



# **Assam–Arunachal Pradesh Border Dispute: Local Perceptions and Analysis of Durpai Village of Lower Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh**

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**Abstract:** Borders are not only geographical markers but also political constructs that shape governance, socio-economic relations, and cultural interactions. This study examines local perceptions of the Assam–Arunachal Pradesh border dispute with a focus on Durpai village in Lower Siang district. Tracing the issue from the Ahom period to the present, it explores the historical and political factors behind contested demarcations and their continued impact on local communities. Using purposive random sampling, the research captures both historical narratives and contemporary experiences of the villagers. The findings reveal that, despite ongoing cross-border exchanges of goods, services, and social ties, the absence of a settled boundary perpetuates mistrust, insecurity, and apprehension. The study argues that the dispute has far-reaching implications for peace, development, and inter-state relations, and emphasizes the need for inclusive and participatory approaches to boundary resolution.

**Keywords:** Borders, Boundary Dispute, Territories, Ahom Period, Demarcation, Delimitation

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## **Introduction**

Border disputes in India remain deeply embedded in historical legacies, administrative ambiguities, and contested perceptions of land and identity. The Assam–Arunachal Pradesh boundary conflict, in particular, has been one of the longest-standing inter-state disputes in Northeast India. Rooted in colonial demarcations and post-independence administrative realignments, the conflict continues to affect not only state-level relations but also the everyday lives of borderland communities. The significance of this study lies in its focus on the micro-level. Instead of approaching the conflict solely through state negotiations and judicial rulings, this paper investigates the dispute from the perspective of Durpai village, located in Kangku Circle of Lower Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh. With a population of just over two hundred, Durpai exemplifies the paradox of borderland settlements: it is simultaneously a site of inter-community exchange and of inter-state contestation.

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By situating the dispute in Durpai, the study examines how borders are experienced, contested, and negotiated at the grassroots level. Through qualitative fieldwork and the collection of local perceptions, the paper analyzes both historical continuity and contemporary dynamics of the Assam–Arunachal Pradesh boundary conflict.

## **Historical Background**

The Assam–Arunachal Pradesh border dispute can only be understood by situating it within its colonial and post-colonial context. During the Ahom era, territorial control was fluid, with local chieftains and tribal communities defining their domains through natural landmarks and customary practices rather than rigid boundaries. The arrival of British colonial rule transformed these flexible arrangements into fixed administrative demarcations. The *1873 Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation*, which introduced the Inner Line Permit system, drew a clear distinction between the plains of Assam and the hill tracts that would eventually constitute Arunachal Pradesh. A further turning point came in *1951*, when the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) was carved out of Assam, resulting in the transfer of nearly *3,648 sq. km of plains areas* to NEFA an arrangement that Assam has since contested, citing historical claims over those territories. Over the decades, multiple efforts have been made to resolve the dispute. The *1979 Survey of India exercise* failed to generate consensus, while in *1989*, the Arunachal Pradesh government petitioned the Supreme Court to safeguard its boundaries. A more recent development, the *Namsai Declaration of July 2022*, represented a significant political initiative in which the chief ministers of both states agreed to address disputes concerning *123 villages across 12 districts*. However, local resistance particularly in areas such as Durpai illustrates how top-down agreements often overlook community sentiments and lived experiences, thereby limiting their effectiveness in bringing about lasting resolution.

Despite decades of surveys, negotiations, and judicial involvement, the Assam–Arunachal Pradesh border dispute remains unresolved. At the micro-level, this manifests in the following ways in Durpai:

- a) **Encroachment of Land:** Villagers report repeated encroachments by Assam counterparts, despite legal rulings affirming Durpai ownership rights (e.g., SDC Gilamara’s 1985 decision).
- b) **Survey Ambiguities:** Boundary surveys conducted in 1979 and again in 2023 failed to translate into effective demarcation, leaving the land contested.

- c) **Development Disruptions:** The 2022 conflict over the Likabali–Durpai PMGSY road exemplifies how development projects can trigger boundary tensions. Police intervention, destruction of property, and retaliatory violence created insecurity and mistrust.
- d) **Discontent with Namsai Declaration:** While intended as a peace measure, the declaration has been rejected by a majority of Durpai residents, who view the looping system as a compromise of ancestral lands.
- e) **Marginalization of Local Voices:** Villagers argue that negotiations take place at the state level without genuine consultation of affected communities, creating resentment and fueling local mobilization.

