



# ISSUE BRIEF

No. 286

April 2021

## Internal Border Conflicts of the North East Region: Special Focus on Assam and its Bordering States



**Jason Wahlang** is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi. He is a PhD Scholar at the Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies, JNU. His area of interest is Peace & Conflict Studies; Foreign Policy and Post-Soviet States. He also focuses on Conflict, Connectivity and Security Aspects of North East India.

### Introduction

The modern day Asian political landscape is characterised with Internal conflicts. India to has seen many internal conflicts—the conflict between Karnataka and Maharashtra since 1956 (The State Reorganisation Act 1956) regarding territorial gains and losses<sup>1</sup> or the river dispute among the Southern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, are examples of such ongoing conflicts. This paper aims to analyse the border conflicts between Assam and the bordering north eastern states—the reasons for the conflict and tries to recommend solutions to solve the same.

The North East Region comprising of Meghalaya, Assam, Tripura, Sikkim, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram, is characterised with a unique mix ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. The region is connected to the rest of the country through a small corridor called the Siliguri Corridor (Chicken's Neck).<sup>2</sup> The closeness of China through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the Siliguri Corridor makes it all the more important for India to focus in this region.

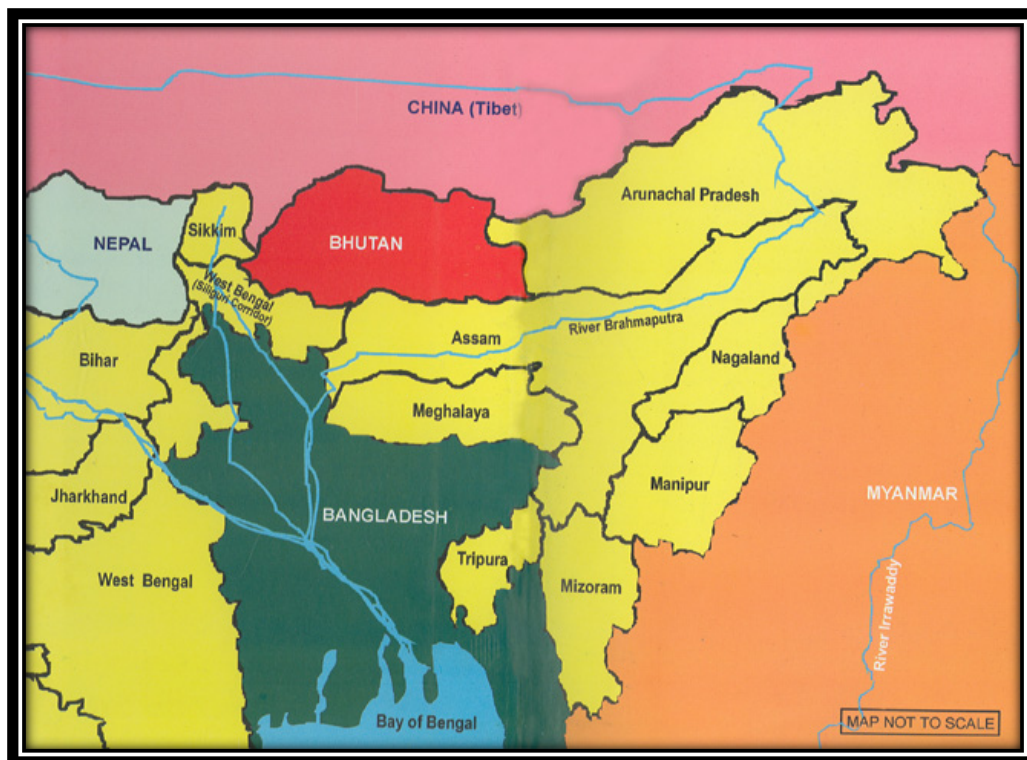
### Key Points

- The North East Region originally comprised of Assam, Manipur and Tripura; Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram were later carved out of Greater Assam; the North East Frontier Agency later came to be known as Arunachal Pradesh.
- This region, with differences of culture and identity, was amalgamated into one major state which eventually led to conflict among the various communities.
- The main reason for conflicts is the lack of proper demarcation of borders.
- Besides the lack of proper demarcation of borders, resource allocation, militancy and ethnic identity, further fuelled the conflict between the states.
- The conflict could be resolved through proper demarcation, eradication of militancy, and active participation of the Supreme Court.

