

# **Bifurcation of Assam in the Post-colonial Era: Border Conflicts in North-East India**

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## **Abstract**

*The arrival of Britishers in Asia is associated with an important shift in the region from frontier to border demarcation. Before the ascendancy of Britain, the whole region of South Asia was very much a fluid cultural organism. Colonial cartography became important as it drew boundaries in the region to bring in a western legal notion of political units. At the time of independence, the North East's regions were made up of the princely states of Manipur and Tripura, the hill districts, the North Eastern Tracts (NEFT) of the North Eastern borderland, and the Assam lowlands of the former Assam Province. Following independence, the Indian government was unable to appropriately address the complex circumstances of the North East and follow the colonial policy of isolation and alienation. In the post-colonial period, Northeast India especially Assam has been plagued by inter-state border conflicts and immigration since the early 1960s, when the process of separating states from the undivided Assam began. It is in this context the paper aims to analyse the colonial origins and present a genealogical study of the border conflicts in Assam. The paper also aims to suggest policy recommendation to the present-day immigration and border issues.*

**Keywords:** Colonial Cartography, Inter-state Border Disputes, Border Demarcation, Post-Colonial

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The post-colonial era in India witnessed the bifurcation of Assam, a northeastern state, into multiple regions due to persistent border disputes and ethnic conflicts. The post-colonial era in Assam has been marred by complex ethnic, linguistic, and socio-political conflicts, resulting in significant turmoil and upheaval in the region. One of the most prominent and violent among these conflicts is the Bodo agitation (George, 1994). The Bodos, a significant ethnic group in Assam, have sought to assert their distinct identity and demand greater autonomy and recognition within the state. However, their struggle for recognition and representation has often clashed with the interests of other communities, leading to inter-community tensions and violence. Moreover, Assam's historical interactions with immigrants from East Bengal, now Bangladesh, have been marked by both welcome and opposition, depending on political circumstances and

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the prevailing sentiments of the time (Hazarika, 1993). When we explore the multifaceted aspects of the post-colonial conflict in Assam, there comes a particular focus on the Bodo agitation and the dynamics of Assam's relationship with Bengali-speaking immigrants. It delves majorly into the historical roots of these conflicts, the changing narratives around refugees and immigrants, the role of political leaders, and the influence of external factors in shaping the regional landscape. The advent of Bodo nationalism has been explained in the following interview (reproduced from Vandekerckhove, 2009).

*“This was around two o’clock in the afternoon.... Suddenly we saw plumes of smoke and heard shooting from nearby villages. Before we even realized what was going on, a group of masked young men dressed in black, came out of the jungle behind us. At first, we thought we could handle them, but they had guns.... We had no other option but to run and leave everything behind.... Nothing could be saved...they burnt and demolished our houses, looted our cattle and chopped down our trees. It was as if they wanted to erase every sign of us ever been there.” — An Adivasi internally displaced person, Sapkata relief camp, February 2007.*

Also, impact of language imposition and the emergence of religious sentiments in the Assamese agitation led by the All-Assam Students Union (AASU) cannot be ignored. This paper explores the historical context and underlying factors that have contributed to Assam's division and the conflicts with its neighbouring states. Additionally, it investigates the role of immigration from Bangladesh in escalating tensions and communal demands for separate states. The government's efforts to mitigate these conflicts and the present-day status of border relations will also be examined.

## **2. THE DIVISION OF ASSAM**

The division of Assam started with the reorganization of states in India in 1956 when the original Assam was split into smaller states like Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh. The primary motive behind this division was to address the diverse ethnic and linguistic groups in the region and provide for better governance and administration. However, this process also laid the groundwork for future border disputes as the newly created states inherited complex demographic and territorial issues from the parent state.

During India's independence in 1947, the region now known as Arunachal Pradesh was referred to as the North East Frontier Area (NEFA). Although it remained a part of the province of Assam, it was separated from the control of the elected state government and administered by the Governor of Assam as the Agent of the Indian President. In the 1960s, the process of dividing Assam into smaller states began, with five of the seven states in Northeast India initially being part of Assam, while Manipur and Tripura were princely



states during British colonial rule and later became Union Territories (Baruah, 1999). The majority of the territory in Northeast India is comprised of tribal areas. The Indian Constitution's Sixth Schedule includes specific provisions for the administration of what was then referred to as 'the Tribal Areas in Assam' (Baruah, 2001). During the colonial period, these tribal areas were predominantly protected enclaves where tribal communities were allowed to follow their 'customary practices', including traditional kinship systems and clan-based rules for allocating land.

