

Assam Mizoram Dispute

In North Eastern States of India the ethnic tensions persisted for several decades. But the violent clash that erupted on July 26th on the borders of Assam and Mizoram was unprecedented which led to the death of six police personnel of Assam, a bystander and injuring more than 50 people.

The border disputes between North Eastern States have been recurring since 1960's when the process of carving out states from the undivided Assam commenced. Non resolution of these disputes has given strong community sentiments among states concerned and vitiated the interstate relations.

Almost all the disputes have their origin in the British colonial rule and reflect the consequences of the British policy of creating and recreating boundaries for their expansion of tea plantations in the region.

Mizoram was carved out of Assam and established as UT in 1972 and as a full-fledged state in 1987. Three districts of Assam – Cachar, Hailakandi and Kasimganj share 164.6 km long border with 3 districts of Mizoram – Aizwal, Kolasib and Mamit. The dispute stems from Mizoram's refusal to accept the boundary defined in the North Eastern Areas' (reorganization) Act of 1971, which in turn is based on notification in 1933 arguing that it was decision imposed upon them by the British. Mizos reject this demarcation and believe in 1875 demarcation drawn in consultation with their leaders.

The first major instance of border dispute between the two states in independent India came to the fore in 1994, when Mizoram objected to Assam's attempt to extend its control over the inner line forest. Major clashes along the borders broke out in 2006, 2008, 2018 and 2020 and more recently in 2021.

Before the violent clash on July 26th ironically the Assam Chief Minister Mr. Himanta and Mizoram Chief Minister Mr. Zoramthanga had a spat on twitter instead of trying to ease the tensions. Both have escalated the tensions resulting in the death of the 6 police personnel and more than 50 injured. After the incident many politicians have given provoking speeches. An MP from Mizoram said, Assam police were lucky that all of them weren't killed and in Assam Cachar district BJP MLA said, if they continue an economic blockade the people of Mizoram will starve to death.

Mizoram and Assam have had border disputes for several decades but often ended in brief clashes between the residents of both the state borders and the tensions would ease with little administrative intervention. But this time politicians from both the states did little to ease the tension and instead raised further allegations against each other. The Assam state govt. has issued a travel advisory not to travel to Mizoram and an economic blockade was enforced after the clash. After the Centre's intervention both CMs calmed down and talked about maintaining peace at the borders and agreed for

deployment of a neutral force at the border and also agreed to continue mutual discussions to resolve the border issue in an amicable manner.

In a letter to Union Home Secretary Mr. Balla, Mizoram govt. said "The blockade is affecting the livelihood of the people of Mizoram adversely. Movement of vehicles along other routes connecting Mizoram and Assam have also been blocked inside Assam. The state sponsored blockade was earlier imposed by Assam for a long period lasting for 25 days in Oct-Nov 2020. That blockade had seriously affected the livelihood of the people of Mizoram resulting in various hardships".

Despite officials' claim that disputes being resolved, people of Mizoram continued to be affected by the rail and road blockade. On 28th July national highway 306, the main highway entering Mizoram through which state essential commodities like fuel, medicine are delivered was blocked on Assam side border. Between 28th July and 7th Aug as the economic blockade tightened around Mizoram, it seriously hampered the daily life as well as Mizoram's already struggling health system amid COVID-19. The politicians from both states have continued to evade accountability for their actions. On 5th Aug Ministers of both states agreed to withdraw forces from the disputed border areas and work towards lasting peace. But in reality the tension is escalating. The trucks were attacked at the town of Lailapur. The trucks were taking essential supplies to Mizoram. A Deputy Commissioner from Mizoram quoted saying, "they escorted my people out of Mizoram house and then left them to the mercy of the angry mob at Lailapur".

Many political commentators from North Eastern States as reported in the media said that the escalation of the crisis and continuation of the blockade were largely because of the central government's inaction. On July 25th Amit Shah, Union Home Minister had met the Chief Ministers of the seven states of North East and agreed that a policy of "give and take" would be adopted along borders". A journalist from Meghalaya Mukhim said, "the idea floated by Assam Chief Minister that states should respect constitutional boundaries is fraught with contentious misconceptions since tribals recognise their cultural boundaries. For tribals land is also about their identity and not just a living space."

Minister of State of Home Nityanand Rai said, "the approach of central government has consistently been that inter-state disputes can be resolved only with the co-operation of the state governments concerned and that the central government acts as a facilitator for amicable settlement of the dispute in the spirit of mutual understanding."

"The states usually approach Supreme Court to resolve the disputes but demarcation of boundaries is an executive task. Therefore Supreme Court usually recommends formation of the boundary commission. If any state doesn't accept the recommendation of the boundary commission little progress can be made" said Chalena of RRAG (Rights and Risk Analysis Group).

Fresh tensions erupted in Hailakand district of Assam after primary school was bombed by unknown miscreants at Kachurthal area on 13th Aug night. It is the fourth school bombed on the borders. In another clash in the early hours of Aug 17th one person from Mizoram sustained gun shot from Assam police as reported and as usual both the

states blamed each other for the firing. Border dispute between Assam and Mizoram intensified in 2018 and injuries to 143 persons indicate intensity of the clashes.

Amid these tensions on Aug 13th Assam assembly passed the Assam Cattle Preservation Bill-2021, seeking to ban cattle slaughter and sale of beef in the areas of where Hindus, Jains and Sikhs are in majority or within 5 km of radius of temples or institutions prescribed by the authorities.

Supreme Court has clearly suggested that no one has the right to interfere with the personal food of anyone.

MLA Akhil Gogoi of Assam hitting out at Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma has said "Assam will remember Himanta Biswa Sarma as the most communal and divisive CM". He said, "this bill is going to destroy the rural economy and will lead to severe inflation as already seen in the price rise in meat, eggs and fish after the bill was introduced. All dairy farmers will be impacted by this as they will not be able to sell their non milking cows for slaughter.

The market involved with purchase and sale of cows will be severely impacted. Though BJP led govt. has brought in the bill to hit the Muslim community in the end it will hit hard the indigenous Hindus of the state who are dependent on the cattle economy, Mr. Gogoi asserted.

It is alarming to see, just months after Mr. Himanta took oath as Assam CM, reports of border disputes between Assam and neighbouring states began surfacing. These instances pose a serious threat to the at least decade long peaceful relations between the north eastern states, inspite of border disputes.

BJP set up North Eastern Democratic Alliance (NEDA). Both Mizo National Front (MNF) and the BJP, ruling parties in Mizoram and Assam are part of NEDA. In spite of that armed forces of two states have fought on the borders. Senior journalist Sekhar Gupta says "the borders were redrawn in a hurry that lot of history, ethnicity and tribal claims were overlooked and with CAA-NRC they are lighting up a fire which one won't be able to control. BJP sees North East as a monolith but it is not so. North East has no single identity, there are ethnicity and tribal insecurities which needs to be addressed".

Centre is reportedly planning to use satellite images to settle the disputes once for all. Many political observers argue that past and present ruling parties lack of understanding of the ethnic minorities and the desire to preserve their identities will be the root cause of every problem in the region's future. There is a very big agenda behind all this and just need to dig deep. In all this the people of both the states are the ones' who are at loss and must be cautious.