

Enduring ethnic fault lines

Protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act in Meghalaya are more about demanding the implementation of the Inner Line Permit system in the state



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On 28 February this year, a clash between protesters and supporters of the Citizenship Amendment Act broke out in Ichamati village near the Meghalaya-Bangladesh border. One of the protesters was killed. Following the incident, curfew was imposed in Sohra subdivision and Shillong to contain the spread of violence. Mobile Internet services were shut down to curb hate speech and messages. In the following days two supporters of the Act were also killed.

Such tensions occurred despite assurance of the central government that the amended Citizenship Act will not apply to the Sixth Schedule areas of the North-east and states with the Inner Line Permit system. Several efforts were made by the authorities concerned and civil society groups to restore normalcy in Meghalaya.

Hill state movement

Shillong was the capital of Assam province during the colonial period, and also for undivided Assam in the post-Independence period till 1972.

The municipality and cantonment areas of Shillong were not included in the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas in 1935 as it hosted a huge population of colonial administrators, clerks and other law enforcing agencies. Many of the Indians who served the colonial administration remained in Shillong after their retirement. Added to that is the population of traders and merchants who mainly came from outside the state and established monopoly over trade and commerce.

When the British were about to leave India, there was fear and uncertainty among the hill people of Assam. Thus, there were attempts to unify the tribes in order to safeguard their interests and aspirations. To achieve that, they wished to become a part of the political process in order to be able to decide their future. To put forth such political demands, the Hill Leaders Union was formed in Shillong in 1945. To make the movement more inclusive and broad based, the Tribes and Races Association of the plains and hills of Assam was also formed the same year.

After Independence, language chauvinism was responsible for instilling insecurity among the tribal people in Assam. A hill state movement was launched in Shillong. However, tribes in the North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills preferred to stay within Assam, with the existing system of protective mechanism for tribal people under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. The Lushais were already involved in their own movement for a Mizo state. Meghalaya was carved out of Assam to include the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills Districts then.

Emerging chasm

With the gaining of statehood by Meghalaya in January 1972, the capital of Assam was shifted to Dispur the same year. Since then, Meghalaya has become a tribal state but with a substantial non-tribal population, which settled in Shillong during the colonial rule. This population was then not seen to be as inimical to their interests as the fight against Assamese dominance. However, soon after statehood, ethnic fault lines developed

between tribal people and the non-tribal population of Meghalaya. The dominance in administrative and educational institutions, as well as trade and commerce by non-tribals became the problem. As such the state witnessed inter-ethnic conflicts on this divide in 1979, 1987 and 1992.

Meghalaya is rich in mineral resources. Coal mining and cement plants are aplenty in many parts of the state. To meet the labour requirements of such undertakings, people, mainly from outside the state, are employed. Furthermore, Shillong is the educational and administrative capital of the region. Many central government officers and students stay for a certain period of time there. That adds to the already existing non-tribal population in the city. Thus, they contribute further to the sense of insecurity among the local population of the state.

Demand for ILP

The Khasi Students' Union has demanded implementation or extension of the colonial Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, in Meghalaya for the last two decades. This regulation categorises certain districts (and states today) as protected areas, and outsiders must have a permit, the Inner Line Permit, to travel in such areas for a certain period of time. The central government has repeatedly ruled out the possibility of extension of this law to Meghalaya.

Since the CAA was passed in the Parliament, several student bodies in Meghalaya, particularly the KSU, raised their opposition to this Act and once again demanded the extension of ILP in the state. The Meghalaya Assembly passed a resolution on 19 December for the implementation of ILP.

Chief Minister Conrad Sangma has also appealed to the central government for the implementation of this colonial era law in Meghalaya. He met Union home minister Amit Shah to discuss this matter on 30 January. He also led a delegation of the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance and met Shah again on 20 February when the Union home minister assured that tribal rights will not be diluted.

In the last three months there have been several demands for the implementation of ILP in the North-eastern states. Manipur was the first to convince the central government for the extension of this law into the

state. The demand for ILP in Manipur is new, compared to the demand for this law in Meghalaya. Moreover, Manipur is not a tribal state. The implementation of this law in such a non-tribal state and the continued denial to a tribal state with a history of lingering demands for the same must have frustrated and may alienate the student leaders of Meghalaya.

The informal economy

The imposition of curfew due to incidents of violence in the state stopped much of the informal economy. In Shillong, much of the vegetables and other rural agricultural products are brought daily to the main market of the city — Iewduh, commonly known as Bara Bazaar. The largest and oldest market of the state provides livelihood to vast sections of the rural poor, especially women, who set up stalls there. To the rural poor the disruption of their daily livelihood activity is much more a threat to their life. It does not distinguish between “us” and “them”; the disruption of their livelihood is their greatest enemy.

What's holding the Centre back?

Meghalaya was the land route from the Assam plains to East Bengal during the colonial period. Today it provides land connectivity to the Barak valley and the states of Tripura and Mizoram. The implementation of ILP will severely restrict the movement of goods and people along this state, particularly for non-tribals from Tripura and the Barak valley. This restrictive regulation will further affect the precarious position of the non-tribal settler communities in the state. For this reason the central government has been reluctant in granting this law to Meghalaya.

Taking the nation-wide movement against the CAA as an opportunity, the KSU will leave no stone unturned to get their decades-old demand. While the state government attempts to keep the law and order situation in place, the central government has to take timely decisions on this matter to avoid future eruptions of violence in Meghalaya. Furthermore, what is at stake most is the lives of daily livelihood earners.

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