

Inter-state Border Disputes in North-East India: A Case of Assam and Meghalaya

Bitupan Doley
Parimita Bhuyan
Jayanta Krishna Sarmah

This paper attempts to trace the root cause of the boundary dispute between Assam and Meghalaya and highlights the governmental efforts towards the settlement of inter-state border conflicts between the two states. It particularly study four aspects of border disputes based on field notes: people's participation in border conflict resolution, responses of people of disputed areas towards government interventions, civil society participation in disputed areas, and development of inter-state border areas between Assam and Meghalaya. The field study reveals that people of the bordering areas are consulted regarding resolution of border dispute between the two states; however, their voices do not receive adequate weightage in the process of boundary demarcation. The field study clarifies that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) expressed their concern regarding the resolution of border disputes; however, there are limitations regarding their participation in interior areas of border dispute. It is revealed that frequent occurrences of border conflicts have a negative impact on the development of inter-state border areas. Further, the field study also clarifies that illiteracy, lack of adequate information and inadequate awareness among people are the main causes of inter-state border disputes between the two states.

Keywords: Border Dispute, Meghalaya, Assam, North-East India, Illiteracy, Civil Society organizations, Demarcation

Introduction

Inter-state border disputes have been a recurring phenomenon in the geo-political landscape of North East India. It has been observed that due to the “frequent closure of inter-state borders in the region”, the inhabitants “could not benefit much from the international border trade as projected by the Act East Policy” (Haokip, 2023). The border disputes between Assam-Meghalaya, Assam-Mizoram, Assam-Arunachal Pradesh and Assam-Nagaland have led to violent clashes; thereby, impelling resolution

Parimita Bhuyan is Assistant Professor at Government Model College, Kaziranga; Bitupan Doley is a doctoral scholar and Jayanta Krishna Sarmah is Professor at the Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, Guwahati-781014. [Email: jayanta1947@gauhati.ac.in]

of these disputes in an efficient and sustainable manner. In this backdrop, this paper attempts to particularly focus on inter-state border disputes between Assam and Meghalaya and therefore, an in-depth analysis is carried on in this regard.

The persistence of cordiality between the states of Assam and Meghalaya is often contested by frequent occurrence of border clashes between the two states since the last few decades, thereby inviting renewed analysis from academia. Assam and Meghalaya share 884.90 km of the long border and seven districts of Assam share the border with Meghalaya¹. The Chief Secretaries of Meghalaya and Assam identified 12 areas of border dispute between the two states in 1992 (Tynsong, 2021) and these areas are Upper Tarabari, Gizang Reserve Forest, Hahim, Borduar, Boklapara, Deshdemoria, Khanduli, Retacherra, Langpih, Nongwah- Mawtamur, Khanapara-Pilangkata, Block I and Block II (The Outlook, 12 March, 2012; cited in Tynsong, 2021). Recently, on 27th September 2023 near Khanduli border area (along the border between the Tapat area of West Karbi Anglong, Assam and Lapangap village of West Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya), border clashes have occurred resulting in burning of huts in Tapat area and Lapangap village along with injury of one person from Assam (The Assam Tribune, 28 Sept 2023). The coordinating efforts of the police forces and administration from both states have helped in the restoration of control and order in the disputed area. Previously, on 22nd November 2022, clashes of high intensity broke out between Assam police and a mob in Mukroh, a bordering area of West Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya and West Karbi Anglong district of Assam. As a result of the conflict six people were killed by Assam police, of which five were from Meghalaya and one from Assam (Karmakar 2022). These clashes testify to the fact that there is the persistence of inter-state border tension between the two states of Assam and Meghalaya and therefore necessitates the undertaking of governmental efforts directed towards a sustainable solution. Significantly, in March 2022, the historic agreement for settlement of inter-state border dispute was signed by Chief Ministers of Assam and Meghalaya in the presence of Union Home Minister Shri Amit Shah in New Delhi. The agreement claimed to resolve boundary dispute in six out of 12 disputed areas (PIB Delhi, 2022), namely- Tarabari, Gizang, Hahim, Boklapara, Khanapara-Pilangkata and Ratacherra (Agarwala, 2022). Nevertheless, there are still many disputed border areas between the two states facing persistent border tension, namely Langpih, Borduar, Nongwah-Mawtamur, Desh Doomreah, Block I & Block II, and Psiar- Khanduli. The recent border clashes, as discussed above, point to the fact that the 29th March 2022 agreement has only partially resolved the border issue between the two states; and that concerted efforts are required to reach a sustainable solution regarding the matter. In this backdrop, this paper provides an in-depth analysis of the border dispute between the two states of Assam and Meghalaya with reference to both primary and secondary sources.

Statement of the Problem

There has been recurring border clashes between the states of Assam and Meghalaya since the formation of Meghalaya as a full-fledged state within the territory of India. Among the disputed areas, Langpih is a prominent one that is located bordering the