The North Eastern region originally comprised of Assam, Manipur and Tripura—Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram were later carved out of Greater Assam; the North East Frontier Agency later came to be known as Arunachal Pradesh. The region, with differences in culture and identity, was amalgamated into one major state which eventually led to conflict among the various communities— further leading to the ‘balkanisation’ of Assam<sup>3</sup> and thereafter to the formation of three major states that is Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya and Mizoram(1972).

However, the conflict further escalated among the communities, due to lack of proper demarcation of border. The conflict spread outside Assam, and ‘radically redefined’ the political balance between the local communities.<sup>4</sup> The conflict is not only limited to ethnic identity that is the suppression of one ethnic identity over another, but also is based on territorial and resource aspirations.

**Map 1: The North East India**



Source: India Defence Review <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/transportation-infrastructure-in-the-north-east/>

## The Conflict Scenario

The conflict scenarios are based on historical claims more than on recent times.

### Assam and Nagaland

The conflict between Assam and Nagaland is considered to be one of the contemporary conflicts in the North East Region. This age-old conflict, which started while Nagaland was part of Assam, was further instigated by the creation of the Naga state in 1963.

The lack of proper border demarcation between Nagaland and Assam, is one of the most important reasons for the conflict. For Assam the border established in 1963 is the main border whereas Nagaland believes in historical claims and respects the border which was established during the colonial period.

- **Clashes.** Clashes in the border regions started back in 1965 mainly in the form of raids, forced harvesting of crops, kidnappings, abductions and killings. However, the first major violence was reported in 1979 in the Chungajan region, between the Rengma and Karbi tribes in during which 55 villagers lost their lives and 467 houses were. <sup>5</sup> In 1985 another fresh round of clashes occurred in the Merapani region between the police forces. This clash resulted in the killing of 32 villagers and 50 wounded as well as 25000 villagers fleeing.<sup>6</sup>
- **Steps Undertaken to Solve the Conflict.** The first most significant agreement signed between the Government of India and the Naga People's Convention for settlement of disputes was the 16-point agreement that resulted in the formation of state of Nagaland. In order to ease tensions, the Indian Government had formed the Sundaram Committee in 1971, however, the committee's recommendations were only accepted by Assam, Nagaland on the other hand rejected it.<sup>7</sup>

The main aim of the committee was to maintain peace & tranquillity, and at the same time maintain status quo between the borders. However, this did not have much impact on the clashes. The violence in Doyang Reserve Forest in 1979 led both states to sign an interim agreement for peace and stability in the border regions—this led to limited peace in the region.

The Union government took steps to control the violence and set up the Shastri Commission. The Commission recommended proper demarcation of border, for peace and tranquillity in the region. It also favoured the of claims of both states within the constitutional boundaries, as short-term measure for peace. However, this also met with limited success with the Assam Government seeking legal remedies for settlement of the border.

- **Current Situation of the Conflict.** Incidents of border skirmishes are now more regular, the latest being the economic blockade of 2020, wherein the Assamese protested encroachment of Nagas into their land.

### Assam and Meghalaya

The state of Meghalaya was carved out of Assam in 1972 and the capital was shifted from Shillong to Dispur. The major point of contention between the two states is the district of Langpih in West Garo Hills bordering the Kamrup district of Assam—both the states have claimed ownership of the district for more than a century.<sup>8</sup> The main reason for the contention is again the demarcation of the borders with both states having a difference of opinion with regard to it. The district was part of the Kamrup district during the colonial period but post-independence was shifted to the Garo Hills and a part of Meghalaya.<sup>9</sup> As per Meghalaya, the demarcation of the border in 1951 shows Langpih as part of future Meghalaya state whereas Assam believes it to be part of the Mikir Hills in Assam.

- **Clashes.** The two states are involved in on-and-off clashes since 1974, wherein a skirmish occurred between law and order officials of both sides. However, a major conflict occurred between the two states in 2010,<sup>10</sup> wherein, the ethnic groups of Khasi, Garo communities clashed with the Nepali villagers, that ultimately required police intervention. During the clash four people were killed and 26 others were injured. However, this was not the end—in 2012, a Khasi individual led a hunger strike in memory of those killed in 2010; the hunger strike continued for a period of two weeks.<sup>11</sup> The latest clash occurred in 2018, between the Assam police personnel and the locals, however, the situation was brought under control and escalation was averted.
- **Steps Undertaken to Solve the Conflict.** The local Government continuously takes effective steps to maintain stability in the region, the most recent being the letter written by Member of the Legislative Assembly from Meghalaya in 2020 to the Home Ministry for a solution to the conflict.<sup>12</sup>
- **Current Situation of the Conflict.** There are no new reports of a major clash between the communities since 2018. However, in the national interest, it is important to take immediate steps to maintain the sanctity of the border.

