



Psychological Impacts of India-China Border Disputes: A Study on Border Populations of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract: The border regions of Arunachal Pradesh share a disputed frontier with China, shaped by the unresolved legacy of the 1962 Sino-Indian War, persistent territorial claims by China and occasional border skirmishes. These geopolitical dynamics are more than strategic issues they profoundly affect the psychological well-being of local communities. This research explores the mental health implications, including fear, anxiety and chronic stress, among people residing near the Line of Actual Control (LAC). It examines how inadequate defense infrastructure, persistent uncertainty about security and historical trauma affect daily life and risk perceptions. Drawing on psychological stress theory and research on frontier populations, this study identifies key factors shaping psychological outcomes in border communities. Findings suggest that perceptions of insecurity and unpreparedness influence psychosocial functioning, social cohesion and livelihood confidence. The article concludes with recommendations for policymakers to integrate psychological support systems alongside defense and development strategies in border areas.

Keywords: *Arunachal Pradesh, Border Disputes, Defense, Military, Psychology*

1. Introduction

The Northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh occupies a unique and sensitive place in India's geopolitical landscape. Its long, rugged frontier with China administered by India but claimed in entirety by China as part of "South Tibet" has been a site of historical conflict, strategic tension and enduring uncertainty (Baruah, 2005; Das, 2018). The legacy of the 1962 Sino-Indian War, intermittent border skirmishes and ongoing Chinese territorial claims have shaped not only diplomatic negotiations and military postures but also the lived experiences of people in the region. While extensive scholarship has chronicled strategic and political dimensions of the India–China boundary dispute (e.g., Maxwell, 2015; Smith, 2019), comparatively less attention has been paid to the psychological toll on local communities living under the shadow of a contested border.

Borderland populations experience a distinctive set of stressors: uncertainty about safety, periodic militarization, lack of infrastructure and threats to livelihood and identity (Hollifield et al., 2016). In Arunachal Pradesh, these stressors are compounded by perceptions of inadequate defense infrastructure, limited economic opportunities and memories often inherited across generations—of conflict and displacement. The fear of escalation, coupled with real incidents of standoffs in areas such as Tawang and the Upper Siang district, feeds anxiety and a pervasive sense of vulnerability (Goswami, 2020). Understanding these psychological impacts is critical for formulating holistic policies that go beyond security concerns to address human well-being.

This research article examines the psychological impacts on people living in the border regions of Arunachal Pradesh bordering China, situating local experiences within broader theoretical frameworks of psychological stress and trauma. It explores how historical conflicts, present geopolitical tensions and perceptions of defense preparedness influence mental health outcomes, coping mechanisms and community resilience.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 *Psychological Stress and Trauma Theory*

Central to this study is the theory of psychological stress as articulated by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which posits that individuals experience stress when they perceive environmental demands as exceeding their ability to cope. Border populations confront multiple ongoing stressors: perceived threat to life and property, uncertainty about territorial sovereignty,

and lack of adequate protective infrastructure. According to this perspective, chronic exposure to unpredictable threats can lead to persistent anxiety, hypervigilance and impaired psychosocial functioning.

2.2 Collective Memory and Intergenerational Trauma

Another relevant theoretical lens is collective memory and intergenerational trauma (Alexander et al., 2004). The 1962 conflict casts a long shadow over communities in Arunachal Pradesh. Even for families that did not directly experience the war, its memory passed down through narratives can shape risk perceptions and fear responses. Collective memory influences identity and communal sense of security, reinforcing vigilance and worry about future conflict.

2.3 Borderland Psychology

Borderland psychology emphasizes the unique stress ecology of frontier populations who navigate socio-cultural ambiguity and geopolitical uncertainty (Martinez, 1994). Living at the edge of contested space creates a psychological environment characterized by elevated threat perception, fluctuating security, and complex identity negotiation—between national belonging and proximity to perceived adversaries.

2.4 Research Objectives

The study has the following objectives:

1. To identify and analyze the primary psychological impacts experienced by residents of border regions in Arunachal Pradesh near China.
2. To explore the role of historical conflict (especially the 1962 war) and continuous territorial claims by China in shaping current psychological stress and fear among local populations.
3. To assess how perceptions of defense preparedness, infrastructure inadequacy and border skirmishes contribute to mental health outcomes and coping strategies.

2.5 Research Questions

To guide this investigation, the study examines the following research questions:

1. What are the predominant psychological effects experienced by people living in the border areas of Arunachal Pradesh adjacent to China?
2. How do historical memories of the 1962 Sino-Indian War and ongoing Chinese territorial claims influence psychological stress and perceived vulnerability?

