



Understanding The Border Disputes Of Northeast India: Special Emphasis On Assam And Its Bordering States

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ABSTRACT

The North East Region of India, comprising Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura, Sikkim, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Mizoram, is characterized by a distinctive blend of ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. Connected to the rest of the country via the Siliguri Corridor, also known as Chicken's Neck, this paper delves into the historical context of conflicts in the region. It assesses various contributing factors such as ethnic diversity, migration patterns, resource allocation, and political interests. Given China's proximity through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the Siliguri Corridor, India's attention to this area becomes crucial. Furthermore, the paper evaluates the socio-economic impact of these conflicts and proposes potential strategies for conflict resolution and peace-building efforts. Specifically, it focuses on analyzing border disputes between Assam and neighboring Northeastern states, identifies primary causes of conflict, and offers actionable recommendations for resolution.

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Keywords: North-East, Assam, Border, Conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The border disputes within Northeast India primarily involve conflicts between Assam and its neighboring states, such as Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Meghalaya. These disputes, marked by confrontations between opposing police forces, have led to casualties, economic disruptions, and property damage. In many instances, these border disputes are interconnected with broader national separatist movements, sub-regional tensions, ethnic rivalries, and criminal activities. These internal territorial conflicts within the Northeast region contribute to the 322 districts across India grappling with ongoing land disputes out of a total of 703 districts.

Initially, the North Eastern region encompassed Assam, Manipur, and Tripura. Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Mizoram were subsequently separated from Greater Assam. The North East Frontier Agency was later renamed Arunachal Pradesh. Despite cultural and identity disparities, the region was consolidated into a single major state, sparking conflicts among its diverse communities. This ultimately resulted in the fragmentation of Assam, leading to the establishment of three prominent states: Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya, and Mizoram (1972). Nevertheless, the conflict intensified among the communities primarily due to the absence of clear border demarcations. It extended beyond Assam, fundamentally reshaping the political dynamics among local communities. This conflict isn't solely confined to ethnic identity, involving the dominance of one ethnic group over another, but also revolves around territorial and resource aspirations.

OBJECTIVES

1. To have an understanding of the border conflicts in North-Eastern India.
2. To examine about the reasons for border disputes of Assam with other Northeast states.
3. To suggest measures and solutions for border disputes resolution.

METHODOLOGY

By conducting a thorough examination of secondary materials such as scholarly works, newspaper reports, media coverage, and direct accounts, this study aims to illuminate the real-life experiences of impacted populations, the involvement of governmental bodies, and the obstacles and possibilities for addressing conflicts and fostering harmony in North-East India. Additionally, information sourced from government publications, documents, and reports is incorporated. A descriptive and qualitative approach is adopted in the research.

PRIMARY REASONS FOR BORDER DISPUTES

Inadequate Border Demarcation has been a prevalent issue contributing to major border conflicts in the North East, notably involving Assam, from which Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya were carved out. Borders have been delineated according to the convenience of involved parties, lacking proper consultation with local tribes residing in the area. The presence of significant natural resources also significantly influences these border clashes.

Historical and Ethnic Identity-The presence of diverse ethnicities in the border regions is a primary driver of conflict. Groups often clash to suppress minority ethnic groups, and sometimes, two ethnic tribal identities engage in conflict to assert dominance over the region.

Insurgency-Udayon Mishra opines that “the existence of militant factions in North East India exacerbates the regional complexities. The majority of these groups espouse secessionist ideologies, potentially disrupting border relations and interpersonal interactions. These militants aim to sow chaos and maintain an atmosphere of terror among residents throughout the state, including border areas.” A case in point is the presence of militant groups near the Assam-Nagaland border, such as the involvement of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) in the Golaghat region, prompting fear among many individuals and dissuading them from returning to the area.

DISCUSSION

Assam and Meghalaya- Meghalaya was established as a separate state from Assam in 1972, with the capital moving from Shillong to Dispur. A significant point of contention between the two states revolves around the district of Langpih in West Garo Hills, bordering Assam's Kamrup district. Both states have asserted ownership of the district for over a century, primarily due to differences in border demarcation. During the colonial era, the district was part of Kamrup but was later transferred to the Garo Hills and became part of Meghalaya post-independence. According to Meghalaya, border demarcation in 1951 designated Langpih as part of the future Meghalaya state, while Assam contends it belongs to the Mikir Hills. Since 2018, there have been no significant reports of clashes between the communities.

Assam and Mizoram- Rahul Karmakar observes that “the border between Assam and Mizoram is relatively less volatile compared to that of Nagaland and Meghalaya.” Despite being carved out of Assam and initially declared a Union territory in 1972, Mizoram officially attained statehood in 1987. The conflict between the two states stems primarily from two documents: the 1875 notification, which delineates between the Cachar Hills & Lushai Hills, and the 1933 notification, which demarcates the Lushai Hills (the area from which Mizoram emerged) and Manipur. The Mizo side disputes the validity of the 1933 notification, as the boundary was established prior to the formation of the Mizo state.