Kamrup district of Assam and the West Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya. The Government of Assam argues that Langpih was a part of Assam since the British Colonial period, while the Government of Meghalaya argues that Langpih originally belongs to Meghalaya and therefore, they have a total claim over the area. The dispute over Langpih originated in 1974 when the Meghalaya police evicted people belonging to the Nepali community from their homes and grazing land and thereafter, these evicted people approached Assam police for justice (Sharma, 2021). Interestingly, in 1979, Meghalaya again claimed that Assam Government had occupied the villages of Langpih (Azad, 2016). The growing tension centering Langpih led to the raising of these border issues in the floor of Parliament (Sharma, 2021). The Government of Assam alleged that Meghalaya government sought to create a new legislative constituency by occupying areas of Assam (ibid.). The clashes in Langpih reached its peak in May 2010 among the Nepali, Khasi and Garo communities. The clashes led to triggering of an open fire by Assam Police, wherein four Khasi people were killed and 18 were left injured (Banerjee, 2022). The Khasi people protested against the incident and prohibited the government officials of Assam from entering the village. Another violent dispute broke out in the area in March 2020 when Assam police set up an outpost in Umwali in Langpih (Sharma, 2021). On visiting the tensed villages, MLA Nandita Das of Boko (Assam) accused Meghalaya of occupying 14 villages of Assam and thereby, showed concern over the issue that Meghalaya did not accept the Survey of India map which shows that these villages are part of Assam (Kalita, 2020). Like Langpih, Khanapara-Pillangkata is another disputed location between Assam and Meghalaya which is home to people from various communities as Khasis, Garos, Hmars, Kukis, Aos, Assamese and so on. However, recently both Governments of Assam and Meghalaya have claimed to settle the Khanapara-Pillangkata border dispute by signing an agreement on 29th March 2022. The settlement of the border row of Khanapara-Pillangkata by an agreement has not been accepted by nine Garo villages of Khanapara-Pillangkata and they staged a protest against the agreement in Maikhuli playground on 1st April 2022 as there was discontentment regarding the Maumari beel. Further, Maikhuli villagers stated that the government signed the MoU without discussing it with the people on ground level (The Shillong Times, 2022). The clash that broke out along the border area between the West Karbi Anglong district of Assam and the West Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya on 22nd November 2022 is a significant one. According to reports the border conflict started when clash broke out between Assam police and a mob in Mukroh. Followed by debates and counter-debates between Assam police and villagers at the spot, the Assam police triggered an open fire resulting in killing of six people (Deb & Tiwary, 2022). It has been reported that in that incident five people from Meghalaya and one forest guard from Assam were killed (Karmakar, 2022). The villagers of West Jaintia Hills claim that Mukroh is a territory of Meghalaya and Mukroh is at nine kilometers from the border outpost of Mokoilum in West Karbi Anglong district of Assam (Mukhim, 2022). As discussed earlier, border clashes between the two states also occurred in September 2023 near Khanduli border area (along the border between the Tapat area of West Karbi Anglong, Assam and Lapangap village of West Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya) resulting in destruction of property and injury of people.

The above discussion clarifies that there is the persistence of border disputes between the two states of Assam and Meghalaya from the creation of Meghalaya till date. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed on 29th March 2022 between Chief Ministers of Assam and Meghalaya in the presence of Union Home Minister claims the settlement of inter-state boundaries between the two states in respect of six out of 12 areas of difference (PIB Delhi, 2022). However, there are other disputed areas between the two states with persistent border conflicts as Langpih, Borduar Nongwah-Mawtamur, Desh Doomreah, Block I & Block II, and Psiar-Khanduli. The recent clashes of November 2022 and September 2023 make it distinct that there is the persistence of border disputes between the two states and that sustainable solution to the border issue is the urgent need of the hour. It has been observed by commentators that border issues not only results in loss of human lives; but “has often led to the partition of minds and the breakdown of inter-state relations” (Haokip, 2023). Hence, the recurring and persistent clashes between Assam and Meghalaya have far reaching consequences in various levels- political, economic, social and even psychological.

In this backdrop of recurring border conflicts between the two states of Assam and Meghalaya, this paper takes up the much-needed inquiry and explores the subject of inter-state border disputes between Assam and Meghalaya.

Materials and Methods

The paper is based on information and data collected from both primary and secondary sources. For secondary data, the paper has relied on content analysis of national, regional, and local newspapers of both Assam and Meghalaya to detail on the border clashes. It has gone through historical accounts of prominent scholars, papers of reputed journals and scholarly books to provide a historical understanding of border disputes in North East India. Based on both government documents and secondary sources, discussion is provided on the interventions made by Governments of Assam and Meghalaya in the way of settlement of border dispute between the two states. The paper has also relied on primary data collected from field for dealing with the queries of people’s participation in resolving border dispute between the two states, responses of people of disputed areas regarding government’s intervention, role of civil society in resolving border dispute between the two states, and developmental status of the disputed areas. For the collection of primary data, qualitative method of research is applied and the paper relies on observation and focus group discussions. As mentioned above, there are mainly six bordering areas with persistent border conflicts between Assam and Meghalaya; and therefore, three areas (of continued border dispute) have been selected for conducting field study. These three areas are mainly- Langpih (bordering Kamrup district of Assam and West Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya); Borduar (bordering Kamrup district of Assam and Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya) and Khanduli (bordering West Karbi Anglong district of Assam and West Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya). For this study, two focus group discussions were conducted in each of the selected areas amounting to a total of six focus group discussions together. Each focus group consisted of six to ten respondents. In addition, the paper has relied on overt participant observation method for the collection of primary data.

