
UNIT 1 MAKING OF THE REGION*

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Emergence of Northeast India as a Region
 - 1.2.1 Assam
 - 1.2.2 Meghalaya, Nagaland Mizoram
 - 1.2.3 Manipur and Tripura
 - 1.2.4 Arunachal Pradesh
 - 1.2.5 Sikkim
- 1.3 Let Us Sum UP
- 1.4 References
- 1.5 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit introduces you to the formation of Northeast India as a region. After reading the unit, you will be able to:

- Explain how the extant identity of Northeast India evolved from the first half of the nineteenth century;
- Compare various stages in the evolution of Northeast as a region; and,
- Discuss the role of the state in shaping the identity of the region.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The region of Northeast India has eight states – Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Sikkim. The states of this region share international borders with neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, China, Bhutan and Nepal. Seven states, generally known as “seven sisters” - Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya, are connected to the rest of India through Siliguri, West Bengal, which is known as “chicken neck” (see the map). The extant identity of Northeast India as a region has evolved over the years following the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 between the British and the Burmese. There were attempts to make administrative changes in the region by the British administration at different points of time over the years. In 1874, Assam became a separate

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INTRODUCTION

province under the control of a commission. In 1905, Assam was annexed with East Bengal following Bengal's partition. However, again, in 1912, Assam became a province after the partition of Bengal was annulled. In 1919 Assam was brought under the rule of the Governor according to the Government of India Act 1919. It remained so until 1935 under the Governor's rule according to the Government of India Act 1935. Northeast India has hills and plains areas. It consists of communities and regions which have had differences in language, levels of economic development and educational attainment. The Government India Act 1935 designated some areas as "excluded" and some as "partially excluded". These areas had a majority of the tribal population which had distinct cultural identities. These areas were excluded from the application of legislative powers of the provincial legislature. In these areas, those Acts could be applicable which were notified by the Governor as per his discretion. As you will read in unit 7, the impact of the provisions for "excluded" and "partially excluded" areas have been reflected in special provisions of the Indian Constitution, such as the VI Schedule. After Independence, District Autonomous Councils were created in the Northeast. Indeed, the shape of Northeast India formed during the colonial period largely continued to exist until the 1960s with the formation of Nagaland state and reorganisation of Assam in the 1970s. Even the linguistic reorganisation of states in the 1950s did not impact Assam. In this unit, you will read about the process of the emergence of Northeast India as a region.

Map of Northeast India



The creation of some institutions contributed to identifying a Northeast Region that first accommodated seven states, and later eight, with the addition of Sikkim. According to B.P. Singh (1987: p. 108) after Independence, reorganisation of Assam in the 1970s and establishment of three administrative institutions – North-Eastern Council, and Common High Court and Common Governor (both at that time) provided certain uniqueness to the region. In his opinion, Northeast India as “ the region emerged as a significant administrative concept ---- replacing hitherto unit public imagination, Assam” by two pieces of Indian Parliamentary legislation passed in 1971 – North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act and the North-Eastern Council Act (B.P. Singh quoted in Baruah, 2020: p.26). The establishment of the North-East Council (NEC), aimed to act as an agency for the development, a “regional planning body” of the states which are located in the region of Northeast India. In September 2001, the central government established the Ministry of Development of the North Eastern Region (DoNER). It functions as the nodal Department of the Central Government to deal with socio-economic development issues of eight states of Northeast India. (<https://www.india.gov.in/offical-website'-minisrty-development-north>, accessed on July 3, 2021). The NEC was brought under the DoNER after its formation. Sikkim became its member in 2002 (According to The North Eastern Council (Amendment), Act, 2002, and NER have now eight states.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1) What was the significance of the North East Council (NEC) and DoNER?

1.2 EMERGENCE OF THE NORTHEAST AS A REGION

Four states of Northeast India emerged from the state of Assam – Nagaland in 1963, Meghalaya in 1972, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram in 1987 (they became Union Territories in 1972). Two of them – Manipur and Tripura were princely states during the colonial period. Arunachal Pradesh had existed in the form of an administrative unit known as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Sikkim was a country prior to joining India as a state in 1975. Let us discuss how the formations of the states of Northeast India occurred.

