

Fueling the Margins: The Diesel Trade as Borderland Livelihood in Tusom and Somra Areas

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the informal cross-border trade between Tusom village in Manipur, India and Somra and adjoining villages in Myanmar as a critical borderland livelihood practice. Even without steady-state backing, these Naga-inhabited villages illustrate how communities at the geopolitical margins sustain themselves through informal economic practices, even when situated on the Indo-Myanmar borderlands.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork involving participant observation, in-depth interviews and life history narratives, the study documents how diesel is transported across unofficial border routes and embedded within networks of kinship, trust and mutual dependence. The findings show that local traders do not perceive the trade as illegal. Instead, it is framed as a legitimate livelihood in their own terms. While the trade technically violates formal border and trade regulations, it is often tolerated or selectively policed by local authorities, reflecting a complex negotiated form of governance at the margins of the state.

This paper argues that the diesel trade functions as a form of substitute infrastructure that enables everyday mobility, electricity generation and small-scale economic activities in the absence of reliable state support. It exemplifies how informal economies in borderlands are shaped by both necessity and agency. Instead of viewing these practices as aberrant, the study makes a case for recognizing them as pragmatic response to government shortcomings and highlights how people in the border region creatively navigate and reshape the boundaries of state power and law.

INTRODUCTION

There is strict restriction to cross international border of India and Myanmar even though villages of the same ethnic groups spread before the creation of the modern boundary. Traditional ties of ethnicity and livelihood are challenged by the hard border security measures (Saikia and Chaudhury, 2020). However, there also arises challenges of border paradox wherein informal economy fueling shadow

economy (Schneider and Dominik, 2013; Singh *et al.* 2024) Informal cross-border trade plays a significant role in sustaining livelihoods in many border regions of North-East India, despite existing regulatory and policy challenges (Singh *et al.*, 2024)

In 1950, realizing a comprised socio-economic space for the tribes on either sides, the Government of India and Myanmar agreed a cross-border movement by allowing to carry head load trade and cross the India-Myanmar international border without any travel documents and spent 72 hours in India or 24 hours in Myanmar. It is called Free New Series © SERIALS 133

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Regime Movement (FMR) (MP-IDSA 2024). In August 1968, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) introduced the permit system for travelling across the Myanmar border up to 40 kilometers; however, in 2004 they revised to move only up to a radius of 16 kms. There are 10 (ten) operational gates in Manipur state along the Indo-Myanmar border under FMR to improve the livelihood values in border villages.

Tusom area that includes Tusom Khullen or New Tusom, Tusom Christian village (CV), and Tusom K/L under Ukhrul district, Manipur in India on one side and Somra under Sagaing in Myanmar on the other side, are Tangkhul villages having ethnic, linguistic and kinship ties that predate the international boundary. Tusom is located at a distance of about 120 kms away from district headquarter and at 25°N latitude and 94°E longitude. Livelihood activities in these borderland settings routinely transcend sovereign lines, shaped less by formal regulation rather than by necessity, reciprocity and local negotiation. The 35 Assam Rifles in Tusom CV controls and issues 'QR code-enabled border passes' for allowing to stay up to 14 days and to continue 'dual economy' by crossing International Border Pillar number 130 which marks the border junction toward the Nammia River. It is not an international border market, rather it has been planned to open a Border Haat or market here.

This paper investigates one such livelihood practice: the informal trade in diesel fuel between Tusom and Somra. Diesel is informally transported by vehicles like Shaktiman from Indian towns -primarily Ukhrul and Meluri via Tusom to cross the hilly terrain into Myanmar. In Somra and its neighbouring villages, diesel is used not only for gold mining operations but also for everyday uses. It fuels motorcycles and small transport vehicles, power irrigation pumps and provides electricity via household generators in the absence of state infrastructure.

While the Indian state agencies formally regulate the Indo-Myanmar border, enforcement on the ground is uneven and selective. The presence of the Assam Rifles, the paramilitary force stationed at the Tusom outpost, marks state authority, yet the engagement with the diesel trade is characterized

by limited intervention. This paper argues that such selective enforcement reflects a negotiated form of governance rather than an absence of the state. Informal cross-border exchanges often play a crucial role in sustaining borderland economies, demonstrating that informal or illegal trade can actually enable borders to function rather than weaken them. (Abraham, 2014) Through an ethnographic lens, the diesel trade is analyzed not merely as an economic activity but as a window into how borderland communities navigate legality, morality and state power in everyday life. It is a window into the politics of border life where legality is fluid, infrastructure is improvised, and survival hinges on local negotiation. This paper contributes to the anthropology of borders by documenting how material exchanges in peripheral zones both rely on and reconfigure state authority.

MATERIALS & METHODS

The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Tusom village and the surrounding border areas. Multiple qualitative methods were employed to document the organization, meanings and practices associated with the diesel trade.

