

Inter-State Border Conflicts of Assam with Meghalaya: Understanding The Root Causes and Historical Context

Nobagata Das¹ and Dr. Monalisha Phukan Roy²

¹PhD Scholar, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Department of Social Work, Guwahati, Assam.

²Assistant Professor, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Department of Social Work, Guwahati, Assam.

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ABSTRACT

The border conflict between Assam and Meghalaya has been a long standing issue which started from colonial era administrative demarcations and following readjustments of seven states in Northeast India. Meghalaya become an autonomous state in 1970 when it was carved out of Assam and then declared a full-fledged state in 1972 leading to disputes between the two states for precise boundary. It has been more than 50 years since the conflict arose. There are various recommendations from academicians, cartographers, non- governmental organisations to resolve the matter through dialogue and advance technology such as satellite mapping. This paper analyses the root causes and historical factors behind the conflicts. Analysis done by the researcher based on the pilot study conducted with the communities living along the Assam-Meghalaya border and the data has also been collected from secondary sources.

Keywords: Boundary, Conflict, Inter-state, North-east India

Introduction:

Inter-state border conflicts in Assam are deeply rooted in historical, political, and socio-economic factors, many of which date back to colonial-era administrative decisions and the post-independence reorganization of Indian states. These disputes are not unique to Assam but are widespread across Northeast India, reflecting complex regional dynamics shaped by ethnic identities, historical grievances, and resource competition. In essence, Assam's inter-state border disputes reflect a complex interplay of colonial legacies, ethnic aspirations, political manoeuvring, and socio-economic insecurities. Lasting resolution requires cooperative

federalism, respect for ethnic identities, and sustainable development in the disputed border regions.

Significance of the study:

The border disputes between Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland have led to the death of more than 150 people, injured more than 360 people and displaced more than 65000 people from 1979 till today (Daimary, 2014). Suhas Chakma, the Director of the Rights and Risk Analysis Group in his letter to Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Chief Ministers of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland stated “the victims are citizens of India and the increase in human toll warrants permanent peace building measures”. With the advancement of scientific technologies, the boundary disputes between the states can be settled by using satellite mapping of actual locations but there are a lot of complications to it. Therefore, it is pertinent to understand how different initiatives by the government and non-government organizations have been reshaping the lives of people living in the border areas.

Methodology:

The research on border conflict uses a mixed method, emphasizing more on qualitative data collection exercises with quantitative data as a supplement. The researcher collected primary data from people who were involved in inter-state border conflicts by using interviews and FGDs. Secondary data collected from various academic institutions, NGOs, social activists, development professionals, defence personnel, local community representatives, journals, articles and newspapers.

The study is exploratory due to limited available information and aim was to explore various aspects related to ethnic groups. It includes interviews with individuals who are affected in border conflicts, community members, affected children and their parents, civil society organizations, service providers, community leaders, academicians, and media persons. Telephonic interviews are also conducted for convenience. Additionally, the researcher organized focus group discussions with various groups. Observation and fieldwork analysis were the primary tool to collect data.

Inter-state Border Conflict:

The British colonial administration drew boundaries in Northeast India for administrative and economic convenience, often without considering the region's ethnic and cultural diversity. The creation of reserved forests and reclassification of tribal lands alienated indigenous populations. Key among these decisions were the 1875 and 1933 demarcations, especially involving Mizoram, which were drawn without consulting local leaders. Mizoram considers the 1875 Inner

Line demarcation under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation (BEFR) Act, while Assam follows the later 1933 boundary, a deviation that led to current tensions (Rao, 2021). Similarly, Nagaland disputes the 1925 boundary, claiming historical ownership of large areas now part of Assam.

After independence, Assam was divided into several new states, Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Mizoram (1987), and Arunachal Pradesh (1987). Each of these states has challenged the boundaries as defined during reorganization.

- Nagaland claims over 12,000 sq km of Assam territory, leading to violent clashes and long-standing tensions.
- Meghalaya contests areas in 12 locations like Blocks I and II of West Karbi Anglong belong to the Khasi-Jaintia region.
- Mizoram bases its claims on the 1875 boundary, leading to occasional violent incidents.
- Arunachal Pradesh disputes the transfer of forested areas to Assam in 1951, affecting over 800 km of border and more than 100 villages.