### Assam and Mizoram

Assam and Mizoram shares a less volatile border as compared to Nagaland and Meghalaya. Although, the state of Mizoram was carved out of Assam and declared a Union territory at the start in 1972, it officially became a state in 1987.

The two documents that is the 1875 notification which differentiates between the Cachar Hills & Lushai Hills and 1933 notification which demarcates the Lushai Hills (from where Mizoram has been carved out) and Manipur<sup>13</sup>, are the major reasons of conflict between the two states.

The Mizo side does not follow the notification of 1933, since the boundary was demarcated before the formation of the Mizo state.<sup>14</sup>

- **Clashes.** Small clashes took place in the region during the 1972 demarcation of border alongside the districts of Cachar, Halakandi, and Karimganj border.<sup>15</sup> However, in 2020, a major conflict occurred in the border wherein members of both sides clashed with each other, which led to the loss of property on both sides. However, with the intervention of the Centre, the situation was brought under control and peace was restored.
- **Steps Undertaken to Solve the Conflict.** There was a meeting in Meghalaya comprising officials of both Assam and Mizoram with the sole purpose of finding a solution to the border conflict, where they agreed to maintain a status quo along the border. However, owing to the dynamic nature of the situation, it is important to find a permanent solution to the border problem between the states.
- **Current Situation of the Conflict.** The latest clash occurred in 2021 in the border that created an aura of instability. The main reason for the escalation is believed to be the attack on members of the Mizo Power Department and a villager by “unknown” miscreants. This attack was followed by counter attack from the members of the villages.<sup>16</sup> The main reason for the clash in 2021 as well was related to the border demarcation which has been a thorn in the relations between the two states and thus a permanent solution to the conflict is a must for peace and stability. Although the main reason for the clash were the miscreants, but their underlying sentiments could be traced to the border dispute which ‘still acts as a thorn’ in the relations between the two states.

### Assam and Arunachal Pradesh

Conflict between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh started to gain momentum since 1992, when the Arunachal Pradesh Government accused Assam of encroachment and construction in their territory.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, there were also accusations of burning down of buildings— both official and residential.

- **Clashes.** Since 1992, small clashes took place between the populations, particularly in 2005 and 2007. In 2005 the main reason for the clash was the eviction drive



undertaken by the Assam Government in Arunachal Pradesh' territory, in which about 100 houses were damaged by the officials of the Assam Government.<sup>18</sup> The second major clash occurred in 2007, wherein villagers from the other side of the border fired at a peace meeting in Assam, injuring eight people.<sup>19</sup>

- **Steps Undertaken to solve the Conflict.** One of the major steps towards a plausible solution was taken up by Assam in 1989, when Assam Government filed a case in the Supreme Court. However, the case is still in the trial stage. Secondly, another legal step was taken in 1997, when a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Arunachal Pradesh submitted a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) regarding the eviction drives. In 2015, Arunachal Pradesh again took the legal course to stop illegal constructions by Assam in disputed area. This case however, averted Assam from proceeding with the illegal construction.
- **Current Situation of the Conflict.** In 2020 there were clashes, which led to a small economic blockade by Assam based NGOs for few days.<sup>20</sup> The main reason for the clash was the killing of a truck driver from Assam due to an argument in the border. The tensions were diffused after the intervention of local authorities from both sides of the border.

### Reasons for Border Conflicts

- **Resources.** The presence of important natural resources plays an important role in the border clashes. To occupy a resource-rich land, is beneficial for trade and economic purpose of any state.
- **Ethnic Identity.** One of the main reason for the border conflict is the presence of different ethnicities near the border region. Groups mainly clash in order to suppress the minority ethnic group. At times two ethnic tribal identities clashes in order to dominate the region.
- **Lack of Proper Border Demarcation.** A common factor among the major border clashes, in the North East, has been Assam— as the three states involved that is Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya were carved out of Assam. Border demarcation has been improper that is the borders have been demarcated as per convenience of the involved parties, therefore, leading to many 'undefined and complicated borders'. The biggest shortfall in the North East is that, the local tribes residing in the area has not been consulted upon before demarcating the borders.
- **Historical Evidence.** Another important reason for clashes has been the role played by history— all the states involved seem to have a connected history and all of them tend to quote historical evidences in order to justify their land/border claims.

