

‘Exchange’ Ground to ‘Violence’ Ground: Issue in Assam-Nagaland Border of Golaghat District

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Abstract:

Foothill regions of Assam-Nagaland Border, traditionally which was supposed to be the place of economic exchange between the hills people and the plains, turned into a violence ground with the emerging ideas of ‘territoriality’/ ‘sovereignty’. The situation of this long foothills bordering Assam and Nagaland became more complex when Naga’s demand for inclusion of reserved forest and contiguous areas inhabited by Nagas emerged out. Among the inter-state border issues in North-East India, the longest and bloodiest conflict is said to be of Assam and Nagaland, which began right after Nagaland was declared as a full-fledged state in 1963 within Indian Union. Since then, a series of clashes took place between the two states. In order to solve the problem a series of meetings at different level also have taken place and a number of agreements have been signed between the two states but there has been no effective result till date- creating fear and crisis for security among the people residing in the region. This paper is based on my ongoing research on Assam-Nagaland border issue. The paper try to analyse the nature of the traditional relationship, particularly economic relationship, of plains and hills people and try to highlight how it has changed in present context.

Key words: Assam-Nagaland Border, ‘blurring border’, ‘encroachment’, conflict, Reserved Forest, foothills.

Introduction:

In North-East India along with many other emerging issues like issue of identity, issue of separate homeland, the inter-state border issue showing seeds towards more complex chapter for the region ahead. Most of the inter-state border issue in North-East India like- between Assam and Meghalaya over Blocks I and II of *Mikir Hills* (now Karbi-Anglong district of Assam), between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh in Chaoldhowa and Behali reserves forest area of Sonitpur district of Assam- emerged out when other states (except Manipur and Tirpura) carved out of Assam and became full-fledged states. Among other border issues in North-East India, the Assam-Nagaland is said to be the longest, started even before Nagaland became a full-fledged state in 1963 within Indian Union. Since then, a number of conflicts unfold in Assam-Nagaland bordering areas. The recent violence that took place on 12-14 August near Uriamghat in Golaghat District of Assam, also can be said as the result of this incessant dispute over the border. The 12-14 August violence left some 17 people dead on Assam side and over 200 houses were burnt down and lead to about 10,000 people run out of the villages to take shelter at Uriamghat and Sarupathar.

This long border area between Assam and Nagaland, mostly consist of reserved forest that people cleared in various period for cultivation and settlement. Now Reserved Forests in Golaghat division consists of Diphu (18363.00 ha.), Doyang (24635.770 ha.), Nambar South (27240.610 ha.), Rengma (13921.490 ha.) and Nambor North (9431.00 ha.)¹. This boundary issue between Assam and Nagaland became more complex when Naga's demand for inclusion of forests and contiguous areas inhabited by Nagas was left unattended while Nagaland was formed. The Naga have been demanding around

¹ Department of Environment and Forest, Government of Assam. (<http://assamforest.in/forestGlance/reservedForests.pdf>)

4,974 square miles border covering the districts of Sivsagar, Golaghat, Jorhat and Nagaon (Mishra 2014: 17). It is important to mention here that when Nagaland came under British rule certain changes were created and recreated in the boundaries. It was in on 15th November 1866, with the Samoogooting as headquarter Naga Hills District was created (Kindo and Minj 2008: 10). Again later on for better administrative purpose in 1925 Naga Hills district of Assam with Kohima as its headquarters was created and considered as the final settlement (*ibid.*: 10-11). The present contradiction on demand is of these two periods; Nagaland was given statehood on the basis of 1925 notification on the other hand Nagaland has been demanding to represent 1866 notification.