Several associated factors contribute to the continuance of these conflicts. Conflicting historical interpretations lead to "cartographic conflicts" as states assert borders based on myths, colonial documents, or ethnic memories. This overlaps with strong ethnic identity politics, where communities demand exclusive "homelands" to preserve culture and control resources. The competition for natural resources including oil, gas, forests, and arable land which escalates these disputes. Migration, especially from Bangladesh, has further complicated the demographics, increasing fears among indigenous communities of being outnumbered or losing land. Moreover, underdevelopment in border areas, lack of clear land rights and poor governance contribute to local populations accepting projects from other states, weakening Assam's claims. Political opportunism and insurgent exploitation of disputed zones also escalate tensions. Despite the deployment of central forces and multiple commissions, many solutions have failed due to a lack of political will and unilateral rejections by disputing states. The central government's role has remained largely facilitative, emphasizing dialogue over enforcement.

Assam-Meghalaya Border Conflict:

The core of the conflict can be traced back to the conflicting interpretations of historical boundaries. According to Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act, 1969, Block I and II of the Jaintia Hills and parts of the Garo Hills were transferred to Assam's Mikir Hills in Karbi

Anglong and Goalpara districts respectively based on the 1951 Bordoloi Committee recommendations. Meghalaya refuses to accept it arguing those areas were historically belonged to the Khasi-Jaintia Hills but Assam on the contrary insist on sticking to the maps drawn in 1979-80. There are currently 12 disputed areas along the 884.9 km border between Assam and Meghalaya, covering approximately 2,765.14 square kilometres (Gupta, 2023). Borduar, Bakhlapara, Gizang, Hahim, Langpih (Lumpi), Nongwah-Mawtamur (Garbhanga), Tarabari in Kamrup Rural, Khanapara-Pilangkata and Desh Doomreah in Kamrup Mtero, Khanduli and Psiar, Block I and Block II in West Karbi Anglong, and Ratacherra in Cachar districts of Assam. Langpih village is a particularly disputable village, as both the states claims ownership and time to time experiences violent clashes and police firing. Allegations of encroachment made from both the sides on a frequent basis. In a recent instance in Bakhlapara village where Assam was accused of constructing a road within Meghalaya's claimed territory (Bhattacharjee, 2023).

Most of these conflicts arise due to ethnic diversity, competition over resources like land, and political interests. The lack of developmental initiatives by the Meghalaya government in some border areas has reportedly led the local residents to accept projects from Assam, or vice versa, further complicating the situation. Some of the local people were seen having voter cards or ration cards from both the states to get the benefits out of it. These disputes are frequently resulting in an uneasy calm and hostility, hindering development and sometimes spilling over into violence, causing injuries and displacement of people.

