

Conflict and Its Consequences: A Case Study of Assam Nagaland Border

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Introduction :

Conflicts continue to occur in many parts of the world and their root causes often include poverty, the struggle for scarce resources, and violation of human rights. Armed conflict and instability entails profound loss and physical and mental stress. They have another feature in common, ie. women and girls suffer their impact disproportionately (United Nations 'Women - Peace & Security' 2002). In this paper an attempt is being made to study the impact of such a type of conflict occurring between the two states of Assam and Nagaland in August, 2014. The issue always starts from petty quarrels but leads to often much bigger conflicts spreading its impact on innocent hardworking people, working for their livelihood.

A reflection on the history of these two states of Nagaland and Assam reveal that they have been disputing their shared border ever since one was carved out of the other. Officially, Assam and Nagaland share a 434 km boundary after the latter was carved out as an independent state in 1963. Interestingly, the tea plantations along the border have become sites of conflict in recent times. The Nagas engage not only ex-tea garden workers as labourers in their agricultural land but also immigrant Muslim population. The latter especially act as cheap labour. But this practice has come up with its own set of problems. Now the population has gradually increased in the area leading to confrontations between these two groups and the Nagas regarding ownership of land.

Objectives:

In this study, an attempt has been made to study the causes and impact of this conflict on the local people.

The main objectives of this study are:

- (a) To find out the causes of conflict,

(b) To study the impact of this conflict on the socio-psychological and economic dimensions of the people with reference to women and children specially.

Methodology :

Background literature study was done extensively and field visits were done in the bordering villages about a month after the attack. Interaction was done with the villagers although they were apprehensive in giving information. Special permission had to be taken from the concerned authorities in order to visit the area.

Background :

The dispute started with an alleged abduction on 26 July 2014 of two children - Filson Kujur of Green Valley High School and Ajay Gad of Gholapani Little Flower High School who were studying in the tenth and ninth standard respectively. The incident happened in the Assam Nagaland border under Dhansiri subdivision of Golaghat district of Assam. In the initial phase about 10,000 people from various organisations undertook democratic protests to put their demand for the release of the abducted students. The protestors went on to surround the 155 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) camp which led to baton charge by the CRPF on the protestors. At that time the miscreants who were hiding about 200 m away started firing indiscriminately with sophisticated weapons on the unarmed protestors. In addition to firing, the Naga miscreants started torching houses which led to the evacuation of many villagers. The firing and torching of houses continued in the following days, when 17 people were killed and there was a massive exodus of people which led to the internal displacement of more than 10,000 people.