In 2021, a significant border conflict erupted, resulting in casualties and property damage on both sides. Tensions escalated with Assam on 26 July when clashes broke out between police forces at a contentious border point. The confrontation led to seven fatalities and 60 injuries as both sides exchanged fire. However,

with the intervention of the Central government, the situation was brought under control, and peace was restored.

Assam and Nagaland- The longstanding conflict, which originated during Nagaland's affiliation with Assam, was exacerbated by the establishment of the Naga state in 1963. Angshuman Sharma notes that “The absence of clear border demarcation between Nagaland and Assam stands out as a significant cause of the conflict.” While Assam regards the border established in 1963 as primary, Nagaland upholds historical claims and respects borders established during the colonial era. In 1985, another round of clashes erupted in the Merapani region, resulting in the deaths of 34 villagers, injuries to 50, and the displacement of 20,000 villagers. The initial significant agreement between the Government of India and the Naga People's Convention, known as the 16-point agreement, led to the formation of the state of Nagaland. To mitigate tensions, the Indian Government formed the Sundaram Committee in 1971, but its recommendations were accepted only by Assam; Nagaland rejected them. In response, the Union government established the Shastri Commission, which recommended clear border demarcation as a means to achieve peace and tranquility in the region.

Assam and Arunachal Pradesh- The conflict between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh began escalating in 1993, when the Arunachal Pradesh Government accused Assam of encroaching on and constructing within their territory. Additionally, there were allegations of arson targeting both official and residential buildings. In 2005, tensions rose due to an eviction drive. The second significant clash occurred in 2007 when villagers from the opposite side of the border opened fire during a peace meeting in Assam, resulting in eight injuries. In 2020, clashes ensued, prompting a brief economic blockade by Assam-based NGOs. On July 15, 2022, the Historic Namsai Declaration was signed between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh at Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh, reducing the 123 villages claimed by Arunachal Pradesh to 86.

WAY FORWARD

Pushpita Das emphasizes the critical importance of maintaining peace in the North East, asserting that it is crucial for India's 'Act East Policy' since the region serves as a gateway to ASEAN regions. All interconnected states must ensure peaceful borders to facilitate unhindered movement of people and trade. With the North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) exerting significant influence in the region and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in power at the center, achieving a political resolution to the issue appears feasible. The shared leadership across most states could facilitate agreement on border matters, and the presence of central leadership could expedite the implementation of solutions in the region.

Respect and development should be extended equally to both majority and minority identities in the region, fostering stronger people-to-people connections. Embracing a collective North East identity could unite the populace. Education serves as a potent means to facilitate interpersonal bonds. Eradicating militancy from the region would promote peace and harmony.

There is a pressing requirement for a comprehensive 'Centre-led' initiative to address the border issues. The Centre holds the authority to either maintain the current state of affairs in the region or devise a 'unifying rationale' for border demarcation. The active participation of the Supreme Court in resolving legal matters could expedite the decision-making and implementation processes. The establishment of a 'court-monitored boundary commission' tasked with assessing the demands of all conflicting parties and proposing viable solutions is imperative. It is paramount to find a lasting resolution to the border conflicts in the North East, as it would foster peaceful relations among the involved states and serve as a pivotal moment for India's 'Act East Policy,' given its proximity to ASEAN countries. Furthermore, considering China's presence through its Belt and Road Initiative near India's North-East, it becomes increasingly crucial to expeditiously resolve internal border conflicts in the region.

CONCLUSION

The Government of India has entered into numerous agreements aimed at quelling insurgency and establishing enduring peace in the northeastern states. A landmark border agreement was reached between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh on April 20, 2023, effectively putting an end to decades-old border disputes along their boundaries. Furthermore, on March 29, 2022, the chief ministers of Assam and Meghalaya inked an agreement to settle their five-decade-long border dispute. These developments carry significant weight in restoring normalcy and reshaping perceptions about the northeastern region. Long-standing disputes among

various states in the Northeast have posed significant challenges to the region's development. However, through the proactive efforts of the Central government, many decades-old disputes are now being permanently resolved. This proactive approach has bolstered the laying of groundwork for long-term peace and progress in the region.

To sum up, the border disputes in North East India have been longstanding and complex, fueled by historical, cultural, and political factors. These conflicts have hindered regional development and stability for decades. However, recent efforts, including agreements between states like Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya, signal a positive shift towards resolution and reconciliation. The proactive measures by the Central government offer hope for lasting peace and progress in the region. Moving forward, sustained dialogue, mutual understanding, and inclusive policies will be essential in addressing the root causes of these disputes and fostering harmonious relationships among the diverse communities of North East India.

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