

## **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>