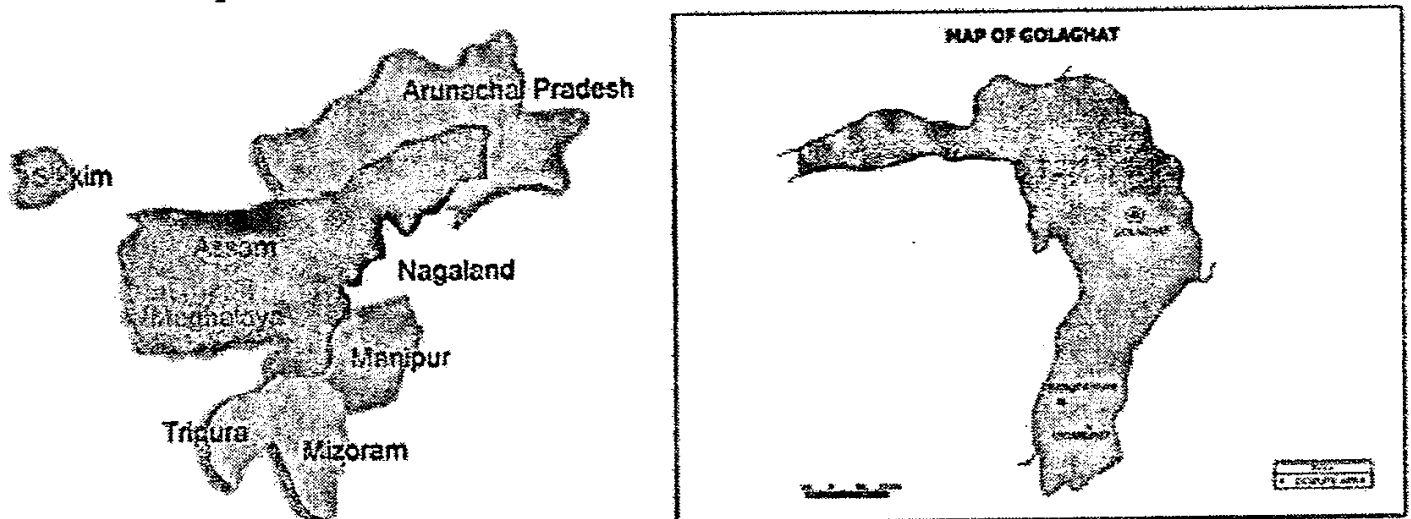


Fig 1 Map of the North Eastern States and Location of the Study Area (Uriamghat) in Golaghat District.

The current conflict area in question is border area of Golaghat district of Assam and Wokha district of Nagaland. Wokha district is dominated by the Lotha tribe followed by the

Semas. The Assam and Nagaland interstate border area has been divided into six sectors - A,B,C,D,E and F, spread over Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Karbi Anglong. According to a document received from the Circle office of Golaghat district indicates that this conflict ridden area falls under Sector "C" of Rengma Reserve Forest. While the actual size of the Rengma Reserve Forest is 13921.49 ha, encroachment by Nagas is projected to be 9935.00 ha. The number of Non- Naga villages in the encroached forest land is 80 whereas Naga villages are about 11. The non-Naga villages consist of various communities comprising of Nepalese, Kacharis, Adivasis, Muslims etc. The current violent conflict between the Adivasis and the Nagas culminated over years of tug of war over land resources.

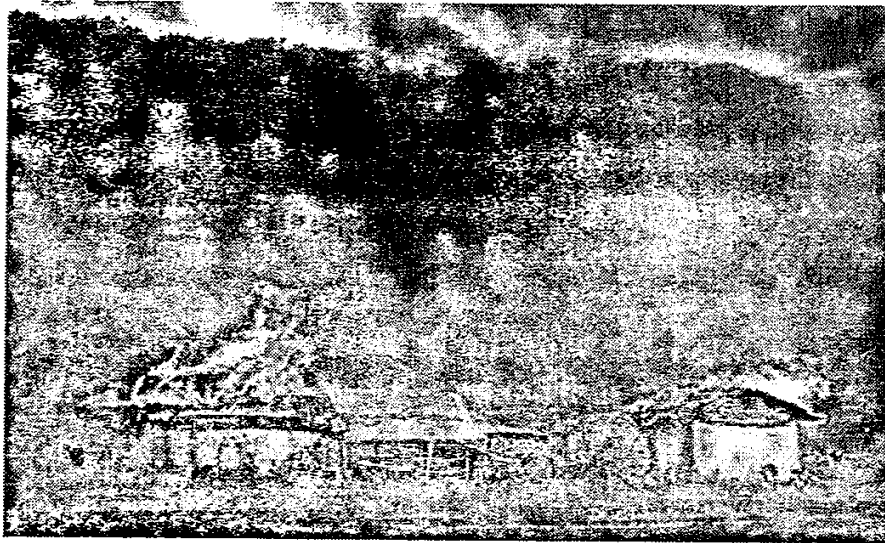


Fig 2 Houses being destroyed

The Naga community asserts that they should be granted sectors A, B, C and D. The Adivasis, who were originally workers at the tea estates of Assam, settled in this region around 1964-65 with an aim of having a permanent settlement. Giving up their uncertain livelihood as daily wagers, they became farmers and started agriculture. The Adivasis were initially brought by the Nagas into their land as tenants and the agreement was that half of the produce was to be handed over to the Lothas.

Subsequently, the Adivasis reneged on their agreement to share their crop. The Naga movement of self determination and to own the control of 'greater Nagaland', the Adivasis became soft targets as they are considered 'outsiders' and are subjected to violence by the Naga nationalists.

