

BEYOND THE MAP: THE ENDURING BORDER CONFLICTS OF ASSAM AND THEIR SOCIO-ECONOMIC REPERCUSSIONS

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Abstract

The Northeast region of India, renowned for its ethnic and cultural diversity, continues to grapple with persistent inter-state border disputes that have deep historical roots. While public narratives often emphasize ethnic unrest, insurgencies, and immigration issues, boundary conflicts—particularly between Assam and Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh—remain a constant source of political tension. These disputes, originating from the reorganisation of undivided Assam, have perpetuated territorial ambiguities that disrupt connectivity, impede socio-economic development, and exacerbate insecurity in borderland communities. Such areas face recurring disputes over agricultural land, sporadic violence, and loss of lives, yet receive inadequate policy attention. This article critically examines the historical, spatial, and operational aspects of these disputes, their socio-economic impacts, and the measures undertaken by state and Union governments to address them. It advocates for sustained, collaborative, and community-centered approaches to conflict resolution, aiming to foster long-term stability and equitable growth in the Northeast.

Keywords: Northeast, border disputes; ethnic conflict; socio-economic impact; territorial demarcation; conflict resolution.

Introduction

The Northeast region of India, comprising eight states after the inclusion of Sikkim in 2003, remains one of the most strategically and politically sensitive zones in the country. Geographically, it is connected to mainland India by a narrow 29-kilometer stretch known as the Siliguri Corridor, also referred to as the “Chicken’s Neck” (Baruah, 2020). Borders, in the most formal sense, signify demarcated lines separating two or more entities. However, they are not merely geographical constructs; they also embody psychological, cultural, and political divisions that often shape the lived experiences of communities residing along them (Goswami, 2019). Border-related conflicts in the Northeast are not a recent phenomenon. Such disputes have historically emerged both along international frontiers and within the internal boundaries of the Indian federal system, which were often drawn for administrative purposes rather than cultural or historical coherence (Bhattacharjee, 2021). The most significant phase of such disputes in the region can be traced to the 1960s, following the fragmentation of undivided Assam into Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram. Although this political restructuring was intended to address ethnic aspirations, it inherited and, in some cases, intensified pre-existing territorial disagreements.

Many of these disputes can be traced back to the colonial era, when the British administration frequently redrew boundaries for administrative convenience. This practice was driven by annexation strategies, resource exploitation, and military considerations, rather than by local socio-cultural realities (Baruah, 2020). As a result, the demarcations often disregarded indigenous territorial claims, leading to ambiguities that persisted even after independence. When Assam was divided, these inherited uncertainties resurfaced, leaving several boundaries undefined and contested (Misra, 2018). The implications of such unsettled boundaries are profound. Border communities have repeatedly been subjected to violence,

arson, and forced displacement. Reports document instances of houses being burnt, villagers killed, and resources looted during episodes of heightened tension (Goswami, 2019). Bandhs (shutdowns), road blockades, and restrictions on the movement of essential goods have also become recurrent strategies in times of inter-state hostility, directly affecting economic stability and development processes in the region (Bhattacharjee, 2021).

The pre-colonial period offers little evidence of precisely marked territorial divisions in the Northeast. Instead, boundaries were often fluid, defined by customary practices and shifting spheres of influence. Under colonial rule, these flexible frontiers were replaced by rigid administrative lines, which did not always align with ethnic or linguistic realities. The post-independence state formation process failed to reconcile these differences, particularly after the creation of Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Mizoram (1987), and Arunachal Pradesh (1987) from the greater Assam territory (Baruah, 2020). The persistence of these disputes underscores their impact not only on inter-state relations but also on governance and socio-economic development. Infrastructural projects, trade routes, and administrative coordination are frequently disrupted, further marginalizing border communities. Consequently, the issue remains both a humanitarian concern and a challenge to cooperative federalism in India. Addressing it requires historically informed negotiations, stronger institutional mechanisms, and sustained engagement between state and central governments.

The Northeast region of India, renowned for its ethnic and cultural diversity, continues to grapple with persistent inter-state border disputes that have deep historical roots (Baruah, 2020; Misra, 2021). While public narratives often emphasise ethnic unrest, insurgencies, and immigration issues, boundary conflicts—particularly between Assam and Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh—remain a constant source of political tension (Goswami, 2022). These disputes, originating from the reorganisation of undivided Assam in the post-independence era, have perpetuated territorial ambiguities that disrupt connectivity, impede socio-economic development, and exacerbate insecurity in borderland communities (The Hindu, 2021). The affected areas face recurring disagreements over agricultural land, sporadic violence, and the loss of lives and livelihoods, yet often receive inadequate policy attention from both state and national levels (The Times of India, 2025). The implications of these conflicts extend beyond the immediate contestation of territorial limits, influencing patterns of migration, economic marginalisation, and inter-community relations (Bhattacharyya, 2019). Against this backdrop, a nuanced understanding of the historical, spatial, and socio-political dimensions of these disputes is essential for framing durable solutions. This study critically examines the origins, operational dynamics, and socio-economic impacts of these disputes, while assessing the measures undertaken by both state and Union governments. It further argues for sustained, collaborative, and community-centred approaches to conflict resolution to promote long-term stability and equitable growth in the Northeast (Misra, 2021).