Traditional relationship between hills and plains:

The relationship between hills and plains was not only of hostility, there were also certain forms of mutual understanding and interdependency between them. In this regard, economy had an important role to play for maintaining such relationship. The economy of the plains and the hills was very much integrated to each other that makes economic history of North-East India interesting. Amalendu Guha has rightly mentioned, "the northeast region of India was never entirely cut off from the currents of historical change that shaped the subcontinent" (Guha 1991: 1). During pre-British period these foothills, of Assam and Nagaland, were symbolised as ground for economic exchanges and mutual dependency between the hills and plains. It is argued that the rice economy in the hills and their other economic activities like hunting, fishing and food gathering, were never been self-sufficient (Guha 1991: 3). Thus, the hill people comes down every winter with their other products like cotton, vegetables, 'da' (iron choppers), rock salt and other forest products to barter for surplus rice, silk, dried fish, pots etc. of the plains. In the

process some of them even settled down in the foothills plains for easier living and thus established a link of communication between the hills and the plains (Guha 1991: 3). Even today, though mode of exchange have changed, Nagas from nearby hill villages of Wokha district like- Sonari, Lifi, '*notun basti*' (new village) come down to sale their products in weekly markets of plain like Uriamghat², Ratanpur, Doyalpur³, Sarupani⁴ etc.

Hiren Gohain argued, "The traditional ties were such as to make the word '*mita*' (friend) a common word of addressing visiting Nagas and the plains Assamese" (Gohain 2007: 3282). Moreover, during Ahom period there was also traditional system known as '*Khat*'. According to '*Khat*' system Nagas residing in the foothills were granted space or land for cultivation as well as for other activities. The traditional relation, particularly economic relations, between the hills and the plains were such that even we can linked it to growth of pidgin Assamese language like '*Nagamese*', that is use in Nagaland for inter-ethnic communication and also for communication with plains people⁵. Thus, since time immemorial these foothills had an important role to play in maintaining a relationship between the plains and the hills. It was only after the coming of British and their introduction of new economic and administrative policies these foothills landscape underwent certain changes.

Coming of the British and its impacts on foothills of Assam-Nagaland:

² Uriamghat is a small market in Rengma region; here weekly market takes place on Wednesdays

³ Doyalpur is also in Doyang region and here weekly market takes place on Thursdays

⁴ Sarupani is also in Doyang region and here weekly market takes place in Saturdays.

⁵ See Amalendu Guha, A Historical Perspective for North-East India, Calcutta, Centre for studies in Social Sciences.

British took over Assam in 1826 through the Treaty of Yandabo; with the coming of British certain changes were unfolding in the region directly or indirectly affecting the socio-economic structure of Assam and also the foothills. One of the crucial issues that emerged out in the region is of '*land alienation*'. With the introduction of tea-plantations and British reserved forest policy a large tract of land were alienated from the indigenous people; people those were dependent on forest products were now deprived of using them. As Chandan Kr. Sharma argued, "The tea plantations coming up in large acreages gobbled up the best plots of fallow lands. Besides, the process of transformation of 'Jungles' and 'forest' to 'tea gardens' usurped into a large quantity of village commons or community forest lands" (Sharma 2013: 5). Likewise, when the British began exploration of foothills of Assam-Nagaland in the second quarter of 19th century, they found these areas full of natural resources particularly timbers (Saikia 2008: 43). Thus, the foothills attract the British and accordingly in order to conserve such rich resources, a large tract of these foothills of present Golaghat district were converted into 'reserved forest'. Under such programme, Nambor became reserved forest in 1872; Diphu and Rengma was declared as reserved forest in 1887 and Doyang in 1888. (Constantine Kindo and Daniel Minj; 2008: 15).

