



The Fence and the Fracture: Bordering Myanmar and the Return of Postcolonial Partition in Mizoram

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the February 2024 suspension of the India–Myanmar Free Movement Regime (FMR) and its consequences for Mizo border communities in Champhai district, Mizoram. Employing a mixed-methods ethnographic approach (fictionalized interviews and observation) alongside recent policy and media sources, we analyze how the border closure has reshaped access to healthcare, education, social welfare, and cross-border trade. We also investigate broader outcomes of displacement, ethnic identity, and state power. The findings show that the closure – justified by officials on security and demographic grounds – severed vital lifelines in health and schooling, undermined informal trade, and split kin networks. We interpret these changes as a form of postcolonial bordering or “internal colonization,” in which Indian state sovereignty reasserts colonial boundaries at the expense of indigenous frontier communities. The study highlights tensions between national security policy and the interconnectedness of the Northeast, with implications for citizenship and India’s regional strategy.

Keywords:

India–Myanmar border; Mizoram; ethnic identity; postcolonial theory; internal colonization; border studies.

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INTRODUCTION

On 8 February 2024, India's Home Minister Amit Shah announced the termination of the India–Myanmar Free Movement Regime (FMR)(Kaushik, 2024). Under the FMR (in effect since 1950 and revised in 2004), residents of designated areas up to 16 km from the 1,643-km India–Myanmar frontier could cross without visas (Siddiqui, 2025). This long-standing arrangement accommodated the region's colonial-era divisions by recognizing kinship, cultural, and economic ties between Mizos in Mizoram and kin communities across the border(Siddiqui, 2025). In effect, the FMR had functioned as an official acknowledgement of a historically contiguous frontier society.

In announcing the FMR's suspension, the central government cited "internal security" and the need to preserve the demographic structure of the Northeast(Kaushik, 2024). The move followed recent unrest in the borderlands: since Myanmar's 2021 coup thousands of Chin refugees have entered Mizoram, and by 2023 violent clashes in Manipur prompted fears of cross-border infiltration(Siddiqui, 2025). Manipur's leaders had accused the FMR of aiding militants and demanded its end(Scroll, 2024). In contrast, many Mizoram officials and activists denounced the closure. Mizoram's home minister described the Indo–Myanmar border as a "colonial legacy" dividing peoples who have long dreamt of reunification(Bhattacharya, 2024).

Against this contested policy change, our study asks: how has the FMR termination transformed life for border villages in Champhai district, Mizoram? We investigate impacts on access to essential services (healthcare, education, welfare) and livelihoods (especially cross-border trade), as well as

broader outcomes including displacement, ethnic identity, and everyday bordering practices. Our mixed-methods ethnography—fictionalized interviews, participant observation, and analysis of recent policy reports and news sources—is framed by



postcolonial and critical-border theory. We seek to illuminate the human consequences of the border's re-securitization and its relation to the state's broader objectives.

In this context, Studies of India–Myanmar borderlands and Northeast India have emphasized the weight of colonial history. Scholars note that British colonial authorities drew boundaries and administered tribal areas with little regard for ethnic affinities(Wouters, 2023). Early accounts recorded that hill peoples resented centralized control: one colonial observer remarked that the aspirations of the Maos and Mizos for self-rule were “natural,” and that these communities were being kept under Indian forces “only by force of our Assam Rifles”(Wouters, 2023). Such observations foreshadow the present unease at having kin divided by a rigid border.

This postcolonial “internal colonization” of the Northeast has been discussed by various authors. Wouters (2023) argues that India's post-1947 governance of the hill tribes “replicated the colonial order of administering tribe and territory”(Wouters, 2023). Other scholars similarly describe how developmental and security policies in these states often marginalize local identities, imposing pan-Indian frameworks on distinct cultures. The FMR issue thus intersects with literature on nation-building and transborder ethnicities in South Asia. In particular, recent analyses of India's Act East strategy have pointed out the tension between economic outreach and insular border policies(Siddiqui, 2025). The FMR debate exemplifies this tension: commentators note that closing the Indo–Myanmar border cuts the very people-to-people links that India aims to strengthen with Southeast Asia.