Historical Context of Border Issues and Disputes in Northeast India:

Border disputes in Northeast India represent one of the most enduring legacies of both colonial boundary-making and postcolonial state restructuring. Since the 1960s, when the reorganization of Assam led to the creation of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh, disputes over boundaries have frequently disrupted relations among the states of the region. These conflicts are not accidental; they stem from a layered history of colonial interventions such as the Inner Line Regulation of 1873, arbitrary cartographic demarcations, and the imposition of administrative units that ignored indigenous histories and

socio-cultural affiliations. The postcolonial Indian state, instead of fundamentally rethinking these lines, often reproduced them, thereby institutionalizing tensions that have persisted into the present.

The British annexation of various hill territories into Assam illustrates this process of administrative convenience overriding local realities. Territories such as the Garo Hills (1822), Goalpara (1826), Cachar (1832), Khasi Hills (1835), and the Naga Hills (1866) were incorporated without clear demarcations that accounted for ethnic settlements or historical affiliations (Gohain, 2007). Later annexations, such as the Jaintia Hills in 1883, the North East Frontier Tracts in 1914, and the Lushai Hills in 1895, added further complexity (Baruah, 1999). Because these boundaries were not grounded in indigenous consent or traditional systems of landholding, they became fault lines for future disputes (Misra, 2014).

The Assam–Nagaland conflict vividly demonstrates the continuing salience of colonial borders. Naga tribes historically occupied areas that extended into what became Assam, with records of interactions going back to the Ahom period (Gohain, 2007). The 1925 boundary demarcation—later used in the State of Nagaland Act of 1962—became the central legal reference point for Assam, but Nagaland rejected it, asserting claims over fertile and resource-rich areas of Sivasagar, Golaghat, and Jorhat (Wouters & Tunyi, 2018). These claims, framed within the demand for “Greater Nagalim,” have their roots in pre-independence Naga nationalism, particularly the Nine-Point Agreement of 1947 (Ao, 2002). Armed clashes in 1965, 1968, 1979, 1985, and 2014 demonstrate how unresolved claims escalate into violence, with the Merapani clash of 1985 being one of the most violent incidents (Doungel, 2023). Assam, however, maintains that the colonial boundary remains constitutionally valid, reflecting the persistence of legalistic interpretations of disputed lines.

The Assam–Meghalaya dispute follows a comparable trajectory. The roots of this conflict can be traced to the 1951 Bordoloi Committee notification that transferred 3,648 square kilometers of tribal-inhabited plains areas to Assam. Meghalaya, attaining statehood in 1972, argued that these territories historically belonged to the Jaintia Kingdom and were merged into Assam without local consent. The present-day conflict covers twelve contested locations spread across about 2,765 square kilometers of the 885-kilometer border (Gohain, 2007). The disputes are particularly visible in regions such as Charduar, Ri Bhoi, and Jonai-Murkongselek, where both states provide conflicting historical and cultural claims (Baruah, 2005). While Assam emphasizes the legality of the 1951 boundary, Meghalaya views the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act of 1969 as unilateral and unjust (Das, 2020). These competing narratives demonstrate how postcolonial boundary commissions often reinforced colonial logics rather than resolving them.

The Assam–Arunachal Pradesh dispute similarly underscores the colonial continuity in postcolonial times. After Arunachal Pradesh was made a Union Territory in 1972, tensions grew around the 1951 notification that transferred about 3,648 square kilometers of plains to Assam. By 1979, efforts to demarcate 396 kilometers of the boundary had already stalled, reflecting entrenched disagreements. Arunachal leaders regard the transfer as “defective,” pointing to historical recognition of local customary rights under both Ahom and British rule (Misra, 2014). Assam, meanwhile, asserts that the constitutional validity of the 1951 boundary makes it non-negotiable. Violent incidents have been recurrent, such as the 2005 burning of houses in East Kameng and clashes in 2020. These episodes show how disputes rooted in historical grievances often manifest in destructive forms of collective action.

The Assam–Mizoram dispute illustrates perhaps the most dramatic divergence between colonial demarcations and local perceptions of legitimate boundaries. The Lushai Hills, originally incorporated into Assam in the late nineteenth century, became a Union Territory in 1972 and later a state in 1987. The current boundary, based on the 1933 notification, is rejected by Mizoram, which argues that the earlier 1875 Inner Line Reserved Forest boundary under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act of 1873 should be restored. Mizoram contends that the 1875 line respected Mizo customary territorial rights, whereas the 1933 boundary ignored them (Baruah, 1999). Assam counters that the Inner Line was merely an administrative demarcation and not a state boundary (Gohain, 2007). Violence has flared repeatedly—in 2006, 2018, 2020, and most recently in 2021, when clashes left several dead (Doungel, 2023). These recurring confrontations demonstrate how historical grievances, compounded by forest land disputes and ethnic assertions, make reconciliation difficult.