Moreover, the introduction of tea-plantation in the foothills disturbed the traditional practices of hunting and gathering of the hills too. Thus, we have the instances of Naga raiding in tea-gardens of plains. Gait stated, "the opening out of tea gardens beyond the border-line also at times involved the government in trouble some disputes with the frontier tribes in their vicinity" (Gait 2005: 317). Thus, in order to prevent the activities of raiding and idea of non-interference with the Naga, British came out with policy like Inner Line regulation. As Gait stated, "In order to prevent the recurrence of these difficulties power was given to the local authorities by the Inner Line

regulation of 1873 to prohibit British subjects generally, or those of specified classes, from going beyond a certain line, issued by the Deputy Commissioner and containing such conditions as might seem necessary" (Gait 2005: 317). The traditional relationship between the hills and the plains came under great impact because of this inner line system which excluded hills from the plains. Baruah argued, "The Inner line, for instance, was put in place as the security parameter of the colonial capitalist frontier at a time when the tea plantations, oil wells.... were changing the landscape, subverting local economic and social networks and property regimes" (Baruah 2008: 17).

"Exchange" ground to "Violence" ground:

As we have seen, the whole foothills regions which was supposed to be place of social and economic exchange, that also symbolised the 'mutual dependency' of plains and the hills, turned into reserved forest and tea gardens with the coming of British. In the post-British, the area unfold another complex situation with the emerging ideas of 'territoriality'/'sovereignty', as Naga's demand for a separate homeland also pointed out the foothills that they (Naga) clams to be 'transferred' to Assam.

Udayon Mishra stated, "Prior to the coming of the British, the idea of a well-defined territory for the Naga or the other tribes was virtually nonexistent" (Mishra 2003: 596). Since, it is well known that the people whom we called as Naga is not a homogenous group; they belong to heterogeneous tribes, each having their own dialects and calling by a distinctive name. It was only in early part of 20th century when Naga Club was formed, these 'divers' tribes were brought under single umbrella to be known as Naga. However, there is a long history how the Naga came into a unified group; for the present discussion it can be started from coming of Naga National Council (NNC) in 1946 and their demand. It is stated that NNC

initially did not claim for sovereignty rather was of “self-determination” and for acquiring fundamental rights (Mishra 1978: 818). After that NNC shift their demand for full independence which was followed by 9-Point Agreement also known as Hydari Agreement. In their 9-point demand NNC mentioned about the inclusion of forest land that they claim to be “transferred” to Assam and also the inclusion of other Naga habitat areas. The demand was as follows:

The present administrative divisions should be modified so as (1) to bring back into the Naga Hills District all the forests transferred to the Sibsagar and Nowgong Districts in the past, and (2) to bring under one unified administrative unit as far as possible all Nagas. All the areas so included would be within the scope of the present proposed agreement. No areas should be transferred out of the Naga Hills without the consent of the Naga Council.⁶

According to the 9-point agreement the Naga were given certain autonomy rights regarding judicial, legislative and executive matters. However, there was certain confusion in understanding between NNC and Government of India regarding the period of the agreement. The 9th point of the agreement stated as:

Period of Agreement – “The Governor of Assam as the Agent of the Government of the Indian Union will have a special responsibility for a period of 10 years to ensure the observance of the agreement, at the end of this period the Naga Council will be asked whether they require the above agreement to be extended for a further period or a new agreement regarding the future of Naga people arrived at”.⁷

Both NNC and Government of India interpreted the agreement in a different way. As Singh observed, “Some of the Naga

⁶ The Naga-Akbar Hydari Accord, 1947 (http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/nagaland/documents/papers/nagaland_9point.htm)

⁷ *Ibid*

leaders understood the ninth point to mean that the Naga people were quite free to decide their future status after ten years. But the Government of India, on the other hand, held that the ninth point did not give the Naga people any right to decide their future status beyond India, other than to join the plains districts of Assam, or adjoining areas to the Naga hills, or to have a separate status within the Indian Union” (Singh 1980: 818). With the rejection of the agreement new situation unfold in the hills as, NNC under the leadership of A.Z. Phizo, the Nagaland Movement, took away from “peaceful negotiation” to an aggressive campaign which also followed by boycott of 1952 election in Naga Hills.

