Northeast's integration

Why in news?

The integration of Northeast India into mainstream Indian life has been on the national agenda from the very start of India's journey as an independent nation.

Why Northeast India's integration has still been an issue?

- The region has always been seen to be somewhat alien and needing assimilation, which found reflection in administrative terms too.
- Two such measures, on opposite ends of the spectrum, should characterize this predicament:
    1. The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution introduced in 1949
    2. The draconian Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), was promulgated in 1958.
- Seventy-five years after Independence, the question is how successful this integration has been.

Why the Northeast Indian States is considered an excluded area?

- The British had also considered leaving this "Mongolian Fringe", a term British India Foreign Secretary Olaf Caroe coined in a paper in 1940, as a Crown Colony.
- This entity was to be a combination of hill regions of the Northeast and Upper Burma.
- The Governor of Assam, Robert Reid 1937 observed that "the people here, neither racially, historically, culturally, nor linguistically", had any affinity with the rest of India".
- These "Excluded" and "Partially Excluded" areas as Reid mentions, were constituted largely of the unadministered hills of Assam.
- These areas were separated from their revenue plains by an "Inner Line" created by the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation 1873.
- This was a year before Assam was separated from Bengal and made a Chief Commissioner's Province.
- Earlier, Assam was annexed into British Bengal after the First Anglo-Burmese War 1824-26 and the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo.

Why did the crown colony plan fail?

- British Assam was virtually the entire Northeast of today, excluding two kingdoms, Tripura and Manipur.
- In these kingdoms too, though no Inner Line was introduced, the British brought similar administrative mechanisms separating "excluded" hills from the revenue plains.
- In Tripura, the plains of Chakla Roshanabad were annexed to British Bengal and the

Tripura kings were allowed to be landowners there but not claim sovereignty over them.
- In Manipur, the hills and the central revenue plains of the Imphal valley came to be treated as separate administrative regions in 1907.
- The Crown Colony plan was ultimately dropped on grounds of administrative feasibility.
- Reid's idea probably was also influenced by a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929 by a Naga nationalist body, Naga Club, which argued that Nagas were not Indians.

How did the States of Northeast India come into existence?

- The Sixth Schedule was independent India's first administrative instrument for undivided Assam's tribal belt.
- The Schedule mandated the formation of Autonomous District Councils in which, among others, tribal customary laws were given legitimacy.
- The Naga Hills refused the Sixth Schedule and would have nothing less than sovereignty.
- A powerful insurgency resulted, and in its wake, AFSPA, with sweeping powers given to the armed forces.
- The Naga Hills district was merged with the adjacent Mon and Tuensang subdivision of the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA), or today's Arunachal Pradesh, to form a separate Nagaland State in 1963.
- Naga insurgency, however, raged on in different avatars.
- A peace negotiation has been in progress for the last 25 years, and the hope is that this would culminate in a lasting settlement.
- In 1972, most of these autonomous regions were bifurcated from Assam.
- Meghalaya became a State, while Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were made Union Territories.
- The latter two were upgraded to States in 1987.
- Tripura and Manipur, which were made the Part-C States after the merger with India in 1949, were also upgraded to States in 1972.

> *"Part C states – included both the former chief commissioners' provinces and some princely states, and each was governed by a chief commissioner appointed by the President of India."*

- The national identity question remained incompletely resolved and insurgencies spawned and spread even in States such as Assam and Manipur, where the emotional gulf with mainstream India had seemingly narrowed.
- The hegemonic suspicion of the Indian state of the "Mongolian Fringe", and reciprocal fear of the latter of being forced out of their traditional worlds, persisted.
- Every deviation from national norms in the region came to be attributed to machinations by unseen foreign hands.
- Likewise, every nationalizing project tended to see the other side as insidious cultural aggression.

How has the Northeast situation unfolded over the years?

- India gained confidence and shed its insecurities of further balkanization after its traumatic Partition experience, and the outlook toward national identity and nationalism underwent moderations.
- Such moderations were inclined towards a constitutional definition of these understandings rather than it being cultural.

How did the Union Government accommodate the Northeast States in India?

- National integration was also about the mainstream broadening to accommodate all other streams within the national territory, rather than requiring the latter to leave their streams to join the mainstream.
- The changes the North Eastern Council (NEC) went through can be read as a demonstration of this.
- This institution was founded in 1971 as an advisory body.
- Initially, its members were Governors of the Northeast States, thereby remaining as the ears and eyes of the Centre.
- Its original pledge too made security the primary concern.
- In 2002, the act that brought NEC to life was amended.
- From an advisory role, it became an infrastructure planning body for the region.
- Sikkim was also brought into its fold.
- Significantly, its executive structure expanded to include Chief Ministers of these States, linking it to the aspirations of local electorates.
- Likewise, the Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) was created by the Union Government in 2001, and in 2004 it was upgraded to a full-fledged Ministry.
- The paranoid suspicion of a “foreign hand” has all but disappeared.
- In 1991, India’s Look East Policy was born with the stated objective of linking the Northeast with the vibrant economies of South East Asia.
- In 2010, a protected area regime that had restricted visits to Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram by foreigners was relaxed.
- Although unsuccessful, there was even a judicial commission constituted in 2004 to recommend a way to repeal or else humanize AFSPA.

How does the future look?

- The ruling party at the Centre has a strong presence in the Northeast.
- The party is in power in Assam, Tripura, Manipur, and Arunachal Pradesh.
- However, what needs to be remembered is that electoral politics in the region has been less about ideology and more about aligning with the party in power at the Centre.
- The two examples of this are, that Assam vehemently opposed the BJP-sponsored Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), yet the electorate returned the BJP to power.
- In Manipur, AFSPA remains an emotive issue, yet the BJP which did not even mention AFSPA in its election manifesto was voted back.
- If unmindful, the potential for trouble in the CAA, AFSPA, or other counter-cultures the region is known for, can flare up again regardless of the party in power.

Reference

https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/india-at-75-the-fragility-of-the-northeasts-integration/article65772603.ece