Hence the Nagas, to assert their ownership of territory have resorted to burning the homes of Adivasi groups. This incident started when some Naga miscreants reportedly burnt around 200 houses in seven border villages of Uriamghat. There was indiscriminate firing and arson by miscreants from Nagaland in eight villages in Assam's Golaghat district along the disputed boundary. According to the people 14 villages were affected and around 200 village

houses were burnt. Meanwhile, the indefinite economic blockade imposed by some organisations at Rangajan area along National Highway 39 in Golaghat district to protest the attacks by miscreants on Assam villages along the interstate border, affected supplies to Dimapur town- Nagaland's commercial hub. The victims from the affected villages shifted to the relief camps.

The researcher visited villages in Urimaghat area which were affected. The Village Head has been residing here since the last 60 years. According to him most of the people have shifted/ migrated here from Sarupathar. The region comprises of people belonging to different communities. There are Urangs, Kachari, Basumatari, Nepali, Bihari, Tea garden community as well as Assamese people. The following table no.1 shows the Reserve Forests with the total land area under it and the area encroached by these people. Maximum encroachment is seen on Diphu and Doyang where it is more than 90% and it is in this sector where the recent conflict took place. Again in the Diphu Reserve Forest the land occupied by Non-Nagas to Nagas is relatively less (ratio of 1:1.5) but in Doyang R Forest the ratio of Non-Nagas to Nagas is higher (23:1).

Table 1 Reserve Forests under different Sectors showing Ttotal Lland and Encroached Land.

Reserve Forests	Sector	Total land	Encroached (ha)	%age encr.land
Diphu Reserved Forest	A	18363.00	18053.00	98
South Nambor Forest	B	27240.00	2500.00	9.1
Rengma Nambor Forest	C	13921.00	11800.00	84
Doyang Nambor Forest	D	24635.77	23000.00	93.4
Desoi Valley Nambar Frt.	E/F	16381.45	13322.46	81.3
Desoi Nambor Forest	F	2797.15	1532.34	54.7
Tiru Hills Nambor Hills	F	5954.55	4794.15	80.5
Abhoypur Nambor Forest	F	6737.98	400.00	5.9
Geleki Nambor Forest	F	5157.00	4000.00	77.5

Source: 'Brief Notes on Assam-Nagaland Border Areas, of A, B, C and D sectors under Golaghat District' by J.C. Pegu, Deputy Commissioner, Golaghat. (Source : J.K. Pillai Commission Report, 1997)

The relief camps were mainly set up at the government schools to provide safe habitation for the affected people. However, there was crowding in the camps and the basic amenities were seen to be lacking. Since the people had no other choice, they had to stay in these camps for their security. There were no separate rooms for males and females, and no

separate toilets. Moreover, some toilet doors were non functional. There were no appropriate places to dispose of waste materials. Women faced lack of privacy while bathing and even though temporary toilets were constructed by Oxfam, they were full of slush. This increased their exposure to diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, and other communicable diseases. The experience shared by the inmates of the relief camp was tragic and traumatic as they witnessed burning of their houses and belongings and taking away of their assets like cattle and other movable properties by the miscreants.

The only solace, the affected people had was the knowledge that they were provided with security by the authorities and moreover they were in large numbers together. One can of course imagine the dreaded feeling of leaving one's home in a hurry and worrying about the safety of their meagre assets like animals and crops in the field. Moreover, children had to miss school and their daily activities like tending to their fields and earning their livelihood.

Education of the children was adversely affected as around 18 schools were converted into relief camps and was closed for at least three weeks. Incidents of illness and communicable diseases were reported as well. Medical facilities were inadequate and were available only scarcely. No doctor was available on a regular basis, only the nurses used to come regularly but they could provide only the first aid facility.

Like any other abnormal situation, here too the additional energy and micronutrient needs of pregnant mothers were not met. This would result in high rate of low birth weight which would increase the risk of child mortality rate and also impaired immune function. Studies have proved that maternal mortality is 2.5 times higher, on average, in conflict and post-conflict countries.

