

Geopolitical Problems of North-East India with special Emphasis on Assam-Arunachal Pradesh Border Dispute

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ABSTRACT

The eight states that make up northeastern India are renowned for both their cultural variety and their breathtaking scenery. This lovely part of India has been progressively turning into a conflict-ridden area that disrupts the peace between the states in the vicinity. The region has often seen a number of interstate boundary conflicts, such as the Assam-Nagaland border dispute or the Assam-Arunachal border dispute. This research is an attempt to analyse the geopolitical issues of the Northeastern area, with particular reference to the Assam-Arunachal boundary dispute, by examining the frequency of interstate border disputes. Violent conflicts have become a common occurrence along the border as a result of the two states' intense territorial dispute. Thus, this issue is the primary focus of the study. The role of both state governments in resolving the boundary issue will also be highlighted in this article.

Key Words: *Geopolitical Problems, Boundary Dispute, Violent Clash, Government Role.*

I. Introduction

North-East India is the easternmost part of India comprising eight states i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, and the Himalayan state of Sikkim. The region covers an area of about 2,62,230 square km which is almost 8% of India's total area. As of 2011 the region has a total population of 44.98 million, which is about 3.7% of India's total geographical area. The whole North-East India is connected with the rest of India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor with a width of 21 to 40 km. The region shares more than 4500 km of international border with China in the north, Myanmar in the east, Bangladesh in the south-west, and Bhutan to the north-west [3]. The northern and eastern boundaries of the region are represented by high Himalayan Mountains. The region is covered by five foreign countries viz. China, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The northeastern region of India is best known for its picturesque topography, cultural heritage, ethnic beauty and rich natural resources. The region has rich bio diversity, oil and natural gas, coal, limestone, hydro potential and forest wealth. Given the peculiar geo-political location, the region can develop cross-border markets, which are likely to be more cost effective for North East India's surplus production than the distant national markets. The region is famous for its exotic flora and fauna. It is ideally situated to produce spices, fruit & vegetables, flowers and herbs. Therefore, the North East India can emerge as an exporter of orchids, flowers, apple, orange, pineapples, spices, herbs, etc. to the South East Asian Region [2]. The vast array of aromatic plants of the region can be used in aromatic industry for the manufacture of perfumes, incenses, etc. Rich bio-

diversity, heritage sites & ethnic beauty can make it a destination for the tourists. Several big & small rivers flowing across this region are suitable to construct hydro projects to generate electricity. Moreover, owing to climatic advantage the region can also be a major producer and exporter of tea [5].

In spite of all these facts, the entire region is regarded as underdeveloped. The remoteness, difficult terrain, infrastructural bottlenecks and unfriendly neighbors are the serious impediments of the development of the region. Being a border area, the region is suffering from specific problems like illegal cross-border movements, law and order, security, insurgency, smuggling etc. One of the important causes of backwardness of the region is the frequent occurring of inter-state border dispute in the region [6].

II. Database & Methodology

The entire study is purely conducted on secondary data. The data pertaining to the topic collected from numerous reliable sources like different books, bulletins, daily newspaper periodicals and different journals. Little valuable information is also collected from old as well as unpublished thesis and dissertation of the university. Internet links and govt. websites as well as published book have also been taken into consideration for detail analytical study.

The data obtained from different reliable sources have been analyzed and describes systematically in a suitable manner. Few statistical techniques have been used where necessary. The whole study has been organized in a systematic way. First of all, introductory part is set up which includes introduction of the topic. In the next phase objectives, data base and methodology have been organized. After that detail study of the selected topic which includes analytical part and generalization of the study has been depicted systematically. Finally, conclusion part has been depicted.

III. Geopolitical Problems of North-East India

Geopolitical problems in North-East India are varied and diverse. It includes several aspects of problem like internal and external boundary problem and many more. In case of internal boundary problem or interstate boundary problem, emphasize is given on the exact location of the disputed areas, its origin, various governmental measures for its solution and suggestion for the settlement of the problem [1]. The external boundary problem is basically the problem of Indo-China border dispute in the north-eastern sector, which can be studied or analyzed in the context of origin, development, limited extension etc.

The boundary disputes between the states of North-East India lie on the boundary of the state of Assam and its three neighboring states viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Nagaland. The boundary dispute in these states started since the creation of new politico-administrative units from the composite Assam. In 1960 the Naga Hills district and the former Tuensang Division of the NEFA were constituted into a separate state, known as Nagaland. In 1972, by virtue of the North Eastern areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971 enacted by Parliament, a new state was formed known as Meghalaya. A new Union Territory known as the Union territory

of Mizoram was constituted comprising the territories of Mizo district in the state of Assam. The new state of Meghalaya and the Union Territory of Mizoram came into being on 21st January 1972 and ceased to form a part of the then state of Assam. The NEFA was also formed into a new Union territory known as the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh. Later in December, 1986 Arunachal Pradesh and in February, 1987 Mizoram attained state-hood [9].

