario of India-china land border can be divided in three sectors i.e. western sector of J&K which extends from Laddakh to Aksai chin; central sector between Himachal Pradesh and Uttrakhand; and eastern sector extended up to Sikkim & Arunachal Pradesh. India argues that China has infringed upon its borders in Laddakh and Arunachal Pradesh while China considers Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim as Southern part of Tibet, hence its own territory. Recently in the year 2017, a rift was developed in Doklam area which depicts the level of India – China border dispute. Apart from this, China presents dubious data on the projects undertaken on Brahmaputra River which has also led to threat of water terrorism in India's eastern states. At present, China is developing an economic corridor to Pakistan passing through PoK which further threatens India's security & sovereignty.

The LBA between India & Bangladesh got resolved in the year 2015 in accordance with the Indian constitution when India's Prime Minister Narandra Modi & Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajid made, Chief Ministers of neighbouring state party under the political narratives. Alongside to solve the issue of illegal incursions from Bangladesh, emphasis is given on popular narratives in state dining land borders like **BANGLA GAURAV SAMMAN**, making cultural mechanism, trade facilities etc.

Owing to historical and cultural relationship of India with Bhutan and Nepal, we entered into a treaty for peace and friendship with these nations as early as 1949-50 and this matter received due attestation in popular narratives of that age. This time also coincided with the initial phase of India's foreign policy under the guidance of Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru.

An attempt was made during this time to ensure that no direct bilateral dispute emerge amongst these nations as well as to construct India-China relations in such a way that it does not bring any adverse effect on the status quo of these nations. The influential role played by India in creation of Bangladesh & nuclear testing despite its conflict with China and merging of Sikkim state, has adversely affected its relations with Nepal. Under the popular narratives, employment generations, assistance in entertainment industry and the way with which Indian society and media helped Nepal during the earthquake in 2015 has played a vital role in strengthening the land border relations; however the emergence of Maoist ideology in Nepal is emerging as a cause of concern. Hence Indian leadership under the political narratives has adopted emotional touch

therapy and HIT formula for the development of Nepal. The prime minister gave HIT formula for Nepal, saying India wants to help Nepal build highways (H), information's highways (I), and tramways-transmission lines (T).

In the context of Afghanistan, the use of political narratives began in 2001 when America was hit by Taliban Attack and thereafter with the declaration of war against terrorism and when India related its geo-strategic scenario with economic development and re-construction of Afghanistan as well as with abolition of Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Consequently India is participating regularly in Haat of Asia conference since 2011. Recently the construction of Salma Dam in Afghanistan, Deranj Jalram road project and construction of Chabhaar port in Iran by India under the India- Iran-Afghanistan triangular relationship are few initiatives taken under popular narratives. Apart from this, opportunities for Afganistan students to study in India and pictuarisation of Afghanistan in India's major movies and documents such as Kabul express, Phantom & datum are few steps taken under popular narratives.

The political narratives of India with Myanmar developed in the decade of 90's when new relationship were developing in south east Asia countries on the adoption of economic liberalization by India. Myanmar not only share its land border with India but also maritime border and has been a major pillar in India's *look east to act east policy*. India has initiated works on kaladan multi-transport project with Myanmar and also began construction of roadways connecting its north east states with Myanmar as a popular narratives and political narratives.

#### **The India's Land Border with Pakistan: A Critical Study of Political and Popular Narratives**

While analyzing India's land border relations with Pakistan, it becomes imperative to discuss a few factors a prior:

1. Emotional attachment of Pakistan with Indian sub continent
2. The relationship of both the nations got affected by communal factor
3. Development of tensions before the wars of 1965,1971 and 1999
4. Since the decade of 1980s involvement of Pak in proxy war against India
5. With an objective of counter balancing India, the bond between China-Pak is getting strengthened year by year.
6. At the international forum, both nations stand against each other
7. Till date, democracy in Pak is in bad state with alliance of army

In the initial years of independence, division and implementation of constitution, Jawaher lal Nehru had said that while developing international relations, Pakistan held a major place as a part from being our neighbouring country, it shares with India its history and culture; in fact similar nature of problems also bring these two nation closer.