1.2.1 Assam

As stated earlier, Assam was made a separate province by the colonial authorities in 1874. It was done following the transfer of colonial headquarters from Cherrapunji to Shillong. Until then, the region which became Assam was a part of the Bengal Presidency. The British transferred headquarters from Cherrapunji because it was inconvenient as it recorded the highest rainfall. From 1826 onwards, large parts of Assam came under British rule. In 1826 the Treaty of Yandabo was signed between the British and the Burmese. The treaty was signed in a specific political context. The Burmese were expanding into Ahom territories. Finding it difficult to face the Burmese, the British intervened on the invitation of the Ahom king and defeated the Burmese. It led to the signing of the Yandbo Treaty. From then onwards, different areas were annexed by the colonial rulers. These included: upper Assam (under Purandhar Singha) was annexed in 1832; Matak country was annexed in 1842; Khasi states were annexed following Anglo-Khasi war (1829-33); Garo Hills was annexed in 1873. Following the formation of Assam, different areas – hills and plains were included in the province of Assam. Assam, formed in 1874, consisted of hill areas and plain areas – Bramputra and Barak Vallies. This shape of Assam continued until new states, or Union Territories, were made out of Assam at different points of time: Nagaland in 1963; Meghalaya, Tripura and Manipur (states in 1972); Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (Union Territories in 1972 and states in 1987).

1.2.2 Manipur and Tripura

Manipur shares a border with Nagaland in the north, Assam in the west, southwest with Mizoram, and Myanmar in the south and east. Tripura shares a border with Mizoram and Assam in the Northeast and Bangladesh in the north, south and west. Manipur and Mizoram were native states during the colonial period. Following their accession to Indian Union, they became category C states according to Part C States (Laws) Act of 1950. The central government administered the category C states through Governors or Lt. Governors. Following modification of Part C States (Laws) Act as Union Territories (Laws) Act of 1956, Manipur and Tripura were made Union Territories in 1956. The people in both Manipur and Tripura met the members of SRC during its visit and demanded statehood. Rejecting the demand for statehood as unviable, the SRC suggested the merger of Tripura in the short-run and that of Assam in the long run with the state of Assam. The Union Territories of Manipur and Tripura were made states in 1972 (S.K. Chaube, p. 205).

1.2.3 Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram

The state of Meghalaya was made of the three hill districts of Assam – the Khasi hills, the Jaintia hills and the Garo hills. As you have read above, these hills were captured by the British after the Anglo-Khasi war, and they were placed in Assam as its hill districts following the formation of Assam in 1874. Shillong became the capital of Assam had become the capital of Assam at that time. During the 1960s, there had been a demand for the formation of a hill state out of

the hill districts, mainly in opposition to the language policy of the Assam government, and dissatisfaction with the provisions of the VI Schedule (which in their opinion did not safeguard their interests adequately). The government appointed the Pataskar Commission (1965-66) under the chairmanship of H.V. Pataskar to look into the demand for a hill state. The Commission recommended the formation of a State of Meghalaya within the state of Assam instead of creating a new statehood. The Parliament passed Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) for Act, 1969. It led to the formation of a new state of “Meghalaya” within the state of Assam. This state comprised the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills District and Garo Hills District as defined in the VI Schedule. An autonomous state was created within Assam – “a state within the state” which existed during 1970-72. In 1972, it was elevated to statehood.

Compared to other parts of the Northeast, Lushai hills (old name of Mizo hills) came under the colonial administration much later, in 1989, within five decades. These became part of Assam (Pachau, Joy L.K. 2014). The Mizo hill district was made a Union Territory, along with Arunachal Pradesh, in 1972. Moreover, in 1987, the Union Territory of Mizoram became a state along with Arunachal Pradesh.

Different Naga-inhabited areas came under the control of the British administration over seven decades. Parts of Naga hills were annexed in 1835 and in 1866; Lotha-inhabited area was annexed in 1875, Ao in 1899, Sena in 1904, Konyak in 1910. Different areas/hills inhabited by Nagas (various tribes) were granted statehood of Nagaland in 1963.