The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution made special provisions for the management of tribal territories, which were formerly termed as 'backward tracts' and 'excluded areas' during colonial times. These were protected enclaves where native groups could carry out their traditional rituals and laws governing the distribution of land. The Sixth Schedule also allowed for the creation of autonomous districts and regions with elected councils empowered to regulate customary laws, administer limited justice, and determine land use and shifting cultivation practices. The administration of some tribal areas was conducted directly from Delhi, with the Assam Governor serving as the Indian President's agent, due to their unadministered status during colonial times or lack of state institutions. Additionally, the Inner Line restricted the entry of outsiders into certain states, including Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Nagaland.

The Naga movement began immediately after independence; Nagaland leaders reject the concept of their territory moving into Indian and Burmese hands following British colonial rule. In the 1950s, this resulted in violent clashes between insurgents and India's armed forces. In 1957, there were attempts to create a separate Naga administrative unit, and the state of Nagaland was created in 1963 in an attempt to incorporate participants in the pan-Indian polity and put an end to the Naga war. The establishment of Nagaland marked the first step in the development of a federal regional order in Northeast India, decoupling statehood from fiscal viability or constitutional compatibility with the pan-Indian polity. This shift eventually led to the creation of other states in the region over the following years (Baruah, 2003).

### **3. ASSAM'S INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CONFLICTS**

Assam shares its borders with several states, including Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram, leading to various territorial disputes. The disputes have been primarily fuelled by competing claims over land, natural resources, and political representation. The colonial legacy of demarcating borders without considering the cultural and historical affiliations of local communities has exacerbated these conflicts in the post-colonial era.



One of the longstanding issues between Assam and its neighbouring states is territorial disputes. The states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Mizoram have been involved in border disputes with Assam, leading to frequent tensions and confrontations (Suykens, 2013). Border disputes often revolve around the interpretation of historical treaties, local land use practices, and competing administrative claims. These issues have led to periodic standoffs and challenges in maintaining peaceful relations. India's vulnerabilities in the North East Frontier Area (NEFA) and throughout Assam were made evident by the confrontation with China. There were signs of instability in other sections of the region in addition to the current Naga movement, with some rebel groups having ties to India's external enemies. Indian officials were already concerned about the region's potential for pro-independence protests and the cultural gap with the rest of India (Guha, 1999).

Furthermore, North-east India shares borders with Myanmar, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh since 1971), and Bhutan in the post-colonial era after the division of British India in 1947. Currently, a 20 km wide, rather small strip of land separates the North-east from the rest of India. While Bhutan and Myanmar do not pose direct threats due to their special treaty relationships with India, it has been concerning that state institutions in these border crossing zones are inadequate. The diverse demographic composition of the region has contributed to conflicts between Assam and its neighbouring states. Assam is home to various ethnic groups and linguistic communities, each seeking political representation and cultural preservation. These competing interests have at times resulted in violent clashes, exacerbating inter-state tensions and posing challenges to fostering harmonious coexistence.

The Bodo people's economic and sociocultural goals, which they first voiced during British administration, gave rise to the drive for a distinct Bodo state. The All-Bodo Students Union (ABSU) was founded in February 1967 and called for the creation of a Bodo state. During the 1980s, a mass movement in Assam, led by the All-Assam Students Union (AASU) and the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), demanded detection and eviction of foreign nationals and greater autonomy. The Assam Accord was signed in 1985, and although the Bodo youth continued to actively support this campaign, they lost faith in the new government since they felt that not much had changed for the better. Then, the ABSU took the initiative and started a campaign for further autonomy, calling for the establishment of a state for Bodoland apart from Assam (George, 1994).

