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Invention of Northeast

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Why is in news? How the Northeast was ‘invented’, 52 years ago

On December 30, 1971, two laws — the **North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act** and the **North-Eastern Council Act** — were enacted by Parliament.

With these, Northeast India “emerged as a significant administrative concept replacing the hitherto more familiar unit of public imagination, Assam,” B P Singh, a former senior bureaucrat who served as the Governor of Sikkim from 2008-13, wrote in **The Problem of Change: A Study of North-East India (1997)**.

Today, ‘Northeast India’, or just ‘the Northeast’, is commonly used by Indians to refer to the diverse region, with its inhabitants becoming ‘Northeasterners’, regardless of how they themselves self-identify. Yet the term took root only in the 1970s.

Background:

North-East India has witnessed many changes in society, economy, and polity throughout its history. The picture of North-East India we see today is very different from what it was in its antiquity.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to find any well-documented historiography of the social and cultural past of this region.

Proper documentation of events in these states only occurs during the British era. However, only its fragments can be found today, in the form of monographs and census data.

Hence to reconstruct the past of the North-East, historians have had to **rely heavily on oral traditions** like folk tales, folk songs, myths, and legends, as well as study the symbolic representation of rituals and traditions, in the form of festivals and fairs.

It is believed that North-East India finds a mention in the epics of the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, as well as the Puranas.

Various tribes residing in these states, accept this lineage and continue to follow the prescribed traditions and rituals to date. The folklore associated with these regions further crystallises their belief.

Pre-Independence Era:

It was **from the 19th Century CE, during the British Raj**, that the territories of this area came to be recognised as “North-East India”.

Prior to this, **all territories of the northeast existed as different kingdoms and were ruled by different kings and chiefs**. Unfortunately, the availability of written records in this region prior to British rule is very scarce.

This was mainly due to the lack of a written script for most of the tribes, with few exceptions like the **Ahoms of Assam and the Meiteis of Manipur**, Sikkim was ruled by the **Namgyal-Chogyal dynasty**, from 1642 to 1975.

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British Raj in North-East India:

The long dynastic rule in the northeastern states of India helped to keep invaders at bay for a long time - including the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughals as well as the British, until Burma invaded and established its control in Assam and Manipur. This resulted in a **conflict of power between the Burmese and the British**.

Eventually, the British were able to annex Burma following a series of wars known as the **Anglo-Burmese Wars**.

By the end of the first war (1824-1826), the British took over control of Assam and Manipur. This led to the signing of a peace treaty between the British and the Burmese, called the **'Treaty of Yandabo' on 24 February 1826**.

Following this, the British started annexing different territories of the region to expand their authority. This included the kingdom of Cachar- inhabited by the Kachari tribe, followed by the annexation of the Jaintia and Khasi hills, the annexation of Assam- which terminated the Ahom rule, and finally the annexation of the Naga Hills and the Lushai Hills. During this period, **North-East India became a part of the Bengal province**.

However, the northeastern states constantly challenged the British hegemony in India, mostly in the form of tribal uprisings.

Towards the end of the 20th century CE, these uprisings took a more nationalistic form and finally integrated with the **larger independence movement** in the country.

North-East India played a huge role in India's struggle for freedom.

Freedom fighters from all over the region participated in this movement against British imperialism.

Some of the legends include Bhogeswari Phukanani from Assam, U. Tirot Singh from the Khasi Hills, Shoorvir Pasaltha Khuangchera from Mizoram, and Rani Gaidinliu from Manipur.

Post-Independence Era:

Towards the end of the 20th century CE, the territories of northeastern India were formed into different states.

At the time that India gained its independence in **1947**, there were **only 3 states** - Assam, and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura. Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland were part of the larger territory of Assam.

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.

