

## Chapter 1

### Integration of the North East: the State Formation Process

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North East India in this study consists of eight states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim), and is enclosed by Bangladesh, Bhutan, China (Tibet), and Myanmar<sup>1</sup>. A narrow corridor between Bhutan and Bangladesh provides the only overland connection between the North East Region and mainland India. The population of the North East consists of the original, indigenous inhabitants together with various ethnic groups, including people from Tibet, Burma, Thailand and Bengal<sup>2</sup>, who migrated into the region at various periods of history. Although there are migrants of long standing, who have become integrated into the local population over very many years, an increasingly large inflow of recent migrants over a short period has caused friction with the local population. During the British colonial period and even after independence, the North East, adjoining China, has been a difficult frontier region.

Throughout the British colonial period, the North East was treated separately and differently from other regions of British India. In the early colonial period, the region formed part of Bengal Province and it was governed as though it were an adjacent subordinate area of Bengal Province even after it became the separate province of Assam in 1874. Moreover, with the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873, a Line System was introduced on the pretext of protecting the minority indigenous ethnic groups in the hill areas of Assam by restricting outsiders' entry, business activities, land transactions and settlement. For the same purpose, in 1935 the hill areas were demarcated and divided into "excluded areas" and "partially excluded Areas"<sup>3</sup>. The former fell under direct British jurisdiction and the latter were given a limited representative system under British administrative control. In short, separation and isolation formed the core of British policy towards the North East.

The history of separation and isolation from the rest of India in the colonial period created a problem for the national formation and integration of independent India. In the North East, a sense of incompatibility grew into one of resentment against

being made a part of India, and an anti-India sentiment emerged amongst the region's people, especially when the Indian government cold shouldered local aspirations. Given the region's historical background, antagonism could be easily instigated.

The most urgent task for the Indian government after independence was the consolidation of a new nation state. As national integration was the most pressing of the issues confronting the new sovereign state, any movement that might disrupt the process of integration had to be dealt with stringently, and in some cases oppressively<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, after the India-China border conflicts in 1962, the North East became a strategic region as regards the national security of India. Any indigenous ethnic movement was considered as "anti-national" and became a "security trouble". As such, it had to be suppressed. Suppression invited resistance and resistance was countered with more oppressive measures from the government, creating an antipathy among the people, and providing the groundwork for armed confrontation and, furthermore, a growing aspiration for an independent homeland.

In this chapter, I examine the issues relating to India's nation-state building and the North East, focusing especially on political developments and reactions to them during the process of administrative integration.

## **1. Brief History of the North East**

The Ahom kingdom was established in the Brahmaputra valley by the Shans, who migrated from upper Burma in the first half of the 13th century. In 1818, disturbed by repeated invasions from Burma, the Ahom king requested assistance from the British East India Company, which was then based at Calcutta. The British East India Company responded to the request, and fought and defeated the Burmese armies. The war ended with the Treaty of Yandaboo, by which the Burmese agreed to withdraw from Assam and the Ahom king ceded a part of his territory to the British East India Company as a reward. The war gave the East India Company an opportunity to establish rights and interests in the North East, leading to the extinction of the Ahom kingdom in 1838 (Lahiri 1955). The history of the North East until independence in 1947 is a history of the expansion of British rule and of social, economic and political changes in the region.

After the great Indian revolt of 1857, British rule over the North East gathered pace and the North East was tossed about by colonial policy. Expansion of the area under control and administrative rearrangements were among this policy's characteristics. For example, Assam was ruled as a part of Bengal Province until 1874, when it became Assam Province governed by a Chief Commissioner who was subordinate to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal Province. Between 1905 and 1921, Assam Province was merged with Bengal Province to become East Bengal and Assam Province, a unit that was again divided into two in 1921 following strong protests against the merger. Under the new arrangements, Assam was named Assam Province, and was directly administered by the Governor-General of Assam Province. Even so, Assam's independence as a province remained unsatisfactory<sup>5</sup>.

Another critical aspect of the administrative change was that hill kingdoms such as Khasi and Jaintia were annexed one after another, while hill areas like the Lushai (Mizo) hills and the Naga hills, where distinctive ethnic groups had lived, were merged into Assam Province. There was a growing sense of loss and a feeling of being deprived, and anxiety for the future among the people in the region was very strong.