A lot of friends and relatives of Indian citizens resides in Pakistan and vice versa who forget about the strained political relations amongst the two

nations when it comes to their relations. Recently problems amongst the nations have been reframed in the forms of boundaries; however despite such differences, India is trying to build good relations.

In fact the regional dispute that began in 1947 over the question of Jammu & Kashmir became an international issue. In the year 1949 ceasefire was declared and this dispute was raised at UN. The failure of McNaughton plan, Dixon plan and Graham mission has brought issue of land border not only at forefront but also created problem in popular narratives which affected common masses, literature, media and movies as well.

There are few successful attempts as well to resolve the dispute between India Pak such as in 1950, the agreement between Nehru- Liyakat Ali resolved the issue of minority groups and in 1960 the Indus water treaty between J.L.Nehru and Ayub khan. However in 1963 Pak china friendship and question on Rann of Kutch, the dispute started again. Although Nehru believed within the ambit of popular narratives that the dispute between India Pak will get resolved through friendship, however the way through which Pak tried to disrupt India's internal stability through its Gibraltar operation is not a good sign.

The nature of cold war prevailing at international level during India – Pak war in 1965 resulted in to Tashkand agreement. Prior to this, Pak created tension in this area by retaining membership of SANTO & SEETO but under the able leadership of Lal Bahadur Shastri India won the battle of 1965. Although Tashaknd agreement of 1965 was not much favorable for India as it had to forgo its rights but it improved India's prestige at global level.

In 1971, eastern Pak under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was struggling for independence and people from this region were migrating in India. Despite India's discomfort with this situation, Pak declared war against India and in this war also India stood as a winner under the leadership of Indira Gandhi. But still in Shimla agreement of 1972, India did not achieve much. Under this agreement it was decided that the disputes but two states would be resolved through bilateral talks and peaceful methods. The ceasefire of 1949 was converted into line of control. Both the nations promised each other to maintain regional sovereignty and independence. It was also decided to release prisoners of war from India. In fact there are multiple other factors that have affected India Pak land border issues which was majorly affected by popular and political narratives. In 2000 dialogues began between these two countries and few factors were identified for the cooperation which strengthened popular narratives. The factors are:

1. Jammu Kashmir
2. Sir creek
3. Siyachin glacier
4. Tubule project
5. Terrorism
6. Smuggling
7. confidence building
8. Peaceful exchange
9. Economic trade cooperation

Both the nations are regularly in conversations with each other on Sir Creek issue. There is continuously a condition of dispute in Siyachin glacier since 1984 when India carried out its *Operation Meghdoot*. Despite Lahore declaration of 1999 which talked about commitment to fight against terrorism, natural cooperation and bilateral talks, Kargil war took place. At present both the nations have nuclear weapons and it has created balance of terror in the region.

In political narratives of both the nations, first is the oath diplomacy wherein all the SAARC nations were included by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014. However due to terror attacks and support of Pak to terrorism has increased tension amongst India and Pak.

Popular narratives also played an important role in India Pak relationship. In the field of literature, a lot of people have worked on it. For instance, Saadat Hasan Manto on whose writings one can see the influence of partitions time received *Nishan-e-imitiaz* award (Pak's highest civil honor) in 2012 post his death. In addition to, the writings of Khushwant sing (train to Pakistan) and Kamleshwar (Kitne Pakistan) have talked about Pakistan. In this way literature has also played a vital role in improving Indo- Pak relations. Further media reporting of events taking place in these nations and sharing of same stage by their speakers are few such steps to remove tensions between these nations. Also organizations of religious trips by these nations have strengthened their relations.

