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Q8(a)

Ethnicity is the underlying cause which poses a great challenge in the resolution of the problems in the North-East region of India. Comment

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · PSIR GS 1 · 20 marks · Indian Nationalism

Indian Nationalism: Political Strategies of India's Freedom Struggle; Perspectives on Indian National Movement; Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar, and the socialists.

Core demand of the question

- Ethnicity is the underlying cause which poses a great challenge in the resolution of the problems in the North-East region of India. Comment. (20 marks)

Revision summary

Ethnicity is a central, not a solitary, cause of North-East conflict.

Naga, Mizo, Bodo, and Assam Accord politics show peoplehood claims against existing maps.

Sixth Schedule and Inner Line already treat identity as law.

Colonial borders, hydropower and timber, migration, and **AFSPA** co-produce the deadlock.

Settlements that only pay development, or that only freeze one ethnic winner, recreate minorities.

Introduction

- **Ethnicity is a central cleavage in the North-East:** tribe, language, hills and plains, and indigeneity versus migrant. Calling it the underlying cause of every unresolved problem is too simple. Colonial borders, development models, and the security state also structure the conflict, even when the names of the parties are ethnic.

Body

Why ethnicity is central

- The region is a corridor of Tibeto-Burman, Tai, Mon-Khmer, and Indo-Aryan groups, with Inner Line and **Sixth Schedule** devices that treat identity as a legal fact.
- Naga nationalism, from the Naga National Council to NSCN factions, frames a people and a territory that do not match state boundaries. Peace talks and the Framework Agreement show ethnicity as both grievance and bargaining identity.
- Mizo, Bodo, Kuki, Khasi, and Garo assertions, and Assam's anti-foreigner movement leading to the **Assam Accord (1985)**, organised politics as ethnic demography.
- **Walker Connor** and later Indian scholars of ethno-nationalism treat such mobilisation as more than "law and order." **Kymlicka's** minority-nation argument fits hill councils and autonomous districts.

Why "underlying" overstates a single cause

- Colonial recruitment, inner lines, and the Radcliffe-post-1947 border made minorities overnight. The cause includes state-making, not only primordial culture.
- **Boas** and **Herskovits** warn against treating ethnicity as a timeless essence. North-East identities have been recast by census, conversion, and reservation lists.
- Resource conflicts-oil, timber, hydropower, poppy, and highway corridors-follow **Easton's** allocation. Ethnicity organises who is seen as entitled to the resource.
- **AFSPA** and militarisation, as in debates after alleged excesses, add a security cause that can outlive any one ethnic charter.
- Migration from Bangladesh and from other Indian states is economic as well as cultural. The NRC exercise in Assam mixed citizenship law with ethnic anxiety.

Resolution problems

- Ethnic settlements often create new minorities inside the winner's map, as Bodo territorial politics and Bru/Reang displacement showed.
- A Naga "unique history" claim collides with Manipur's territorial integrity, an inter-ethnic deadlock the Centre cannot split by development grants alone.
- **Sixth Schedule** and **Article 371** variants are liberal-multicultural tools. They can freeze elite ethnic brokers, a **Michels** oligarchy in a tribal key.
- **Gandhi's** swaraj does not by itself settle overlapping homelands. **Ambedkar's** equal citizenship sits in tension with indigenous priority.

Comment

- Ethnicity is the idiom and a real cause of North-East conflict. It is not a geological base under all other causes.
- Resolution needs political recognition (talks, autonomy, Inner Line), economic justice, and demilitarisation sequenced with trust.
- Treating only ethnicity produces either partition logic or forced assimilation. Treating only development produces the charge of internal colonialism.
- **The accurate comment is:** ethnicity is the principal identity through which North-East problems are posed, and therefore a necessary object of any settlement, not a sufficient explanation of why settlements fail.

Flow diagram

North-East problems -> Ethnic homelands
 North-East problems -> Borders migration
 North-East problems -> Resources hydropower
 North-East problems -> AFSPA security
 Ethnic homelands -> Naga talks Sixth Schedule

Conclusion

Ethnicity organises North-East conflict and makes resolution hard because homelands overlap. Borders, resources, migration, and **AFSPA** are co-causes. A settlement that names ethnicity without sharing power and security will fail, and so will a settlement that pretends ethnicity is only a mask.

Facts & figures

Sixth Schedule

Autonomous district and regional councils in selected North-Eastern tribal areas.

Assam Accord, 1985

Settlement after the anti-foreigner movement; citizenship cut-off politics still follow from it.

Naga peace process

Talks with NSCN-IM and other groups; territorial claims remain the hard constraint with Manipur and others.

Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA)

Armed Forces (Special Powers) law in "disturbed areas"; a security overlay on ethnic insurgency.

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