Origin of the Border Disputes: A Historical Imprint

The origin of the border dispute may be traced back to the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act, 1969 that separated Meghalaya from Assam as an autonomous state in 1970. This Act of 1969 was based on the recommendations of the Gopinath Bordoloi Committee, 1951 and following the recommendations of the committee, Block I and Block II of the Jaintia Hills (Meghalaya) were transferred to the Mikir Hill (Karbi Anglong) district of Assam. In addition, Ri-Bhoi and some areas of Garo Hills were transferred to Goalpara district of Assam. The repetitions of these Gopinath Bordoloi committee recommendations in this Act of 1969 lead to a refusal by Meghalaya to accept the Act. The appeal of Meghalaya was that originally these areas belonged to the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Khasi Pnar tribe was resident of Khasi-Jaintia Hills. However, the Government of Assam reaffirmed that Meghalaya lacks proper or valid documents for such claims (The Indian Express, 2022). Significantly, the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971 provided for the formation of the state of Meghalaya comprising the territories which immediately before that day were comprised in the autonomous State of Meghalaya formed under Section 3 of 1969 Act and the territories comprised within the cantonment and municipality of Shillong (which did not form part of that autonomous state). Precisely, the 1971 Act transferred new areas (areas not part of autonomous state of Meghalaya) to Meghalaya and accordingly, all areas that were under the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills districts were transferred to Meghalaya. Before the enactment of the 1971 Act, the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills were part of undivided Assam and with the enactment of the Act; the said territories cease to be part of the 'existing state of Assam'. Following the Act, Meghalaya becomes a full-fledged state within the territory of India in 1972. Nevertheless, border disputes between Assam and Meghalaya arose again as the 1971 Act failed to finalize or accurately demarcate the boundary between the two states. In the course of time, both states tried to settle their boundary dispute and in May 1983, a Joint Official Committee was formed to address this issue. The Committee submitted its report on 16th November 1983, identifying six sectors of border differences between the two states of Assam and Meghalaya. The sectors pointed out by the committee are: Sector I- border between Garo Hills District of Meghalaya and Goalpara District of Assam; Sector II- border between Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya and Karbi-Anglong District of Assam; Sector III- border between East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya and Karbi-Anglong District of Assam; Sector IV- transfer and re-transfer of Block I and Block II of the Karbi-Anglong District of Assam and Meghalaya; Sector V- border between Cachar District of Assam and Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya and Sector VI- border between the district of East and West Khasi Hill District of Meghalaya and Kamrup and Nagaon District of Assam (Tynsong, 2021). The committee suggested that disputed areas could be solved with the help of Survey of India by re-demarcating border between the two states of Assam and Meghalaya (Das, 2021).

Governmental Efforts and Interventions

The governmental efforts aimed at searching solutions to the inter-state border dispute between Assam and Meghalaya are marked by continuity and persistence. On a

significant note in the 1980s, the states of Assam and Meghalaya sought to form an independent committee and requested the Central Government to take proactive role in resolving the inter-state boundary disputes. The Central Government responded by constituting one Committee in 1985 under Y.U. Chandrachud and the Committee examined the border issues “in the light of 6th Schedule of the Constitution of the India and other relevant laws” (Haokip, 2023). The argument of the Meghalaya Government before the Committee was “that all the areas of the Khasi states that were tagged as Kamrup district by the British should be within the constitutional boundary of Meghalaya” (Haokip, 2023). The Committee submitted its report on 27th July 1987 and rejected Meghalaya Government’s claims, thereby sustaining Assam’s claims. The Meghalaya Government rejected the Commission’s report and alleged that the Commission took Assam’s side. Subsequently, in 1991 both the Governments of Assam and Meghalaya agreed to demarcate the borders between the two states with the help of the Survey of India. Accordingly, both governments demarcated about 100 kms of the border by the end of 1991, but later Meghalaya Government revoked the demarcation process and alleged that the border demarcation was done in an unconstitutional manner (Das, 2021). There have been many rounds of discussion held between the two states of Assam and Meghalaya regarding border dispute and out of them, significant rounds of discussion were held at the level of Chief Secretaries. Significantly, in the presence of the Union Home Minister Amit Shah an agreement was signed between Chief Minister of Assam, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma and Chief Minister of Meghalaya Conrad Sangma on 29th March 2022 in New Delhi. In this regard, Union Home Minister claimed that 70 percent of the inter-state border disputes between the two states have been resolved and consequently, boundary dispute has been resolved in six disputed border areas (Northeast Today, 2022). As mentioned earlier, these six areas are Tarabari, Gizang, Hahim, Boklapara, Khanapara-Pilangkata and Ratacherra (Agarwala, 2022), falling under West Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi and East Jaintia Hills districts of Meghalaya and similarly, under Cachar, Kamrup (Metro) and Kamrup districts of Assam. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the two states two months after a draft resolution was submitted by both the Chief Ministers on 31st January, for examination and consideration by Ministry of Home Affairs (Times of India, 2022a). As per the proposed recommendations, for the 36.79 square Km. of land, Assam will keep 18.51 square km and the remaining 18.28 square km to be given to Meghalaya (Times of India, 2022a). Followed by this, the second phase of talks were initiated to resolve boundary dispute in remaining six areas and in this regard significant discussions took place on 21st August, 2022 in Assam Secretariat between Chief Ministers of both states along with Chief Secretaries of both states and other officials. These deliberations resolved to constitute Regional Committees and pledged that Chief Ministers of both states will be visiting certain areas to build confidence amongst the public (Press Release, Guwahati, August 21 2022). Following these initiatives, discussions were held on 24th May 2023 in Assam Guest House, Assam among Chief Ministers of both states (Press Release, Shillong, Government of Meghalaya, 24 May, 2023) and recently on 30th September 2023, as part of second phase of discussions. The September 2023 talks “decided to let the personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF)” to stay at Khanduli (which is a major point of confrontation); moreover, decided to let the police outposts of both the states to move 200 meters inside their own territories (The Hindu, 1st October, 2023). In addition, the Chief Minister of Assam stated that

Survey of India have completed the mapping of six areas where the dispute had been resolved in 2022 and that border pillars will be “erected with both governments having accepted the position” (The Hindu, 2023). Significantly, the Hahim area has been approved by both states for the construction of pillars (The Assam Tribune, 1 Oct. 2023). Precisely, the Governments of both the states of Assam and Meghalaya have actively intervened to resolve inter-state border disputes between the two states through peaceful means.

Border dispute in North-East India: Field Notes and Analysis

The disputed border areas between Assam and Meghalaya are inhabited by people from different communities as Hmar, Kuki, Pnar, Khasi, Jaintia, Rabha, Gorkha, Bodo and so on, for long period of time. As discussed above, it has been officially claimed that border dispute has been resolved in six out of twelve disputed areas between Assam and Meghalaya and therefore, there is the persistence of serious border tension or dispute in other six border areas. The authors have selected three disputed border areas between Assam and Meghalaya, namely Borduar, Langpih and Khanduli for the conduction of field study. The field study aims to look at border conflict between the states of Assam and Meghalaya in relation to four major aspects: a. participation of people in border conflict resolution; b. responses of people of disputed areas regarding Government interventions; c. civil society participation in disputed border areas; and, d. developmental status of interstate border areas.