Similarly, Cinema has played an important role in defining India Pak relations under popular narratives such as Chhalia (1960) Earth (1998) Dharamputra (1961) Gadar – Ek Prem Katha (2001) Garam Hava (1973) Hey Ram (2000) Lahore (1949) Mammo (1994) Pinjar (2003) Tamas (1987) Train to Pakistan(1998) Border(1997) PK (2014) Bajrangi Bhaijaan (2015) has raised such issues which are associated and have depicted real situation to a great extent. Such initiatives are basically an attempt to increase the positive effect of popular narratives amongst common masses irrespective of prevailing cross border tensions. Many statements made in bollywood movies helps in strengthening the relationship by having positive effect on mindset of Indian people and speed up the dispute rendering process. Pakistani artists are often invited in Indian shows, passion for cricket in both nations are such context of popular narratives which brings these nations closer to each other. Owing to certain circumstances, political narratives find themselves in stressful situations but still talks at army level; ministerial agreements etc. are such examples which are speeding up the process of improving India Pak relations.

### **Conclusion**

The history of Political narratives began with the independence of India in 1947. Since beginning India has given importance to agreements and talks with nations sharing its land borders. Since leader diplomacy has an importance place in political narratives. India has organized meetings, negotiations

and agreements with political leaders of Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, China and Bangladesh with aim of resolving land border issues. Consequently Panchsheel accord of 1954 emerges as a land mark agreement wherein emphasis was given on regional integrity and sovereignty. Despite land border disputes and wars, under political narratives efforts were made such as Tashkand and Shimla agreement. The effect of these political narratives is seen on India's foreign policy where India has given immense importance to its neighbouring nations with is evident in Gujral doctrine and currently in the neighbor first policy. In order to being south Asian countries sharing land border with India closer, the present leadership has used diplomacy including non political approach in Political narratives, ocean diplomacy and space diplomacy.

From the above discussion, the perspective of Political narratives makes it clear that under various agreement and negotiations, cultural uniformities is presented in bordering regions because of which cross border management of people and trade relations have improved. Considering the needs of India and Pak citizens, the transport services have been extended like train services between Munabao and khokharapar and bus services at Vagah Attari border. Similar attempts have been made for Bangladesh by starting a friendly bus service between Kolkata and Dhaka. Because of Political narratives attempts are being made to simplify visa procedures. Recently under political narratives the 100<sup>th</sup> amendment in the constitution resolved the land border agreement with Bangladesh and dispute of identity and citizenship of lacs of Bangladeshi and Indian living in those regions. Various agreements, treaties and accepted documents under political narratives have made the livelihood and security arrangements for common masses living in bordering areas.

Within political narratives, cultural homogeneity based on religion, language, values, traditions, rituals etc is prevalent. The political narratives have been represented at various fronts such as cinema, media, literature, sports etc. This perspective of political narratives proves that border divides only citizens and land but a cultural interaction among people continues. Indian movies are not only appreciated cross border but have also regenerated historical ties. In the context of Nepal popular narratives are visible in marital knots and eating habits. In the similar fashions, haat market of Meghalaya has developed trade relations between Indian and Bangladeshi merchants. In certain circumstances, the boundaries of political narratives are crossed when on cinema and T.V. scenes of patriotism and filled of hatred against other nations are shown. In few instances, cultural hegemony is also visible in Political narratives for example owing to India's geographical area, it is often considered as big brother in mutual relationships which has also became a region of ill feeling against India among people living in neighbouring nations. The kind of tension prevailing during Indo-Pak cricket match elaborates this point. In the similar fashion, the main

contentions issue of Nepal (Madhesi dispute) is associated with those Indian residents are living in states bordering Nepal.

This analysis of Political narratives and popular narratives proves that the factors deciding land border issues are multi-dimensional and agreements, declarations made at governmental level are not enough; while implementing such agreements and cultural aspects associated with popular narratives should be given due importance. Hence under India's foreign policy, diplomacy track I to IX is being used and non conventional areas for mutual cooperation are explored in which people associated with business community, media group, art and literature and cinema can contribute.

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