Across all of these disputes, a central theme emerges: the colonial and postcolonial reliance on maps and notifications, rather than indigenous understandings of land, has perpetuated conflict. Scholars have argued that colonial administrators saw the Northeast less as a homeland of diverse communities and more as a frontier to be managed for imperial security (Baruah, 2005). Postcolonial India inherited this logic, embedding it into the state system without adequately recognizing local identities. For indigenous groups, land is inseparable from culture, memory, and autonomy, which is why disputes over boundaries evoke deep resistance (Ao, 2002).

Recent attempts at resolution have included judicial intervention, bilateral talks, and partial agreements. For instance, the 2022 discussions between Assam and Meghalaya resolved six out of twelve contested areas, showing some progress. Similarly, the Supreme Court of India has often been called upon to adjudicate disputes, though its interventions have been slow due to the complex historical claims (Das, 2020). Yet, as Wouters and Tunyi (2018) note, without addressing the colonial legacy and its disjuncture with local histories, such negotiations often remain superficial. In sum, the border disputes of Northeast India are not merely administrative disagreements; they reflect deeper structural tensions between state-centric territoriality and community-centric understandings of land. Colonial annexations, arbitrary notifications, and postcolonial continuities have all combined to produce contested spaces where law, history, and identity collide. Unless future resolutions incorporate not only legal and political frameworks but also cultural and historical recognition of indigenous claims, these disputes will likely continue to resurface, shaping the politics and security of the region for years to come.

Government Efforts and Contemporary Dynamics in Resolving Assam's Inter-State Border Disputes:

The history of Assam's inter-state border disputes is marked by recurring tensions, intermittent violence, and largely inconclusive negotiation attempts. Despite successive interventions by the Union government since the 1960s, the disputes remain unresolved, rooted in historical ambiguities, contested administrative practices, and entrenched political interests. While the scale and intensity of disputes have varied across time and neighbouring states—Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram—the core challenge persists: reconciling competing territorial claims with legitimacy derived from colonial boundaries, ethnolinguistic settlement patterns, and constitutional provisions (North-Eastern Areas Reorganisation Act, 1971).

The Assam–Nagaland border dispute has been one of the most intractable and violent. The post-independence attempts in 1967–68 to allow the Survey of India to demarcate the boundary collapsed due to lack of cooperation from the Nagaland government. In 1971, the Union government established the Sundaram Committee, which concluded that Nagaland’s claim to 4,975 square miles of Assam was unsubstantiated. However, it recommended transferring around 300 square miles from the Disoi Valley Reserved Forest to Nagaland. Assam accepted the recommendation, but Nagaland outright rejected it. Tensions escalated through the 1970s, with continued encroachments into Assam’s reserved forests. A major clash in 1979 led to the creation of a 10-kilometre-wide Disputed Area Belt (DAB)—within Assam’s administrative boundary but claimed by Nagaland—divided into sectors A (Diphu RF), B (South Nambor RF), and C (Rengma RF). CRPF and Assam Rifles were deployed as neutral forces (MP-IDSA, 2019).

The Sundaram Committee report, circulated to the states in 1979, recommended boundary demarcation based on the 1925 notification and a joint survey, while rejecting most claims by Nagaland except for the Disoi Valley. Nagaland dismissed the report as “one-sided”. The 1985 Merapani incident further intensified the conflict. A violent confrontation between Assam and Nagaland police, along with armed civilians, resulted in heavy casualties and destruction. This prompted the formation of the Shastri Commission, which expanded the DAB to Sector D (Doyang RF), blamed the Nagaland government for initiating violence, and called for firm implementation of interim agreements, reaffirmed Assam’s constitutional boundary, and recommended a boundary commission. Nagaland again rejected the report. In response to ongoing provocations—such as the setting up of polling stations in Assam by Nagaland—Assam filed a civil suit in the Supreme Court in 1988 under Article 131. The case was withdrawn in 1995 but revived in 1998. A mediation commission led by J.K. Pillai in 1997 also failed to bring a resolution.

Assam’s border dispute with Meghalaya, while less violent, remains politically sensitive and persistent. A joint official committee formed in May 1983 recommended that the Survey of India re-demarcate the boundary, but no action followed. In 1985, the Chandrachud Committee applied the Sixth Schedule and constitutional analyses, rejecting Meghalaya’s claims—including over the flashpoint village of Langpih. Meghalaya refused to accept the findings (The Hindu, 2022). In 1991, both states agreed to a joint demarcation with the Survey of India, resulting in approximately 100 km of demarcated border. However, Meghalaya later declared the process unconstitutional (The Hindu, 2022). The Meghalaya Legislative Assembly passed a resolution in 2011 urging the Centre to form a boundary commission; Assam countered with a resolution opposing it. Nodal officers were later appointed to facilitate talks, but substantive progress remained elusive. A 2019 Supreme Court petition by Meghalaya for intervention was dismissed, with the Court advising the state to approach the Centre instead.