Participant observation was used by staying in Tusom village to get involved in engaging with traders, observing transportation routines and following the movement of diesel from Indian market towns to the border villages. Border trail mapping was done to trace the footpaths and seasonal routes used to transport diesel across the international boundary. Although the routes are not official, they are widely known and regularly used by local traders. In-depth interviews were conducted with male and female traders, community leaders, and buyers from the Somra side. In addition, oral histories were collected from older residents to document how border trading practices and the local economy have evolved. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained where required.

RESULTS

Empirical findings shows that Tusom villagers procure diesel from Indian market towns such as Ukhrul (Manipur) and Meluri (Nagaland) and

transport it to the village in barrels or jerrycans. From Tusom, the villagers transport the diesel across the border by Shaktiman or Bolero Camper along the unmarked hilly terrain but well-established trails. It serves as a functional though unofficial point of transit. Due to the difference in price and the availability patterns, Tusom functions as the supply node and Somra operates as the demand centre. The trade is small-scale and localized. Traders transport diesel in limited quantities. There is no commercial syndicate. Rather, the trade activity is embedded within everyday livelihood practices. The trade halts each year with the arrival of the monsoon. Landslides and slippery terrain make transport unsafe and nearly impossible. Traders, therefore, plan accordingly, maximizing movement during the dry season.

For Tusom traders, the diesel trade plays a very important role in supplementing income source. Profit margins may be tolerable per trip but repeated transactions generate steady cash flow. As such, this has created entrepreneurial opportunities in a space with limited formal employment resulting in reduced immigration. Consequently, this has led to localized economic circulation within the village. The income generated from the trade is spent within the village itself (village shops, agricultural expenses for equipment and manpower, other society/organization contributions, etc.) thereby, stimulating the economy of the village.

Though gold mining remains the most capital-intensive use of diesel in the Somra region, the commodity supports somewhat broader forms of rural life. Diesel is used to run motorcycles and transport vehicles for goods and passengers, run water pumps and small-scale agricultural machines. It is also used to fuel generators that provide lighting and power in homes and workshops. These functions are crucial in areas where state infrastructure particularly roads, electricity and fuel supply is absent or unreliable on their side. Then, diesel becomes not only a trade good but also a substitute infrastructure.

Both men and women villagers of Tusom take part in this trade actively. While men often undertake the physically demanding task of strenuous cross-border transport, women are central in handling logistics, storage, managing resale and maintaining trade

networks within Tusom and Somra. Elders typically do not participate as the work demands mobility and involves risk management in unpredictable terrain. Nevertheless, they act as financier in a few cases where interested youngsters do not have the funding for start-ups in this trade. The seasonal nature of the trade further limits involvement to those who can adapt to its high-demand cycles.

The Assam Rifle checkpoint in Tusom CV acts as the controller of the Indo-Myanmar border policy in Manipur. Diesel trade is not legalized as it is not included in the list of 62 permitted commodities as only edible oil is permitted. If caught for trading diesel, confiscation of the fuel and the vehicle, cancellation of the QR-code border pass and legal action under the Essential Commodities Act or the Customs Act can be taken up. However, their engagement with the diesel trade is marked by what traders describe as “calculated tolerance”. Field interviews denote that traders are aware of the surveillance and potential restrictions associated with the cross-border fuel movement. As a result, the diesel trade operates under conditions of cautious negotiation rather than open defiance. The presence of checkpoints limits the scale of trade and prevents commercialization beyond subsistence levels within the villages. Traders intentionally avoid large-scale transactions that might trigger stricter enforcement. Interactions are described as circumstantial and negotiated rather than consistently confrontational. Thus, the checkpoint does not eliminate the diesel trade but regulates its volume and visibility. The livelihood persists within a space shaped by state surveillance and local adaptation. This reflects what Das and Poole (2004) call governance “in the margin of the state”- where state actors retreat from enforcement when formal control is either too costly or politically undesirable. In many marginal regions, the presence of the state is not always direct or uniform and local communities negotiate their relationship with state institutions through everyday practices (Gupta, 1995). Such selective visibility allows state authority to persist without being absolute.

Local traders view the diesel trade as a viable short-term income strategy and has reduced their sole dependence on agriculture. For Somra buyers,

the primary concern is price fluctuations rather than legal enforcement. Traders do not consider the diesel business to be illegal or unethical. Rather, they describe it as “a symbiotic benefit for both sides”. This moral framing is rooted in kinship ties, shared histories, mutual dependence and the absence of viable livelihood alternatives. This echoes Scott’s (2009) concept of “non-state spaces” where borderland actors create ethical systems outside centralized law, shaped by necessity and reciprocity.