The insurgency of the region is caused by many geographical, historical and socio-economic factors. Geographical factor represents the border of the entire region where about 98% of the region's border belongs to international border, pointing to the weak or slight connectivity of the region with rest of India. Apart from geographical factor, social factor includes the population of the region. The region shares about 3% of the country's total population, and its rate of growth has exceeded two hundred per cent between 1951-2001, that generates great stress on livelihood.

IV. Types of Conflicts

The region has been witnessing a range of conflicts since the last fifty years. Insurgency for succession, insurgency for autonomy, sponsored terrorism, ethnic clashes, conflicts resulting from continuous inflow of migrants from across the border as well from other states are some of the examples of conflicts occurring in the region. Conflicts in the region sometimes represent the concept of 'distinct homeland' as a separate nation and pursuit of the realization of that goal by its votaries. Ethnic conflicts in the region sometimes cause havoc as smaller and less dominant tribal groups raise their voice against the political and cultural hold of the dominant tribal group. The same also cause tension between local and migrant communities in states like Assam. Again movements of tribal communities against a particular thing also cause serious conflicts in the region. Such movements ask for recognition of sub-regional aspirations, leading to the direct conflict with the State Governments or even the autonomous councils [11].

In the same manner, the entire region has seen an unending cycle of conflicts for the last fifty years. Insurgency in the region has taken a thousand of lives, both of security personnel and citizens. This is cleared from the following statistics:

Table-1: Incidence of Violence in the North East

Years	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Extremists killed	163	85	58	38	11	3
Security personnel killed	49	20	13	15	5	0
Civilians killed	64	63	35	20	18	2
Not Specified	3	0	1	0	0	0
Source: South Asia Terrorism portal (SATP), Institute for Conflict Management (ICM)						

V. Assam-Arunachal Border Dispute

The present boundary between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh runs from the tri-junction of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan at Bhairabkund, on the west bank of Dhansiri River to the tri-junction of Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh on the Teok River. This boundary is 704 kilometers long and it is the second longest inter-state boundary in the North Eastern Region. From Assam Government official sources (unpublished) it is found that a total length of 396 kilometers of Assam-Arunachal Pradesh boundary had been demarcated on the ground, leaving 308 kilometers of the boundary undemarcated. The boundary dispute between the two states is confined to a portion of this undemarcated boundary which is officially stated to be as 316 kilometers.

The disputed area can be placed into two categories according to the nature and intensity of the dispute and can be divided into several sectors. In the first category, the dispute is confined to the claims and counterclaims for certain areas with no or very rare boundary incidents. For example the Baliyan-Bandar Dewa (Tipling) sector in Lakhimpur-Subansiri area or the Kanubari-Sukanjuri-Nagakhat sector in Dibrugarh-Tirap district area. The second category areas are those where the boundary is very sensitive and where frequent boundary incident takes place. The areas belong to this category are Jonekorong, the Debing-Depi, Telam-Dekapam and the Likabali sector of the boundary. In the former category the dispute is mostly regarding a village or a reserve forest, while in the later category the dispute mostly involves cultivable lands on the boundary.

The actual areas of dispute between these two states vary from place to place, which involves a plot or patch of cultivable land or a commercially important site from less than an acre to few hundred acres. Dispute generally comes up when lands traditionally cultivated by the people on one side are claimed by the people on the other side on the ground that it lies on their side of the boundary. Sometimes, lands reclaimed by the people of one side are occupied by the people living on the other side because they think that it is on their side of the boundary. At other times a tenant tilling the land for his landlord for several years suddenly claims the land to

be his, with a pretext that, the land is on the other side of the boundary. These types of incidents generally lead to tensions on the border areas and assume the proportion of a boundary dispute between the two states.

Arunachal Pradesh entangled in border disputes with Assam. Initially Arunachal Pradesh accepted their notified border with Assam, but later on started raising the issues of Assamese encroachment leading to border clashes. In the case of Assam-Arunachal border, clashes were first reported in 1992 when the Arunachal Pradesh state government alleged that people from Assam are building houses, markets, and even police station on its territory. Since then, intermittent clashes have been taking place making the border tense. For example, in 2005, during an eviction drive by the Assam government, some 100 houses in East Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh were allegedly set ablaze by Assam police and forest officials. Again in 2007, tension flared up along the Assam-Arunachal border where villagers from across the border fired at a peace meeting in Assam injuring 8 people. Recently, few years back, armed group from Arunachal Pradesh raided a village in Assam's Sonitpur District (Undivided) and killed at least 10 people and injured 8 others. According to the police statement, the attack took place at Chauldhuwa Village at Bihali Reserve Forest close to the Assam-Arunachal border. The area has been considered a bone of contention between the two states for decades.