In March 2022, Assam and Meghalaya signed a historic MoU resolving disputes in six of the twelve “areas of difference” in the presence of Home Minister Amit Shah (The Print, 2025). Under the MoU, six sectors—Tarabari, Gizang, Hahim, Boklapara, Khanapara-Pilingkata, and Ratacherra—were shared nearly equally between the states through a “give-and-take” approach: Assam received 18.51 sq km while Meghalaya got 18.28 sq km (The Print, 2025). Boundary pillars have since begun installation, signifying progress toward peace and clarity.

The Assam–Arunachal Pradesh boundary dispute centers on colonial-era demarcations and the transfer of plains regions to Assam. In 1979, both states formed a committee that failed to resolve the issue. Arunachal proposed in 1983 for the return of 956 sq km, and in 2007 increased its demand to 1,119.2 sq km before the Tarun Chatterjee Commission. The Commission endorsed 70–80% of Arunachal’s claim, which Assam rejected in favor of a “give-and-take” approach. Encroachments have intensified the dispute. Assam in 2020 accused Arunachal of occupying 6,375 hectares of its forest land, leading to violent eviction drives in 2005 and 2014, with communities—especially Bodos and Nyshis—being mobilized (Newspapers). A milestone in the dispute came in 2022 with the Namsai Declaration, where both state CMs agreed to reduce disputed village claims from 123 to 86 via joint verification committees (Deccan Herald, 2024).

Assam’s border dispute with Mizoram remains volatile. Security forces, including the SSB and CRPF on the Assam side and BSF on the Mizoram side, serve as buffers. In July 2021, a meeting convened by the Union Home Secretary failed to yield a breakthrough, as Mizoram sought more internal consultation time. Most meetings have been reactive, not proactive. Despite calls from civil society for a boundary commission post-2018 clashes, no decision has been made.

Across all these disputes, a consistent pattern emerges: initial agreements or commissions seldom lead to resolution due to non-cooperation, differing historical claims, and political aversion to territorial compromise. Union interventions often vacillate between ad-hoc peace management and committee-based inquiry, with limited implementation—even when recommendations are clear and equitable. Colonial-era administrative notifications, ambiguous and insensitive to local impact, continue to be contested. For local communities, these disputes are existential conflicts over livelihood, security, and identity. Encroachments and retaliation cycles deepen mistrust and instability, signaling that security deployments are inadequate substitutes for definitive settlements.

Assam’s inter-state border disputes reflect the complex interplay of historical legacies, constitutional nuances, and contemporary politics. The Namsai Declaration of 2022 stands out as a rare moment of tangible progress. However, without sustained political will, structured cooperation, and inclusive mechanisms incorporating community perspectives, these disputes are likely to remain entrenched. The way forward lies in transitioning from reactive conflict management to proactive, binding, clearly communicated resolutions.

Border Disputes and Development in Northeast India: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis

The Northeast region of India, comprising eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim—is one of the most geographically and culturally diverse regions of the country. Since the inclusion of Sikkim in 2003, the region has been linked to the rest of India only by the narrow Siliguri Corridor, a 29-kilometer-wide stretch often referred to as the “Chicken’s Neck,” which underscores both its strategic vulnerability and its logistical challenges (Baruah, 2003). The Northeast shares almost 98 percent of its borders with foreign countries, including Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal, making border management a complex geopolitical and socio-economic issue (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2022).

Colonial Legacies and the Origins of Boundary Disputes

Boundary conflicts in Northeast India are not a new phenomenon; rather, they have deep roots in the colonial period. In the pre-colonial era, boundaries between kingdoms and tribal territories were often fluid, negotiated through customary practices and seasonal movements (Misra, 2014). The British colonial administration, in its bid to impose administrative order, introduced formal demarcations that frequently disregarded indigenous territorial understandings. This was done largely for administrative convenience, often in connection with resource extraction and control over trade routes (Gait, 1906).

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British officials repeatedly created and re-created district and provincial boundaries in the region, annexing territories and altering jurisdictions. Such changes, while serving the colonial imperative, ignored ethnic affiliations and traditional land use patterns. As a result, when Assam was subdivided after independence, many of these boundaries were poorly defined or contested (Baruah, 2005). The long-term consequence of this colonial cartography has been persistent disputes between Assam and the states carved out of it—Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Mizoram (1987), and Arunachal Pradesh (1987).

Post-Independence State Formation and Escalation of Dispute

Following independence, the Government of India undertook several state reorganizations to address ethnic aspirations and administrative challenges in the Northeast. The creation of Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1972, and Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram in 1987 was intended to grant greater autonomy to distinct ethnic groups and improve governance. However, the reorganization did not resolve all territorial disagreements. Many of the state boundaries were drawn based on colonial-era notifications, such as the 1925 Assam–Nagaland boundary, which Nagaland continues to dispute (Kumar, 2021). These disputes have frequently led to violent clashes, property destruction, and even fatalities. They are often exacerbated by political mobilization around identity, resources, and land rights. For example, the Assam–Nagaland border has witnessed recurrent armed confrontations since the 1960s, resulting in numerous deaths and the displacement of thousands of people (Phukan, 2019).