Together with these developments, another issue poured fuel on to the flames of this volatile situation. This was population inflow, especially an inflow of Muslims from Bengal Province in pursuit of land and jobs. The inflow created political tension. The major reason for the population migration into Assam was the economic development of the region during the British period. Among the opportunities for employment were the tea gardens that were established in the 1930s. Assam's tea gardens expanded rapidly by mobilising a large-scale workforce from outside the region. As for the tea garden workers, there were many who, after the end of their employment contracts, obtained land in the vicinity of the tea gardens and settled down (Guha 1977; 1991 and Barpujari 1998). Labour has also been in great demand from the oil and coal fields, and from road and railway construction, and as a result, the inflow of population has increased continuously (Baruah 1996: 46).

Above all, the arrival of immigrants from Bengal Province was widely perceived as a penetration into the living space of the local people that changed the demographic as well as the economic situation. The colonial administration and political rivalry were related to these changes.

The population inflow became an issue with the introduction of the representation system under the Government of India Act of 1935. Political rivalry gradually took on the aspect of a confrontation based on places of origin, namely Assam and Bengal, and on religions, namely Hinduism and Islam. Public opinion was divided on the future of the North East after British withdrawal. On the one hand the Assam State Congress Committee, which was set up in Assam in 1921, drew support from Hindu Assamese, who claimed that Assam should belong to independent India. On the other hand the Muslim League, supported by a growing number of Muslims, many of whom were immigrants from Bengal Province, argued in favour of affiliation with Pakistan. The cleavage became wider, especially when partition became imminent and the religious composition of the population took on greater importance as a factor deciding the future of Assam. Each side used tactics that were clearly designed to increase its own population numbers within the region. For example, while the Congress government banned immigration into Assam, the Muslim League, when it came to power in the province, reversed the previous government's decision and tried to encourage Muslim immigrants by easing land holding regulations for immigrants from Bengal Province ( Hazarika 1994: 58-59; Barpujari 1998: 37-38 ) .

Another focal point was the status of the North East after British withdrawal. It was not clear whether Assam would be separate from India or independent from it, and the extension of the region's autonomy became the subject of heated discussion. Even before independence, there were calls for an exploration of the possibility of establishing a separate political entity especially among the hill ethnic groups such as the Nagas and Mizos<sup>6</sup>. In other words, merger with India was not a foregone conclusion, at least not so far as some people in the region were concerned.

The final decision was left to the last Governor-General of British India, Mountbatten, who decided in June 1947 that Assam and the North East should belong to independent India.

## **2. States Formation of the North East after Independence**

The regional composition of the North East at the time of independence consisted of the Assam plains of the old Assam Province, the hill districts, the North

Eastern Frontier Tracts (NEFT) of the North Eastern borderland, and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura, both of which opted for merger with India in 1949. As for administrative changes in the wake of the transfer of power on 15th August, the administrative jurisdiction of the excluded and partially excluded areas in the hills of Assam was transferred to the Government of Assam which acted on behalf of the government of India.

The Indian government after independence was unable to sensitively respond to the intricate realities of the North East. Rather it seemed to follow the colonial policy of isolation and alienation, treating the North East differently from the other Indian states ( Fürer-Haimendorf 1991: 39; Savyasaachi 1998: 13 ) .

The Constitution promulgated in 1950 contained a special provision in the form of the Sixth Schedule for the administration of “tribal” areas that were meant to protect the tribal people who were living scattered throughout the country. The provision was applied to the ethnic groups in the hill region of the North East. Under it, the “tribal” areas in the North East were divided into two parts, Part A and Part B. The United Khasi and Jaintia Hills District, the Garo Hills District, the Lushai Hills District, the Naga Hills District, the North Cachar Hills District, and the Mikir Hills District were placed in Part A as Autonomous Districts administered by the Government of Assam, with a limited representation in the Assam State Legislative Assembly and in the National Parliament, The North East Frontier Tract, the Balipara Frontier Tract, the Tirap Frontier Tract, the Abor Hill and Mishmi Hills Districts and the Naga Tribal Area came into Part B, which was administered by the Governor of Assam acting as Agent of the President of India. Tripura and Manipur were not promoted to states but were made special administrative regions under the control of central government. Hereafter, state formation in the North East followed a process whereby the area once unified into Assam was separated and ultimately turned into a state.

