

"A clash on the border, a stabbing spree in Shillong and three deaths have thrown the spotlight on the ethnic complexities of Meghalaya. Which communities are in conflict, and where does CAA figure in it?"

Last week, ethnic violence left three dead in Meghalaya. A Khasi tribal was killed in a clash in a village near the Bangladesh border, followed by a stabbing spree by masked attackers in Shillong and attacks elsewhere, leading to the death of two non-tribal men, both Muslims. The violence underlined the ethnic complexities of Meghalaya, with tensions coming back to the fore following the passage of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

Multi-ethnic Meghalaya

Meghalaya became a state in 1972, when it was carved out of Assam. Before that, Shillong, now Meghalaya's capital, used to be the capital of Assam. Sharing a 443-km border with Bangladesh, Meghalaya has seen decades of migration from areas that are now in Bangladesh, as well as from various Indian states via Assam. Besides the indigenous groups, Meghalaya's residents include Bengalis, Nepalis, Marwaris, Biharis and members of various other communities.

Meghalaya is a tribal majority state, and the indigenous Khasis, Jaintias and Garos are entitled to 80% reservation in government jobs. Groups such as the Khasi Students' Union (KSU), established in 1978, have continuously expressed concerns that illegal migration from Bangladesh and growth of "outsiders" from other states would overwhelm the indigenous communities.

Meghalaya violence: The CAA context

The CAA, passed by Parliament in December, relaxes the norms for Hindus from Bangladesh (among six religious groups from three countries) for eligibility to apply for Indian citizenship. Long before that, the legislation was already facing protests in the Northeast, including Meghalaya. Eventually, the Centre decided the CAA will not apply in Sixth Schedule areas. The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution has special provisions for administration of certain areas in the Northeast, including almost the whole of Meghalaya.



Despite the large exemption, the concerns have persisted in Meghalaya, and demands for an Inner Line Permit (ILP) regime have gathered fresh momentum. If the ILP system is introduced, every Indian citizen from any other state would require a time-bound permit to visit Meghalaya.

Signals simmering tensions

The last four decades have seen numerous incidents of violence in Meghalaya targeted at non-tribals, including from Bengal and Nepal. The latest bout follows a sustained campaign over the implementation of the Inner Line Permit and unrest in the Northeast over the CAA that led to six deaths in Assam two months ago.

The violence last week has an immediate context in the anti-CAA campaign and ILP demand. On Friday last week, a KSU team went to Ichamati village, near the Bangladesh border, to hold a meeting on these two issues. It was during this campaign that a clash took place between student activists and non-tribal villagers, leading to a Khasi man being killed.

This sparked violence in other parts of the state, with non-tribal persons targeted. In Shillong, at least 10 persons were stabbed by masked persons, leading to the death of a Muslim from Assam. Another Muslim (married to a Khasi woman) was killed in a village called Pyrken.

Border flashpoint

Ichamati houses mixed communities, largely Bengali Hindus but also Manipuris and Hajongs. Five Bengalis and three Manipuris have been arrested after the killing of the Khasi activist. A KSU member said non-tribals in Ichamati neither oppose the CAA nor want the ILP, hence the delegation was attacked.

“The CAA-ILP cocktail has just exacerbated the problems and sharpened the divide even between people who traded with each other in normal times,” said Patricia Mukhim, editor of The Shillong Times. She also cited a link between the violence in Ichamati and the mechanics of a limestone business across the border, and cattle smuggling.

Mukhim said that in Ichamati and nearby Bholaganj, there are more Bengali residents than there are Khasis and Garos. “This is what happens when new borders are drawn between countries that were once part of each other... In fact there have been occasions last year when people allegedly from across the border attacked tribals in Shella, Ichamati etc.”

Shillong, then and now

Shillong has seen violence against “outsiders” several times in the last four decades. The targets were Bengalis in 1979, Nepalis in 1987, and Biharis in 1992. In 2018, Shillong saw clashes between Khasis and Punjab-origin Dalit Sikhs whose ancestors had settled there over 100 years ago.

In an essay in 2013, historian Binayak Dutta, who teaches at the North-Eastern Hill University, described how Bengalis, Assamese, Nepalis, Marwaris and Biharis came together to develop the “multi-ethnic space of Shillong”. All that began collapsing after Independence, Dutta wrote. “Constitutional institutions set up to safeguard the interest of the tribes came to be popularly perceived as opportunities to convert these tribal areas into exclusive zones of tribal hegemony.”

In 2003, political scientists C R Lyngdoh and L S Gassah wrote in the Economic and Political Weekly: “The issue of ‘foreigners’ illegally residing in the state of Meghalaya was one of the most important issues which dominated state politics in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1979, the state was plunged into a crisis for the first time since it was created.” They added, “In all these incidents, the non-tribal community was always at the receiving end.”

Old concerns, revived

In the recent violence, Jaddu Choudhury, 52, was stabbed twice in the shoulders. Hailing from Assam's Bengali-dominated Silchar town, he has been selling vegetables in Shillong since 1982. Yet, he said, this was the first time he had seen masked men going around knifing people in Shillong.

Social activist Angela Rangad stressed the need for knowing "each other" better and overcoming suspicions. "We also need to challenge the idea of 'threat from the outsider'. We have to understand what exactly is the threat. People coming here to earn a living, are they threatening the indigenous people? We should have strict labour laws for outsiders to come and work and earn a living without posing a threat to the indigenous people and also so that they may have rights as migrant workers, who in a sense also contribute to the local economy, and their security is also ensured. Our people also go out to work and earn."

Mukhim said: "Our young people are moving out for work and education too. How would we react if they are assaulted or asked to go back because they don't belong to Delhi or Bengaluru?" she said. "... To address the threats and insecurities of tribals, there have to be enough employment opportunities for them and that could have happened if those entrusted with governance have the vision and commitment to serve that larger purpose."

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

Q. Recently incidents of ethnic violence have been witnessed in Meghalaya related to CAA. Consider the following statements related to Meghalaya:

1. Meghalaya is a tribal majority state in the Northeast.
2. In 1973 Meghalaya became an independent state by separating from Assam.
3. CAA will not be applicable to the areas of the Sixth Schedule which include Meghalaya.

Which of the above statements is/ are correct?

- (a) Only 1 (b) 1 and 2
(c) 1 and 3 (d) All of the above

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 05 March., is 1 (d)

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

'The current spell of violence in Meghalaya is due to it's failure to protect interests of non-tribals in the state.' In the context of this statement give an account of various factors responsible for this violence in Meghalaya.

(250 words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.