Assam-Meghalaya Border Dispute Agreement

Why in news?

Assam and Meghalaya have partially resolved a 50-year-old border dispute in six of the 12 sectors.

How did the boundary dispute start?

- Meghalaya, carved out of Assam as an autonomous State in 1970, became a full-fledged State in 1972.
- It was based on the Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act of 1969
- The Meghalaya government refused to accept it because the Act followed the recommendations of a 1951 committee that defined the boundary of Meghalaya.
- Based on the panel's recommendations, areas of the present-day East Jaintia Hills, Ri-Bhoi and West Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya were transferred to the districts of Assam.
- After claims and counter-claims, the dispute was narrowed down to 12 sectors on the basis of an official claim by Meghalaya in 2011.

How did the two governments go about handling the issue?

- In 1983 a joint official committee was formed to address the issue.
- The committee suggested that the Survey of India should re-delineate the boundary with the cooperation of both the States but there was no follow-up action.
- In 1985 an independent panel headed by Justice Y.V. Chandrachud was constituted.
- Meghalaya rejected the report as it was allegedly pro-Assam.
- In 1991 both the governments agreed to jointly demarcate the border with the help of the Survey of India.
- About 100 km of the border was demarcated by the end of 1991, but Meghalaya found the exercise unconstitutional and refused to cooperate.
- In 2011, the Meghalaya Assembly passed a resolution for central intervention and the constitution of a boundary commission.
- The Assam Assembly retaliated with a resolution to oppose the move.
- The Centre made the two governments appoint nodal officers to discuss the boundary dispute.
- In 2019, the Meghalaya government petitioned the Supreme Court to direct the Centre to settle the dispute but the petition was dismissed.

What about the current agreement?

- Both States formed three regional committees, one each for a district affected by the disputed sectors.
- The main objective is to end the boundary dispute between the two states in six of the 12 areas along their 885-km boundary.
- The committees, each headed by a cabinet minister, were given "five principles" for approaching the issue which includes
    - historical facts of a disputed sector

    - ethnicity
    - administrative convenience
    - willingness of people
    - contiguity of land preferably with natural boundaries such as rivers, streams and rocks
- Of the disputed territory (a little over 36 square kilometres), the two States will get a near equal share, enshrining the sharing principle by adopting a give-and-take approach.
- The agreement was signed by Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and his Meghalaya counterpart Conrad Sangma, in the presence of Home Minister Amit Shah.
- There is a fear among non-tribal people that they could end up living in a region with no right.

What will be the impact of the settlement on other border disputes in North-East?

- Assam, the mother State from which other States were carved out in the northeast, currently has boundary disputes with Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Nagaland.
- The agreement amplifies cooperative federalism and provides a road map for resolution of other boundary disputes between states.
- It is said that in the next six-seven months, the second phase of resolution would commence for the remaining sites.

From 2019 to 2022, many achievements in establishing peace in the North East have been seen - NLFT agreement (2019), Bru-Reang agreement (2020), Bodo agreement (2020), Karbi-Anglong agreement (2021), and today's Assam-Meghalaya border agreement.

References

1. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/the-assam-meghalaya-boundary-dispute-resolution/article65273908.ece
2. https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/step-by-step/article65279627.ece

SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering