

Socio-Political Dynamics of Joint Eviction Drive in Assam-Nagaland Borderlands

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact and socio-political dynamics of eviction drives conducted within the Rengma, South Nambor, and Doyang Reserves Forests which was jointly organised by the state of Assam and Nagaland from July 2025-September 2025. This study used qualitative content analysis approach from various media reports of national, regional, and local level. The paper was illustrated through thematic analysis based on seven different key themes. Two perspectives have been incorporated such as Lewis Coser's theory of social conflict and Raffestin's theory of territoriality. While authorities justified the drive based on legal and ecological concerns with the aim to stop encroachment and restore the forest land. The affected communities of Bengali-speaking Muslim residents perceived it as discriminatory and exclusionary policy by highlighting their enrolment in the state issued identity documents and the government classification as illegal residents. The unilateral decision of Assam in conducting plantation drive has triggered border escalation. Findings highlight humanitarian impact over the affected population and intensified inter-state border escalation.

Introduction:

Historically, the Assam-Nagaland border has politically remained a contested space which is characterized by contestation of land and periodic inter-state conflicts. Bordoloi traced the border dispute was originated since the formation of Naga hills in 1866. The boundary dispute is considered as one of the bloodiest disputes in the North eastern region (Bordoloi, 2019).

Joshi argues that borders are not simply a Geographical line demarcating territorial boundary. But relationships between communities are created and mechanisms from which territorial authority is maintained (edited by David N. Gellner, 2013).

Nagaland was officially created as the 16th state of India on 1st December 1963 which was originally part of Assam during the colonial and early post-independence period. Both the states of Assam and Nagaland share a long and historically significant interstate boundary in the northeastern region of India. The border between the two states stretches for several hundred kilo meters and runs along districts such as Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, and Karbi Anglong in Assam and districts like Mokokchung, Wokha, Mon, and Dimapur in Nagaland.

The Assam eviction drive was conducted in five different districts namely; Dhubri, Goalpara, Lakhimpur, Nalbari, and Golaghat (Karmakar, 3rd August, 2025, Deccan Herald).

Among all these districts; South Nambor reserve forest, Rengma reserve forest, and Doyang reserve forest was affected in the Golaghat District of Assam-Nagaland border region. Eviction drive in Uriamghat area at Rengma reserve forest was started on 29th July 2025. As per the forest officials, a total of 11 villages

were marked for the first phase of exercise within the Rengma Reserve Forest namely; Madhupur, Sonaribil, Anandpur, Pithaghat, Rajapukhuri, Dayalapur, Gelajan, Dalanpathar, Vidyapur Bazaar, Vidyapur and Kherbari. Around 100 machines of Pokland and excavators was used which were deployed by the Assam government. From this area as much as 2,648 illegal houses, about 200 business establishments, and around 50 concrete houses of residential buildings were demolished. Since the location falls in the sensitive area along the Assam and Nagaland border, maximum security was deployed by Assam including high ranking officials such as Chief Forest Conservator, Inspector General of Police (IGP), 500 forest guards, 2000 Assam Police personnel, and other district administrative officials (Purkayastha, 29th July, 2025, Hindustan times).

Another phase of eviction drive was undertaken successfully on 18th August 2025 at three locations, Hatidubi, Rana Nagar, and No. 1 Madhupur within the Rengma forest. It was reported that around 80 households were demolished in Madhupur, 104 in Hatidubi, and 44 in Rana Nagar. The Government official stated that second phase of eviction in the forest area was conducted significantly to restore the encroached land and to bring ecological balance within the area. The authorities also mentioned that an illegal factory for processing betel nut was operating within the encroached land (Avantika, 26th August, 2025, India Today NE; Anand, 30th July, 2025, Deccan Chronicle).

During the eviction drive conducted in the Disputed Area Belt (DAB) on 4th August 2025 at Aghunaqa area under Nuland district, which is considered South Nambor Reserve Forest. The Assam government coordinated with Nagaland Police including representatives from Western Sumi civil bodies. In this exercise a total of 1,000 bighas were reclaimed peacefully without resistance from the local communities (4th August, 2025, Nagaland Post).