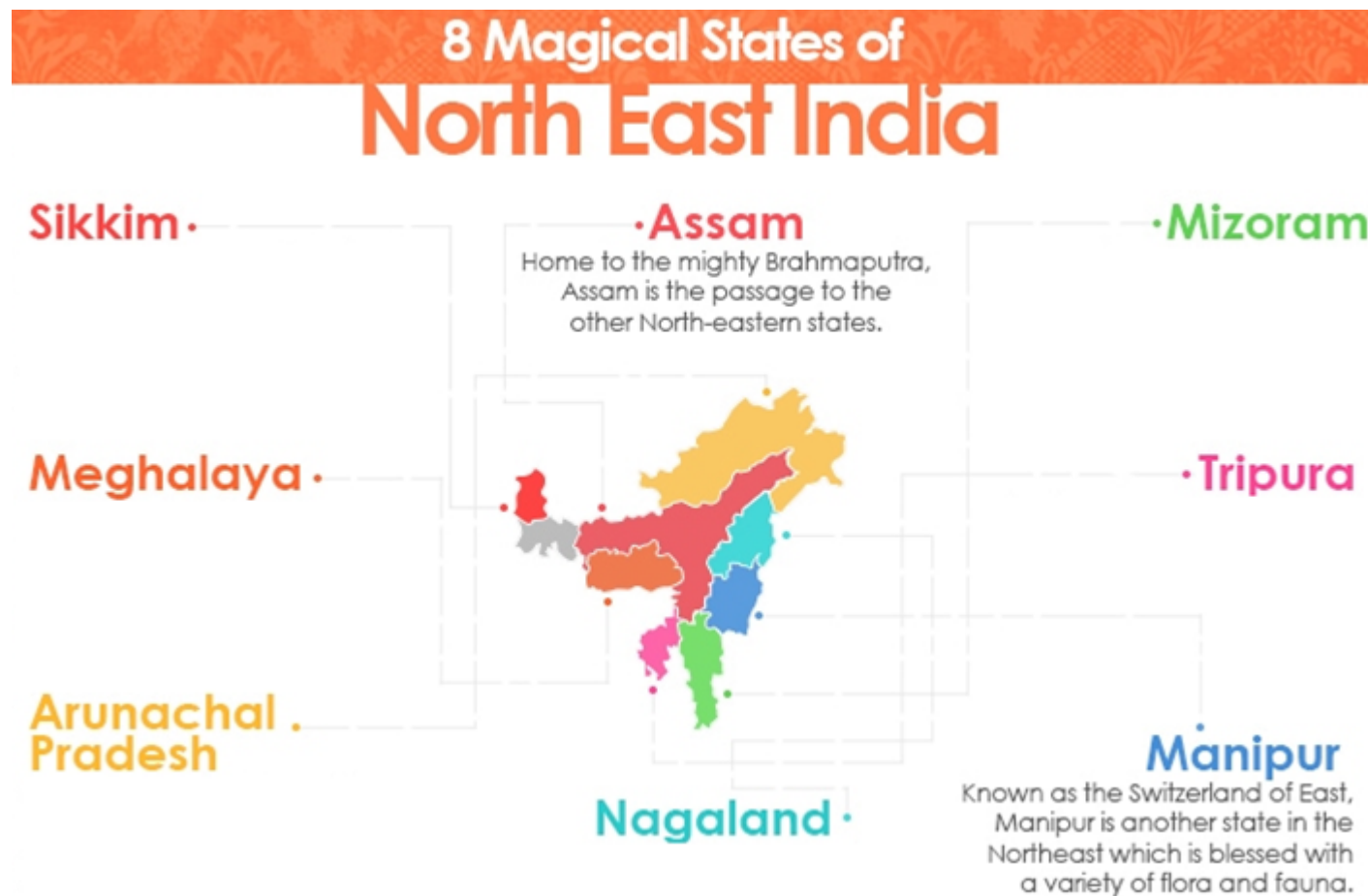
The Naga Hills district was merged with the adjacent Mon and Tuensang subdivision of the North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA), or today's Arunachal Pradesh, to form a separate Nagaland State in 1963.

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. **Assam** was the **first to gain statehood** with the rest of the country in 1947

. This was followed by Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya, Tripura and Manipur in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh in 1975 and Mizoram in 1987.



Sikkim was added as a state of India in 1975 and finally integrated with other northeastern states in 2002.

Unlike the process of state formation in the mainland, which took place primarily on a linguistic basis, the **northeastern states were formed on the basis of ethnic and tribal identities**. Each tribe identifies itself with its own distinct culture, traditions, festivals, and art forms.

The North-East Today:

The 8 distinct states of North-East India cover an area of 262,179 Sq.Km.

There are more than 200 different ethnic groups residing in these states. Each of these ethnic groups has its own dialect and script.

Along with it, these groups also have their own extravagant fairs and festivals, traditional attires, delicious cuisines, unique handicrafts, exemplary literary works, and an enchanting trove of music and other art forms.

Blessed with abundant natural resources as well flamboyant cultures, the northeastern states of India stand as the epitome of grace and heritage.

Military operations and AFSPA:

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Special powers under AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) were bestowed on armed forces to deal with emergency conditions. It is there in the **whole of Assam, Nagaland, most of Manipur, and some areas of Arunachal Pradesh.**

Military operations in Mizoram, where the army reportedly launched air strikes to neutralize the M.N.F. cadres, resulted in several fatalities and displacement among the civilian population.

In Assam, at the beginning of the 1990s, two military operations, **Operation Rhino and Bajrang**, were launched against U.L.F.A. militants.

Assam rifle has been given the task to deal with insurgents in Assam.

The security scenario in the North East is constantly improving. While there is almost no insurgency left in Tripura and Mizoram, there has been a marked improvement in the security situation in other States of the region.

The **lifting of the AFSPA from all areas of Meghalaya** on 31st March 2018 is an illustration of the vast improving security scenario in the NER.

In Arunachal Pradesh also, areas under AFSPA have been reduced from 16 PS/Outposts areas bordering Assam to 8 Police Stations, besides Tirap, Changlang and Longding districts.

