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Quest for Conflict Resolution: Analyzing Efforts to Resolve the Assam-Meghalaya Border Dispute

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Quest for Conflict Resolution: Analyzing Efforts to Resolve the Assam-Meghalaya Border Dispute

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Northeast India, comprising the seven states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, is characterized by complex interstate border issues. These disputes arise due to various factors, including historical legacies, ethnic tensions and conflicting territorial claims. The unresolved border issues have posed challenges to inter-state relations and hindered regional integration and development. Assam, being the largest state in the region, shares borders with all other states. It has faced border disputes with multiple states, including Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. These disputes have led to sporadic clashes, displacement of people and economic disruptions. The Assam-Meghalaya border dispute has been a long-standing issue in Northeast India, characterized by territorial claims and counterclaims between the two neighboring states. This article aims to shed light on the historical background, current status and implications of the border dispute.

Historical Background

The arrival of the British in the 19th century marked a significant turning point in the demarcation of borders in the region. The British colonial administration, in their efforts to establish administrative control, initiated surveys and demarcation processes to delineate the territories. The Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act of 1873 played a crucial role in defining the boundaries between Assam and the tribal areas, which later became part of Meghalaya. The partition of India in 1947 and the subsequent formation of independent nations led to significant geopolitical changes in the region. The tribal areas of Assam, including the present-day Meghalaya, became part of the Assam state. However, with the reorganization of states in 1972, the tribal areas were separated from Assam and formed into a Union Territory known as the Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA). The demand for statehood by the tribal communities in the NEFA region gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s. The Meghalaya State Movement emerged as a result, advocating for separate statehood for the tribal-dominated areas. In 1972, Meghalaya was carved out of Assam as a separate state, with its own legislative assembly and administration. The process of demarcating the borders between Assam and Meghalaya has been a contentious issue since the formation of Meghalaya as a separate state. Both states have had disagreements over the precise location of the boundaries, resulting in sporadic conflicts and tensions. Several agreements and commissions, such as the Mizo Commission (1972), the Sundaram Commission (1978) and the Goswami Committee (2001), were established to address these border disputes, but a lasting resolution has remained elusive. The root cause of the dispute lies in the differing interpretations of historical administrative records, particularly the demarcation of the boundary between the erstwhile undivided Assam and the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, which are the core areas of Meghalaya. Assam claims

that the boundary should be determined based on the 1873 notification, while Meghalaya argues for the 1951 notification. Assam argues that subsequent notifications or interpretations, such as the 1951 notification, are invalid and that the original boundary defined in the 1873 notification should be upheld. They believe that the boundary should be determined based on historical precedence, administrative records and the intent of the original demarcation during British rule. It's important to note that Meghalaya, on the other hand, supports the use of the 1951 notification as the basis for determining the border. They assert that the 1951 notification should be considered valid and it differs from Assam's interpretation of the boundary. Both Assam and Meghalaya put forth their respective claims over certain areas along the border. Assam claims that the regions of Block I and Block II, which are currently under the administrative jurisdiction of Meghalaya, rightfully belong to them based on historical and administrative records. Meghalaya, on the other hand, argues that these areas have a significant tribal population and should remain under their control. The conflicting claims have led to tensions and occasional outbreaks of violence between the communities residing in the disputed regions.

Current Status

The Meghalaya has maintained that differences persisted with Assam on 12 places along the border. The areas of difference along the inter-state border are Upper Tarabari, Gazang reserve Forest, Hahim, Langpih, Borduar, Boklapara, Nongwah, Matamur, Khanapara-Pilangkata, Deshdemoreah Block I and Block II, Khanduli and Retacherra. The total area of difference is 2,765.14 square km, of which Blocks I and II cover 1,583.42 square km.¹

