GEOPOLITICS

SECURING THE BANGLADESH BORDER: MOBS, SMUGGLERS AND THE UNFENCED 864 KM

By **Kamlesh Bhagatkar**, *Politician, Author & Geopolitical Analyst · 21 November 2026*

On 2 November, a patrol of the Border Security Force's 49th Battalion stopped what it believed was a ganja smuggling run at Ashabari, a village under Kalamchoura police station in Tripura's Sepahijala district, close to the Bangladesh border. What followed was a mob attack. According to IANS, as carried by Telangana Today, a crowd of about 50 men and women surrounded the BSF personnel and attacked them. Organiser reported that a BSF vehicle carrying an Assistant Commandant, his driver and another jawan was set upon with sticks, bamboo poles and stones, the vehicle was vandalised, and someone tried to snatch a service firearm, which was later recovered. Three BSF personnel were injured, the Assistant Commandant among them, and were moved from Boxanagar hospital to Agartala.

Police have since arrested 18 people, three of them women, and booked them under the NDPS Act, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and the Prevention of Damage to Public Property Act, Telangana Today reported. The case is now with the courts, and I will say nothing about any individual accused. Chief Minister Manik Saha called the attack "completely unacceptable", chaired a security review in Agartala with the police, BSF, CRPF and Assam Rifles, and called for "zero tolerance towards cross-border smuggling."

I want to look at what this attack tells us about India's eastern frontier and what the country should do about it. My answer is simple to state and hard to deliver: finish the fence, settle the land, and keep talking to Dhaka from a position of strength.

What happened at Ashabari, in the BSF's words

The BSF's own account deserves attention. The force said smugglers who fled "allegedly misled local villagers and mobilised them to organise a violent blockade," Organiser reported. Its personnel showed restraint and did not use lethal force "to prevent further loss of human life."

That is the pattern I worry about. A smuggling gang does not need guns to beat a border patrol. It needs a crowd, a rumour and a road to block. The men on duty then face an impossible choice: fire and risk deaths among villagers, or hold back and take the blows. At Ashabari they held back. I respect that discipline, and I also think we cannot keep asking jawans to pay for it with their bodies.

Tripura knows this cost well. Telangana Today recalled that in 2017, BSF Deputy Commandant Deepak Kumar Mandal was run over by a vehicle allegedly driven by smugglers at Balerdepha in Sonamura, and died. In 2019, Tripura Police Sub-Inspector Durga Kumar Hrangkhawl was killed in the same district when a vehicle allegedly driven by cross-border smugglers ran him over. The state shares an 856 km border with Bangladesh, which surrounds it on three sides.

Nor is Tripura alone. On 24 October, near a BSF outpost in Mekhliganj in West Bengal's Cooch Behar district, a group of Bangladeshi nationals crossed the barbed-wire fence to dig sand and stones on the bank of the Saniyajan river, ETV Bharat reported. When told to leave, they allegedly called more people from across the border and attacked the BSF with sticks and stones. The BSF fired grenades in self-defence, the report said, and the group went back into Bangladesh.

The fence that is still not finished

The government's own figures explain why these incidents keep happening. In a written reply in the Lok Sabha on 4 February 2025, Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai said the India Bangladesh border is 4,096.7 km long, of which 3,232.218 km had been fenced, Scroll reported. That left 864.482 km unfenced, including 174.514 km described as a "non-feasible" gap where a fence cannot practically be built. The minister listed the reasons for delay: land acquisition, objections from Border Guard Bangladesh, limited working seasons and difficult terrain.

West Bengal holds the longest stretch. The Tribune reported in May 2026 that the state's border with Bangladesh runs 2,216 km, of which 1,648 km was fenced, around 112 km could not be fenced because of geography, and 569 km remained unfenced. In 182 km of that, the Centre had already paid for the land but the state had not handed it over. Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari said at the time: "The land will be handed over to the BSF within two weeks."

Some of that has since happened. All India Radio reported on 29 August that Murshidabad had become the first district in West Bengal to complete its land handover, a total of 334.24 acres covering nearly 48 km of border, and that the state planned to hand over around 1,025 acres across nine districts that border Bangladesh. That is real progress. I will judge it, though, by kilometres of fence standing, and those figures have not yet been published.