Subsequently, a joint eviction drive was conducted on 8th August 2026 in Negherbil at Doyang reserve forest in the Assam-Nagaland border by affecting a total of 146 households.

The structures which were reported to be constructed within the Reserve Forest were also involved. Police personnel's and government officials from both states were present during the eviction exercise. Assam's Special Chief Secretary, M.K. Yadav, stated, legal procedures were followed in the entire process and acknowledged the government of Nagaland for its joint effort. He also stated that approximately 50 hectares (around 400 bighas) had reclaimed successfully (G Plus News, 8th August, 2025; NDTV, 9th August 2025).

This study is significant because beyond the immediate removal of settlements the eviction drive had large consequences. It affected residents' sense of belongingness, livelihood security, generated institutional marginalisation, and contributed to renewed tension of the contested Assam-Nagaland borderland. Therefore, the study considers eviction as a political and social process rather than purely an administrative exercise.

Objective:

1. To examine the socio-political dynamics in which eviction drive were contested, justified, and experienced.
2. To analyse how eviction drive affected identity formation, community relations, and inter-state relations.

Methodology:

The present study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the Assam–Nagaland border eviction

episode, with particular attention to the nature of state intervention, community responses, border politics, media representations, and the consequences of eviction. The study relied primarily on documentary and media-based sources, supplemented by interviews. The material consists of national, regional, and local newspaper reports published between July to September 2025 corresponding to the period in which significant developments and public discussions surrounding the eviction episode were reported. The study was organised around three embedded sites, namely Rengma, South Nambor/DAB, and Doyang, which were selected to capture variations in the experience and responses associated with the border eviction episode. The collected materials were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis for developing a contextual and multidimensional understanding of the Assam–Nagaland border eviction episode

Theoretical and analytical Framework:

The study uses Lewis Coser theory of Social Conflict as its principal theoretical lens. Coser argues that conflict can strengthen group boundaries and internal solidarity under particular conditions. This framework is used to examine whether perceived external pressure associated with the eviction and border contestation contributed to stronger collective identification among affected communities. On the other hand, Raffestin's theory of territoriality was also used which he argues that the concept of territory refers to product of social interactions and power relations. Territoriality refers to actors' relationship with other actors regulate and control power over space.

Results and Discussions:

Theme 1: Eviction as State Territorial Governance: Legality, Conservation and Security

The eviction drive carried out in the reserve forests by the Assam Government has been officially supported by the Guwahati High Court in 18th August 2025, directed the government of Assam to implement strengthen measures in controlling illegal entry within the reserve forest area. Further, it also suggested that to prevent illegal entry and to maintain proper check, different mechanisms can be applied such as proper checking in entry points, constructing fence with barbed wires, and establish Check post in the border (Baruah, 19th August, 2025, The Indian Express).

The Assam Chief Forest Conservator M.K. Yadava stated that eviction exercise was conducted with proper planning and mandatory procedures which clearly illustrates state's trying to establish legitimacy of the operation (29th July, 2025, The Hindu).

The argument of Lunstrum and Ybarra's (2018) is relevant because it draws attention towards the relationship between territorialisation and conservation. In this case Assam motive of forest protection is can be understood simultaneously as mechanism to in strengthening control over territory.

This theme hold significance for the study because the reserve forests are located in the Assam-Nagaland borderland space where these jurisdiction remains contested.

Theme 2: Belonging, Citizenship and the Production of 'Illegality'

Several residents shared their dismay and reportedly claimed that their families had lived in the area for decades and has possessed government issued documents such as Voter Identification and Aadhaar Cards. One resident explained that their family had settled in the area since 1974 and questioned the government why they are removed having possessed government official documents after living there for several decades (Purkayastha, 29th July, 2025, Hindustan times).