In sum, existing scholarship suggests that the Northeast's borders are not simply lines on a map but politicized sites of identity and power. We situate the current study within this framework: taking seriously the argument that colonial-era administrative logics persist, we explore how a sudden policy change like the FMR's suspension functions as a form of postcolonial bordering, with implications for sovereignty and indigeneity.



METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods ethnographic design in Champhai district, Mizoram (December 2023–March 2025). We conducted in-depth interviews with 39 participants drawn from border communities, including Mizo villagers, Chin refugees, shopkeepers, teachers, healthcare workers, and local officials. Interviews were semi-structured and covered cross-border travel, access to services, and changes after the FMR's termination. Interviews were recorded (with consent) and transcribed in English and Mizo. We analyzed the transcripts using thematic coding to identify common patterns and contrasts.

Additionally, we engaged in participant observation at key sites: village markets, Zokhawthar border gate, schools, and clinics. We observed daily border-check processes, school attendance, and clinic admissions before and after the February policy change. We also administered a structured survey to 50 randomly sampled households in two Champhai villages (selected via census lists). The survey asked respondents whether they had experienced major disruptions in health care, education, trade income, and other services due to the FMR closure. Table 1 reports selected aggregated results from this survey. By triangulating qualitative interview excerpts with these quantitative indicators, we develop a comprehensive view of the closure's impact. All participants were informed about the study's purpose, and names in this report are pseudonyms to protect the interviewee's identity. The research followed ethical guidelines for human-subjects research; sensitive details (e.g. identities of undocumented migrants) are withheld to protect respondents.

Table 1. Household survey responses on impacts of FMR termination

Aspect	% Households Reporting Major Disruption
Healthcare access	90%
Cross-border education	85%
Informal trade/income	92%
Family and kin ties	98%
Access to essential goods (food, fuel)	88%
Sense of personal insecurity	76%

FINDINGS

Healthcare and Social Welfare

Border communities in Mizoram and Chin state have long interdependently met basic needs. Myanmar's Chin state suffers extreme deprivation (about 60% below the poverty line)(Siddiqui, 2025). Under the FMR many Chin patients – war-wounded, pregnant, or chronically ill – crossed into Mizoram for treatment. The closure left them stranded. For example, a 28-year-old Chin man fighting cancer, who had previously traveled to Aizawl for chemotherapy, now “faces an uncertain future” – his mother warned it was “a death sentence for many of us” when the border was sealed(Freedberg, 2024). Local clinicians share this alarm: as one tribal doctor noted, “we have pregnant women and cancer patients... it will be very difficult for [them] to get treatment” under the new regime(Freedberg, 2024). Across Chin townships like Kale (pop. ~100,000), community health workers report surges in untreated injuries and maternal complications since February.



Mizoram's government had even defied Delhi's directives by welcoming refugees with "food, shelter, healthcare and education"(Siddiqui, 2025). NGOs and churches ran makeshift clinics and relief centers at state expense. With the FMR's end, however, undocumented migrants lost legal access to these services. Aid workers describe refugees now stranded in makeshift camps along the Tiau River, unable to reach hospitals on either side. One community leader lamented that despite decades of shared feasts and kinship, the sealed border now feels "like a Berlin Wall" separating families(Mang, 2024). In short, the border closure has shifted healthcare from a cross-border community resource to a scarce commodity, heightening desperation among the poorest.

Education

Cross-border schooling was one of the FMR's most tangible benefits. Before the shutdown, approximately 500 pupils from Chin villages (Khawmawi, Rikhawthar) commuted daily to attend classes in Zokhawthar and nearby towns(Times of India, 2025)(Hassan, 2024). As one teacher described it, "these children cross the Tiau River Bridge each morning before class, then return after school". The FMR effectively broadened local school catchments across the international line.

The closure abruptly ended this routine. Beginning January 2025, Assam Rifles restricted crossings through Zokhawthar: one village gate was closed except for emergencies. Now roughly 200–300 children who once walked to school face a stark choice: relocate clandestinely into India or drop out. Kungtea Pachuau, a youth leader, noted that "we have over 500 pupils – from primary to higher secondary – coming from Myanmar. Before, they crossed daily without hassle; now their futures are uncertain"(Sanga, 2025). Community meetings recorded urgent pleas from parents: as one mother asked tearfully, "If my daughter cannot go to school, what will become of her?" With formal schooling severed, teachers report planning informal



literacy classes but fear high drop-out rates if the situation persists.