Socio-Political and Economic Impact of Border Disputes

Border disputes in Northeast India have far-reaching socio-economic consequences. They often lead to road blockades, disruptions in the supply of essential goods, and constraints on movement between states. Such blockades not only impede economic activity but also deepen mistrust between communities on either side of the disputed boundary.

In addition, border tensions have sometimes been exploited for political leverage, with local groups using economic disruptions as a form of protest or pressure. The resulting climate of insecurity discourages investment and slows down infrastructure development, further entrenching the developmental gap between the Northeast and the rest of India (Bhattacharya, 2016).

Transport Systems as the Lifeline—and Point of Vulnerability:

India's road networks are a vital component of national growth, contributing over 3.6 percent of the GDP and carrying about 85 percent of passenger traffic and 65 percent of freight (National Highways Authority of India, 2023). For the Northeast, road connectivity is particularly critical because the region's dependence on the Siliguri Corridor makes it highly vulnerable to blockades and infrastructure bottlenecks (Das, 2018). Infrastructural

development is thus central to the integration of the Northeast with the national and global economy (Arora & Ziipao, 2020). However, the uneven pace of infrastructure growth across India has meant that the Northeast still lags in transport facilities, with fragile roads and limited rail connectivity. This vulnerability is aggravated by the frequent inter-state border disputes that physically block transportation routes.

For instance, in July 2024, the Hynniewtrep National Youth Federation (HNYF) in Meghalaya blocked vehicles from Assam from entering tourist spots in the East Khasi Hills district, leaving thousands stranded (The Sentinel, 2024). The Assam State Drivers' Union publicly criticized the Assam government for its delayed response, reflecting the political sensitivity and administrative inertia that often accompany such incidents. These disruptions affect not only tourism revenue but also the everyday movement of goods, thereby undermining economic growth.

Lives at the Border: Everyday Insecurity

Border communities in the Northeast often live under constant uncertainty. Roads in hilly terrain can be muddy and treacherous, and during clashes, movement becomes even more dangerous. Villages located in disputed zones are sometimes subjected to arson, looting, and violent attacks. The psychological toll is equally significant, with fear and mistrust shaping social relations and disrupting agricultural and commercial activities (Hazarika, 2000). Historical tensions between Assam and Meghalaya illustrate the human cost of these disputes. In 1992, the Chief Secretaries of both states identified twelve specific disputed areas, including Langpih, Khanapara–Pilangkata, and Block I and II (Tynsong, 2021). As recently as September 2023, clashes near the Khanduli border area between Assam's West Karbi Anglong district and Meghalaya's West Jaintia Hills resulted in the burning of huts and injuries to residents. Similarly, disputes between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have flared repeatedly. In July 2022, tensions rose in Assam's Dhemaji district over alleged land encroachment by residents from adjoining Arunachal Pradesh. On 5 June 2023, two individuals were killed and two injured in a violent confrontation along the Assam–Arunachal border in the Lower Siang district. Such incidents underscore the lethal nature of unresolved territorial disputes.

The Longest and Bloodiest Dispute: Assam–Nagaland

Among all the border disputes in the region, the Assam–Nagaland conflict is the most prolonged and violent. Originating in disagreements over the 1925 demarcation, the dispute has led to repeated armed clashes since the 1960s, with fatalities on both sides. Efforts at negotiation have been hampered by deep-seated mistrust, competing historical claims, and the involvement of insurgent groups. Although insurgency-related violence in the Northeast has declined by over 80 percent in recent years (MHA, 2023), border conflicts like this remain unresolved and continue to cause disruption.

Governance Challenges and Policy Responses

While the Union and state governments have made various attempts to address these disputes—including setting up joint boundary commissions, organizing bilateral talks, and initiating confidence-building measures—progress has been slow. Part of the difficulty lies in reconciling historical claims with contemporary administrative needs. Moreover, the political stakes for state governments make compromise challenging.

Recent initiatives, such as the Assam–Meghalaya agreement in 2022, resolving six of the twelve identified disputed areas, demonstrate that negotiated settlements are possible (Tynsong, 2022). However, without addressing the root causes of mistrust and ensuring that agreements are implemented on the ground, such resolutions risk being temporary. The persistence of border disputes in Northeast India reflects a combination of colonial legacies, post-independence political choices, and ongoing governance challenges. These disputes have a profound impact on the transport systems that are essential to the region’s economic integration, creating vulnerabilities that can be exploited during political or ethnic tensions. The human cost is borne disproportionately by border communities, whose security, livelihoods, and mobility are continually at risk. Addressing these disputes requires not only diplomatic negotiations but also comprehensive development strategies that prioritize infrastructure, community trust-building, and fair resource distribution. Without such measures, the Northeast’s potential as a bridge between India and its neighbors will remain constrained by the very boundaries meant to define it.