Participation of People in Border Conflict Resolution

The multidimensional, comprehensive, and multi-track approach to peace has received relatively new emphasis in comparison to state-centric realist approaches in the sphere of conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Mahanta, 2013). The term multi-track initiatives coined by McDonald (McDonald 2002, as cited in Mahanta, 2013) invite the participation of various stakeholders in conflict transformation and peace process from varied sectors including but not limited to the government, NGOs, business, research/education, activism, religious and communication/media and so on (Mahanta, 2013). In this connection, the common people at the grass-roots level are considered as a significant actor in conflict transformation and peace Process (Mahanta, 2013). While the involvement of people in peace initiatives cannot replace the official process, they “can help create, build, stabilize or strengthen relationships between people” (Mahanta, 2013). In this connection, the authors would like to look into the issue of people’s involvement in the conflict situation; particularly, conflict arising out of inter-state border dispute between Assam and Meghalaya. It is revealed during field study that Ministerial level teams from both states visited the disputed areas like Borduar in 2021 and during their visits organized meetings with village people. The people of the area interacted with government officials and raised their voices in connection with witnessing frequent border dispute in the area. With an urge to resolve inter-state border dispute, villagers in Langpih organized meetings among themselves in the presence of village headmen. The villagers have expressed that despite their continuous efforts to resolve border dispute, the government has not given enough weightage to their views. Expressing their discontentment, the respondents of Langpih

continues that the governments have organized meetings regarding border dispute in the presence of villagers; however, they are not asked nor incorporated in furthering the process of boundary demarcation. The villagers have expressed that the task of boundary demarcation is kept in the hands of top officials of both states, thereby excluding the voices and opinions of the people of border areas. Further, the respondents of Langpih have said that in connection to the border dispute, they submitted various memorandums to the Government of Assam as well as met Ministers and officials in Guwahati. According to them, in spite of all their efforts they have not received any satisfactory response and therefore, they have lost faith in government. The respondents have elaborated that in West Karbi Anglong, the people of Assam sold their land to the Meghalaya people a long time ago and now the people of Meghalaya claim that the land that has been sold belong to their territory. This matter has been pointed out as a major cause of interstate dispute between Assam and Meghalaya.

Significantly, students from both Meghalaya and Assam, particularly the Karbi Students' Association (KSA) and the Jaintia Students' Movement (JSM) has established a peace committee named "Students Committee for Peace Initiative" to minimize and resolve the misunderstandings, differences and minor conflicts between Assam and Meghalaya. Further it has been reported that the people from both states assembled together to sustain a harmonious relationship among the inhibited communities of West Karbi Anglong Assam and West Jaintia hills of Meghalaya (Hub News, 2023). The field studies conducted in the disputed border areas reaffirms the urge, participation and efforts of the people of border areas towards the settlement of interstate border dispute between Assam and Meghalaya. However, as expressed by the respondents their voice and efforts have not received adequate recognition from governments in the course of settlement of border dispute.

Responses of People of Disputed Areas regarding Government Interventions

The proactive role of the government and administration in minimizing disputes as well as in preventing dispute from escalating in other areas of the border is recognized by the respondents during field study by the authors. As communicated by the respondents, during border clashes sometimes police has to trigger open fire to control situation and for self-defense. During field visit in Langpih, the respondents have alleged that when the Meghalaya side people attacked the police force of the Lower Lumpee (Langpih) border outpost by use of catapults, arrows and borrows one police personnel was injured in 2010. According to respondents, in such circumstances, Assam police triggered an open fire against Meghalaya people. Similarly in 2022, police personnel of Assam triggered an open fire in Murkroh in self-defense because of the aggressiveness of people, as intimated by respondents during the course of field visit. The respondents have declared that in some cases conflict between the two states arose when both states have tried to set up police outposts in bordering areas. For instance, Assam police tried to set up a border outpost in Umwali in Langpih in March 2020 and this created resentment among the Khasi people of Meghalaya (Kalita, 2020). They opposed the setting up the police outpost and alleged that these areas belong to them. As expressed by the respondents of Langpih, previously there

were four police outposts of Assam in bordering areas namely Upper Langpi, Mawlan, Boko Bridge and Lower Lampi; however, the Assam Government withdrew the police outposts of Malwan and Boko Bridge. As claimed by the respondents, Meghalaya people took advantage of this withdrawal of police outpost by Government of Assam and consequently encroached over nine kilometres of Assam. In addition, Meghalaya has set up their police station in Langpih in 2010 which according to the respondents belongs to Assam. Further, the respondents of Langpih have alleged that the Assam police don't take any complaints against the Khasi people (of Meghalaya). To quote one respondent, "... if we complain against khasi people of Meghalaya, the Assam police do not take serious action. But if any complaint is raised against our people (of Assam), they take the matter seriously". During field visit in Khanduli, the respondents have expressed that the Meghalaya government has set up a police station in area which comes under Assam boundary. According to them they face confusion in identifying that they come under the jurisdiction of which police outpost. Further they have stated that sometimes people are disturbed by police outposts of both states. As revealed by the respondents, people living in disputed areas are enrolled as voters in both states of Assam and Meghalaya as each state has forced people to enroll in their respective state. According to them, government of both states have tried to 'manipulate' them by showcasing the opportunities of various developmental schemes and following this, most of the people in disputed areas have availed the opportunity of development schemes from both states. Further, respondents have expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the efforts of the government and administration in resolving border disputes and to quote one respondent, "... the administration has weakness in resolving border issue. The government only gives sympathy. In reality, nothing happens". As revealed during the course of field study, in Langpih the Assam government removed one voter centre at Panbari and shifted it to Langpih. According to them this provides an advantage for Meghalaya to "continue encroachment". The respondents have showed concern over Assam Government's policy of giving up its own land and for not making any effort to acquire "own land in return".