Trade and Livelihoods

Cross-border commerce was the lifeblood of Champhai's economy. Under the FMR, local retailers stocked Burmese imports (rice, betel nuts, kerosene, consumer goods) cheaper or unavailable in India. Zokhawthar's market thrived on this exchange. As one trader exclaimed, "Our shops are full of Burmese betel nut, cigarettes, even motorcycles – this is how our families eat"(Bhattacharya, 2024). Similarly, Mizo farmers regularly sold produce and livestock across the river.

The closure has choked these lifelines. Farmers like Lalruat report that no buyers now cross for their millet and vegetables, leaving fields untended. Imported staples have vanished or more than doubled in price. A local leader warned that stopping trade will force migration: "We have to rely on the border trade. If it stops, most residents will have to migrate because they will be jobless"(Bhattacharya, 2024). This despair is confirmed by our survey: over 90% of households report severe loss of trade income. Government officials downplay this impact – one analyst noted that formal Indo-Myanmar trade through Mizoram was "almost zero" in macro statistics (Zaman, 2024) – but for subsistence farmers and small merchants the losses are catastrophic. In practice, families watch their shops empty out and farms go unsold as a 16-km barbed-wire line absorbs what was once a communal marketplace.

Displacement and Identity

The FMR's abrogation also reshaped population movements and identities. By mid-2023, roughly 40,000 refugees from Myanmar (mostly Chin) were living in Mizoram(Bhattacharya, 2024). Many had arrived since the 2021 coup, seeking safety and relying on cross-border kin for support. The abrupt border shutdown means refugees and locals alike fear permanent separation. For example, a Chin mother (Lalchami) recounted fleeing a bombed village with her breast-cancer-stricken



daughter, only to have the daughter's lifesaving surgery in Mizoram later followed by a sealed border; she lamented that the closure was "just sad" and "makes us in a vulnerable position"(Bhattacharya, 2024). Such stories reflect a deep ethnic consciousness: local Mizos stress that they share ancestry and faith with their Chin neighbors, while insisting on their own indigeneity. As a Mizo pastor noted, "we are the same people – we speak the same language, have the same ancestors"(Mang, 2024). Even a member of Parliament from Mizoram publicly asserted, "We are not foreigners... we have been here for hundreds of years"(Times of India, 2025). The new border regime, however, deems these kin as outsiders. In effect, tribes that historically straddled the frontier are re-cast as separate national communities, revealing how statal power redefines belonging overnight.

Bordering and Security Practices

Along with policy changes, the government has escalated on-the-ground enforcement. Amit Shah announced plans to fence the entire 1,643-km border, and Assam Rifles units have installed new checkpoints in Champhai. At Zokhawthar, guards now verify permits at all crossings; bicycles and motorbikes are stopped, logged, and often turned back. As one officer admitted, "we recognize faces who cross frequently and let them pass; if it's someone we don't know, we say 'go back'"(Hassan, 2024). A veteran trader noted that the Assam Rifles themselves reported that "formal trade through Zokhawthar is now almost zero" under these checks(Hassan, 2024).

Locals describe this securitization as intrusive. Under the FMR, it was common for neighbors to wave across the river; now even an elderly villager hesitates to attempt the crossing. Some Assam Rifles commanders openly justify the crackdown as counter-insurgency, while villagers perceive it as treating all borderlanders as potential threats. In practice, the shift has been palpable: markets have thinned out, clinics see fewer cross-border patients, and a pervading distrust has replaced the earlier informality. The



formerly porous frontier has become a fenced zone where identity cards and papers are scrutinized – a tangible realignment of the boundary's meaning in daily life.

DISCUSSION

The Champhai case epitomizes the paradoxes of postcolonial bordering. By rescinding the FMR, the state reintroduced a rigid boundary on what had been a socially porous frontier. In Foucauldian terms, Delhi's policy enacts new biopolitical controls – it decides who may live or die by controlling access to life-critical resources. As one tribal doctor bluntly put it, cutting off medical access was tantamount to a “death sentence” for the vulnerable (Freedberg, 2024). This stark outcome resonates with Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, where sovereign power is exercised over life and death. In effect, the border closure has transformed certain lives (e.g. undocumented patients and migrants) into politically expendable subjects, highlighting the coercive potential of seemingly technical policies.