Causes of Border Disputes in Assam and the Northeast: A Comprehensive Analysis

India’s Northeast region, marked by rugged topography, deep ethnic diversity, and the colonial legacy of arbitrary boundaries, continues to face prolonged interstate border disputes that intertwine administrative, social, economic, and security complexities. Assam’s disputes with Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and Mizoram have persisted for decades, largely because boundary lines drawn during colonial times remain inadequately surveyed and poorly demarcated, fostering overlapping territorial claims (The Assam Tribune, 2025). These disputes are not simply technical disagreements; they are embedded in insurgent movements, demographic shifts, economic interests, and the erosion of traditional governance structures, producing tensions that are as much about identity as they are about territory.

Insurgency has played a particularly disruptive role in shaping the trajectory of Assam’s border disputes. The long-standing campaign of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) exemplifies this challenge. Its demand for a “Greater Nagalim,” encompassing Naga-inhabited areas across multiple Indian states and parts of Myanmar, has intensified inter-state tensions and challenged both the sovereignty and administrative stability of the region (The Economic Times, 2025). While the 2015 Framework Agreement between the Government of India and the NSCN-IM stopped short of redrawing state boundaries, its ambiguity over sovereignty symbols such as flags and constitutions has allowed uncertainty to persist. This ideological and territorial overlap demonstrates how insurgent claims can stall or derail formal negotiation processes.

In addition to insurgency, governance failures have perpetuated disputes through political posturing and mutual recrimination. State governments often engage in public “blame games,” such as when Assam accused Arunachal Pradesh in 2020 of encroaching upon 6,375 hectares of forest land, leading to violent eviction drives in prior years (The Times of India, 2025). These actions, while intended to assert territorial control, deepen mistrust between neighbours and erode the prospects for sustained, good-faith dialogue. Similar tensions are amplified when encroachments involve ecologically sensitive areas such as reserved forests. Forest zones like Geleki, Desoi Valley, and Tiru Hills in Sivasagar and Jorhat have witnessed large-scale occupation by settlers from neighbouring states, with an estimated 72,000 hectares of forest land affected (The Assam Tribune, 2025). These patterns reveal how environmental degradation is often a by-product of territorial competition.

The deployment of neutral forces, such as the CRPF and Assam Rifles, in disputed areas has had mixed results. While intended to act as buffers, these forces are frequently perceived by local communities as biased, undermining their credibility and reducing their effectiveness in preventing escalation (Land Conflict Watch, 2025). This perception gap reflects a broader failure to integrate community trust-building into security management. Similarly, historical agreements designed to maintain peace, such as the 1972 Interim Agreement following the Sundaram Committee's recommendations, have faltered under political and ethnic pressures, as seen in Nagaland's rejection of proposed boundary adjustments in the Disoi Valley (The Assam Tribune, 2025). Economic interests further entrench border disputes, as contested zones often contain valuable resources such as timber, minerals, and fertile agricultural land. The scramble for control over these assets provides a material incentive for continued encroachment (Land Conflict Watch, 2025). Compounding this, demographic changes—driven in part by migration—alter the social landscape of border districts. The encroachment by approximately 500 migrant families, mostly “Miya Muslims” from Bangladesh, into the Rengma Reserve Forest in Uriamghat illustrates how settlement patterns can complicate claims of historical ownership and intensify inter-ethnic mistrust (The Times of India, 2025).

Ethnic and cultural overlaps present another deeply rooted cause of persistent disputes. Communities such as the Nagas, Kukis, and others often straddle state boundaries, creating situations where ethnic solidarity supersedes administrative demarcations. This dynamic is visible in the Kuki–Naga conflict in Manipur, where land settlement patterns are shaped by identity politics as much as by geography. The absence of clearly surveyed and legally demarcated boundaries exacerbates these tensions, leaving much of the Northeast reliant on vague colonial-era descriptions rather than precise, mutually agreed lines (NESAC, 2025).

The human, economic, and ecological consequences of these unresolved disputes are substantial. Violent clashes, such as the 1985 Merapani incident—which left 41 people dead—underscore the human toll when weak boundaries, failed agreements, and distrust converge. Beyond casualties and displacement, border tensions disrupt trade, delay infrastructure development, deter tourism, and trigger environmental degradation through deforestation and habitat loss. Administrative paralysis is a recurrent outcome, as political reluctance and legal ambiguity prevent decisive resolution.

Although the Indian government and state administrations have pursued solutions—ranging from commissions like the Sundaram and Shastri Committees to eviction drives and partial agreements such as the 2022 Assam–Meghalaya accord—most efforts have been reactive and short-lived. The Namsai Declaration of 2022 between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh offers a rare example of progress achieved through pragmatic dialogue and joint problem-solving, suggesting that political will coupled with inclusivity can produce breakthroughs.

Addressing Assam's border disputes, and by extension those across the Northeast, requires a fundamental rethinking of both process and purpose. Permanent, legally empowered interstate boundary bodies, supported by technological precision mapping through institutions like the North Eastern Space Applications Centre, can provide clarity and legitimacy (NESAC, 2025). However, such technical fixes must be complemented by community participation in verification and acceptance processes to ensure that agreements resonate locally. Borders need to be reframed as spaces of cooperation—facilitating

economic exchange, cultural interaction, and shared governance—rather than as rigid lines of division.