Civil Society Participation

The governments of both Assam and Meghalaya have proclaimed to incorporate CSOs in border conflict resolution and peace process between the two states. It is noteworthy that Meghalaya Cabinet Minister Renikton Lyngdoh Tongkhar in a press statement declared that "the will of the people living in disputed areas" had been considered for demarcation of boundary (The Print, 2022). In the same manner, the Assam Chief Minister held a meeting with the leaders of different student organizations including All Assam Students' Organisation (ASSU), All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU), All Rabha Students' Union (ARSU), All Assam Gorkha Students' Union (AAGSU) and Garo Students' Union (GSU) in January 2022 asking for their suggestions and recommendations on amicable boundary solutions (The Sentinel, 2022a). The CSOs of both the states of Assam and Meghalaya have tried to mark their presence in the process of resolution of border disputes between the two states. The members of the North East Students' Organization (NESO) have emphasized that the boundary issue is not an ethnic issue and that both the state governments are responsible for solving

this boundary dispute (India Today NE, 2022a). In the same way, during the Mukroh violence in 2022, the members of ASSU and Khasi Students' Union have called for increased and stronger security for the residents living along the Assam Meghalaya border (The Sentinel, 2022b).

Assam as an ethnically diverse constituent unit of India has witnessed the emergence of both ethnically defined civil societies as well as trans-ethnic civil society which is called civil society of Assam (Dutta, 2016). With reference to the Boklapara village of the Borduar sector the All Assam Students' Union (ASSU) cited that 70 percent of people in the village speak the Assamese language and follow the Vaishnavite teachings of Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev (Kalita, 2022). These people belong to Bodo and Rabha communities and basically want to stay in Assam (Sharma, 2022). The demand of ASSU has been that these people of Boklapara should not be included in or transferred to Meghalaya. Similarly, Karbi CSOs namely the Autonomous State Demand Committee, Karbi Students' Association and Karbi Nimso Chingthur Asong oppose the give-and-take policy of the governments of both states (The Times of India, 2022b). These organizations opposed to the Assam Government's decision on the transfer of Block I and Block II of the West Karbi Anglong district to Meghalaya (India Today NE, 2022b). They strongly argued that the notification of Assam Government in 1951 should be referred to resolve boundary dispute (The Meghalayan, 2022). These organizations appealed to about 60-70 villages of the Block I, Block II and Pesar-Khanduli, which are prime areas of dispute, and argued that Meghalaya has no rights over them (The Times of India, 2022b).

Contrary to this, the federation of Khasi States of Meghalaya contended that the boundary between Assam and Meghalaya should be based on historical facts and on the terms of the Instrument of Accession and Annexed Agreement which was signed and accepted by the Government of India and the Khasi States on 17th August in 1948 (Tynsong 2021). Significantly in 1946, the members of the Khasi federation came into an agreement among themselves to create a federation of the Khasi states (Kharshiing & SR, 2019; Tynsong, 2021). The agreement defines the "Khasi states" comprising the entire region occupied by the Khasis, whether or not such areas are part of the Khasi states (Tynsong 2021). Significantly, a total of 25 Khasi Hill states have signed the Accession Instrument in 1948 (Instrument of Accession of the Khasi State; Kharshiing & SR, 2019).

With an aim to study the involvement of CSOs in border conflict resolution between the two states, field study was conducted in Borduar sector. During the course of the field study, one respondent from the Borduar sector have said that they established an NGO named '*Kaifait*' in 1981 and put forward the demand before the Central Government for development of the Borduar area along with proper demarcation of its border. It has been claimed by the respondents that they have submitted memorandum to both the Governments of Assam and Meghalaya in this regard. During the course of field study, CSOs and people of the disputed areas from Assam have alleged that the original boundary pillars between Assam and Meghalaya is removed by Meghalaya people and that they have encroached on Assam's territory. During the course of field study, the respondents have expressed that most of the political parties have politicized the issue of border disputes by making these issues

political agenda for election. They have stated that after election, the political leaders forgot their promises and showed reluctance towards resolving inter-state boundary dispute. Moreover, interaction with people of conflict areas has helped the authors to assess the contribution of CSOs in resolution of inter-state conflict between the two states as well as to point out their limitations in this regard. The people have communicated that even though the CSOs express their views in media, the latter hardly do anything in reality. In addition, they have stated that the CSOs often visit nearest places like Borduar but show hesitancy to visit remote areas of conflict as Langpih.

Developmental status of inter-state border areas

The paper has relied on both observation of selected disputed areas and interaction with people of these areas in order to understand the developmental status of the inter-state border areas. It is observed that people living in the inter-state border areas between Assam and Meghalaya have faced various problems in their everyday lives. The border areas are situated in hilly terrain and therefore, the border roads are often muddy. The poor condition of roads in border areas make them non-conducive for travel. During the course of field study in the Borduar sector, the respondents have informed that, the Government of Assam has started construction of one road but the people of Meghalaya have stopped its construction. It has been expressed by the respondents that one conflict has arisen in Jimirgaon of the Borduar sector due to hindrances of Meghalaya people regarding construction of the road. The respondents from the remote villages of the Borduar sector, like Mateshor, Longsai, Umsur and others, have alleged that they do not receive any benefit from the Government of Assam. However, the Government of Meghalaya has been providing them benefits such as job cards, houses and so on. In addition, they have expressed that except one or two, none of the *Sattras* and *Namghars* of border areas has received any fund from the Government of Assam. Further, they have intimated that few villagers are even ready to be with Meghalaya due to the negligence of the Government of Assam. Precisely, in the context of Borduar sector, on the one hand the Government of Assam has initiated development of roads which has been hindered by the people of Meghalaya. On the other hand, respondents from remote villages of the Borduar sector have expressed their discontentment towards Government of Assam for not providing them the basic developmental facilities.