Fig.1: Kamrup Rural District with disputed areas

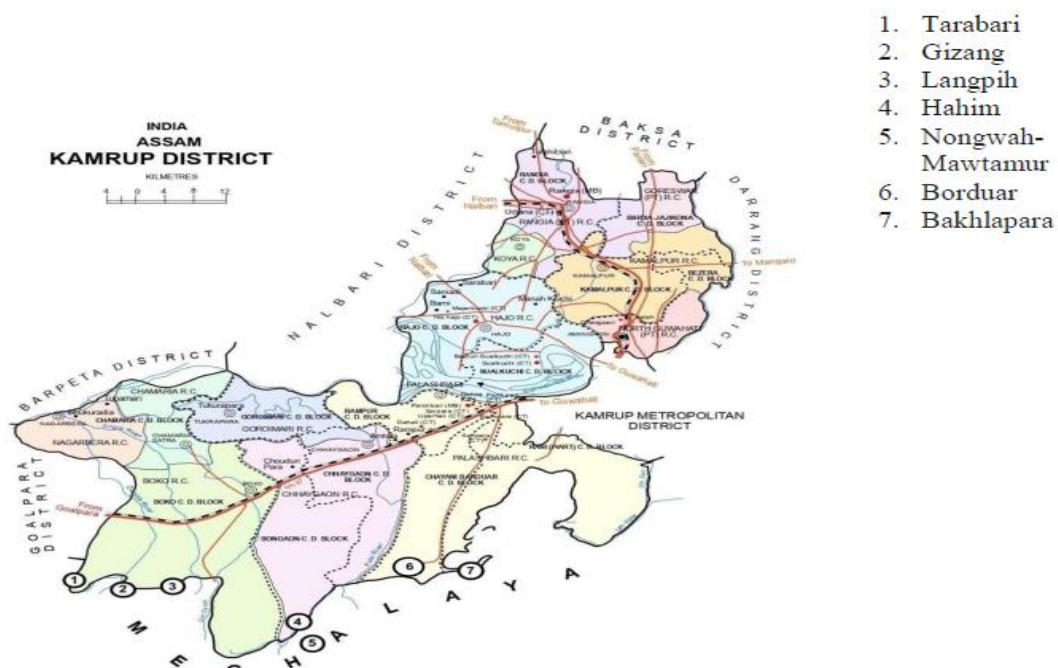
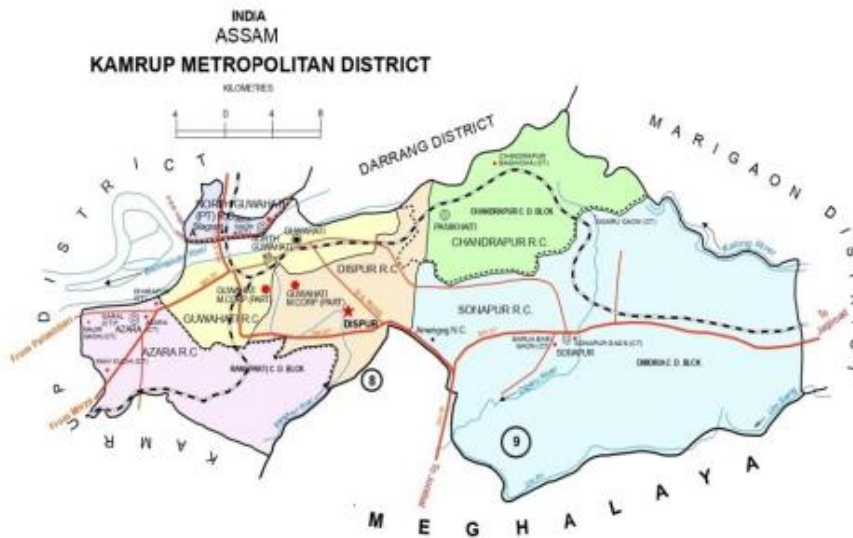
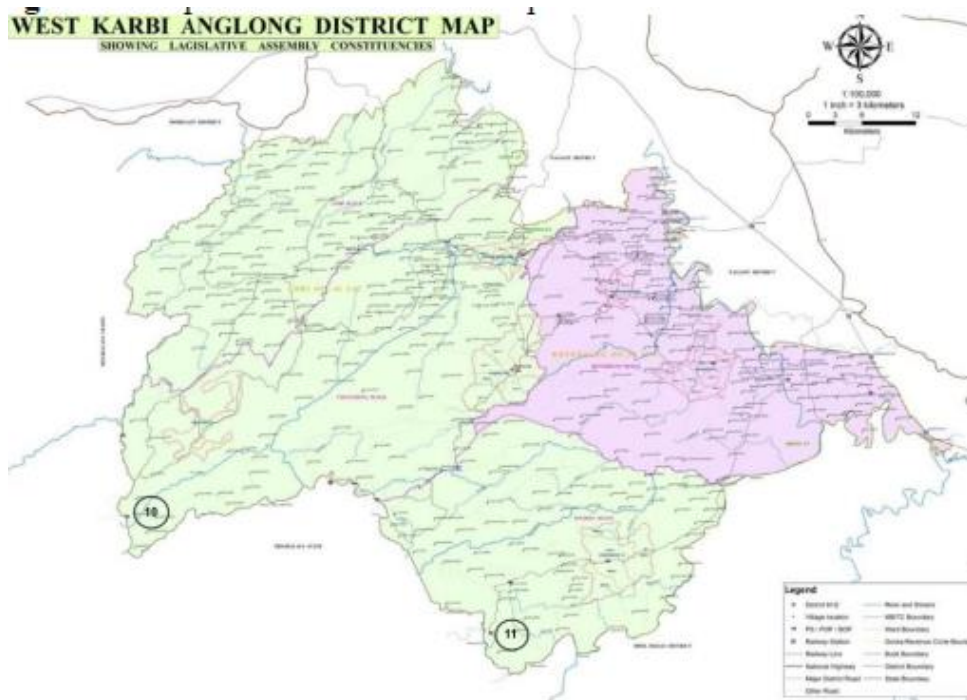