Sikkim, a small mountainous area surrounded by China in the north, Nepal in the west and Bhutan in the east, followed a different process of state formation. It was a kingdom at the time of the British arrival. In 1819 British India signed a treaty, known as the Treaty of Titalia with Sikkim, through which and other engagements the British was able to exercise influence in Sikkim. In 1947 when India became independent, a treaty was signed between India and Sikkim, under which Sikkim was able to retain a special status of a protectorate of India. Sikkim to become a fully-fledged 22nd state of India on 16th May 1975. The institution of king was

abolished. In 1975 Sikkim was merged with India.

Sikkim, an Indian State on the Eastern Himalayan ranges, is counted among states with Buddhist followers, which had strong cultural ties with the Tibetan region of Peoples' Republic of China. Because of its past feudal history, it was one of the three 'States' along with Nepal and Bhutan known as 'the Himalayan Kingdoms' till 1975, the year of its merger with the Indian Union.

The State Assembly met in an emergency session and passed this resolution: "The institution of Chogyal (the head of the state) is hereby abolished and Sikkim shall henceforth be a constituent unit of India". The ruler went on asking for right of self-determination to Sikkim, the above Resolution of the Assembly was put on a state-wise referendum on April 14, 1975. Ninety-seven percent electorate favoured the resolution. This led to the Indian Parliament passing the 38<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill on April 26, 1975. Thus, Sikkim ceased to exist as an Indian protectorate and became the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of the Indian Union. Accordingly, the office of the Chogyal stood abolished and provisions of the Indo-Sikkimese Treaty, Tripartite Agreement and the Government of India Act, 1974 were made inoperative. Lhendup Dorji Kazi (L D Kazi), the Chief Minister, emerged as the central figure after these epoch-making developments. His style of functioning was that of an old-world patriarch, addicted to advice from all corners, but too old to learn anything afresh.

Table shows the state formation process in the North East except of Sikkim after independence. Four states (Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram) were separated from Assam one after another. These four states were the areas to which entry was regulated during the British colonial period. In the four states, even before independence, there were several indigenous cultural and political organizations representing the interests of the hill peoples. After independence, some of these groups began to pursue political activities, including protest against unity with Assam, a demand for expansion of autonomy within Assam, a demand for separation from Assam, and a further demand for statehood.

During state reorganization in India in 1956, fourteen states were created based on language characteristics. In the North East, however, only Assam State was approved. The demands of minority groups for a Nagaland State to be created out of Assam and for separation of the Mizo areas from Assam were not met. On the contrary, the State Reorganization Commission suggested an enlargement of

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Assam State to include Tripura and Manipur. This proposal was put forward on the grounds of administrative efficiency, regional stability, resource constraints and security needs, even though Assam was going to be a multi-lingual state, a development that ran counter to the Commission's original policy. The suggestion was not taken up<sup>7</sup>.

Disappointment surfaced. Ethnic groups in various areas, especially the people of the hill area, expressed dissatisfaction with the outcome of the reorganization. They argued that the real purpose of the reorganization was to institutionalize the hill people's subordination to the Assamese and that it was a negation of their ethnic identities. Dissatisfaction of this kind led to a demand for autonomy and a further demand for the establishment of a separate state. When the answer fell short of what had been demanded, discontents tended to turn into anti-government movements and in some cases into armed conflicts with the government.

### **3. The Case of State Formation for the Nagaland**

After Assam, the first area to achieve statehood in the North East was Nagaland, in 1963. Because the establishment of Nagaland and the way it was formed influenced succeeding state formation in the area, it is necessary to look at the process in some detail.

The Tuensang area, which was defined as the "Naga Tribal Area" in the Constitution, was formed into a district within the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). In 1957, The Tuensang area was joined with the Naga Hills District to form the Naga Hills Tuensang Area (NHTA) as a Central Government Administrative Area. The NHTA was renamed as Nagaland by the Nagaland (Transitional Provisions) Regulation of 1961. The Regulation of 1961 was replaced with the State of Nagaland Act of 1962 which made Nagaland a fully fledged state. The State of Nagaland was inaugurated in December 1963.