It is seen that the aftermath of such incidents falls more on the women, since they are always in charge of the household and the housework. Women and men often do different types of work, frequently as a result of prescribed gender roles, and may be exposed to different threats through this work. Women tend to be responsible for the care and nurture of the family and thus shoulder heavy burdens. The food we eat, the water we drink, the cleanliness of the household and toilets are mainly the responsibility of the womenfolk. Collection of firewood or water often puts young girls and women at risk of dangers. Separation and loss of family and friends, loss of home and social environment, including witnessing destruction of basic infrastructure, loss of livelihood opportunities create a feeling of trauma and fear among the residents, especially on children.

However, the trauma and impact of violence on the residents remain for a long time to come. Families were facing many challenges -loss of near and dear ones, displacement from their homes, loss of material assets including extreme poverty and destruction of social networks. Women suffer more as they are often stereotyped as victims and their experiences and contributions are virtually ignored in conflict zones. The consequences that violence has

on women's physical, mental and reproductive health are disastrous. Many of these are complex and not immediately evident, but their impact is often enormous.

Even after the violence subsided the enrolment in schools dropped, more so for females. As it is the nearest Higher Secondary School is 14kms away and the children walk to school every day. There are only 3 buses which ply daily to the village.

On occasions, when an adult male had to flee, the household burden fell on the women, which led to an increase of work for the women. Household assets like farm animals, crops are frequently sold in order to support families during conflict. This threatens the livelihood of the entire family.

Presently the disrupted zone of Assam-Nagaland border areas are under the supervision of neutral central forces. After the violence, both the governments have been playing blame game on the issue. The Assam government alleged that much of its territorial land has been encroached by some Nagas. There have been instances where the respective state governments carried out dialogues to resolve the issue. But these initiatives remained largely inconclusive.

The situation along the Assam-Nagaland border is also affected by lack of trust between the security forces and the people and by distrust between the communities (Conflict Mapping And Peace Processes in North East India Edited by: Lazar Jeyaseelan, NE Social Science Centre). The vagueness of the borders and the Central Government's failure to bring about an amicable and permanent solution to the vexed border dispute between Assam and Nagaland is its immediate cause.

Findings

1. The current conflict appears to be a struggle for resource access and land resource sharing between the Adivasis and Kacharis etc on the side of Assam and the Lotha's towards Nagaland side.
2. Nearly 10, 000 people were displaced and every family suffered a huge property loss. Most of them lost cattle, house, food grains, transportation vehicles, household staffs and currency notes. However they considered themselves lucky as 'nobody was burnt alive'. Paddy was burnt in their storage leading to huge losses.
3. The relief camps were overcrowded, unhygienic and very humid leading to sleep deprivation and fresh air. Children lack space for recreation and put their schooling on halt.
4. Food provided is inadequate, lacks nutrition and not suitable for children and also pregnant and lactating mothers.
5. Only first aid was available in the camps. There was no presence of medical practitioner or security persons in the relief camps.
6. The vagueness of the borders and the Government's failure to bring about an amicable and permanent solution to the vexed border dispute between Assam and Nagaland is also the main cause.

Suggestions :

Both the state governments of Assam and Nagaland should initiate dialogues on the border dispute between the two states involving the administration as well as the village leaders and the people. These talks must be backed by utmost sincerity and dedication in order to bring a sustainable solution. This current conflict cannot be seen as an isolated case. It is a result of continued tension with which both the communities have lived for years. Efforts to resolve these conflicts should also focus on empowerment of all those who have suffered especially women. Women should also participate in the decision-making process of the society.

Limitations encountered by the Researcher

Movement into the affected area is heavily restricted. With great difficulty, adequate permission and prolonged persuasion, the researcher managed to enter the area. The road leading to the village is hardly accessible due to its poor maintenance. No proper transportation facility was noticed and there was no network for cellular communication. The researcher also faced problems during interaction as the residents of the village hesitated to speak up and were not sure how much to reveal and what would be the consequences.

Conclusion :

The conflict has been lingering and the people inhabiting the area are the worst sufferers. The two state governments have been playing blame game instead of laying out concrete efforts for the protection of the people. Perhaps, a dialogue is required that can lead to a certain amount of give and take with the administration involving the local people. There are four Interim Agreements whose spirit can be used as the starting point for a dialogue in which the churches can play a major role because, a majority of the people in this area are Christians. There should be representation of all sections of the society living there including women to voice their opinion and thoughts.

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