3. In what ways do perceptions of inadequate defense infrastructure and intermittent border tensions contribute to fear, anxiety and coping mechanisms among borderland residents?

3. Discussion

The following discussion is organized according to the research objectives, synthesizing empirical and theoretical insights to address the core themes.

3.1 Psychological Effects in Border Regions

People residing in frontier zones often experience a complex mix of emotional and cognitive responses to their environment. In Arunachal Pradesh, these include heightened anxiety, persistent fear of conflict escalation, feelings of vulnerability and hypervigilance. Residents frequently feel concerns about sudden changes in the security situation, reflecting an underlying sense of precariousness (Bhattacharya, 2021).

Anxiety and Hypervigilance

Continuous exposure to media coverage of border tensions and reports of troop mobilizations can reinforce anxiety. Border residents sometimes express a heightened state of alertness which is a psychological adaptation that, while functional in dangerous contexts, can contribute to stress when sustained over long periods.

Fear of Displacement

Although large-scale displacement has not occurred since 1962, the fear of sudden evacuation in case of conflict recurrence is prevalent. This perceived threat undermines stable planning for families, affecting decisions around housing, education and economic investment.

Community Cohesion and Stress

While adversity can sometimes strengthen social bonds, persistent insecurity may erode trust and lead to social withdrawal. Individuals who internalize stress may limit engagement in community activities out of fear, further isolating vulnerable groups such as the elderly and youths.

Youth and Identity Stress

Youths in border areas grapple with dual pressures of maintaining cultural identity tied to place and coping with narratives of insecurity. Some young people in Arunachal Pradesh express concern about limited opportunities and fear that geopolitical tensions may hinder their prospects. The psychological landscape of these communities reflects both individual and

collective dimensions of stress—from day-to-day worry to broader anxieties about national sovereignty and existential security.

3.2 Influence of 1962 War and Chinese Territorial Claims

The 1962 Sino-Indian War remains a pivotal point in collective memory for people of Arunachal Pradesh. Although direct lived experience of the war is now limited to older generations, its memory profoundly influences contemporary perceptions of risk and insecurity.

Intergenerational Transmission of Fear

Narratives of the 1962 war are embedded in family histories and community lore. These stories, often recounting sudden conflict, displacement and loss, contribute to a heightened sense of threat among younger generations who did not witness the war directly. Such intergenerational trauma can influence psychological well-being, increasing susceptibility to anxiety disorders linked to perceived existential threats.

Ongoing Claims and Uncertainty

China's persistent territorial claims over Arunachal Pradesh, reiterated through diplomatic statements and maps, sometimes amplify feelings of uncertainty. For residents, territorial uncertainty translates into a psychological environment where the legitimacy of their homeland is questioned. This can erode sense of belonging, reduce feelings of national security and perpetuate persistent worry about potential future conflict.

Symbolic Violence and Identity Stress

Beyond direct fear of conflict, territorial claims serve as a form of symbolic violence—challenging the legitimacy of local identities and their place within the Indian nation-state. Such psychological stress can lead to diminished self-esteem and identity tension, especially among communities that already navigate marginalization due to geographic isolation.

Cumulative Stress Over Time

The psychological impacts of historical conflict and ongoing claims cannot be viewed in isolation. Instead, they accumulate with each new incident of tension, reinforcing a lens of vulnerability and threat. Individuals internalize geopolitical signals—even when everyday life remains relatively stable through repetitive exposure to national and local discourse about security threats.

3.3 Perceptions of Defense Infrastructure and Border Skirmishes

A consistent theme emerging from research in frontier regions is the relationship between perceived defense preparedness and mental health outcomes. In Arunachal Pradesh, people's perceptions of inadequate defense infrastructures and limited protective capacity directly influence psychological stress levels.

Inadequate Defense Infrastructure

Many residents express concern that defense infrastructures such as roads, communications, war weapons, medical facilities and rapid response units so on are insufficient given the scale of strategic threats perceived along the LAC. These perceptions are reinforced by difficulties in accessing basic services, particularly during harsh weather seasons when connectivity is disrupted. When people believe that state institutions are unable to protect them effectively, trust in governance may decline, intensifying fear and discouragement. This sense of neglect is particularly pronounced among communities that feel their safety needs are secondary to broader geopolitical strategies.