Fig.2: Kamrup Metro District with disputed areas



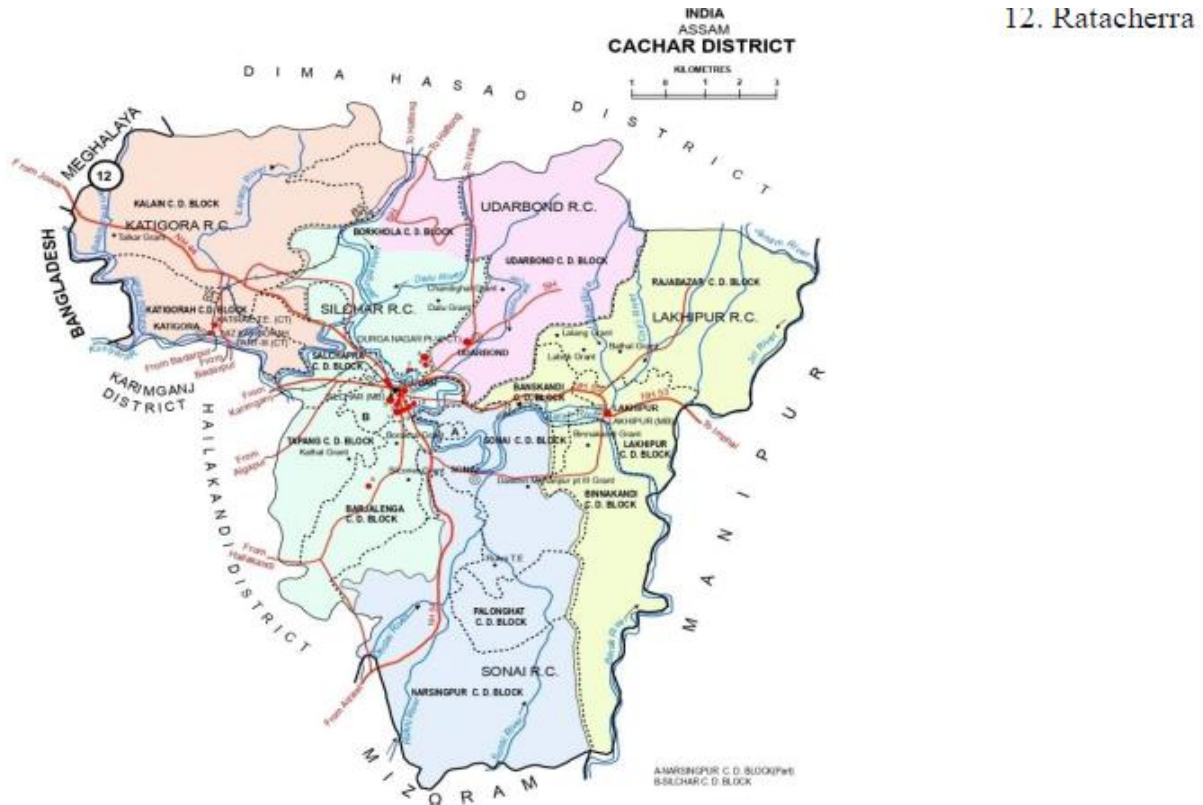
8. Khanapara-Pilangakata
9. Desh-Doomreah

Fig.3: West Karbi Anglong District with disputed areas



10. Block I
11. Block II

Fig.4: Cachar District with disputed areas



Map Source: Directorate of Census Operations, Assam

There have been efforts taken by the central government and both the state governments at various levels to resolve the dispute. The Union government acts as a facilitator and promotes cordial settlements. Attempts like Joint official committees formed in the 1980s, one of the known, in 1985, the Justice Y.V. Chandrachud Committee recommendations which were rejected by Meghalaya stating it largely favours Assam. On different occasions, both sides have pursued legal avenues, Assam filed a civil suit in the Supreme Court in 1988 and 1998, the Supreme Court dismissed Meghalaya's petition in 2019. The honourable court has advised direct engagement should be made by the centre. In August 2021, the Chief Ministers of Assam and Meghalaya have agreed to form regional committees, led by the respective cabinet ministers, to resolve six of the twelve disputed areas on a priority basis. Later, an agreement was signed in March 2022, to resolve the areas of Gizang, Tarabari, Bakhlapara, Khanapara-Pilangkata, Ratacherra and Hahim, allocating 18.51 sq km out of 36.79 sq km to Assam and 18.28 sq km to Meghalaya (The Assam Tribune, 2025). However, the main challenge remains the same i.e., to implement it on the ground as fresh encroachments from both sides continue to be reported. As

of early 2025, Meghalaya has expressed concern over the lack of progress in resolving the remaining six disputed areas, referring that a definitive solution remains elusive and requires sustained political will and dialogue.