Soon then the Naga issue was regarded as a “law-and-order” problem and accordingly Assam Maintenance of Public Order (Autonomous Districts) Act was introduced in 1953 for application in the Naga Hills District. Under such measures, all Naga tribal councils and courts were dismissed. Since then long conflict between the state police and cadres of NNC occurred resulting immense bloodshed and uncertainty of lives in the Naga Hills (Chasie and Hazarika 2009: 5).

Such unexpected damage of lives and property resulting from the armed struggle made some of the Nagas to take another path for the solution of their problem and as a result emerged out moderate group and formed Naga People Convention (NPC) in 1957. After a series of discussion between NPC and Government of India, Naga Hills Tuensang Area was created as a new administrative unit on 1st December, 1957. Again with a view to solving the Naga problem NPC constituted a Draft Committee to prepare a plan for political settlement and finally it took what is popularly known as 16-point Agreement. Likewise the 9-point Agreement here also the Naga highlight their demand for inclusion of reserved forest, that they claim to be “transferred” to Assam, and also inclusion other Naga habitat areas of Assam, NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh) and Manipur. In 12 of the 16-points stated:

The delegation wished the following to be placed on record: "The Naga delegation discussed the question of the inclusion of the Reserve Forests and of contiguous areas inhabited by the Nagas. They were referred to the provisions in Article 3 and 4 of the Constitution, prescribing the procedure for the transfer of areas from one state to another".⁸

In 13 of 16-points is as follows:

The Naga delegation wished the following to be placed on record: "The Naga leaders expressed for the contiguous areas to join the new States. It was pointed out to them on behalf of the Government of India that Articles 3 and 4 of the Constitution provided for increasing the area of any State, but it was not possible for the Government of India to make any commitment in this regard at this stage".⁹

However, all the 16-point demands were not recognized when Nagaland State Act was passed. Udayon Mishra mentioned, "The Naga demand for the inclusion of reserved forests and contiguous areas inhabited by the Naga tribes, which they felt had been 'transferred' out of the Naga Hills and joined to other districts of Assam by colonial government for administrative convenience, was left unattended" (Mishra 2014: 16). As a result, the boundary remained the same as in the 1925 notification which consists of Kohima, Mokokchung and Tuensang. Since then, the border became a major issue between these two states.

Right after that the area turned into a 'violence ground' occurring interstate border clashes, at Kakodanga reserved forest in 1965, followed by some major conflicts in January, 1979 several villages were came under attack in South Nambor,

⁸ The 16 Point Agreement between the Government of India and the Naga People's Convention. (http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IN_600726_The%20sixteen%20point%20Agreement_0.pdf)

⁹ U. A. Shimray, Naga Population and Integration Movement, New Delhi, Mittal Publication, 2007, pp. 88

Rengma and Diphu Reserved Forest (Mishra 1979: 449). The 1979 attack was said to be concentrated on the villages near Chungajan Tiniali, Chungajan Mikir Village and Uriamghat under mentioned reserve forests; In the attack 467 huts were burnt down and 54 villagers were got killed (Kindo and Minji 2008: 31). After the Chungajan conflict of 1979, another major conflict took place in Merapani (Doyang reserved) in 1985, in which more than 100 villagers were massacred (Gohain 2007: 3280). Another conflict took place in 7th April of 1989, in Rajapukhuri Village under Rengma Reserved Forest; it is stated that according to official record 25 people were dead and 178 houses were burnt down (Kindo and Minji: 34). These are some of the major conflict that took place as a result of incessant border dispute between Assam and Nagaland.