The authors have also conducted field study in Langpih sector to explore on the condition of health infrastructure and facilities in disputed bordering areas between Assam and Meghalaya. The authors have observed that there is lack of basic medical facilities in the bordering areas of Assam and Meghalaya thereby indicating inadequate social infrastructure in these areas. Further, it has been intimated by the respondents that there is lack of basic medical infrastructure like Public Health Centres (PHCs) and Community Health Centres (CHCs) in these areas. In this connection, one respondent (from Langpih sector) has expressed that the people of this area have to go to Boko for medical treatment, which is 31 km away from Langpih market. Further he has expressed that better education, electricity and healthcare are only election agendas for the political parties which are not adequately provided in reality. During

field study in Langpih and Hahim sectors, it has been intimated by the respondents that the Government of Meghalaya has improved roads, drinking water facilities and hospitals in these areas. They added that there is a PHC in the Assam's side (of the border) where medical personnel hardly visit in a week. The inability of the Government of Assam to carry on developmental projects in border areas between Assam and Meghalaya has been previously highlighted in many literary sources. For instance, newspapers from Assam stated that in most places Government of Assam has faced restrictions in implementing development schemes due to reserve forest lands; while, the Government of Meghalaya does not face any such restrictions (The Sentinel, 2023). The field study conducted by the author substantiates this point and further, reveals that benefits provided by Government of Meghalaya often serve as a mechanism to convince bordering people to stay with Meghalaya.

Policy Recommendations

Indian federation is conceptualised as a Centrifugal Federation (Assefa Fiseha, 2009, as cited in Behera, 2022) and it has been perceived that states in Centrifugal Federations would face frequent boundary disputes. In addition, due to India's multi-ethnic character territorial and boundary conflicts are common in such federation (Behera, 2022). The persistence of inter-state border dispute between Assam and Meghalaya has resulted in socio-economic challenges as well as security challenges both at local and national level. The people residing in these areas of inter-state boundary dispute face problems relating to health facilities, road connectivity, electricity and so on. The continuance of inter-state boundary tension poses challenges towards national security and affects integration of different communities at the national level. The clashes in Mukroh, Tapat, Khanduli and Langpih have exacerbated border tensions between the states of Assam and Meghalaya. The search for a permanent or sustainable solution towards inter-state border dispute between Assam and Meghalaya is the urgent need of the hour for prolonged peace and prosperity in both the states. In this context, a bottom-up approach rather than a top-down one may be suitable for the resolution of inter-state border dispute. The adoption of a bottom-up approach invites the involvement of multiple stakeholders as Government, CSOs, local people and so on; within the dispute redressing mechanism. The opinions of the people of these disputed areas as well as the history of these conflict zones should be taken into consideration within the process of resolving inter-state boundary dispute between the two states. The engagement of CSOs and local communities (bordering people of both states) in the process of demarcation of inter-state boundaries becomes significant to restore prolonged peace and stability in these border areas.

Additionally, Central Government should set up neutral committees to work with the Survey of India for proper demarcation of borders between the two states and for land surveys. The governments of both states should adopt the principle of mutual giving and taking for restoring peace and for sustaining the age-old socio-cultural bonds among the bordering people of both states. The attainment of feasible solution requires avoiding of indifferent attitudes and biased stances by governments of both the states. In addition, both states may also invite the Central Government to mediate the dispute and thereby, to build a political consensus over the proper demarcation of

the border.

There are also certain constitutional provisions and mechanisms that may work towards the resolving of the border dispute between the two states of Assam and Meghalaya. It is noteworthy that Article 3 of the Constitution of India authorises the Parliament to create regulation concerning the alteration of boundaries of existing states and therefore, Parliament in India may resolve boundary dispute between Assam and Meghalaya by enacting an Act. Furthermore, under Article 263 of the Constitution of India, the President may establish an Inter-State Council for advising upon disputes between states. The mechanism of Inter-State Council may be utilised to resolve border dispute between the states of Assam and Meghalaya. In addition, both the states may request the Supreme Court to resolve the border issues if both governments fail to build a political consensus over the issues. In this connection, Article 131 of the Constitution of India may be referred which confers power on the Supreme Court to deal with inter-state disputes involving a legal right.

Strengthening of the North Eastern Council (NEC) which is endowed with the responsibility of economic and social development of the region may contribute towards the resolution of border dispute between the two states. The NEC may take into consideration border issues between the states of Assam and Meghalaya as development in North Eastern region is intricately connected to the restoration of peace and stability in the region. Further, education may play a significant role in resolving of border disputes between the two states. The spread of education in disputed border areas may work towards removing misunderstanding among people living in border areas and thereby, may contribute towards the restoration of peace in these areas. The restoration of prolonged peace in the inter-state border areas also requires setting up of border outposts by Governments of both Assam and Meghalaya to monitor illegal smuggling of frontier resources.

The role of media, CSOs, pressure groups and other actors remain prominent in both conflict situation and post-conflict situation. In most cases, violence spreads rapidly when inter-state border dispute occurs and therefore, media of both states should act responsibly to prevent aggravation of violence and should work towards the restoration of peace. The role of civil society and pressure groups is significant in resolving of conflict and these actors should actively cooperate with the political leadership to settle inter-state border disputes. The civil society along with the local people may participate in the process of demarcation of border between the two states. In addition, civil society and pressure groups may monitor and examine Government's actions on border disputes. Further these actors should not contribute in any way to instigate violence or enmity between the two states; rather they should involve responsibly searching for permanent or sustainable solution to border dispute. Precisely, the attainment of a political understanding or consensus between the states of Assam and Meghalaya to resolve border dispute requires a multi-stakeholder approach that recognises the voices of the local people and Civil Society Groups along with the political leadership.