The Time-Line:

Assam and Meghalaya have a shared border spanning 885 kilometers, and Meghalaya was formed from Assam through the Assam Reorganisation Act of 1971, which triggered contentious disputes between the two regions.

1970: Meghalaya was carved out of Assam as an autonomous State.

1972: Meghalaya attained statehood under the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act of 1969. However, disputes arose when the Meghalaya government contested the Act, as it relied on boundary definitions from a 1951 committee. This led to the transfer of areas including parts of East Jaintia Hills, Ri-Bhoi, and West Khasi Hills districts to Assam. By 2011, the dispute focused on 12 specific sectors, reflecting ongoing claims and negotiations between the two states.

1983: Despite the formation of a joint official committee tasked with addressing the issue, their recommendation that the Survey of India should re-delineate the boundary with the cooperation of both states did not lead to any subsequent action or follow-up.

1985: Meghalaya dismissed the findings of an independent panel led by Justice Y.V. Chandrachud, claiming it favored Assam's interests.

1991: Although both governments agreed to collaborate with the Survey of India to demarcate the border, approximately 100 kilometers had been demarcated by the end of 1991. However, Meghalaya later deemed the exercise unconstitutional and declined to continue cooperating.

2011: The Meghalaya Assembly sought central intervention and the formation of a boundary commission. In response, the Assam Assembly passed a resolution opposing this action. Subsequently, the central government intervened, facilitating the appointment of nodal officers from both states to engage in discussions on the boundary dispute.

2019: The Meghalaya government's petition to the Supreme Court, seeking direction to the Centre to resolve the dispute, was dismissed.

From 2019 to till date: Between 2019 and 2022, significant strides have been made towards peace in Northeast India, including agreements such as the NLFT (National Liberation Front of Tripura, 2019), Bru-Reang (2020), Bodoland Accord (2020), and Karbi-Anglong (2021). Today's

Assam-Meghalaya border agreement marks another milestone. To resolve remaining border issues, options like satellite mapping for demarcation and the establishment of interstate councils under Article 263 of the Constitution are being explored. Zonal councils could also aid grassroots-level dispute resolution. Public opinion must be shaped towards peaceful borders, while efforts to find political solutions to long-standing disputes should be intensified.

In March 2022, an agreement between both the states was signed to resolve six out of 12 disputed areas. In 2025 reports came about resolving remaining 5 out of 6 remaining disputed areas through representatives of the cabinet ministers from both the states.

Role of Social Workers in Conflicted border areas:

Social worker's role here is crucial right from supporting (physically, mentally, economically) the people to advocating and peace building. The social worker should try to appease the repercussions of the conflict on those defenceless populations. The social worker should thrive to bring social cohesion and harmony. Being a social worker, one has to voice on behalf of the conflict-ridden people in terms of basic necessities such as health and education. The social workers can also provide support by offering trauma counselling and helping them to adjust with the situation. The social worker can also act as a negotiator by building peace among the conflicted parties by bringing them to a common ground and resolving the conflict.

Conclusion:

The study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding and root causes of interstate border conflicts in Assam-Meghalaya border and the initiatives aimed at resolving them. By shedding light on these issues, the study aims to inform policy and practice towards peace, stability, and development in the region.

The border disputes in Northeast India, particularly involving Assam and its neighbouring states, are deeply rooted in historical, political, and socio-economic factors. The region's complex history of colonial demarcations, the creation of new states, and the subsequent delineation of boundaries have contributed to ongoing tensions and conflicts. These disputes often involve issues of territory, ethnicity, identity, and resource allocation, leading to violence, displacement, and economic disruptions.

The border dispute between Assam and Meghalaya are examples of the ongoing challenges in the region. Efforts to resolve these disputes, such as the formation of committees and diplomatic dialogues, have been made, but a lasting solution remains elusive.

Addressing these border disputes requires a comprehensive approach that considers historical

grievances, socio-economic disparities, and the aspirations of diverse communities. Dialogue, mutual respect, and inclusive governance are crucial to finding peaceful and sustainable resolutions. Regional cooperation, supported by national governments and international partners, can also play a vital role in promoting peace, stability, and development in Northeast India.

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