- **Militancy.** Presence of militant groups in North East India further complicates the situation in the region. Most of the militant groups have ‘secessionist tendencies’ which could impact the border and people to people movement; the militants also believes in creating havoc and keeping the element of ‘terror’ alive among the people residing across the state including the borders. The militants further restricts the free movement of people across the border; it also creates a safety issue which diverts the attention of the states towards defending their own territorial integrity, thereby, leaving less time to focus on finding a solution to the conflict. One such example is the involvement of militant groups near the Assam -Nagaland border—the involvement of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang-Kitovi) [NSCN-KK] in the Golaghat region, resulted in many people fearing to return to the area.<sup>21</sup>
- **Legal Delays.** There has been limited or negligible progress, in cases with respect to border conflicts. Such delays lead to exhaustion of economic means in the region, thereby contributing to instability in the same.

### **Suggested Steps needed for Conflict Resolution**

- **Proper Demarcation of Borders.** There is a need for proper ‘Centre led’ initiative to solve the border issues. The Centre can decide to maintain status quo in the region or find a ‘common rationale’ to demarcate the border.
- **Eradication of Militancy.** The elimination of militancy from the region would bring upon peace and tranquillity in the region.
- **People to People Engagement.** Majority and minority identity, residing in the region, must equally be respected and developed. Hence, people-to-people connect can be enhanced. the idea of a ‘shared’ North East Identity could bring the people together. Education can be an effective tool to facilitate people-to-people connect.
- **Involvement of the Supreme Court.** The active involvement of the Supreme Court in matters pertaining to legal issues could fast-track the decision-making process and thereafter the implementation process. Establishment of a ‘court monitored boundary commission’ to look into the demands of all the conflicting parties involved, and thereafter, suggest a solution, is the need of the hour.
- **Politically Solutions.** With the dominant presence of the North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) in the North East and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) at the centre, a political solution to the problem seems easy. The presence of common leadership in most states can lead to an agreement on border issues as well as the presence of the centre leadership would lead to faster implementation of the solution in the region.

- **The Act East Factor.** Maintaining a peaceful North East is vital for India's 'Act East Policy' as the North East Region is also a doorway to the ASEAN regions. All the states connected to one another needs to have peaceful borders to ensure 'free' movement of people and trade.

## Conclusion

It is time to find a permanent solution to the border conflict in North East, as it would not only lead to peaceful relations between the various states involved but, in the long run, will act as an important juncture for India's 'Act East Policy' owing to its proximity to the ASEAN countries. Moreover, the presence of China via its BRI near India's North- East makes it all the more important to solve the North East 'internal border conflicts' as soon as possible.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Shubhangi Khapre, "Explained: The Maharashtra-Karnataka border dispute – the past and the present", *The Indian Express*, updated on 30 January 2021. Accessible at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/maharashtra-karnataka-border-dispute-explained-7167316/>. Accessed on 18 March 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Heinrich Boll Stiftung, "Conflict in the Northeast India: Issues, Causes and Concern", Heinrich Boll Stiftung Regional Office, New Delhi, India, 28 February 2009. Accessible at <https://in.boell.org/en/2009/02/28/conflict-northeast-india-issues-causes-and-concern>. Accessed on 18 March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> S Thianlalmuan Ngaithe, "The Reality of the North East as an Entity", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48.50 (2013). Accessible at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24479035>. Accessed 18 March, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Philippe Ramirez, *Margins and borders: politics and ethnicities in North-East India* and Joëlle Smadja, *Territorial Changes and Territorial Restructurings in the Himalayas*, (New Delhi, Adroit Publishers, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Ramesh Menon, "Naga settlers cause tension in border villages of Assam" *India Today*, 15 October 1987. Accessible at <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19871015-naga-settlers-cause-tension-in-border-villages-of-assam-799401-1987-10-15>. Accessed on 30 March 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Reuters, "32 Indians Are Killed in a Police Battle" *The New York Times*, 08 June 1985. Accessible at <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/06/08/world/around-the-world-32-indians-are-killed-in-a-police-battle.html>. Accessed on 30 March 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Tanmoy Das and Angshuman Sarma, "Nagaland-Assam Border Dispute: Past Perspective", *NewsLaundry*, 09 September 2014. Accessible at <https://www.newsLaundry.com/2014/09/09/nagaland-assam-border-dispute-past-perspective>. Accessed on 23 March 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Abdul Kalam Azad, "Assam Meghalaya Border Dispute", *Land Conflict Watch*, updated on 02 November 2019. Accessible at <https://www.landconflictwatch.org/conflicts/assam-meghalaya-border-dispute>. Accessed on 23 March 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Gaurav, "Centre to probe firing across Assam -Meghalaya border", *One India News*, 19 May 2010. Accessible at <https://www.oneindia.com/2010/05/19/centreto-probe-firing-across-assam-meghalaya-border.html>. Accessed on 23 March 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Press Trust of India, "Hunger-strike at Langpih to be withdrawn tomorrow", *Business Standard*, updated on 24 January 2013. Accessible at [https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/hunger-strike-at-langpih-to-be-withdrawn-tomorrow-112071300198\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/hunger-strike-at-langpih-to-be-withdrawn-tomorrow-112071300198_1.html). Accessed on 30 March 2021.