1.2.4 Arunachal Pradesh

The state of Arunachal Pradesh was formed on February 20, 1987. The formation of Arunachal Pradesh can be traced to the process of formation of administrative boundaries that began in the second decade of the twentieth century. In 1914, the British administration created North-East Frontier Tract (NEFT). The tract separated hill areas of the then districts of Darang and Lakhimpur districts of Assam in the light of the Assam Frontier Tract Regulation Act, 1880. In 1954, the Government of India renamed North-East Frontier Tract (NEFT) as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) existing within the administrative boundary of Assam state (Jayati K. Patnaik, 2019: fn.1). Following the reorganisation of Assam, NEFA was made into a Union Territory on January 20, 1972. The Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh was converted into a state with the same name on February 20, 1987.

1.2.5 Sikkim

Sikkim joined Indian Union as its 22nd state in 1975. Its location is not contiguous with the other states in Northeast India, known as “seven sisters” - Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya. It is connected with the “seven sisters” through the districts of Cooch Bihar, Jalpaiguri and Siliguri (Darjeeling) West Bengal (See map: p:10). In 2002, Sikkim became the eighth member of the North Eastern Council (NEC),

INTRODUCTION

adding to the list of seven states which were already its member. With its inclusion in the NEC, Sikkim has become known as one of the states in the Northeast India region. Prior to its merger with the Indian Union in 1975, Sikkim was a country that enjoyed the status of a protectorate of India according to the Indo-Sikkim Treaty, 1950, signed between the Government of India and the monarch of Sikkim. The merger of Sikkim in India was followed by political unrest there. In 1973, opposition parties and leaders launched an agitation demanding political reforms, including abdication by the monarch. In the final sequence of political developments, the monarch held a referendum in Sikkim, then a country, on the question of the abolition of the monarchy. More than 97 per cent of persons voted for the abolition of the monarchy. This resulted in the merger of Sikkim with India as one of its states.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of the unit.

1) Briefly state the formation of Northeast India.

2) Which states in Northeast India had been Union Territories?

3) Discuss the relationship between Sikkim with Northeast India as a region.

1.3 LET US SUM UP

Northeast has a distinct identity among the regions in India in terms of geographical location, linguistic and ethnic composition, local institutions and economic features. The formation of the extant structure of Northeast India as a region can be traced back to the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 between the British and Burmese. Since then, several areas in the region have come under the control of the British. In 1874, the British created a new province of Assam consisting of the areas which they had captured. Shillong became the headquarters of the new province. In 1971, Northeast India “emerged a

significant administrative concept” following the passage of two Acts - North-Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act and North-Eastern Council Act. Until then, Assam was a commonly used term for the region (B.P. Singh 1997). Northeast India has eight states - Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Sikkim. Four states, i.e., Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram, were part of Assam state before getting statehood. In 1972 Meghalaya became a state, and Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram became Union Territories. Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram got statehood in 1987. Until 1972, Arunachal Pradesh was known as North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Two of these – Tripura and Manipur, existed as princely states during the colonial time. After Independence, they joined the Union of India by signing the Instrument of Accession and were categorised as C category states in 1950. In 1956, they became Union Territories after being replaced as the C category states. Sikkim was a country and protectorate of India according to the Indo-Sikkim Treaty 1950 signed between the Government of India and the Monarch of Sikkim. It got merged with India in 1972 and became a state of India. In 2002, Sikkim became part of the Northeast region when it became a member of the North Eastern Council (NEC). In popular parlance, seven out of eight states of Northeast India - Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Meghalaya, are known as “seven sisters”.

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1.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) North East Council (NEC) was an advisory body created in 1971 to act as a regional planning body for the development states in Northeast India. It was brought under the Ministry of Development of Northeast Region (DoNER), which was created in 2001 by the central government to act as the nodal department of government for the development of Northeast India.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Northeast India as a region evolved from the first half of the 19th century. The signing of the Treaty of Yandabo, 1826, started a process of occupation by the British of different areas in the region. Following the shifting of British headquarters from Cherrapunji to Shillong in 1874, Assam became a separate Province consisting of the territories occupied by the British. Northeast as a concept emerged in 1971. In 1972 Meghalaya state was formed, Tripura and Manipur Union Territories became states, and Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were created. In 1987, the Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram were changed into states. In 2002, Sikkim joined the North Eastern Council (NEC). These days, there are eight states in Northeast India.
- 2) Manipur and Tripura (between 1956 and 1972) and Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (between 1972 and 1987) were Union Territories.
- 3) Sikkim was a country that became a state of the Indian Union in 1975. It became a member of the North Eastern Council in 2002. It enabled Sikkim to become a constituent of the Northeast India region.