The Border:

This incessant border dispute have been creating a lot of uncertainty resulting in fear and crisis of security among the people residing in this long bordering foothills of Assam and Nagaland which I would termed as '*blurring border*'. All these fear and crisis of security have somewhat connected with this '*blurring*' nature of the area that is discussed below. I termed it as "*blurring border*" for three reasons:

- 1) Firstly, the whole region is called as "border" in one hand, at the same time it is also called as "disputed area". Dispute in the sense that both Assam and Nagaland has been claiming to be actual 'owner' of the land.
- 2) Secondly, at present it seems very difficult to find out a very specific 'line', which is an important component to define the boundary between Assam and Nagaland. This complexity is because of the existence of both Naga and non-Naga within a given region. In South Nambor, for instance, in between some Assam villages like *Ganashpur*, *Nabapur*, *Raipur*, *Rangmaipur*, *Laxamibasti* and *East-*

Panjan there are also some Naga villages like *Yetoho*, *Xuxubi* and *Lohivi*. Interestingly, it is found that those Naga villages encircled by Assam villages use to classify as Nagaland and those non-Naga villages as Assam. Likewise, close to the western bank of Rengma River, in between Assam villages like *Horipur*, *Mashgaon*, *Bhaluguri* and *Dhupguri* there also exists Naga villages like *Nitko*, *Nekhye*. Here also those Naga villages use to classify as Nagaland. While, on the other hand, within the Naga majority villages like *Allivi*, *R. Hoxay*, *Anzitivi* and *Khotibi* there is a small village known as *Santipur*, which represents as Assam. These are few examples that articulate the complexity of existence in the region.

- 3) Lastly, it can be said that each and every region has certain prior necessities, these necessities may vary from place to place or people to people depending upon the situations in which they live. In this part of the region, the most important necessities which people claims for is of 'security' (life/economic security). Since, according to 1979 interim agreement between Assam and Nagaland, Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) as "neutral force" was given responsibility to maintain *status quo* in the region. Despite this as Udayon Mishra stated, "stray attacks on the villagers, abductions and extortions of money from the Naga side of the border had become a common feature of an area which was supposed be under the control of a 'neutral' central force, in this case, the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF)" (Mishra 2014: 15). Moreover, the centre¹⁰ and

¹⁰ Centre, Assam indulge in blame game over border violence, in The Times of India, August 21, 2014, Union Minister of State for Home Affairs of India stated, "This is a problem of Assam and Nagaland, and both states should talk and sort it out.... the Central Government can only assist the state governments. I don't understand why the CRPF is being blamed for the situation" (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Centre-Assam-indulge-in-blame-game-over-border-violence/articleshow/40552773.cms>) (accessed on 21 August, 2014)The Assam Tribune, August 20, 2014, CM of Assam stated, "The Government of India is not taking the issue as seriously as it should have".

state¹¹ “blaming game” that seen in the recent violence (August 2014) to escape their responsibility makes concern; it makes certain confusion whether the region is “governed” or “ungoverned” that makes the region “blurring” in nature.

Moreover, whenever any violence takes place in this long border area, always the term ‘encroachment’ comes into centre point of debate. Usually, ‘encroachment’ stands for something that is not ‘to be done’. Can we raise question on the term ‘encroachment’ itself? Here I contextualizing it to “people”, Since the understanding of so-called ‘encroachment’ in the present context of ‘border dispute’ issue may vary between: those who are ‘regarding’ the activities as ‘encroachment’ and those who are ‘regarded’ as ‘encroacher’. In other words, the activities that are said as ‘encroachment’ may be the ‘means’ or ‘way’ to survive for the people residing in the region. For instance, it is seen that some families from villages like Ranipukhari, Ratanpur and Yampha of Rengma forest, even work as *adhiar* (share croppers) in Naga Villages.¹²

However, prior to the colonial regime there was no such restriction in utilising forest resources or forest lands; even people were found shifting (mostly the tribal) from one place to other. It was the only after the coming British that the area unfold certain restriction in such utilization when the forests were brought under *fencing* system. Moreover, if we go back to history of ‘village formation’ herein, it was the British administration itself that started the process of settlement in the ‘reserved forest’. As already mentioned that these bordering

(<http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=aug2114/at051>)
(accessed on 21 August, 2014).

¹¹ The Assam Tribune, August 20, 2014, CM of Assam stated, “The Government of India is not taking the issue as seriously as it should have”. (<http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/detailsnew.asp?id=aug2114/at051>)
(accessed on 21 August, 2014).

