

# **Multi-dimensional view of a conflict: Interdisciplinarity in understanding the interstate border conflicts in North-East India**

**Author: Pratyush Pran Sarma**

## **Introduction**

Whether it is community/group consciousness or grievances faced by one, conflict in several cases in the North-East region (NER) of India, has transformed not into peace, but quite oppositely into another type of conflict. Whereas one can find themselves classifying ‘conflict’ in different terminologies based on the reason for their occurrences, there are certain conflicts where the reason of occurrence translates into another and thus transforms its nature and definition into something else altogether. With these changes, the nature of responses necessary to de-escalate and/or resolve the conflict changes too. This is especially true in the case of border conflicts in the NER, where the conflict over resources along the disputed border areas is overlooked during the negotiation and subsequent peace process.

Border conflicts are examined here in this article, which are rooted in several causes. These conflicts occur for a bunch of reasons, the history of the region, ethnic differences, and retaliatory motivations, and are treated with negotiations directed at these reasons. This article aims to investigate the resource conflict in these disputed regions and how the negotiation and peace process have accommodated the resolution of conflict over resources in these regions. For that purpose, the latest episode of the border conflict between Assam and Meghalaya is considered. The article also looks at the similarity in the pattern of conflict over control of resources as a key feature of the border conflicts between Assam and Meghalaya, and Assam and Mizoram. The article explains how resolving the border conflict should be understood through inter-disciplinarity in observation and reaction.

## **Border Conflicts in the NER:**

Border conflicts can be defined as disagreements among two or more groups, communities or nation-states over the demarcation of their common border. These border disputes can take the shape of violent conflicts very easily, given the fragile political environment that these disputes are characterized by.

The NER is a cluster of 8 States (7 States until 2003 when Sikkim was made a part of the North Eastern Council) in the eastern frontier of India bordering Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal and the Tibet Autonomous Region (under Chinese governance). The 8 States that constitute the NER are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Presently, there are four cases of border conflicts between Assam-Arunachal Pradesh, Assam-Nagaland, Assam-Meghalaya and Assam-Mizoram. Characterized as a treasure of natural beauty and natural resources, one of the most reputed producers of tea, a land troubled by a massive insurgency movement and the frontier land right next to the Dragon, the NER is a crucial part of India from a viewpoint of the economy and national security. The Ministry of Home Affairs has been involved with several rounds of negotiations acting as a mediator between each of the pairs and reaching a consensus on some of these areas.

The hopes that the recent negotiations and agreements by the Central government had instigated among the people, the incident on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2022, in the Mukroh or Mukhrow region near a disputed region between the borders of the states Assam and Meghalaya have thwarted these hopes. The firing incident occurred when a team of Assam Police and Assam Forest Guard chased and detained a truck full of smuggled timber into the Mukroh village and the villagers surrounded the authorities from Assam. This led to the firing and subsequent loss of the lives of five villagers and one Assam Forest Guard.

As much as the Assam Government has stated the incident unrelated to the ongoing border conflict between the states and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) backed by a report by the Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma, stated that had the border disputes been resolved, the incident could have been avoided. It is not so simple as these linear negotiations and agreements have not been able to answer the underlying factors behind these border conflicts.

The agreement on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2022 between the two States, mediated by the Central Government, resolved six out of twelve contested regions. The occurrence of this incident has agitated the residents of the state; several accounts of vandalism, arson and attacks on the non-tribals (Hindu Bengali, Bihari, Assamese, etc.) by the locals against the State government who could not protect its people at the border that have further worsened the faith on such agreements in the future. The area of the firing incident is near a disputed region. The two claims of the States vary until the names of this village; Meghalaya calls it Mukroh in the West Jaintia Hills, while Assam calls it Moikrang or Mukhrow in the West Karbi Anglong district.

This village is in close proximity to Block 1 which is one of the unresolved six disputed regions between the two States.

The history of the Assam-Meghalaya border conflict can be traced back to the time when Meghalaya was carved out of Assam as an autonomous State in 1970 and subsequent full-fledged Statehood in 1972 through the Assam Reorganization (Meghalaya) Act, 1969. When a 1951 committee was deciding on the demarcation, it recommended certain areas from the East Jaintia Hills, Ri-Bhoi and West Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya to the districts Karbi Anglong, Kamrup (Metro) and Kamrup in Assam. The claims made by the Meghalaya side date back to the colonial rule when these areas 'used to belong' to the tribal Chieftains. However, on not being able to produce any concrete documents of its claims, the request for a new border was considered insubstantial.

All of the border conflicts in the NER can be attributed to British colonial border-making, which was not just a process of drawing lines on the map to give the people of the region a boundary, it was also the division of land that best suited the colonial ambition. The race for resources continued to be the ambition behind the numerous agreements and demarcations between different colonizers and between colonizers and the inhabitants of the colonies. The creation of ethnic minorities in a way which could have been easily avoided has led to many violent conflicts. These minorities thus created suffer from identity crisis and cultural miscommunication, which ultimately gives rise to a sense of animosity and distrust among them.

This can be seen in a lot of other cases. The borders and border disputes in East Africa, for example, the Ethiopia-Eritrea border, the Somalia-Ethiopia-Kenya borders, the Sudan-Kenya border, and the Kenya-Uganda border, etc. are often argued as products of un-demarcated and poorly managed borders by the colonial powers. The present-day border disputes in the 'once colonies' create a pattern of how the colonial powers overlooked the indigenous ethnicities and their basic requirements for an undisrupted life for the control of resource-rich regions. In the case of East Africa, the British aspiration was to control the origin of the river Nile and the rich gold mines and other minerals.