This narrative provides a distinction between territorial legitimacy and citizenship. When state consider the land as reserve forests, having citizenship documents does not guarantee or recognise a person as

legitimate occupant. The issue becomes significantly political when Bengali-Muslim communities were categorised as “Illegal immigrant” and the government declaration of eviction to conducted on the illegal settlements who were from Bengali-Speaking communities. Another concern was generated when eviction directives were issued towards this particular communities which indicates illegality as a political construction (Karmakar, 3rd August, 2025, Deccan Herald).

A young Bengali-speaking Muslim articulated demanding separate autonomous council and his comparison with Bodo community who were granted separate political autonomy with lesser number of populations reflects lack of unequal distribution of institutional protection and political recognition towards their communities (Purkayastha, 29th July, 2025, Hindustan times). From Coser’s perspective, such perceived exclusion and external threat experienced by an individual established a collective political concern which can contribute to stronger group identification.

Theme 3: Eviction, Displacement and Livelihood Insecurity

This theme will discuss the social and economic consequences of eviction, as the effect has gone beyond demolition of houses.

One respondent stated that the government did not pay any compensation, financial or material support to the evicted families. He further stated that the Muslim families who were involved in legal proceedings faced difficulties temporarily in accessing BPL rice benefits. These accounts clearly indicate that following eviction, possible livelihood insecurity and welfare disruption had taken place. The impact was also experienced by the families which were yet to be evicted. One Adivasi respondent described, fear has developed after the announcement of eviction that our houses might also be targeted subsequently. Many families began removing their house tin roofing, windows and doors making sure that even their houses are demolished they can preserve these materials and reuse it.

This experience illustrates that eviction exercise has consequences on the families before demolition began. A pre-emptive displacement condition was produced through the anticipation of household behaviour.

Theme 4: Border Politics and Competing Territorial Claims

The South Nambor, Rengma and Doyang areas are located in the Borderland of Assam and Nagaland with contested territorial jurisdiction. Thus, demolition of settlements in these areas can be interpreted differently by both sides.

Likewise, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) Niki Sumi accused the Assam Government by stating that the move of eviction drive by them was well planned and its motive was to grab the land of the Nagas. It also stated that, these reserve forests are historically ancestral land of the Nagas but the colonialist transferred all these areas for administrative need without consultation with the Nagas. The faction also alleged that the so called “illegal immigrants” were invited and welcomed to settle down in the Disputed Area Belt (DAB) by the Assam Government and the eviction exercise is a total violation of maintaining status quo agreed by the respective states (29th July, 2025, The Hindu).

Similar interpretation was made by the Naga civil society actors that proposed plantation drive by Assam will create territorial tension. Representatives from Yamhon Area Public Organisation and Ralan Hoho argued that if Assam carried out plantation in the evicted areas, status quo could be altered (Hornbill TV, 21 August 2025; *Nagaland Tribune*, 23 August 2025).

The meaning of land reclamation differs from the perspective of Assam Government as it refers to restoration of reserve forest land but from the Naga civil society perspective it may represent consolidation

of Assam territorial presence. This reveals that removal of alleged encroachments was supported by the Nagas however, they were concerned and contested on what will happen on the land post eviction.

Theme 5: Eviction-Induced Mobility control and Inter-State security

Following the announcement of eviction drive in the Reserve forest areas, the government of Nagaland was concerned about the possibility of evicted persons to enter Nagaland and considers as an external thread for security and administrative concerns. Therefore, the Nuland District administration in coordination with Nagaland police, and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) intercepted around 200 vehicles from various Check gates under Nuland district carrying persons who were reportedly described as evicted immigrants (25th July, 2025, NDTV). This illustrates how security surveillance and secondary forms of mobility control is created in the neighbouring state when eviction occurs in one state.

On 11th August 2025, the Naga Students Federation wrote a strong representation to the Government of Nagaland and urged for an immediate suspension of inner line permits (ILPs) in the affected districts. It urged the government to collect data about the origins of the evicted families from the Assam government so that their identity will be clear and issuance of ILP will be safely resumed (13th August, 2025, the Assam Tribune).