Conclusion

The persistence of inter-state border disputes has adversely affected political, economic

and social stability in the North Eastern region of India. The intensification of tension and turmoil in border areas between Assam and Meghalaya has resulted in loss of human lives along with enormous economic and social costs. The presence of high hills, jungles and rivers in boundary area have created problem in the demarcation of a political boundary between the two states. As discussed above, governments of both the states have claimed to partially resolve border dispute between the two states. Nevertheless, there is the persistence of intense clashes in some border areas between the two states. The Government of both states should try to generate a sense of common identity among the people of both states through revival of the common historical past and common cultural heritage. The strengthening of people-to-people connection among the two states may contribute towards building of a political consensus regarding demarcation of border between the two states. Precisely, the generation of a political consensus between the two states under an inclusive or people-centric approach may contribute towards the attainment of a permanent or sustainable solution to the inter-state border dispute.

Note

1. Seven Districts are West Karbi Anglong, Morigaon, Kamrup (M), Kamrup (Rural), Goalpara, South Salmara- Mankachar, Dhubri

References

- Agarwala, Tora (2022) Assam, Meghalaya sign pact to resolve border dispute in 6 locations; Amit Shah terms it 'historic', in *The Indian Express*, 30 March, Available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam-meghalaya-resolve-border-dispute-in-6-locations-shah-terms-it-historic-day-for-northeast-7842749/>
- Assefa, F. (2009): *Federalism; teaching material*, FDRE Justice and Legal System Research Institute, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia [cited in Behera, Jayanta Kumar (2022) "Border Dispute between Odisha and Andhra Pradesh: Issues, Challenges, and Possible Solutions", *Himachal Pradesh University Journal (Humanities and Social Science)*, Vol. 10, No.1, pp. 87- 107]
- Azad, Abdul Kalam (2016) "Assam-Meghalaya Border Dispute over Langpih Remains unresolved amid Police Firing, Centre Intervenes", 22 Oct, Available at <https://www.landconflictwatch.org/conflicts/assam-meghalaya-border-dispute>
- Banerjee, Tirtho (2022), "What's behind the Assam-Meghalaya border dispute?", in *India Today*, 23 November.
- Behera, Jayanta Kumar (2022) "Border Dispute between Odisha and Andhra Pradesh: Issues, Challenges, and Possible Solutions", *Himachal Pradesh University Journal (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, Vol. 10, No.1, pp. 87- 107
- Das, Pushpita (2021), "Inter-state Border Disputes in North-East India", 29 July, available at <https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/disputes-in-northeast-india-pdas290721>
- Deb, Debraj & Tiwari, Deeptiman (2022) "Assam Police open fire near Meghalaya village; 6 killed" in *The Indian Express*, 23 Nov, Available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/assam/killed-several-hurt-firing-at-assam-meghalaya-border-8283361/>

- Dutta, Akhil Ranjan (2016): "The ULFA and Indian state: Role of civil society in conflict resolution". In Dilip Gogoi (eds) *Unheeded Hinterland: Identity and sovereignty in Northeast India*, Routledge, pp. 186- 208
- Government of Meghalaya (2022): Assam-Meghalaya border talks, Government of Meghalaya, Office of the Chief Minister, Media and Communication Cell, Shillong (Press Release, Guwahati, August 21, 2022) Available at https://www.meghalaya.gov.in/sites/default/files/press_release/CMO_140.pdf
- Government of Meghalaya (2023): Chief Ministers Level Meeting on Assam-Meghalaya Border Issues held at Guwahati, Government of Meghalaya, Press Release, Shillong, May 24, 2023, Available at https://www.meghalaya.gov.in/sites/default/files/press_release/Chief_Ministers_Level_Meeting.pdf
- Haokip, T. T. (2023), Inter-State Border Disputes. In *The Routledge Companion to Northeast India*, Wouters, Jelle J.P. & Subba, Tanka B. (eds), London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 279-283
- Hub News (2023), "KSA and JSM form 'Students' Committee for Peace Initiative' to ease tensions in Khanduli border area", 31 August. Available at <https://hubnetwork.in/ksa-and-jsm-form-students-committee-for-peace-initiative-to-ease-tensions-in-khanduli-border-area/>
- India Today NE (2022b) "Assam-Meghalaya border row: Karbi groups demand special KAAC session over Block I, Block II" 9 Sept, Available at <https://www.indiatodayne.in/assam/story/assam-meghalaya-border-row-karbi-groups-demand-special-kaac-session-over-block-i-block-ii-445109-2022-09-09>
- India Today NE (2022a) "North East Students' Organisation condemns Assam-Meghalaya border firing incident, condoles death of six people", 23 Nov, Available at <https://www.indiatodayne.in/meghalaya/story/north-east-students-organisation-condemns-assam-meghalaya-border-firing-incident-condoles-death-six-people-473973-2022-11-23>
- Instrument of Accession of the Khasi Hills State. Available at <https://khadc.nic.in>
- Kalita, Kangkan (2020), "Assam-Meghalaya border tense over Langpih dispute", in *The Times of India*, 1 March. Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/assam-meghalaya-border-tense-over-langpih-dispute/articleshow/74425351.cms>
- Kalita, Kangkan (2022), "Assam students' union opposes forcible transfer of disputed area villagers to Meghalaya", in *The Times of India*, 8 February. Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/assam-students-union-opposes-forcible-transfer-of-disputed-area-villagers-to-meghalaya/articleshow/89437429.cms>
- Karmakar, Rahul (2022), "The Assam-Meghalaya border firing," in *The Hindu*, 30 November. Available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/expained-the-assam-meghalaya-border-firing/article66206903.ece>
- Kharshiing, John F & S.R, Bodhi (2019) *The Federation of Khasi States-History, Epistemology and Politics*, Tribal Intellectual Collective India
- Mahanta, Nani Gopal (2013): *Confronting the State: ULFA's Quest for Sovereignty*, Sage studies on India's North East, SAGE Publications