Currently, the MHA issues periodic 'Disturbed Area' notifications to extend the AFSPA **only for Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.**

The notifications for **Manipur and Assam are issued by the respective State Governments.**

Compared to the year 2014, there is a reduction of 76 per cent in the extremist incidents in the year 2022.

Similarly, the deaths of security personnel and civilians have come down by 90 per cent and 97 per cent respectively during this period.

Several peace accords had been implemented in the northeast States in the past four years and as a result, most extremist groups had laid down arms.

Since 2014, around 7,000 insurgents had surrendered.

Inner Line Permit:

An Inner Line Permit is a document that **allows an Indian citizen to visit or stay in a state** that is protected under the ILP system.

The system is in force today in **three North-eastern states — Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram —** and no Indian citizen can visit any of these states unless he or she belongs to that state, nor can he or she overstay beyond the period specified in the ILP.

The **concept comes from the colonial era.** Under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873, the British framed regulations restricting the entry and regulating the stay of outsiders in designated areas.

This was to protect the Crown's own commercial interests by preventing "British subjects" (Indians) from trading within these regions.

In 1950, the Indian government replaced "British subjects" with "Citizen of India". This was to address local concerns about protecting the interests of the indigenous people from outsiders belonging to other Indian states.

An ILP is issued by the state government concerned. It can be obtained after applying either online or physically. It states the dates of travel and also specifies the particular areas in the state which the ILP holder can travel to.

Problems in NE states:

North Eastern India has been facing **problems of insurgency** for near 5 decades, but things are now settling down and peace started to prevail.

Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Tripura had been witnessing conflict since 1950-60 period, but since 1990, the intensity of conflicts started to decrease.

Now the only state where prominent insurgency exists is Manipur.

But in this region several armed factions operate. Some groups call for a separate state, others for regional autonomy while some extreme groups demand complete independence.

Current challenges in northeast:

North-East India is India's **most ethnically diversified area**. Around 40 million people live there, including 213 of India's 635 tribal groups. These tribes each have their own distinct culture

Each tribal group disagrees with being combined into mainstream India because it means losing their unique identity, giving rise to insurgency

North-East India's **infrastructure and economic development** has been gradual. This has **deepened the gap** between North-East India and mainstream India

The development of North-East India has slowed, resulting in a **shortage of job possibilities**. Insurgent groups provide a way for quick money

Isolation, deprivation, and exploitation are all feelings that people have in that region.

Distance from New Delhi and a **lack of representation in the Lok Sabha** has further silenced the voice of those who truly understand the culture

Changes in the population: Assam's demography was greatly changed by the **migration of refugees** from former East Pakistan (now, Bangladesh). This caused dissatisfaction among the inhabitants of the region and the insurgency in Assam, with the United National Liberation Front leading the anti-immigrant campaign

Internal displacement is also a common issue. People within the region have been displaced as a result of this rebellion

The **Influence of Revolutionary Politics:** Members of the Naga National Council, travelled over Myanmar's Naga Hills to Yunnan in January 1967, seeking Chinese backing for their cause

The triumph of the Chinese people's revolution inspired insurgent commanders and fuelled the insurgency in North-East India

Indian Army's Perceived Excesses: The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) gave the Indian Army the responsibility of Counter-Insurgency operations

This was enacted across much of North-East India, further isolating the local population and was considered harsh by many

Easy availability of arms and ammunitions from hostile neighbours.

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Porosity of the border with Myanmar due to difficult terrain and **political instability** in Myanmar

The **insurgencies in the NE have been supported by erstwhile East Pakistan** in the late 1950s; and in early 1960s, in the form of training of personnel of Naga Army and giving them weapons.

Later, **China also provided weapons and moral support**. The Chinese support for insurgency in India was at a high from 1967-1975 when China's foreign policy advocated the spread of 'revolution' around the world.

Proximity to the Golden triangle ensures funding for separatist/secessionist organisations via support of illegal drug smuggling.

Significance of North East for India:

North-East India is the gateway to South-East Asia and beyond. It is **India's land-bridge to Myanmar**.

India's Act East Policy places the northeastern states on the territorial frontier of India's eastward engagement.

North East India is one of the **most culturally diverse areas** of the world. It is home to over 200 tribes. Popular festivals include the Hornbill Festival of Nagaland, Pang Lhabsol of Sikkim, etc.

North-east India is a **Dowry-Free Zone**. The rich tapestry of cultures of Northeast is reflected in its highly developed **Folk dance** forms like Bihu (Assam). Manipur has a tradition of **worshipping nature in sacred groves**, called UmangLai.

Economically, the Region is **rich in natural resources of "TOT"** (Tea, Oil, and Timber). It is a veritable powerhouse with a potential of 50000 MW of hydroelectric power and an abundant reserve of fossil fuels.

North East is a **part of Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot**. It represents one of the highest avian and plant biodiversity of the Indian subcontinent. This area has the prestige of having all the bear species present in India.