The two Northeastern neighbours had agreed to resolve six “relatively less complicated” areas first. Assam and Meghalaya had formed three regional committees each to inspect the disputed areas and record the views of the local residents. Each committee corresponds to a district on either side of the boundary.² The areas of differences taken up for final settlement in the first phase are Hahim, Gizang, Tarabari, Boklapara, Khanapara-Pillingkata and Ratacherra. Out of the 12 points of disputes between Assam and Meghalaya, these six areas with relatively less critical differences have been taken up in the first phase.³ Through a give and take approach under which Assam will keep 18.51 sq km area of the total disputed 36.79 sq km and give the remaining 18.28 sq km to the neighbouring state. Both the governments propose to resolve the disputes in six sectors (of the total twelve areas of difference between the two states) in the first phase – Hahim, Gizang, Tarabari, Boklapara, Khanapara-Pilingkata and Ratacherra – spread across the constituencies of Boko, West Guwahati, Dispur and Katigora. Of the disputed 3.51 sq km at Hahim (Boko), the committees recommended 0.30 sq km to Assam and 3.21 sq km to Meghalaya. At Gizang (Boko), the committees recommended 10.63 sq km to Assam and 2.90 sq km to Meghalaya. At Tarabari (Boko), Meghalaya will get all the 4.69 sq km. At Boklapara (West Guwahati), Assam will get 1.01 sq km and Meghalaya will keep 0.56 sq km.⁴ Opposition Congress and AIUDF, however, demanded a discussion in the Assembly before going ahead with the recommendations prepared by the regional committees of the both the states. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and his Meghalaya counterpart Conrad Sangma on 29th March, 2022 signed a “historic accord” resolving the

¹“Assam-Meghalaya boundary dispute: An unending saga of conflicts”, *The Northeast Today*, 14th Sept, 2017.

²“Assam, Meghalaya to end border dispute” by January 21, *The Hindu*, January 12, 2022.

³Roadmap for amicable Assam-Meghalaya border row settlement prepared: Himanta, *The Print*, 18th January, 2022.

⁴Boundary Dispute with Meghalay, Assam Govt. proposes give-and-take approach, *The Assam Tribune*, 19th January, 2022.

50 year-old border dispute between the two States. The MoU signed in presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah resolved the disputes in six “areas of differences” involving a total area of 36 sq km.⁵

Districts		Region	Area Disputed	What was agreed	
Assam	Meghalaya			Assam	Meghalaya
Kamrup	West Khasi Hills	Tarabari	4.69 sq km	-----	4.69 sq km
		Gizang	13.53 sq km	10.63 sq km	2.90 sq km
		Hahim	3.51 sq km	0.30 sq km	3.21 sq km
Kamrup Metro	Ri Bhoi	Khanapara-Pillangkata	2.29 sq km	1.74 sq km	0.55 sq km
		Biklapara	1.57 sq km	1.01 sq km	0.56 sq km
Cachar	East Jaintia Hills	Ratacherra	11.20 sq km	4.87 sq km	6.42 sq km

Source: The Indian Express, 2nd April, 2022

Implications

The border dispute has had profound socio-political implications for the people residing in the affected areas. It has resulted in strained inter-state relations, deepened ethnic divisions and hindered development initiatives. The local communities have faced socio-economic challenges, including restricted access to essential services and infrastructure. Political parties and civil society organizations have played a significant role in shaping the discourse surrounding the dispute, further complicating its resolution. The border dispute also has economic ramifications for both Assam and Meghalaya. The lack of clarity and stability in the disputed regions hampers trade and commerce. It inhibits investments and infrastructure development, thereby impeding economic growth and integration in the region. Efforts to resolve the dispute and establish a mutually beneficial economic relationship have been hindered by the protracted nature of the conflict. The Assam-Meghalaya border dispute remains unresolved, with sporadic conflicts erupting from time to time. The central government, through its various agencies, has made efforts to mediate and find a solution. The judiciary has also played a role in adjudicating disputes and issuing directives. However, the complexity of the issue, combined with political and administrative challenges, has hindered a conclusive resolution. The Assam-Meghalaya border dispute has broader implications for regional stability and integration in Northeast India. It can strain inter-state relations, potentially leading to a ripple effect on the overall peace and security of the region. Resolving the dispute would contribute to enhancing regional cooperation, promoting economic integration and fostering a sense of unity among the diverse communities in the Northeast.

Conclusion

The Assam-Meghalaya border dispute is a complex territorial conflict that requires careful consideration and inclusive dialogue. The historical background, conflicting claims and socio-political implications emphasize the need for a sustainable solution. It's important to recognize that the impacts of the Assam-

⁵The Assam Tribune, 30th March, 2022.

Meghalaya border conflict can be dynamic and multifaceted. As the situation evolves, the effects on the people living in the region may also change. Finding a peaceful and equitable resolution to the border dispute is crucial for the well-being and stability of the affected communities. By prioritizing peaceful negotiations, involving all stakeholders and considering the economic and social well-being of the affected communities, a resolution can be sought to ensure lasting peace and stability along the Assam-Meghalaya border.

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