Civil society, including women-led peace groups such as the Naga Mothers' Association and multi-ethnic platforms like Solidarity for Sustainable North East, can act as trusted intermediaries in dispute mediation (Rising Asia Journal, 2025). Developmental investments targeted at disputed areas, from health and education infrastructure to cross-border market linkages, can erode the economic motivations for encroachment and create shared stakes in stability. Security forces must also be trained for cultural sensitivity and conflict de-escalation, building trust with local communities while maintaining readiness. Ultimately, the transformation of Northeast India's borders from conflict zones into engines of regional prosperity will hinge on four guiding principles: inclusivity in negotiations, transparency in demarcation, institutional continuity in dispute management, and developmental integration of border economies. These are not merely administrative imperatives—they are prerequisites for social cohesion, ecological sustainability, and strategic connectivity under India's Act East Policy (AIR Spotlight, 2025). In this vision, Assam's borders would cease to be fault lines of instability and instead become living frontiers of cooperation, linking the Northeast's diverse peoples with one another and with the broader Asian region.

Conclusive Analysis of Assam's Inter-State Border Disputes in Northeast India

The inter-state border disputes in Northeast India, particularly involving Assam and its neighbouring states—Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh—represent a complex intersection of historical legacies, colonial administrative practices, socio-cultural dynamics, and contemporary governance challenges. These disputes are not isolated incidents of local contention; rather, they are deeply rooted in the region's historical evolution, the legacies of British colonial administration, post-independence state formation, and persistent socio-political tensions (Misra, 2021). A conclusive understanding of these disputes requires an integrated perspective encompassing historical context, operational dynamics, socio-economic ramifications, and the effectiveness of policy interventions.

Historically, the genesis of these border disputes can be traced back to colonial-era administrative decisions. During British rule, the region now comprising the northeastern states was often reorganized for administrative convenience rather than cultural or ethnic coherence. Territories were annexed piecemeal, with little regard for indigenous territorial claims, customary practices, or patterns of land use (Gait, 1906). The Inner Line Regulation, various district-level notifications, and demarcation of forest reserves created lines that were primarily administrative constructs, often ignoring the lived realities of local communities (Wouters & Tunyi, 2018). These ambiguous boundaries persisted into the post-independence period, with the reorganisation of Assam into Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh (1987), and Mizoram (1987), which, while addressing ethnic aspirations, simultaneously inherited unresolved territorial disagreements (Misra, 2018).

The Assam–Nagaland border dispute exemplifies the enduring impact of these historical ambiguities. The 1925 colonial notification defining the Assam–Naga Hills boundary has been rejected by Nagaland, which claims fertile and resource-rich areas of Assam, including parts of Sivasagar, Golaghat, and Jorhat districts, as part of “Greater Nagalim” (Doungel, 2023). Armed confrontations since the 1960s, including major incidents in 1965, 1968, 1979, 1985, and 2014, underscore how historical grievances, territorial claims, and identity politics converge to perpetuate conflict (MP-IDSA, 2019). Similarly, the Assam–Meghalaya dispute

revolves around contested territories transferred through the 1951 notification and the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act of 1969, resulting in protracted disagreement over twelve areas of difference along an 884.9 km boundary (Gohain, 2007). Conflicts with Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram are similarly anchored in colonial-era transfers, disputed notifications, and divergent interpretations of historical and customary rights (Das, 2020).

Operationally, these disputes are characterised by recurring cycles of negotiation, temporary agreements, non-compliance, and violent escalation. Commissions such as Sundaram (1971) and Shastri (1985) sought to demarcate boundaries and implement interim arrangements, yet their recommendations were frequently rejected or ignored by the states involved (MP-IDSA, 2019). The creation of the Disputed Area Belt (DAB) in Assam–Nagaland, joint verification committees in Assam–Arunachal, and the 2022 Assam–Meghalaya MoU illustrate attempts at collaborative resolution; however, their effectiveness remains contingent on sustained political will, transparency, and local acceptance (The Print, 2025; Times of India, 2025). Notably, these disputes often intersect with insurgent movements, such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM), whose demand for a “Greater Nagalim” complicates formal negotiations and heightens security risks.

Socio-economic consequences of unresolved border disputes are profound and multifaceted. Communities residing in disputed areas experience recurring insecurity, violence, and forced displacement (Bhattacharyya, 2019). Disruptions to transport networks, particularly road connectivity through the Siliguri Corridor, impede trade, delay infrastructure projects, and isolate communities (Arora & Ziipao, 2020). Recurrent bandhs, blockades, and confrontations undermine the economic livelihoods of border residents and hinder regional integration with national and international markets (Bhattacharya, 2016). The 2024 blockade by the Hynniewtrep National Youth Federation in Meghalaya illustrates the immediate economic impact of border tensions on mobility, commerce, and tourism.