The formation of Nagaland has a complicated history that began in the British colonial period. As we have seen, in order to avoid conflicts with the Nagas and to avoid disrupting traditional Naga society, the British administration maintained as much as possible a policy of non-interference, thus committing the Nagas to isolation ( Rustomji 1983:23-24; Baruah 1999: 34-35 ) . On the other hand, even then there was a movement for advancing the Nagas to independence. As early as

1918, an organization called the “Naga Club” was established with British patronage<sup>8</sup>. The Naga Club discussed the future of the Naga hills after British withdrawal and decided to demand the restoration of the autonomous status formerly enjoyed by Naga society ( Misra 2000: 28 ). Because the Naga hills were remote and isolated and the relations with the rest of British India weak, it was to some extent possible to preserve the identity of the Nagas. The spread of the Christianity during the British period was another characteristic of Naga society and helped to mould the Nagas’ identity.

The Naga Club changed its title to the Naga National Council (NNC) after the Second World War and the NNC demanded an autonomous status for the Naga area in a memorandum presented to the British government in June 1945. The claim took a new turn as India’s independence approached. In December 1946, the NNC decided to claim for home rule for all Naga tribes, and in February 1947 for the right of self-determination ( Misra 2000: 31 ). The NNC listed ethnic identity, the original social system, customary law, religion and so on as the grounds for their claim (Kumar 1996: 24 ). Then in May 1947, the NNC made a demand for an interim government ( Misra 2000: 32 ). After these demands were presented, the NNC met the Governor of Assam in June 1947 and reached an accord with him<sup>9</sup>.

Apart from whether it was legitimate for both parties to enter into such an accord, an entanglement arose concerning the accord’s Article Nine. This stated that both parties agreed to maintain present administrative arrangements for ten years and if the Naga so wished, the arrangement would be continued after ten years; if otherwise, a new treaty would be drawn up. While the Assam Governor understood that the accord meant the continuation of the existing administrative set up, the NNC preferred to see the agreement as paving the way for self-determination or independence.. In the meantime, hardliners led by A.N. Phizo increased their influence over the NNC. After Phizo became its Chairman in October 1949, the NNC inclined strongly toward winning Naga’s independence from India (Guha 1977: 326 ). In February 1950, the NNC declared that it would hold a referendum to decide whether the Nagas should attain independence from India or remain in India. The referendum, which was conducted in May 1951, was said to indicate that ninety-nine percent of the Nagas supported independence ( Kumar 1996: 10; Hazarika 1995: 98 ). The Indian Government and the Government of Assam rejected the result. Talks between the NNC and the Indian Government broke down ( Roychowdhury 1986: 112 ) and the NNC boycotted the

first general election of 1952 ( Guha 1977: 326-327; Maxwell 1973: 10 ) .

However, at this juncture, the NNC had not yet entered into an armed struggle. It followed a course of disobedience in public life ( Kumar 1996: 28 ) , but the Government responded to this with strong countermeasures and in June 1955 sent police and security forces to the Naga area. In January 1956 it declared the Naga hills area a “Disturbed Area”, putting it under the Indian Army’s command. Phizo escaped to East Pakistan in December 1956 and defected to London.

Under military pressure, the NNC’s hardliners pursued a separatist course and in March 1956 declared the establishment of the “Federal Government of Nagaland”. (Kumar 1996: 28-30; Maxwell 1973: 11; Chaube 1999:161 ) . In response to this crisis, the Indian Government took a conciliatory approach by conceding to the Nagas’ demand for self-government. In 1957, the Naga Hills District was separated from Assam and became a Central Government Administrative Area, and in December 1963, Nagaland was established as the smallest Indian state with the population of 350,000. The reconciliation was possible with the help of moderates among the Nagas who agreed to solve the problem within the framework of the Indian Constitution. On the government side, there were circumstances that required a compromise. The government did not wish to complicate the situation of the border area, as the India-China border conflict of 1962 had created a serious security problem and had caused a heightening of military tension. In order to pacify the area, the government settled the problem by accepting the Naga moderates’ move for statehood.