Thus, the dispute in Durpai reveals how unresolved borders directly affect livelihoods, governance, and inter-community relations.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To trace the historical trajectory of the Assam–Arunachal Pradesh boundary dispute with specific reference to Durpai village.
2. To analyze local perceptions and lived experiences concerning the dispute.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a *qualitative, exploratory design*. Primary data were collected through fieldwork in Durpai village between 2021 and 2023. Using *purposive random sampling*, respondents included Gaon Burahs (village headmen), members of the Durpai Village Development Committee, intellectuals, women, and youth. Data collection methods included structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. Secondary sources included archival records, census reports, government notifications, and news coverage of the dispute. Special attention was given to documents relating to the *1979 Survey of India*, *1985 SDC Gilamara ruling*, and the *2022 Namsai Declaration*. Quantitative elements were also incorporated. For instance...

Do you agree with the decision taken under the Namsai Declaration with regards to Durpai?

SI. No	Respondent	Yes	%	No	%
1	Head Gaon Burah	00	00	01	1.63
2	Committee Members	00	00	15	24.59
3	Intellectual	00	00	05	8.19
4	Locals	00	00	40	65.57
	<i>Total (%)</i>		00		100

*Source: Field Survey, 2021-2022.*

The data revealed that *majority of respondent from Durpai village opposed the Namsai Declaration*, reflecting strong community resistance to ceding ancestral lands. These figures were contextualized within qualitative narratives for a comprehensive analysis.

### **Findings and Analysis**

- a) **Historical Continuity of Disputes:** Durpai villagers perceive the boundary dispute as an extension of historical neglect. Oral histories link land ownership to ancestral cultivation and settlement practices. While state governments debate administrative borders, villagers emphasize cultural belonging and heritage, arguing that land cannot be reduced to bureaucratic lines on a map.
- b) **Encroachment and Weak Enforcement:** Despite legal rulings, such as the 1985 judgment recognizing Durpai's rights, enforcement has been weak. Villagers recount multiple instances where Assamese groups occupied or cultivated disputed lands. Appeals to district authorities often went unanswered, reinforcing perceptions of state apathy.
- c) **Development as a Trigger for Conflict:** Infrastructure projects, while meant to improve connectivity, have become flashpoints. The 2022 Likabali–Darpai road construction conflict illustrates this. Villagers expressed both the need for development and the fear that roads provide avenues for external encroachment. Violence during the project further deepened mistrust.
- d) **Perceptions of the Namsai Declaration:** Community responses to the 2022 agreement highlight dissonance between state-level diplomacy and grassroots perceptions. Many villagers reject the *looping system*, which they see as an arbitrary compromise of their ancestral lands. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the regional committees, which they believe acted with bias and without adequate consultation. Survey data show that nearly two-thirds of the population opposed



the decision, while only a minority viewed it as a step toward peace. Intellectuals and youth leaders have called for legal action, demonstrations, and even hunger strikes to press their demands.

- e) **Civil Mobilization and Resistance:** In response to perceived injustice, Durpai villagers have increasingly organized themselves through committees and forums such as the *Durpai Village Development Committee (DVDC)* and *Durpai Border Peace Forum (DBPF)*. These groups have threatened peaceful protests, including demonstrations and hunger strikes, if their concerns are ignored. Civil resistance underscores the depth of attachment to land and the distrust of state-led processes.

## **Conclusion**

The case of Durpai demonstrates how inter-state boundary disputes extend far beyond cartographic lines. They directly shape everyday life, creating insecurity, mistrust, and a sense of exclusion among borderland communities. While Assam and Arunachal Pradesh continue to negotiate at the political level, the persistence of local resistance shows that durable solutions cannot be achieved without meaningful community participation.

The findings of this study suggest three key implications:

1. **Participatory Dialogue:** State-led negotiations must involve local communities to ensure legitimacy and sustainability.
2. **Enforcement of Legal Rulings:** Without effective enforcement of past judgments, disputes will persist regardless of new agreements.
3. **Balancing Development and Security:** Infrastructure projects must be carefully managed to avoid triggering new conflicts in disputed areas.

Ultimately, resolving the Assam–Arunachal Pradesh border dispute requires moving beyond administrative and political fixes. It demands recognition of historical legacies, cultural belonging, and the lived experiences of villagers like those in Durpai. Only by integrating these local perspectives into official negotiations can peace and stability be achieved in the borderlands.



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**Citation in APA 7<sup>th</sup> Edition:** Opi, H. (2025). Assam–Arunachal Pradesh Border Dispute: Local Perceptions and Analysis of Durpai Village of Lower Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh. *Lyceum India Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(3), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16977254>

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