- McDonald (2002): “The Need for Multi-track Diplomacy”, in *Second Track/Citizen’s Diplomacy*, J. Davies and E. Kaufman (eds), Rowman and Littlefield Publishers [cited in Mahanta, N.G. (2013): *Confronting the State: ULFA’s Quest for Sovereignty*, Sage Studies on India’s North East, SAGE Publications]
- Mukhim, Patricia (2022), “Solving Assam-Meghalaya border disputes,” in *The Assam Tribune*, 1December.
- North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act, 1971
- Northeast Today (2022): “Assam-Meghalaya Border Dispute: MoU Signed between CMs of Both States”, 29th March 2022 (<https://www.northeasttoday.in/2022/03/29/assam-meghalaya-border-dispute-mou-signed-between-cms-of-both-states/>, accessed on 10/06/2024)
- PIB, Delhi (2022), In the presence of Union Home Minister Shri Amit Shah, the Chief Ministers of Assam and Meghalaya signed historic agreement for settlement of inter-state border dispute in New Delhi today, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, 29th March, 2022
- Sharma, Rittick (2021), “Assam-Meghalaya boundary row: Himanta, Conrad to visit Langpih”, available at <https://www.eastmojo.com/northeast-news/2021/11/12/assam-meghalaya-boundary-row-himanta-conrad-to-visit-langpih/>
- Sharma, Rittick (2022) “Assam Student bodies oppose ‘forcible transfer of villages to Meghalaya’”, in *East Majo*, 10 February. Available at <https://www.eastmojo.com/assam/2022/02/10/assam-student-bodies-oppose-forcible-transfer-of-villages-to-meghalaya/>
- Sharma, Sandeep (2022), “9 Garo villages of Khanapara-Pillangkata to stage protest against border pact on April 1”, in *The Meghalayan*, 31 March. Available at <https://themeghalayan.com/9-garo-villages-of-khanapara-pillangkata-to-stage-protest-against-border-pact-on-april-1/>
- The Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act 1969
- The Assam Tribune (2023), “Fresh clash along Assam-Meghalaya interstate border”, 28 September.
- The Assam Tribune (2023), “Assam, Meghalaya to withdraw forces from violence-hit border,” 1 October.
- The Hindu (2023), “Assam, Meghalaya governments to let CBI probe Mukroh killings.” 1 oct, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/assam-meghalaya-governments-to-let-cbi-probe-mukroh-killings/article67366394.ece>, Accessed on 12-10-2023
- The Indian Express (2022), “What is the Assam-Meghalaya border dispute”, 24 Nov, Available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/assam-meghalaya-border-dispute-recent-killing-impacts-8285785/>
- The Meghalayan (2022) “Karbi groups oppose transfer of Block I, II to Meghalaya; demand special session of KAAC” 9 September. Available at <https://themeghalayan.com/karbi-groups-oppose-transfer-of-block-i-block-to-meghalaya-demand-special-session-of-kaac/>
- The Outlook (2012): “12 areas of Dispute on Meghalaya-Assam Border”, *The Outlook* 12 March; cited in Tynsong, Sanborlang (2021), “Inter state border disputes between Assam and Meghalaya” (Doctoral Thesis, North-Eastern Hill

- University); <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/395742>
- The Print (2022) “Give & take’: How Assam & Meghalaya struck an agreement on a 50-year-old boundary dispute”, 23 Jan, Available at <https://theprint.in/india/governance/give-take-how-assam-meghalaya-struck-an-agreement-on-a-50-year-old-boundary-dispute/809143/>
- The Sentinel (2023), “Who is to blame for underdeveloped border areas?” 1 May <https://www.sentinelassam.com/topheadlines/who-is-to-blame-for-underdeveloped-border-areas-647733>
- The Sentinel (2022a) “Assam-Meghalaya boundary disputes: CM holds talks with parties, student bodies”, 19 Jan, Available at <https://www.sentinelassam.com/topheadlines/assam-meghalaya-boundary-disputes-cm-holds-talks-with-parties-student-bodies-573706>
- The Sentinel (2022b) “Mukroh firing incident: AASU and KSU call for allaying sense of insecurity”, 25 Nov, Available at <https://www.sentinelassam.com/topheadlines/mukroh-firing-incident-aasu-and-ksu-call-for-allaying-sense-of-insecurity-625017>
- The Shillong Times (2022) “Maikhuli meet reiterates demand for recall of border agreement”, 19 April, Available at <https://theshillongtimes.com/2022/04/19/maikhuli-meet-reiterates-demand-for-recall-of-border-agreement/>
- The Times of India (2022a): “ ‘Historic day’: Assam, Meghalaya sign pact to resolve border dispute in 6 areas”, 29 March (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/assam-meghalaya-sign-agreement-to-resolve-50-year-old-boundary-dispute/articleshow/90517978.cms>; accessed on 10/06/2024)
- The Times of India (2022b) “Meghalaya has no right over Karbi Anglong areas”, 26 Sept. Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/meghalaya-has-no-right-over-karbi-anglong-areas/articleshow/94443580.cms>
- Tynsong, Sanborlang (2021), “Inter state border disputes between Assam and Meghalaya” (Doctoral Thesis, North-Eastern Hill University); Shodhganga@INFLIBNET; <https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/handle/10603/395742>