Environmental degradation further complicates these disputes. Encroachment into ecologically sensitive areas, including reserved forests such as Geleki, Desoi Valley, and Tiru Hills, highlights the intersection of territorial competition and natural resource exploitation (Land Conflict Watch, 2025). Such patterns of forest occupation not only threaten biodiversity but also exacerbate inter-state tensions and challenge enforcement capacity. Moreover, demographic shifts, including migration and settlement by external groups, intensify competition over land and resources, contributing to ethnic and communal tensions in border regions (The Times of India, 2025).

Governance responses have historically oscillated between reactive peacekeeping and committee-based inquiry, often with limited long-term impact. Deployments of neutral forces, including the CRPF and Assam Rifles, serve as buffers but cannot substitute for definitive boundary demarcation and community engagement (Land Conflict Watch, 2025). Legal interventions, such as Supreme Court petitions and Article 131 suits, demonstrate the potential for institutional adjudication, yet political considerations and local resistance often delay implementation. Instances of partial resolution, such as the Assam–Meghalaya agreement of 2022, illustrate that negotiated settlements are feasible when both sides engage in give-and-take arrangements and actively cooperate with the Centre (The Hindu, 2022). However, the durability of such agreements depends on structured verification, transparent demarcation, and the integration of local perspectives.

A recurring theme across Assam's border disputes is the tension between historical claims and contemporary governance needs. Colonial-era boundaries, while constitutionally enshrined in some cases, often fail to align with ethnolinguistic settlement patterns and traditional land use (Baruah, 2020). The persistence of these ambiguities has created an environment where identity politics, resource competition, and territorial assertion intersect, producing a structural vulnerability that threatens both security and development objectives. Addressing these disputes requires a combination of legal clarity, technological precision mapping through institutions like NESAC, and inclusive mechanisms that involve local communities in verification and consensus-building (NESAC, 2025).

From a developmental perspective, unresolved border disputes hinder the Northeast's integration into India's broader economic framework. The region's strategic location under the Act East Policy, with proximity to Southeast Asia and China, amplifies the importance of infrastructure connectivity, cross-border trade, and regional cooperation (AIR Spotlight, 2025). Yet, recurring conflicts disrupt supply chains, limit mobility, and discourage private investment. Strengthening transport networks, investing in borderland economies, and creating multi-ethnic platforms for dialogue are essential to convert borders from points of conflict into zones of cooperation (Rising Asia Journal, 2025). Developmental interventions that address education, health, and livelihood opportunities can reduce the economic motivations for encroachment, while culturally sensitive security management can mitigate local grievances. The human dimension of these disputes must remain central to any resolution strategy. Repeated cycles of violence, displacement, and insecurity have eroded social trust and intensified ethnic polarisation (Hazarika, 2000). Civil society organisations, particularly women-led groups such as the Naga Mothers' Association and multi-ethnic platforms like Solidarity for Sustainable North East, have demonstrated the potential for community-level mediation, trust-building, and conflict de-escalation (ActionAid India, 2025). Embedding these actors in formal dispute resolution processes can enhance legitimacy and sustainability, ensuring that agreements resonate locally and reduce the likelihood of relapse into conflict.

In sum, Assam's inter-state border disputes encapsulate the broader challenges of Northeast India: reconciling historical grievances with modern governance, balancing ethnic aspirations with constitutional mandates, and integrating security imperatives with developmental priorities. Effective conflict resolution requires a multidimensional approach, incorporating legal clarity, technological mapping, community participation, developmental investment, and culturally informed security management (Misra, 2021). The Namsai Declaration (2022) and the Assam–Meghalaya MoU (2022) offer instructive examples of progress achievable through pragmatic dialogue, transparency, and inclusive cooperation (The Print, 2025). However, these instances must be institutionalized and scaled across all disputed borders to achieve long-term stability.

Future strategies must focus on four interlinked principles. First, inclusivity in negotiation ensures that the voices of affected communities, civil society, and local governance structures shape outcomes. Second, transparency in demarcation, aided by modern cartography and satellite imagery, provides credibility and reduces mistrust. Third, institutional continuity, through legally empowered boundary commissions and permanent verification mechanisms, prevents the recurrence of disputes. Fourth, developmental integration of border economies creates shared stakes in peace and stability, reducing the economic incentives for territorial encroachment. By operationalising these principles, Northeast India can transform its

historically contested borders into living frontiers of cooperation, linking diverse communities with national and regional economic and cultural networks.

Ultimately, Assam's border disputes highlight the enduring influence of colonial administrative practices, post-independence political dynamics, insurgent claims, and socio-economic pressures. Their resolution is not merely a question of administrative demarcation but of fostering trust, inclusivity, and shared development in a region historically marked by fragmentation and marginalisation. Sustainable peace in Northeast India will therefore depend on a comprehensive framework that integrates historical understanding, legal and technological clarity, participatory governance, and targeted development interventions. Only through such an approach can borders evolve from fault lines of instability into engines of regional prosperity, connectivity, and social cohesion, consistent with India's broader strategic and developmental objectives (Misra, 2021).

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