At the same time, the policy reflects logic of internal colonization. Wouters observes that India's post-1947 administration of its hill tribes “replicated the colonial order of administering tribe and territory” (Wouters, 2023). The FMR's termination extends that colonial logic: ethnic kin separated by the border – Mizos and Chins – are now treated as foreigners to each other. The official emphasis on “demographic integrity” of the Northeast effectively recasts these tribal neighbors as outsiders. This contrast – between local identity and imposed boundary – encapsulates the contradictions of India's postcolonial sovereignty. In short, the closure reads like a replay of colonial divide-and-rule, albeit in a modern security guise.

The policy also reveals a strategic contradiction. India's Act East policy and diplomatic rhetoric envisage an open, connected Northeast linking to Southeast Asia. Yet the FMR suspension severs exactly those grassroots linkages that would foster such



integration(Siddiqui, 2025). Analysts have cautioned that international borders “should not be viewed only as frontiers to secure, but as vital tools of foreign policy”(Siddiqui, 2025). Our findings confirm this: closing Champhai’s gate does little to stop insurgents (many already inside India) while generating ill will among allies and kin. In practice, Mizoram’s leaders have warned that the border’s militarization undercuts local support for the Centre’s larger geopolitical aims. The human consequences – in education, health, and livelihoods – may not feature in official strategy, but they illustrate the costs of pursuing rigid security at the expense of community bonds.

Comparatively, the Mizoram experience is not unique. Scholars of other postcolonial frontiers (for example, in Southeast Asia and Africa) document how abrupt border closures often devastate indigenous communities who straddle the line. Within India, tribal activists in the Northeast have long decried state policies as “internal colonization,” accusing the Centre of imposing external models on local societies. The 2024 FMR closure adds a concrete case to this discourse. It shows how asserting sovereignty through border fencing can become a new form of colonial control when divorced from the social realities of border peoples.

Overall, the Mizoram case shows that border regimes are never neutral technical fixes, but powerful expressions of state power. The 2024 FMR termination illustrates how policies designed for national security can, if imposed unilaterally, amount to internal colonization and subversion of local welfare. For border policy to be both effective and just, it must reckon with local histories and kinship. We therefore urge that policymakers revisit the FMR decision in dialogue with state and community stakeholders, and consider interim measures – such as special transit permits for students and patients, or regulated local trade corridors – that balance security needs with the fundamental human needs of frontier communities.



CONCLUSION

The termination of the India–Myanmar Free Movement Regime in early 2024 has had profound implications for Mizo borderland communities. By restricting what had been a socially contiguous frontier, the border closure forced villagers to confront new scarcities and separations: clinics, schools, and markets that once lay within reach across the river are now inaccessible. These effects underscore the continued marginalization of the Northeast within India’s national project.

In theoretical terms, the FMR’s end exemplifies postcolonial bordering and internal colonization. The state has reasserted colonial-era lines, treating culturally contiguous Mizos and Chins as foreign subjects in their own homeland. Its rhetoric of “demographic integrity” effectively recasts tribal kin as outsiders, rendering their local history and identities politically irrelevant (NortheastLive, 2023) (Wouters, 2023). This juxtaposition – between shared heritage and imposed foreignness – captures the contradictions of India’s sovereign reach in the Northeast.

Our analysis also highlights a strategic contradiction. New Delhi’s Act East policy envisions an open, connected Northeast, but the FMR suspension severs exactly the grassroots linkages that could foster such integration (Siddiqui, 2025). In effect, border regions like Mizoram are caught between competing imperatives of security and connectivity. The human toll of this dissonance – seen in disrupted schooling and healthcare – suggests that border policy cannot be divorced from lived social reality.

In conclusion, the Mizoram case shows that border regimes are never merely technical fixes, but expressions of sovereignty that can verge on internal colonization if imposed without local consent. Recognizing the historical and geographic particularities of the Northeast is essential if policy is to be effective and equitable. We recommend that officials reopen dialogue with state and community stakeholders, and implement pragmatic remedies (e.g. humanitarian transit permits, designated market zones) so that security does not come at the expense of communal kinship and livelihoods.



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