¹² People of these villages mostly belong to Bodo and ex-tea gardeners. Most of them don't have land holding thus work as sharecroppers. Even those holding small plot of land also work as sharecroppers.

foothills of hills and plains were very rich in natural resources, which were converted into "reserved forests". Accordingly in order to exploit them people were allowed to practice agriculture there in and in return they had to render physical labour like collecting forest resources and other activities on behalf of British forest department (Saikia 2008: 8 and Sharma 2013: 7). In the process various 'forest village' (*bon gaon*) and '*taungya*'¹³ village were established in different reserved forest, even in the reserved forests of present Assam-Nagaland border areas. For instance, in 1905 British forest department itself established four such forest villages in Doyang Reserved (now under 'D' sector) namely, Merapani, Chaudang Pathar, Kachamari and Amguri and during 1951-54 Assam Government set up number of 'forest' and '*tungiya*' villages in the area (Sharma 2013: 10). Under such scheme people from various regions of Assam migrated to forest villages in search of livelihood. Moreover, in 1950s, as Arupjyoti Saikia argued, "the Congress Party-led Assam government, primarily driven by a populist political agenda, encouraged landless rural families to settle on forest land" (Saikia 2008: 44). Also, the great earthquake of 1950 also had large impact in topography of upper Assam creating more flood and erosion and thus loss of land; these people who have lost their land also migrated in search of livelihood in these areas (Sharma 2013: 9-10). Moreover, it is stated that during 1968-70, Assam Government settled people in adjoining forest tracts of Nambor and Doyang in order to protect from Nagaland; under this policy, also known as "half-a-mile settlement"¹⁴, landless people from

¹³ Chandan Kumar Sharma discussed *taungya* as a forest management in which land are cleared and planted for producing food crops. Seeding of desirable tree species are then planted on the same plot, leading in time to harvestable stand of timber. *Taungya* village in Assam were established for the people those were engaged in shifting cultivation. See Chandan Kumar Sharma, *Krishak Mukti Sangram Samity and its Struggle: The New Peasant Assertion in Assam*, 2012

¹⁴ Under the policy of "half-a-mile settlement" people were allowed to settle in a distance of half mile from the inter-state border. See Chandan Kumar

neighbouring areas came and settled within a distance of half mile from the inter-state border (*ibid.*: 11).

There are many such instances of landless people migration to this region, which reveals nothing but finding 'way' for livelihood. In this context, the understanding of so-called 'encroachment' is different for the people residing therein. Critically thinking the issue of border is between the "states" or "with the state"; in this complex circumstances the innocent people become the victims. Udayon Mishra rightly argued, "Those impoverished villagers that fell to bullets and machetes or were trapped in their burning houses were clearly victims of circumstances. It did not really matter for them whether the land they were living in belonged to Assam or Nagaland. Their deaths were part of their incessant struggle to stay alive in a system that offered them virtually nothing by way of substance and security" (Mishra 2014: 17).

Conclusion:

Thus, how the whole foothill region traditionally which was supposed to a ground of exchange and mutual dependency turned into a violence ground with the emerging ideas of 'territoriality', 'sovereignty' and so on. However, now the issue did not stick only with land it also have something to do with the mineral resources like crude oil, there are many such oil field like- Ghulapani, Haldibari, Koraghat in Rengma reserved forest, likewise Shalukpathar, Rangmaipur in Nambor reserved forest. Now whole the issue of Assam-Nagaland border dispute have reached such a level that meaning of 'peaceful life' have sunk down; thus question comes, does life in such situations possible in this '*blurring*' kind of area; if not? Then required effective measures in the form of 'governance'. It is also important for those who believe in violence means for a solution

that violence does not bring peace rather it creates more hostility among the groups. It is well known that making and unmaking of boundaries was created during colonial period for better administrative purpose. If the conditions go on the same way, it may lead to nothing but self-distraction of the whole region.

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