In Tripura, too, the administration is now looking at land. After the Ashabari attack, the Sonamura sub-divisional administration began a land verification and demarcation exercise around the Ashabari Border Outpost at the BSF's request, Organiser reported. District Magistrate Siddharth Shiv Jaiswal

said "any illegal encroachment detected during the exercise would be removed in accordance with the law." The verification is still under way.

What Dhaka says about the fence

A border has two sides, and Bangladesh has its own objections. At the 57th Director General-level border conference, held at BSF headquarters in New Delhi from 8 to 11 June 2026, Border Guard Bangladesh said "at least 39 deviations had been observed in security-related fencing (SRF) projects by India," The Daily Star reported. The Bangladeshi delegation also said that "prior concurrence from the relevant Bangladeshi authorities is required" for activity "within 150 yards of the border."

The two forces still found common ground. According to The Daily Star, they agreed to strengthen coordinated patrols, share information in real time and act together against trans-border criminal networks, reiterated a policy of "zero tolerance towards trans-border crimes, insurgent activities", and signed a Joint Record of Discussions. BSF Director General Praveen Kumar led the Indian side, and BGB Director General Major General Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman Siddiqui led Bangladesh's. The next conference was proposed for Dhaka in November 2026, at a mutually convenient time.

My reading is that India should take Bangladesh's procedural concerns seriously where they rest on agreed protocols, and should be just as firm that the fence goes up. The 150-yard understanding is a reason to consult. It cannot become a veto. Smuggling and drug networks do not respect any distance from the zero line, and I believe they hurt Bangladeshi villages as much as ours.

What it means for Bharat

Our eastern border carries more than security risk. The two DGs named the trans-border crimes themselves in June: smuggling of narcotics, arms, counterfeit currency and gold, illegal crossings and human trafficking. Every unfenced kilometre is a cost borne by the jawan on night patrol, by the farmer whose field becomes a smuggling route, and by the district administration that has to deal with what crosses over.

I see four things India can do, all within its own control.

First, finish the land handovers and publish progress every quarter, district by district, in kilometres of fence completed, not just acres transferred. Murshidabad shows that a district can finish the job when the state treats it as a priority.

Second, for the 174 km where a fence will never stand, the answer has to be technology and people: sensors, cameras and enough manpower to respond quickly. I would like to see the Home Ministry report to Parliament on how these non-feasible stretches are actually covered.

Third, treat mob attacks on border forces as organised crime. If the BSF's account of Ashabari holds, the method is plain: the smugglers run, then send a crowd. Police in Tripura have acted quickly with arrests. The investigation should trace who organised that crowd, and the courts will do the rest.

Fourth, keep the channel with Dhaka open and busy. The DG-level talks work best when India arrives with completed fencing, clear records and a willingness to fix genuine errors. A firm border and good neighbourliness are compatible, and Bangladesh's people have as much to gain as ours from shutting down the gangs.

What to watch

Two things over the coming weeks. The first is the next DG-level conference, which was proposed for Dhaka this month. Whether it is held, and whether the 39 "deviations" Dhaka raised in June are settled or still on the table, will tell us a lot about the working relationship. The second is the land demarcation around the Ashabari outpost, which the district administration says is ongoing.

In February 2025, 864.482 km of the border was still unfenced. I would like the next figure to come from the government, in Parliament, with a date attached.

Sources

- Beyond the FYP: India's eastern frontier faces a growing challenge in securing the Bangladesh border
- Telangana Today: 18 arrested in Tripura over attack on BSF personnel near Bangladesh border
- Organiser: Ashabari BSF attack triggers land demarcation drive in Tripura
- ETV Bharat: Group of Bangladeshi nationals attacks BSF personnel at Indo-Bangla border in Cooch Behar
- Scroll: Nearly 864 km of India-Bangladesh border still unfenced, says Union government
- The Tribune: West Bengal CM transfers land to BSF for fencing along Bangladesh border
- All India Radio: West Bengal's Murshidabad completes 100% land handover to BSF for fencing along India-Bangladesh border
- The Daily Star: Border deaths, smuggling top agenda as BGB-BSF talks conclude in Delhi
- The Daily Star: BGB-BSF talks: Dhaka flags 39 deviations in border fencing



Kamlesh Bhagatkar

Politician, author and geopolitical analyst from Nagpur. Author of *RSS: 100 Years of Selfless Service* (2025); his next book, *Nineteen Days*, tells the story of Pahalgam and Operation Sindoor.

KAMLESHBHAGATKAR.COM