#### **4. The Formation of the North Eastern States**

The establishment of Nagaland brought about various demands for statehood from other hill regions and secessionist movements for state designation were intensified. For instance, at the time of the state reorganization, representatives from the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District and the Garo Hills Districts expressed the hope of forming their own Hill State. This was not accepted by the State Reorganization Commission. But the aspiration turned into a stronger demand for statehood when Asamiya (Assamese) was proposed as Assam state’s official language in the language bill of 1960. The representatives of the hills area formed an All Party Hill Leaders Conference in July 1960 and demanded separation of the hill area from Assam ( Sinha 1970 ) . The movement for statehood continued

and in 1970 Meghalaya Autonomous State was established. It became a fully-fledged state in 1972. The process of state formation was comparatively peaceful in the case of Meghalaya, because the movement was mostly conducted within the framework of India, and the hill area was distinctive insofar as a majority of its population belonged to two major ethnic communities, the Khasis and the Garos, each of them inhabiting its own territory in the hills<sup>10</sup>. In a case such as this, the central government was able to take an accommodating stance.

The Mizo hills area, which was an excluded area during the British period, became the Lushai Hills District within Assam at the time of independence, and in 1954 was renamed the Mizo Hills District of Assam. A separatist movement from Assam was active even before independence. Against the background of prevalent discontent with government relief works to the victims of the famine of *mautam* in 1959 to 1961, and under the guidance of Laldenga, a Mizo leader, the movement began to work for “independence”,<sup>11</sup>. It might not be coincidental that the Mizo National Front under Laldenga’s leadership intensified the movement for secession from Assam when Nagaland was given separate status as a Central Government Administrative Agency in 1957. As in the case of Nagaland, the government began by attempting to suppress the Mizos’ movement by military force, but by reaching accord with the moderates in the MNF in 1972, the government established Mizoram with the status of a Union Territory, and Mizoram attained statehood in 1987.

Tripura Princely State and Manipur Princely State became Central Government Administrative Agencies after they joined India in 1949. They were given the status of Union Territories, and later, in 1972, they became Tripura State and Manipur State.

In the case of Arunachal Pradesh, the shift to statehood was peacefully executed through the initiative of the central government. The area was integrated into Assam at the time of independence. But adjoining China and with an unsettled border, the area had a military importance for the central government<sup>12</sup>, and was put under direct government control ( Rustomji 1983; Elwin 1997 ). The area was upgraded to become the Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh in 1972 and in 1982 it became a state. The formation of Arunachal Pradesh can be understood as a part of the process of state formation in the North East, but at the same time, it might also be possible to interpret Arunachal Pradesh’s promotion to statehood as a move by the Indian government aimed at indicating to China that national

integration was being achieved even in the frontier region of the North East.

## **5. Conclusion**

The North East was once characterized as a remote, underdeveloped, difficult area inhabited by many conflicting ethnic groups. A history of isolation nurtured this impression. But the North East does not have to be seen in these terms. Rather, as a new frontier, the North East can develop into a new region. Bordered by four countries and facing towards southern China and Southeast Asia, India's North East can work as a driving force for regional development and send a political message of ethnic harmony to a diversified world in an era of globalization.

State formation, a process that the central government took up rather belatedly in the North East, cannot be seen as a panacea for all the problems of the North East. The multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic character of the region brings forth ever increasing demands for autonomy or statehood on the basis of individual ethnic identities. Even the demand for local economic development has not been able to escape from parochial ethnic interests. The logic of ethnic identity contains an ideology of exclusion on the one hand and expulsion of other ethnic groups on the other. Creation of a state on the basis of ethnicity often means the fulfilment of one ethnic group's aspiration and at the same time exclusion and oppression of other smaller ethnic groups in the vicinity. There seems no end to this ethnicity pursuit. We see many examples in the ethnic movements active in the region<sup>13</sup>.