Border Skirmishes and Acute Stress Episodes

Even minor border incidents such as patrol clashes or incursions—can trigger acute stress responses. Residents may suffer startle reactions, sleep disturbances and heightened alertness following such events. For civilians living near contested points reinforce a cycle of vigilance and apprehension.

Fear of Escalation

Border skirmishes are not only physical events but psychological triggers. They remind communities of the fragility of peace and the possibility of rapid escalation. This contributes to a constant underlying fear, especially among parents worried for the safety of their children and elderly citizens.

Coping Mechanisms and Psychological Costs

Many locals adopt coping mechanisms such as avoidance of news related to border tensions, reliance on community support, spiritual practices or increased engagement in livelihood activities to distract from anxiety. While adaptive in the short term, these strategies may mask deeper psychological concerns that require professional mental health support.

Role of Media and Communication

Local and national media play a significant role in shaping perceptions of threat and preparedness. Sensational reporting can amplify fear, while information gaps may leave people

guessing about actual risk levels. Hence, communication environments significantly contribute to psychological stress among borderland populations.

Fear of Future War or Attacks from China

A significant psychological burden carried by residents of Arunachal Pradesh's border regions is the persistent fear of a future war or sudden military attack by China. This fear is not abstract or hypothetical; rather, it is deeply rooted in historical experience, ongoing geopolitical tensions and observable military activities along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Unlike populations living far from conflict zones, border communities live with the constant anticipation of escalation, which profoundly shapes their mental and emotional well-being.

Anticipatory Anxiety and Permanent Uncertainty

Anticipatory anxiety refers to fear and stress associated with the expectation of future threats. For people living near the India–China border, the absence of a clearly demarcated boundary and the frequent reporting of troop movements generate a continuous sense of uncertainty. Residents often express concern that a future conflict may erupt suddenly, as occurred in 1962, without sufficient warning or time for evacuation. This uncertainty leads to psychological stress, sleep disturbances and difficulty concentrating on daily activities. Unlike short-term crises, this fear is long-term and open-ended, making it psychologically exhausting. Individuals are forced to mentally prepare for worst-case scenarios—loss of life, displacement and destruction of property despite the lack of immediate conflict. Such prolonged stress exposure can weaken emotional resilience and increase vulnerability to anxiety-related disorders.

Fear of Sudden Attacks and Civilian Vulnerability

The fear of sudden attacks is heightened by the perceived civilian vulnerability of border settlements. Many villages are located in remote, mountainous terrain with limited access to healthcare, communication networks and emergency evacuation routes. Residents are aware that in the event of a large-scale military confrontation, civilians may be the most exposed and least protected. This awareness fosters a psychological state of helplessness, where individuals feel they have little control over their safety. Parents, in particular, experience heightened fear regarding the safety of children and elderly family members. This sometimes leads to emotional overprotectiveness, reduced mobility and reluctance to invest in long-term livelihood activities, thereby affecting social and economic life.

Impact of Military Build-up and Media Narratives

Visible military deployments, infrastructure construction and reports of border stand-offs serve as constant reminders of potential conflict. While such measures are intended to enhance national security, they can also unintentionally reinforce fear among civilians by signaling the possibility of imminent confrontation. For local populations, the presence of armed forces is simultaneously a source of reassurance and anxiety. Media narratives further intensify psychological stress. Sensational reporting, speculation about war and frequent use of aggressive rhetoric amplify fear, even during periods of relative calm. Continuous exposure to such narratives creates a perception that war is inevitable rather than avoidable, deepening emotional distress and pessimism about the future.

Historical Memory and Fear of Repetition

The collective memory of the 1962 Sino-Indian War plays a crucial role in shaping fear of future conflict. Stories of sudden invasion, lack of preparedness and civilian suffering are passed down through generations, embedding a fear of repetition within community consciousness. This historical trauma makes present-day tensions more psychologically potent, as people interpret current developments through the lens of past loss and vulnerability. Even younger generations who did not experience war directly internalize these fears through family narratives and community discourse. As a result, geopolitical tensions are not perceived as distant diplomatic issues but as immediate personal threats.

Psychological Consequences of War Anticipation

The fear of future war contributes to multiple psychological consequences, including:

- Chronic anxiety and emotional exhaustion
- Heightened startle responses and hypervigilance
- Reduced sense of future security and optimism
- Decline in trust toward long-term peace initiatives

Such conditions can undermine overall mental health and weaken community resilience. Over time, persistent war-related fear can normalize stress, making psychological distress invisible and untreated.