The border conflicts in the NER are also fruits of the same tendency of British Colonial Border-making. The presence of a valuable generator of timber and coal made Meghalaya British's area of interest, governed as a part of the Assam Commissionship since 1875. The delusionary agreements between the tribal chieftains and the British were aimed at their control

over the resource-laden lands. Until the time the region received the attention of the colonial ruler, the region would be put beyond the Inner Line. This can also be seen in the case of the Lushai Hills and Cachar being a part of the Inner Line area until the discovery of tea and subsequent exit from the Inner Line into British administration in the latter. This is the reason for the Assam-Mizoram Border Dispute.

### **Multiple Dimensions in the Border Conflicts in NER, Resource and Development:**

For any civilization or a group of people to develop, the importance of being located in geographically superior plains has always been the reason for the immigration of other communities in search of opportunities. This puts into contrast the hilly areas or the deserts, and the people inhabiting those areas. This contrast is especially observable in a region like the North-Eastern Region (NER) of India where the Assamese plains are surrounded by hills on all sides.

The presence of the colonial ruler and the demarcation based on the availability of resources disturbed the natural order of the two ethnicities coming to agreements over resources. This 'intervention' can be called a negative intervention as it was purely driven by greed and its success in consolidating its empire. The Indian government's model of borders of Independent India based on the colonial borders and the contestation of resources at the moment are the sole reasons for these border disputes in the NER still not coming to a foreseeable end. The linear negotiations aiming at the issues can be accepted to not be able to resolve any of the issues rooted deep not just in the periphery but also in the centre of the State.

The necessity of Interdisciplinarity in understanding such situations in a conflict where the negotiations have to aim at several factors in the conflict. The ethnic differences that can be seen in different parts of Meghalaya, especially Shillong, are to be addressed as much as the resource conflict that exists between them. The development in these regions, which has not been the immediate strategy of the government post-March 29 agreement is another indication of the single perspective conflict resolution.

To have an understanding of the ethnic differences, the reasons that give rise to this generally are migration of people from other ethnicities, subsequent inaccessibility to employment opportunities in the presence of a more skilled worker, the loss of living space and the want for autonomy in the region. Looking at these factors, the ethnic differences between the Khasi and

*Dkhars* (the slang for non-tribals), Khasi-Sikh, etc. can be understood, and therefore be aimed at for negotiations.

The resource conflict can be interpreted in terms of faults in the British colonial border-making. While it is difficult to alter lines of history, the ongoing negotiations do not lack when it comes to resolving borderlines. Even though it was the Central government's responsibility to demarcate based on ethnic and economic factors, the present efforts have been relatively fair. The major issue that the national and state governments have not been able to address in their peace process is the development of the region. Here, the Growth Pole Theory by Francois Perroux (1955) can be used to understand the indication of a resource conflict and underdevelopment in these disputed regions. The theory says that economic development trickles down from the centre to its peripheries and therefore, the more developed the centre is, the more development of the periphery also increases.

The theory can be used as far as to understand the reality in these areas. Considering the borders to be the farthest, organized peripheries of a region, the development also seems to run along what the Growth Pole theory says. However, the same theory's idea of top-bottom development in the disputed regions of Assam and Meghalaya cannot be used as a strategy. Development schemes especially for these disputed regions have to be formulated so that there are no grievances and build-up of tendency to engage in violence. The strengthening of the State's institutions of development and the implementation of the development schemes in these peripheral regions are the State government's responsibility.

The proper representation of a border conflict should involve the same methodological understanding that Karl Bruckmeier (2005) considers in understanding resource conflict in the coastal regions of Sweden. While analyzing border conflicts,

- Examine the wider social and cultural aspects regarding the historical roots, and more importantly the economic factors in these regions of the border conflicts;
- Inclusion of diverse sources of information through a multi-disciplinary/inter-disciplinary approach;
- Several approaches of conflict resolution are to be considered to better integrate the stakeholders in the border conflict;
- The motivations of the stakeholders in pursuing the conflict are not to be considered rational, as these motivations are driven by the emotions of relative loss arising out of

grievances such as underdevelopment, poor allocation of resources, unemployment, etc.;

- Thick description of the perspectives of the stakeholders to arrive at a more promising conflict resolution.

While this is not an exclusive list that will ensure a successful peace process, it remains the necessity of understanding the border conflict through multiple dimensions and multiple perspectives. Understanding the nature of a conflict, and the underlying factors that get overshadowed by the intensity of a conflict, it becomes the stakeholders' role in the negotiating table to bring up these numerous perspectives that shape the identity of a conflict.

### **Conclusion:**

Even in a disputed border region that shows increasing growth in development, the stability in the region can be maintained until the people suffer from the grievances every day. There would be no reason for such an incident like that on November 22 if there is adequate development and proper implementation of opportunities in the region. The resolved border regions of Assam and Meghalaya should aim at their development, while the unresolved disputes can be solved better taking the example of its six predecessor regions of the twelve. The Central government has done relatively better, however, the persisting instability in the region can only be decreased through an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the multiple dimensions of the border conflict.

## Readings

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