The cleavage grows acute when political movements are subjected to military pressure. In the North East, military measures, aimed at containing local ethnic movements, were adopted by the government too easily and too often. Military solutions or other oppressive measures invite stronger resistance, often in the form of armed revolts. We know that with the establishment of Nagaland State, the hardliners among the NNC opposed reconciliation and went underground to continue armed struggle over many years with the help of neighbouring countries. This created problems for the Indian government not only in dealing with local issues but also in conducting international relations. It is only recently, after many long years, that some kind of reconciliation between the government and the Naga militants has got under way, though it is still too early to make any judgment on this matter. It might turn out to be a positive change for the better, but caution is advisable in the light of reports that there have been tie-ups among

the anti-government militant groups not only in the region but also across the region's borders.

In such circumstances, the only useful course available will be the maintenance of reconciliation through dialogue on the one hand and the pursuit of the national integration process, by way of administrative and developmental efforts, on the other. Being underdeveloped with tremendous resource constraints, the North East's developmental task will be enormous. The North East is not in a position to execute this task on its own. The peculiarity of the area requires more government efforts and more productive regional cooperation, including cooperation from surrounding countries. For that, the central government's initiative is going to be ever more important.

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**< Indian government publication >**

*Report of the State Reorganisation Commission*, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, 1956.

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1 Sikkim is included as a part of the Northeast in this paper but it underwent a different process of integration. This will be briefly explained in the text.

2 Bengal consists of West Bengal, a state of India, together with Pakistan's East Bengal, which later became Bangladesh.

3 The excluded areas are Northeast Frontier District, Naga Hills District, Lushai Hills District and North Cachar Hills Subdivision. The partially excluded areas

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are Garo Hills District, Khasi and Jaintia Hills district except Shillong and Mikir Hills district.

4 India faced serious problems of national integration just after independence. The princely state of Hyderabad claimed independence and waged a war against India. Kashmir became a flashpoint and a zone of confrontation between India and Pakistan. Goa remained a Portuguese colony.

5 An example for this is language policy. Bangali, not Assamese, was the court and education language in Assam Province from 1837 to 1873. Baruah points out that during the whole colonial period, the British treated Assam as a frontier of Bengal (Baruah 1999: 38-39).

6 Some examples are the “Independent North-East” plan and the “Crown colony” plan promoted by the British who had been engaged in work in the Northeast (Reid 1966: 110; Coupland 1944: 164-165).

7 Report of the State Reorganisation Commission, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, 1956.

8 Charles Pawsay, the Deputy Commissioner of the Naga Hills District, was the main promoter of the organization.

9 A Nine Point Agreement, or The Naga-Akbar Hydari Accord, after the name of the Assam Governor. For the text of Accord, see Hazarika 1995: 346-348 and Appendix C The Naga-Akbar Hydari Accord.

10 Khasis and Garos form about 80 percent of Meghalaya’s population, according to the 2001 Census.

11 Caused by the bamboo flowering.

12 Under the Simla Agreement of 1914, China, British India and Tibet agreed on the McMahon Line as the border between India’s northeast and Tibet. China crossed the McMahon Line at the time of Indo-China border conflicts in 1962. China does not recognise the McMahon Line as the border.

13 The Bodoland movement in Assam is one such instance.

Table States Formation of the Northeast

1947.8.15 Independence	Assam state				Tripura Princely State	Manipur Princely State
	(NEFT)	(Naga Hills District)	hasi & Jaintia, Garo Hills District	(Lushai Hills district)		
1949					Annexation to India	Annexation to India
1950 Constitution					(CGAA)	(CGAA)
1954	NEFA			Mizo Hills district		
1956 State Reorganization						(Union Territory)
1956						
1957		Naga Hills Tuensang Area (CGAA)				
1963		Nagaland State			(Union Territory)	
1970			Meghalaya Autonomous State			
1972	Arunachal Pradesh (Union Territory)		Meghalaya State		Mizoram (Union Territory)	Tripura State
1972						Manipur State
1987	Arunachal Pradesh State					
1987					Mizoram state	
As of 2003	Arunachal Pradesh State	Nagaland State	Meghalaya State	Assam state	Mizoram state	Tripura State
						Manipur State

Note: Constitution classifies Tripura and Manipur as "Part C States" and puts them under the administration of a central government.

:NEFT: North East Frontier Tracts, NEFA: North East Frontier Agency.

:CGAA: Central Government Administrative Areas.

:Union Territory: The area, having assembly and government, directly comes under the central government jurisdiction.

Source: By the authors.