Also, natural resource allocation, particularly water resources and forestlands, has been a contentious point in Assam's relations with its neighbours. The competition for resource-rich areas has led to disputes over their management and utilization, with each state aiming to safeguard its interests. Such resource conflicts



have added to the strain on inter-state ties (Hill, 2013). The region's political dynamics have also played a role in fuelling conflicts between Assam and neighbouring states. Aspirations of local political leaders and parties to assert influence and secure power within their respective states can lead to confrontations with neighbours. Administrative issues, such as jurisdiction and law enforcement in border areas, have also posed challenges, at times causing tensions and disputes (Kolas, 2011). The Indian government has attempted to address these conflicts and disputes through various mechanisms, including negotiation, mediation, and the establishment of interstate councils. Despite these initiatives, resolving long-standing disputes has proven challenging, and new issues continue to emerge periodically. As the region navigates the challenges and aspirations of diverse communities, the need for inclusive governance, transparent negotiations, and mutual respect among states becomes even more critical for fostering a climate of peace and cooperation.

#### **4. ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT TO MITIGATE THE CONFLICTS**

The Indian government has taken several measures to address the border disputes and conflicts in Assam. Political dialogues and negotiations have been initiated to accommodate the demands of different communities, leading to the creation of autonomous councils and separate states. The implementation of the Assam Accord (1985) to tackle the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh was a significant step toward resolving some of the underlying concerns related to border disputes.

The government's role in mitigating the conflicts in post-colonial Assam is crucial to fostering peace, stability, and inclusive development in the region. As conflicts arise from a combination of historical, socio-cultural, and economic factors, the government's approach should be multifaceted and comprehensive, addressing various root causes and engaging with different stakeholders. Some suggestions as to how the government can work to fight these conflicts can be explained:

1. The government should promote inclusive governance that considers the interests and aspirations of all communities, including indigenous populations, immigrants, and marginalized groups.
2. Meaningful participation of diverse communities in decision-making processes and policy formulation can help bridge divides and address grievances. Focusing on socio-economic development in conflict-prone areas is vital.
3. Initiatives to reduce economic disparities, create employment opportunities, and improve basic infrastructure can alleviate tensions arising from resource competition and disparities.



4. Safeguarding and promoting the cultural identity of different communities is essential. The government should support initiatives that preserve and celebrate diverse cultures, languages, and traditions, ensuring that no community feels marginalized or threatened.
5. Ensuring effective border management is critical to controlling illegal immigration and addressing security concerns. Strengthening border security and cooperation with neighbouring countries can help prevent the infiltration of elements with potential links to external groups or criminal networks.
6. Facilitating constructive dialogue and conflict resolution between different communities is essential for resolving disputes and building trust. Engaging in open and transparent dialogue can help identify common ground and find peaceful solutions.
7. Promoting education and awareness about the region's history, culture, and diversity can foster understanding and empathy among different communities. Educational initiatives that promote inclusivity and respect for diversity can help bridge communal divides.
8. The government should also design and implement policies that address the specific needs and challenges of the region. Tailored and responsive policies can address historical grievances and socio-economic disparities effectively.
9. Engaging in diplomatic efforts and fostering international cooperation can help address cross-border issues and prevent external interference in the conflicts. Collaborating with neighbouring countries on border management and security matters is essential for regional stability.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The post-colonial era in Assam has been marked by complex and deeply entrenched conflicts, stemming from historical, socio-cultural, and economic factors. Border disputes with neighbouring states, influx of immigrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar, and the quest for identity and autonomy among different ethnic communities have been central to these conflicts. The Indian government has made efforts to mitigate these tensions through various means, including political dialogues, negotiations, and development initiatives. However, challenges persist, and lasting solutions require a multifaceted and comprehensive approach (Chandra, 2013). The division of Assam into smaller states during India's reorganization in 1956 aimed to address the diverse ethnic and linguistic groups in the region. However, it also laid the groundwork for future border disputes and territorial contentions between the newly created states. These disputes have at times resulted in violent clashes and standoffs, underscoring the complexities of inter-state relations. The issue of immigration from Bangladesh has been a significant contributing factor to the conflicts in Assam. The porous border has allowed for both legal and illegal migration, leading to demographic changes, economic competition, and social tensions. The influx of migrants has raised concerns among the



indigenous Assamese population about cultural preservation and resource competition. The government's role in mitigating the conflicts is critical. Inclusive governance, socio-economic development in conflict-prone areas, and preservation of cultural identities are vital for fostering peace and stability. Effective border management, constructive dialogue, and maintenance of law and order are essential components of conflict resolution strategies. The present-day border relations in Assam remain complex and influenced by historical legacies, political interests, and socio-economic concerns. To ensure lasting peace and development in the region, diplomatic efforts and cooperation with neighbouring countries are necessary.

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