DISCUSSION

The procurement of diesel from the oil pumps of Ukhrul and Meluri shows traces of strategic operations from both the buyer and the seller. It reflects the adaptive mentality of borderland traders who are involved in the trade. The entire process of provisioning diesel from Tusom to Somra always revolves around price awareness, access to mobility, weather and familiarity with the checkpoint system. Procurement is not random or circumstantial but is carefully calibrated. The traders monitor market price, assess market feasibility and adjust volume based on perceived risk. As such, there is a strong indication of a high level of practical knowledge about both market and security conditions. And so, the border becomes a managed space where economic activity is organized around the anticipation of surveillance and regulation.

Informants are of the opinion that the diesel trade supplements rather than replace agriculture and other livelihood practices. This assortment is crucial in peripheral regions where employment opportunities are limited and agricultural returns are slow and uncertain.

The uses of diesel mentioned in the result highlight the role played by the diesel trade as a productive resource rather than a speculative commodity. Agricultural continuity, mobility and market participation are shaped directly by access to fuel. Herein, diesel becomes a part of everyday life and its circulation sustains the functioning of local communities in both villages. All in all, the trade is not merely about profit but about maintaining productive capacity.

TABLE 1

Figure 1: FMR and diesel trade between Tusom and Somra areas

Feature	Free Movement Regime (FMR)	Diesel Trade
Permitted Radius	10 km (Reduced from 16 km in 2024)	0 km (Prohibited at local village gates)
Document Required	QR-enabled Border Pass (IMBPMS)	Formal License and Customs Clearance
Primary Intent	Ethnic ties, local trade, and cultural exchange	National energy security and revenue
Allowed Items	62 commodities (Agricultural and Household)	None (Classified as "Restricted/Prohibited")
Trading Method	Head-loading trade/ Small-scale barter	Tankers via Integrated Check Posts (ICP)
Enforcement Agency	Assam Rifles (Check-post level)	Customs Department and State Police
Local opinion	To be regulated and continue	Only for supporting subsistence livelihood in their marginal economy, not in large scale, survival strategy

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There has been equal involvement of gender in the diesel trade. In comparison to other borderland trades where mobility and risk are primarily associated with men, this case reveals a more collaborative pattern of engagement. Women participate in procurement, transportation, negotiation and resale alongside men. This involvement portrays the economic realities of the borderland where livelihood activities are structured around household survival rather than rigid occupational divisions of labour. This can also mean that equal participation also reduces gendered economic dependency within households. The diesel economy also reflects flexible gender roles within the borderland context.

The Assam Rifles vigilance in Tusom shows that the state actors are not blind to the diesel trade occurring between the villages. And so, the checkpoint is seen to be regulating its scale and visibility, rather than eliminating the trade. The relationship between traders and security personnel can be described as cautious but not equally confrontational. This also suggests that border regulation operates through everyday negotiation rather than full prohibition.

Transactions are embedded in clan ties and long-standing cross-border relationships. Community norms discourage excessive profiteering, reinforcing the perception that the trade is a survival strategy rather than exploitative commerce. Legitimacy emerges not from state approval but from social recognition within the community. This moral embedding differentiates hand-to-mouth exchanges from organized smuggling and sets the diesel economy within local ethical frameworks. Borderland societies often maintain social and economic networks that transcend national boundaries, reflecting the historical characteristics of the Zomia region described by Jean Michaud (2010).

All in all, procurement strategies respond to price and regulation, income diversification reduces economic vulnerability, gender roles design participation, security presence limits scales and kinship norms ensure moral legitimacy. As such, the border is not just a line of division but a structured setting within which economic practices is negotiated continuously.

CONCLUSION

The informal diesel trade between Tusom and Somra exemplifies how border communities adapt to marginalization by cultivating cross-border economies rooted in mutual need, moral justification and negotiated sovereignty. The findings show that diesel circulation is a carefully organized economic practice embedded in everyday life. Procurement is guided by price awareness and risk assessment particularly in relation to the Assam Rifles checkpoint in Tusom. As supposed to eliminate the trade on the grounds of its legality, state presence looks out for its

scale and visibility, shaping how borderland traders manage movement and volume.

In terms of economy, the diesel trade generates direct income for the Tusom traders and stable fuel access is ensured for the Somra village simultaneously. This unbalanced but mutually beneficial relationship strengthens cross-border interdependence. There is an equal division of labour in the trade and operations are done at the household level. This strengthens household resilience and expands livelihood flexibility in the border villages.

The moral framing of the trade within kinship networks ensures its social legitimacy. Trust, reputation and community norms regulate exchange more effectively than formal written contracts. Local traders mostly choose to understand the trade as more of a practical adaptation to peripheral conditions rather than as deviant or criminal behaviour.

In a region where state infrastructure is lacking and border governance is inconsistent, fuel becomes not just a commodity but a lifeline. The international boundary, state surveillance and price differentials do not simply restrict economic life but structure it. By documenting this trade ethnographically, the paper challenges binary notions of legality versus illegality, Centre versus Periphery. It shows that in the highland borderlands of India and Myanmar, informal economies are not merely survival strategies but are sophisticated, socially embedded systems of regional interdependence.

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