- <sup>12</sup> Press Trust of India (2020), “BJP MLA writes to Amit Shah for resolving Assam-Meghalaya border dispute”. *Indian Express*, 23 October 2020. Accessible at <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/oct/23/bjp-mla-writes-to-amit-shah-for-resolving-assam-meghalaya-border-dispute-2214190.html>. Accessed on 30 March 2021.
- <sup>13</sup> Anwesha Mitra , “FPJ Explains: What is Assam-Mizoram border conflict?” *The Free Press Journal*, updated on 20 October 2020. Accessible at <https://www.freepressjournal.in/india/fpj-explains-what-is-assam-mizoram-border-conflict>. Accessed on 24 March 2021.
- <sup>14</sup> Karishma Hasnat , “All about Assam-Mizoram border dispute, which dates back 50 years & still remains unresolved”. *The Print*, 21 October 2020. Accessible at <https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/all-about-assam-mizoram-border-dispute-which-dates-back-50-yrs-still-remains-unresolved/527367/>. Accessed on 24 March 2021.
- <sup>15</sup> Rahul Karmakar, “The Hindu Explains: What triggered the unrest on the Assam-Mizoram border?” *The Hindu*, 15 November 2020. Accessible at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-hindu-explains-what-triggered-the-unrest-on-the-assam-mizoram-border/article33100490.ece>. Accessed on 24 March 2021.
- <sup>16</sup> Press Trust of India , “Violence reported on disputed Assam-Mizoram border”. *The Times of India*, 10 February 2021. Accessible at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/violence-reported-on-disputed-assam-mizoram-border/articleshow/80794886.cms#:~:text=Incidents%20of%20violence%20on%20the,Assam%20and%20Mizoram's%20Kolasib%20district>. Accessed on 24 March 2021.
- <sup>17</sup> Pushpita Das, “Interstate Border Disputes in the Northeast”. *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence and Strategic Analyses*, 12 June 2008. Accessible at [https://idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/InterstateBorderDisputesintheNortheast\\_PDAs\\_120608](https://idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/InterstateBorderDisputesintheNortheast_PDAs_120608). Accessed on 24 March 2021.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Special Correspondent, “Tension on Assam, Arunachal border eases”. *The Hindu*, 22 November 2020. Accessible at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/tension-on-assam-arunachal-border-eases/article33151702.ece>. Accessed on 24 March 2021.
- <sup>21</sup> Simantik Dowerah, “How Assam-Nagaland border dispute became a people versus history problem” *First Post*, 26 August 2014. Accessible at <https://www.firstpost.com/india/how-assam-nagaland-border-dispute-became-a-people-versus-history-problem-1680833.html>. Accessed on 25 March 2021.

---

*The views expressed and suggestions made in the article are solely of the author in his personal capacity and do not have any official endorsement. Attributability of the contents lies purely with author.*



**CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)**

RPSO Complex, Parade Road, Delhi Cantt, New Delhi 110010

Tel.: +91-11-25691308, Fax: +91-11-25692347, CLAWS Army No. 33098; Email: [landwarfare@gmail.com](mailto:landwarfare@gmail.com)

Website: [www.claws.in](http://www.claws.in)