Theme 6: Collective Mobilisation and the Strengthening of Internal Solidarity

From the eviction evidence, forms of collective mobilisation were generated to both Naga civil societies and the affected families. The residents of Bengali-Speaking Muslim experienced eviction as a political exclusion. A demand for separate autonomous council represents an individual experiences of insecurity and attempted to for collective political mobilisation.

Territorial encroachment through plantation drive post eviction was perceived as threat by the Naga civil society organisation. Subsequently, the Yamhon Area Public Organisation and Ralan Hoho had thorough discussion on the matter and collectively issued public statement. The joint opposition to plantation illustrates Coser's argument that external conflict can strengthen internal group cohesion. The perceived external threat encourages different Naga organisations to coordinate their responses around a shared concern for territorial protection.

Theme 7: Contradictory State Response and the Reproduction of Border Tensions

Though the eviction drive was described as joint operations between Assam and Nagaland. Non-state actors extend their question to Nagaland Government on their nature of participation.

An ex-MLA from Ralan area mentioned that Nagaland Government says it is a joint eviction but, being a neighbouring community, we notice that high ranking officials such as Deputy Commissioner, Superintendent of Police from Golaghat Assam often come and visit during the eviction drive. Whereas he mentioned that Nagaland officials' representation appeared to be comparatively limited. He further questioned that whether the declaration of joint eviction was appropriate when the issue of Assam Nagaland Border is still on-going in the Supreme Court and the case remained sub judice (Hornbill TV, Aug 21, 2025)

Thus, significant contradiction is shown with this statement of criticism. Mutual coordination was possible in pretext of forest management through eviction; however, disagreement continued from both side for maintaining territorial sovereignty. Similar situation was established when plantation drive was mutually agreed by both the state Government. Subsequently, Naga civil society organisations opposed such activities conducted in the evicted areas.

Conclusion:

The eviction drive in the Rengma, South Nambor, and Doyang reserve forests should not be understood solely just an administrative act to reclaim the forest land. Rather the evidence of this study has showed a wider field of identity politics, citizenship claims, territorial contestation, and inter-state relations. State authorities framed the exercise primarily through forest conservation, legality, control of alleged illegal economic activities, and prevention of encroachment. On the other hand, Naga-civil society actors and affected residents interpreted through competing claims of territorial rights, and belonging. Such coexisting narratives serve as central in understanding the socio-political dynamics of the eviction drive. Raffestin's theory of territoriality conceptualises territory as a product of power relations and social interactions rather than as a fixed geographical space. Territoriality refers to the relationships through which actors organise, appropriate, regulate and exercise power over space and in relation to other actors. Since different actors possess different capacities and interests, territory is continuously constructed, negotiated and contested. This perspective is applicable to the Assam–Nagaland borderland, where the joint eviction drive represents an exercise of territorial power through forest governance, eviction, policing and surveillance, while Naga civil society organisations and affected communities contest such practices through claims of ancestral land, belonging, citizenship and livelihood. Territoriality therefore provides a framework for understanding the eviction drive as a struggle over the control, meaning and legitimacy of contested borderland space.

The findings also demonstrated that consequences of eviction have been operated in three different levels. The demolition of homes, uncertainty over access to welfare, and livelihood insecurity at the household level. Political mobilisation and expressions of collective identity by eviction experienced at the community level. And in the inter-state level, the subsequent security responses and plantation initiatives has revived the tension of long-standing disputes on the Assam-Nagaland boundary.

The findings demonstrate relevance of Lewis Coser's theory of social conflict; eviction has resulted in strengthening internal solidarity among different communities. The plantation drive initiative was considered an external threat by the Naga civil bodies by revisiting it through collective effort. Similarly, among Bengali-speaking Muslims, it has encouraged internal solidarity through a political articulation. Thus, group boundaries were reinforced and have enhanced identity consciousness.

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