VI. Politico-Administrative Factors behind the Dispute

There are some politico-administrative factors which are responsible for the frequent border disputes between the Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Some of the factors may include:

- a. In 1951, some areas of former frontier had been transformed to the plain area of Assam. This led to the major cause of stir between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.
- b. According to the Administrative Reforms Commission Report of 1963, the boundary dispute between Assam-NEFA created stir in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. According to the Commission, the main reason for the dispute was the shortage of cultivable land in NEFA. In order to solve this dispute, the Commission suggested two alternatives. i) Suitable lands may be provided by the Assam Government in areas bordering NEFA which can be allotted to NEFA people for cultivation. The ownership of the land can continue with the Assam Government. ii) New land can be located and developed for cultivation within NEFA itself.

Besides, ethnicity in disputed area also has direct bearing on the border dispute. Distinctive patterns of population are found in the disputed areas. In the disputed areas, some tribes live in the area since long time. The main reasons of the dispute in this area caused by the desire of a village to come within the jurisdiction of the state where the majority of their tribes lives or use plain cultivable land. Another reason of the dispute is mixed population of several tribes who have migrated to the area from different places in the respective states. For example, in Arunachal Pradesh side Padams, Miniyongs, Galongs, Millangs tribes live in Jonekorong and Dabing-Depi area of the boundary. They usually live in a single village and are migrants from Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. On the other hand, in Assam side, populations are mainly consists of Mishing, Kacharis

and Nepalis. Except Mishings, the Kacharis and Nepalis are the new settlers. This mixed population pattern and ever increasing population pressure on the border areas sometimes defy the boundary line and then dispute emerges [10].

Another reason of the dispute is the existence of Reserve Forest on both sides of the boundary. Earlier the reserve forests played their role as frontier between the two states, but now it has changed its role as government of Arunachal Pradesh started constructing roads in the reserve forest areas due to the lack of sufficient plain lands in the state. The government also started fixing boundary pillars along the reserve forest areas, but it could not stop people's mind from not crossing the boundary. It is because of the poor economic conditions of the people that compel them to practice shifting cultivation in the border areas [4]. The poor economic condition and the scarcity of plain lands in the state compel the people of Arunachal Pradesh to come down to the plain lands of Assam and to construct roads for their convenience leading to frequent clash between the people of the two states.

VII. Assam-Arunachal Government to Solve Boundary Dispute

To solve the boundary issue between the two states, the Supreme Court appointed a local commission on 25.09.2006 which shall identify the boundaries between Nagaland, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. A meeting was held on 1.08.2007 between the Local Commission and the Arunachal Government. In the meeting the Arunachal government made a proposal to the Assam government for smooth adjustment of the boundary. After giving objection on the proposal by the Assam government, the Local Commission directed the Arunachal government to indicate the proposal in detail, and accordingly, the Arunachal government did the same on 26.12.2007. As per the proposal the Arunachal government demanded for the inclusion of an area of 1119.279 sq. km within its territory. But the Government of Assam rejected the proposal as proposed by the Arunachal Government.

The Local Commission called a meeting with Chief Ministers of both the states, directing both the states to coordinate with the same. In 2013, a proposal was given for the visit of Local Commission to the problematic areas, and accordingly, Assam Government suggested the names of Bhalukpong, Kimin, Gumto and Gerukamukh for the visit of the Commission.

The statement of the Commission revealed that several indecent misadventures by Assam Police and Assam Forest Officials have been observed in the aforementioned areas. However, the Commission came out with its report, and with that report a mutual solution of the border dispute is arrived at. As a result of that, the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh has written letters to the Chief Minister of Assam who, in turn, responded positively to cooperate in maintaining peace and harmony along the boundary.

The entire matter is now under the jurisdiction of Supreme Court, which is a major concern not only for the people of the state but also for the Government of Arunachal Pradesh. The report of the Local Commission

once submitted, the Arunachal Government believes that the Supreme Court will give a decision in favor of Arunachal Pradesh and end the long-pending problem of the inter-state boundary row.

VIII. Recommendations

To solve the decade-old boundary dispute between Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, the following recommendations may be taken into consideration:

- a. Both the states must consider all the disturbed area as neutral zone. They can organize village development council in all the disputed areas. The members of the council should come from both the states.
- b. Both the states should provide financial and other requirements for all developmental activities in the disturbed areas.
- c. Both the states must abstain from claiming its rights to the areas, and development in such areas must be the joint effort of the departments of both the states.
- d. To gain peace in the disputed areas it is essential to create an atmosphere for peace and help people regain confidence. Confidence building could be an important way to bring peace in the conflict areas.
- e. Adjustment with 'Give and Take' philosophy of survival must be the basis of solving the border issue.

IX. Conclusion

Peace and harmony in the North-Eastern region is beyond imaginable without the solution to the inter-state border dispute, be it Assam-Arunachal border or Assam-Nagaland border. The solution of the same can be achieved not by dividing people, but by promoting peace, harmony and unity. The Government of all the states of the region must take appropriate steps to stop the ever-increasing boundary problem. A rational approach of each state Government with the consent of the people, particularly living along the border, could be the one and only way to solve the decade-long problem.

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