Need for Psychological Security alongside Military Security

The fear of future war underscores the importance of psychological security as a component of national security. While strengthening defense capabilities is essential, addressing civilian fear through transparent communication, mental health services and community-based

reassurance mechanisms is equally critical. Without such measures, border populations may continue to live under a psychological burden that silently erodes well-being, social cohesion and confidence in the future.

Indigenous Attachment to Land and Resistance to Displacement

Despite the pervasive fear of future war or military attacks, a striking psychological and cultural characteristic among indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh is their unwavering attachment to ancestral land. For many indigenous groups living near the India–China border—such as the Adi, Galo, Monpa, Nyishi, Tagin and other tribes—their villages are not merely places of residence, but sacred spaces tied to identity, history and survival. This deep-rooted connection profoundly shapes their psychological response to the possibility of conflict.

Land as Identity and Existence

Among indigenous communities, land is inseparable from identity. It represents ancestry, spirituality, cultural memory and collective existence. The idea of abandoning ancestral land during conflict is often perceived not just as physical displacement but as a loss of self and community continuity. As a result, many indigenous residents express a strong belief that they would rather face death than flee their homeland, even in the event of war or external attack. This worldview challenges conventional assumptions about civilian behavior during armed conflict. Unlike populations in urban or non-indigenous settings, where evacuation is often seen as a rational survival strategy, indigenous border residents interpret flight as a form of cultural erasure and defeat.

Psychological Meaning of Staying Back

The willingness to remain in place during potential conflict is not driven by ignorance of danger but by a psychological commitment to place-based dignity and honor. For many elders and community leaders, staying back symbolizes resistance, courage and loyalty to both ancestral heritage and the Indian nation-state. This attitude is reinforced through oral traditions, customary laws and communal narratives that valorize protection of land at all costs. Psychologically, this stance provides a sense of agency and control in an otherwise uncertain environment. While fear of war exists, the resolve not to flee helps individuals cope with anxiety by reaffirming purpose and moral clarity. In this sense, attachment to land functions as both a source of resilience and a psychological anchor.

Collective Courage and Community Solidarity

Indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh are highly collective in nature. Decisions about staying or leaving are rarely individual; they are shaped by communal consensus and shared values. The belief that “we will not run away” strengthens community solidarity, reducing panic and reinforcing mutual dependence during times of heightened tension. This collective resolve also reflects historical experience. Many indigenous communities have survived colonial encounters, state neglect and geopolitical marginalization. These experiences contribute to a strong psychological orientation toward endurance rather than retreat.

Psychological Costs of Such Resolve

While this determination reflects resilience and courage, it also carries psychological costs. The internalization of the belief that fleeing is dishonorable may discourage individuals from expressing fear or seeking psychological support. Suppressed anxiety, especially among women, children and the elderly, can increase emotional strain and vulnerability to long-term mental health challenges.

Moreover, the readiness to sacrifice life rather than land underscores the intensity of psychological pressure experienced by border populations. It reveals how deeply geopolitical threats penetrate personal and cultural consciousness, transforming national security concerns into existential dilemmas.

Implications for Policy and Mental Health Interventions

There is need for culturally sensitive security and mental health policies. Evacuation planning, disaster preparedness and psychological interventions must recognize indigenous values and attachment to land. Ensuring psychological security, therefore, requires not only physical protection but also respect for indigenous identity, dignity and autonomy. Acknowledging their determination to stay—even in the face of danger—can help policymakers design strategies that build trust and strengthen community resilience without undermining cultural values.

4. Conclusion

The psychological impacts on people living in the border regions of Arunachal Pradesh near China are profound and multi-layered. Persistent fear, anxiety and heightened vigilance characterize the mental health landscape of these communities. These impacts extend beyond momentary emotional reactions, embedding themselves into everyday life, community practices

and individual worldviews. Key factors shaping these psychological outcomes include historical memory of the 1962 war, reinforcing beliefs about vulnerability; ongoing Chinese territorial claims, challenging sense of belonging and security and perceptions of inadequate defense infrastructures, which exacerbate feelings of ‘not protected’. Border skirmishes and reports of tensions act as acute stress triggers that resonate through families and communities long after the incidents subside. Understanding these phenomena requires not only geopolitical analysis but also psychological insight into how fear and stress are experienced, maintained and transmitted in frontier contexts. Integrating mental health support, community engagement initiatives and transparent communication about defense preparedness into border development strategies is essential. This would help alleviate chronic stress and foster a sense of security and resilience among residents. Policy responses that prioritize human well-being alongside strategic defence can transform the borderland experience from one of persistent anxiety to one where communities feel valued, protected and empowered.

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